

From the Courtyard to the Federation: What holds communities together?

PONARS Policy Memo 341

Oleg Kharkhordin

European University at St. Petersburg

November 2004

We tend to look at social, ethnic, religious, or psychological affinities when we evaluate levels of cohesion in a given community. However, classical thought was more preoccupied with more durable and tangible concerns. It would seem that we may look anew at the burning issues of the day if we start looking at the “res” part of the expression *res publica*: that is, on tangible things that bring the republic together, rather than on the *publica* part that was a perennial concern for political theory and policy studies.

Romans on Things Public

Cicero was preoccupied with the problem of physical objects that laid the foundation of the Roman republic, but we habitually tend to overlook this intense interest in the durable and tangible things that the Romans shared. Thus, he writes in *De re publica* III: 43: “Syracuse, with its admirable citadel, its harbors, its broad streets..., its porticoes, temples, and walls could not be a commonwealth in spite of all these things (*ut esset illa res publica*) while Dyonisus was its ruler, for nothing belonged to the people (*nihil enim populi*), and the people itself was the property of one man”. The idea behind this statement is by now well-entrenched in political theory: in the absence of just laws ruling the republic, there can be no decisive defense from the threat of despotism or tyranny. Cicero’s concern is thus to describe those types of political affairs (*res publica*) that are not worthy of this high title. For example, concludes Cicero, “wherever a tyrant rules, we ought not to say that we have a bad form of commonwealth, as I said yesterday, but, as logic now demonstrates, that we really have no commonwealth at all (*nullam esse rem publicam*).”

But did not the need to make such arguments stem from the fact that many people of Cicero’s time would believe that given the availability of obvious tangible *res publica* – durable shared things, like porticoes and city walls – Syracuse and Rome were republics in any case? Is it not that because of such widespread belief Cicero had to insist, time and again: an existence of a common theater, squares and sculptures, contrary to popular intuitions, does not ensure the presence of *res publica* automatically? Thus, he writes: “Where was there any ‘property of the Athenian people’ (*Atheniensium res*) when ... the notorious Thirty most unjustly governed their city? Did the ancient glory of that state, the transcendent beauty of its buildings, its theatre, its gymnasiums, its porticoes, its famous

Propilaea, its citadel, the exquisite works of Phidias, or the splendid Pireaus make it a commonwealth (rem publicam efficiebat)?- Not at all, since nothing was “the property of the people” (quidem populi res non erat”).

Res publica here is interpreted as things being in someone’s possession; they are, however, very tangible, as their enumeration shows. Property connotations of the expression res publica are important, as many commentators have duly noted, but this should not obscure another interesting fact: a frequent lack of terminological difference between the designations of what we would now call institutions (e.g. republican regime as opposed to monarchy) and tangible things (like porticoes, walls and citadels in the examples above). This conflation of institutions and simple durable public things was not characteristic of Roman life only. Other classical republics did wage a similar life with res publica – and here I will suggest concentrating on the case of the medieval republic of Novgorod that existed for about three centuries until it was conquered by the grand prince of Muscovy in 1471.

The Novgorod Heritage

In comparison with such well-studied republics as Florence or Venice, Novgorod hardly left any exquisite or complicated texts, there is no established code of its laws, and we have to fathom its institutions from chronicle records and archaeology findings. However, many obvious durable things that had brought the Novgorodians together are still there, while those gone are well-studied by generations of historians. In the absence of public treasury or codified records of the decisions of the popular assembly, one nevertheless finds the paved streets and squares, the churches, the bells (the most famous captured and deported to the Moscow Kremlin as the sign of decisive Muscovite victory), and a seemingly very simple case, which is most frequently mentioned in the First Novgorod Chronicle – the Great Bridge that linked the two parts of the city together.

