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On the Borders of Regions: Finland as an Interface Periphery (1809–1995)

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As a result of Napoleonic wars – after 600 years of common history with Sweden – Finland became a part of the Russian Empire in 1809. The other chronologic milestone is 1995, when Finland joined the European Union, together with Sweden and Austria.

Finland was always situated in an *interface periphery* – as the Finnish scholar Risto Alapuro – describes it – being influenced by two regional centres at the same time. The European *West* was represented by Stockholm, and Sankt-Petersburg embodied the *Eastern* centre in this very plausible theoretic model. Although Finland's social and political history was following the Western-type development, the permanent impact of Russia on this process can always be demonstrated during the next two centuries.

The military and political dominancy of the Eastern centre was combined with social, economic and political backwardness, which was characteristic for the so called *latecomers*. However, from the point of view of Finnish modernization (whatever the term means) the role of Russia (and the Soviet Union) was very positive after all, and can not be described one-sidedly as the retardant of the Finnish ascension. It is worthy to note here, that in Sankt-Petersburg the Western European *high culture* was available in many languages, architects and craftsman were welcome there and also the composition of the administration and the high command of the army was plenty cosmopolitan.

Seen from Stockholm, Finland was taken as a provincial, simpler or sometimes even as a more backward land for centuries to come. For a certain part of the Russian (or for the Soviet) elite the socio-political conditions in Finland was an example to follow: the *„living constitution“*, the Western-type political system or for example the high living standard.

The Borders

The border (or: dividing line) constantly separating Finland from East was a very complex one, a kind of *demarcation zone*. Some of the components can be taken as a *regional cleavage*; others were short-lived, temporary ones. Without giving a complete list of these components, we shall give a brief record below:

- The *schism* (in 1054) resulted a firm cleavage between the western Christianity and the eastern orthodoxy.
- This was also a border between *different political systems*, at all times. (For example: enlightened absolutism vs. autocracy; democratic republic vs. soviet system; democracy – undemocracy.)
- There was also a great difference between the two types of *social development*, which were far from being similar. (For example: unlike the Russian system, the Scandinavian-type of feudalism had free peasantry; while the civil society was strong in Finland, for a long time it was missing in Russia.)
- Characteristically differing *legal systems*. (Gustavian 'constitution' of Swedish origin vs. not systematized Russian law; liberal legal system vs. Soviet regulations.)
- *Lingual and ethnic dissimilarity*.
- The division between *small states* and *big powers*. (Comparing to her giant neighbour Finland as a small state has always been in a disadvantageous position.)
- For both of the Finnish and the Russian political thoughts it was the *mystic border* between East and West. (As for the ambivalent Russian attitude concerning the continental West, sometimes they wanted to *overtake* with it, sometimes to *isolate* from it. On the other hand the Finns loved posing in the role of the *Eastern-most outpost of the West*.)

- After the last war there was a bipolar world emerging, and the Finnish-Russian border became also the *border of two world system* until the collapse of the Soviet Union. (Warsaw Pact; COMECOM etc.)

In contrast to it, Finland's western border was in most of the cases much '*softer*' than the rigid Russian one and it was rather *loose* and *permeable*. For hundreds of years there were no religious or custom borders, neither social nor military and political borders between the two countries.

- The lingual differences were not so harsh, because Swedish was spoken in Finland and addition it was used in Northern countries as a *lingua franca*.
- It is the border of *Scandinavia*. (According to the Finnish political thought Finland is a part of *Fenno-Scandia*.)
- The form of the government is differentiating Finland from the rest of the Northern countries. (Republic vs. monarchy.)
- 1809–1917: it is the border of Russian Empire, which is also dividing two different legal and political systems.
- 1944–2001: it is the border of the Soviet sphere of interest.
- For a comparatively short time it was the limit of wellness and low living standard. (A great number of Finns migrated to Sweden for a better livelihood.)
- Finland was often taken as *underdeveloped* or *provincial* in comparison to her more developed neighbour.
- Before the age of icebreakers and aviation, the geographical and meteorological conditions literally isolated Finland from the West.

The Development of the Finnish Society

The Finnish society was one of the so called *rump society* in the 19th century (with the terms of Zoltán I. Tóth), meaning that the rural Finnish peasantry was ruled by an urban, Swedish speaking elite. The whole composition and the development of the Finnish society are similar to her Western neighbour and it was always very much different from any aspect from the Russian model. The basic differences are rooted first in the nature of the two types of feudal systems, secondly in the split of the ennoblement. The next types of differences were overwhelmingly caused by the Soviet regime. By the second half of the 20th century, the ancient and rural Finnish society turned into a modern society, today living in an urban environment (more than 60%) and earning the living in the tertiary sector and in the industry.

Comparing to it the Russian social development was *uneven* and in some regions perhaps *backward*. While applying *coercion* was very typical for the Eastern social history, the Finnish conditions (with a few but not unimportant exception) can be described as *peaceful* and *consensual*. Also the socio-political cleavages dividing the different groups of people are more extensive and sharper in Russia, than in Finland.

Two Ways of Economic Modernization

In the 19th century the driving force of the Finnish economic development was the forest and paper industries, in an agrarian country. Although both countries can be taken as rurally determined economies, the differences in modernization are great.

The basic pillars of these differences are the following ones: the social background; the divergence between the two types of feudalism and capitalism, and finally we must not forget the impacts of the 74 years old Soviet economic system. ('*Planned*' or '*command economy*' with the presence of *shortage*.) While the Soviet experiment suffered a collapse, the Finnish modernization lifted her economy onto the highest world level. However, the Russian/Soviet market was always very advantageous for the Finnish economic development, with the exception of the '*dark ages*' between the two wars.

Finland took the economic opportunities of living on the borders of two world orders (i.e. capitalist and socialist), but in the meantime she got firmly integrated into the Western world market. Russia was unable to use her comparative advantages and often had chosen the means of isolation, for a reason or another.

Legal and political systems

From this point of view there are very few similarities and plenty of differences between Finland and Russia. Finland inherited the Gustavian Swedish legal system in 1809 and it was valid during the Russian rule. Although there were amendments and new provisions put in effect, but the original Swedish codex remained basically unchanged after all.

In the 19th century Russia witnessed two attempts for reforming the Imperial legal system, but with no success.

While in Russia political parties were banned until 1906, in Finland there was a multi-party system. After 1906 the Finnish political system was transformed: the four estate Diet was replaced with an unicameral parliament, based on universal suffrage.

Russia obtained a representative body (*Duma*) and things had changed in the political arena there too, but the climate of autocracy was not fit for building a liberal monarchy. After the Bolsheviks' revolution in 1917, the conditions worsened and a one-party system and undemocracy ruled the political scene for decades to come. Great changes were introduced after the collapse of the communist rule.

Finland's legal and political system was following the Scandinavian model, with the exception of monarchy. Between 1919–2000 there was a semi-presidential system which was replaced by a German-type chancellor democracy with a strong PM in the centre of political power facing a 'weak' president with a symbolic power.

Finlandization

The Finnish-Russian relations were good and tranquil, without great conflicts, until the very end of the 19th century. Later it was different, but we have to note in advance that the Finns were loyal subjects of the Tsar-Grand Duchy and didn't want to become independent. There were no Russophobe attitudes in Finland either; the trend was artificially stoked up by the white political elite after gaining independence. Between the two wars generations were brought up in this manner and anti Russian and anti Soviet attitudes became a constant part of the Finnish political thought.

The outcome of the 2nd World War led to a paradigmatic change in the Finnish attitude and the aggressive Russophobe manner was replaced by the politics of 'friendship'. As a unique exception within the Soviet sphere of interest, Finland could preserve her political and social order, unlike the rest of *people's democracies* in the region ruled by Moscow.

The Western countries were suspiciously watching this strange relation between a socialist and a capitalist country and soon the threatening myth of *Finlandization* was born and started to live her own life. The message of the phrase is a warning for the incautious Western countries: look out; the Soviet Union is able to expand her influence by peaceful means too, just take a look at these booby Finns!

The term of finlandization was forgotten soon after 1991.

Some Features of the Finnish National Identity

The emerging Finnish national identity was also bearing the impact of the semiperipheral entity. Without sinking fully in the phenomenon, we shall point out the sharp contrast between the modern '*Nokia-people*' and the traditional image of the rural Finns. The first one is urban, unbeliever and cosmopolitan. The folk of the Finnish countryside is deeply pietistic, loyal and paternalistic. For both of them Russia is an enemy, and the European West was always an example to follow beyond doubt.

For the Finns Russia is not an enemy anymore, but today the case is maybe even worse: the Eastern neighbor is now the source of all kinds of threatens. In the eyes of Finns the East is now the homeland of terrorism, poverty and migration. Finland joined the EU in 1995. The border between Russia and the rest of Europe became more rigid than ever.

IRODALOM

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On the border of two regions: Finland, the *transitory periphery* 1809–1995

After having been a part of the Swedish Monarchy for 600 years, in 1809 Finland became part of the Russian Empire. With this, it took its place in the so-called *transitory periphery*, which developed for centuries under the auspices of the Stockholm (western) centre and Saint Petersburg, the symbol of the eastern centre. The Russian protectorate meant economical backwardness, but it did not set back Finland in its development; what is more, in a bit more than 100 years, modernisation helped Finland to join the developed world after having been among the poorest regions. Although eastern effects and eastern characteristics could be observed in this development, on the whole it followed the western, Scandinavian pattern. When in 1995 Finland joined the EU, the Finnish arrived where they had always believed to belong.