I will explain briefly the role of this bridge – a veritable case of res publica, a common thing or a common affair - in the republican life of Novgorod. (for more depth see Oleg Kharkhordin, “Things as Res Publica,” in Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel, eds. *Making Things Public*, MIT Press, forthcoming in 2005) The central significance of the bridge is revealed in many ways. Briefly, the Great Bridge was the only bridge that linked Novgorod together and it was central for gathering an assembly of the civitas, for executing the condemned (the Novgorodians threw the offenders from the bridge), for armed fights between city factions and for religious processions. Not only urban but also rural areas of the vast Novgorod land supplied means to maintain this only multi-season bridge in all of Russia (the first Muscovite equivalent appeared in the end of the 17th century - before that they used to have floating bridges only). That is, provinces as far as 500 km away from the city had to send resources to maintain the pillars and sections of the bridge, ascribed to them according to the Law on the Bridges. When Ivan the Terrible finished off the elite of Novgorod in 1570, executions happened by throwing people off the bridge as well. As Novgorod had always been a secondary center in Russian history, the Great Bridge that appears on the icons, in the chronicles, and popular epics, is thus central to understanding politics, finance, and religion of this Russian republic. The Great

Bridge served for generations of Russian historians as the most beloved example of opposing Muscovite despotism and offering another trend in Russian history.

Dealing with Common Things in Contemporary Russia

One might similarly argue that contemporary Russians are very good at communal problem solving. Notwithstanding the usual laments on the weakness of civil society, propertied citizens are pretty active in self-organization - installing and maintaining well-functioning intercom devices at their staircase entrances, locking up their attics and roofs from the homeless squatters attempting to occupy them, and even sometimes taking care of their courtyards and children's playgrounds. These examples of self-organization on the most mundane levels are seconded by cases of mass development of "co-proprietorships" and condominiums, which are the new ownership forms for the high-rise buildings (these mostly work out in the areas of new construction since new multi-apartment building communities are registered as co-proprietorships from the start). The problems, of course, appear while passing from the level of common things to the level of common affairs, from *obshchie veshchi* to *obshchie dela*.

That is, even at the level of a municipal unit people are already apathetic – once they exit the courtyard, the obviousness of the need to act together recedes drastically. Even at the level of the courtyard there is still a tangible common thing that is a common concern one cannot ignore, since this thing imposes itself immediately and resolutely into the agenda of everybody touched by its presence or absence (e.g. when common sewage freezes in the winter this requires immediate reaction; electricity blackouts in the summer mean spoiled food in the fridges for everyone). Municipal units, particularly those that were artificially created by arbitrarily cutting out some chunks of territory, flanked by certain streets and housing about 40,000 people – as is the case with many of 111 municipal units that constitute contemporary St. Petersburg – do not command the same allegiance as the staircase, the apartment block, the courtyard. One might argue that the main reason for apathy is a number of free riders the beset any instance of collective action. Another approach would be to look at the lack of common things that bring these units together: the tangibility and the durability of concerns that unite smaller units are not there. Understanding this, some municipalities started experimenting with common festivals, communal efforts at cleaning, etc. The latent function of those is to create not an idea of commonality but a tangible hallmark of common identity (an arena for choral performance, a cleaner public garden after the rotten leaves and bottles were taken away, etc.)

Federation Concerns

Given the previous exposition, one could be particularly pessimistic about the prospects of finding a common tangible thing that holds the Russian Federation together. Having been created, as Putin noted in the post-Beslan speech, as an arbitrary cut-out from the USSR minus the seceding or pushed out republics, the federation lacks a common infrastructure that would make its claim to unity tangible and durable. The electricity grid extends into the newly independent states (even Georgia has to tolerate the presence of Unified Energy Systems of Russia), gas and oil pipelines traverse the CIS, as do main

Russian TV channels, and even rubles circulate not only in the RF, but in many adjacent territories.

The usual recipes for the maintenance of the Federation, espoused by the current administration, are linked to enlarging the subject units of the federation, thus eliminating ethnically-defined units, and hence canceling grounds for internal ethnic strife or for realistic hopes of secession. However, one could argue that one should also look at creating the tangible set of ligaments that would tie the RF together in a most mundane and obvious way. A common budget serviced by the local offices of the Federal Treasury and surveyed by the Goskomstat offices, seats in the Duma and the Federation Council, power games played out in or linked to these federal playgrounds, and visits to the Kremlin-sponsored banquets and festivities – this is what ties the local elites into a single Russian power corps. But what about the masses?

Foedera is the word that means “treaties”, with many of them concerned with establishing links and relations. Civic obligations are just one of those ligaments that link and tie the body politic together; the word “ob- ligation” carries it in its etymology. People are obliged once they are durably tied by ligaments. As medieval English treaties frequently state: “haec sunt perpetuarum Amicitiarum, Ligarum et Confederationem Capitula,” friendship and confederation are based on ligaments: once you have the tangible ties, you have perpetual peace and federation.

© PONARS 2005