Can the Republic of Korea be Called a Role-Model of Democracy?

Against the background of “tightening the screws” in Russia, the topic of Russia just catching up to the North Korea has become, in some circles, such an attractive topic that almost during every big television interview I am asked the question: how soon will Russia equal to the DPRK in the situation concerning democracy, human rights and so on. And this is the answer I give to the question (starting from a certain moment): “It is not clear whether Russia will catch up with the North Korea, but first it will have to catch up with the South Korea”.

Thanks to its economic growth, the Republic of Korea produces the impression of a democratic country, the more so as the South Korean propagandists expertly use soft power in order to create for their country the image of a flourishing state which has Samsung, kimchee and K-pop. After that, it is very convenient to compare the North and the South, in the style which was used by the Soviet propaganda broadcasting (‘two worlds, two childhoods’). However, being a historian, I understand how inappropriate it is.

Let us not emphasize that the Korean economic miracle had been achieved largely through state regulation and that five-year plans (though indicative rather than directive) had existed in the South Korea up till 1984. Let us not pay attention to the fact that in the 1960ies -70ies the North and South regimes had more common, rather than different, features, including the Leader’s portraits on banknotes (the first president of the Republic of Korea Li Syn Man was notable for that) of the term “chuchkheson” which was traditionally translated as “national subjectivism” in order not to raise any questions with the audience. Let us speak about the modern South Korea, where the “heritage” of the military regime has – seemingly – been discarded long ago, and there is little chance of a military coup, really. However, let us see what has survived.

Anti-extremist laws

Those who deplore tightening of penalties for extremism in the modern Russia and the rather wide “grey zone”, allowing to interpret the dangerous notions in a broad way, should turn their attention to the South Korean Law on National Security. It has, for example, the wording like activities for the benefit of “an enemy state”. It means that if you support extending the rights of workers you are undermining the national economy, therefore you are doing good for the North Korea, and hence you may be convicted under a political article. If you download North Korean music (without the words, but the matter lies solely within the field of their ideological names) you may, as shown by practice, be convicted to 2.5 years on probation, but if you sing their revolutionary songs in a group you may be punished by 4 to 7 years of imprisonment. One may recall also the criticism of the official South Korean point of view - notwithstanding how peculiar this may be. For this very reason the experts who drew attention to discrepancies in the official South Korean documents dedicated to the wreck of the corvette “Chkhonan” were silenced. The text of the Law on National Security is available on the Internet, so the interested persons may read it and come to their own conclusions independently, after comparison of this relict of the anti-Communist epoch to the laws of other countries.

One may also recall the recent ban of the United Progressive Party in the South. This left-wing party had 5 mandates
in the Parliament and expressed rather Socialist views. A group of its members was accused of preparing a state coup and violating the Law on National Security. Against this background, the Ministry of Justice proposed to ban the party. And though later on it became clear that the accusations of preparation a conspiracy and coup were, to put it simply, ill-founded, the deputies from the party were stripped of their Parliamentary mandates, and all the party’s funds were confiscated.

“Internet access after demonstrating your passport”

South Korea is among the first three countries in the world as to availability of the Internet to ordinary citizens. However, beginning from the 2000ies, you have to indicate the number of your ID if you purchase anything in a Korean e-commerce facility or register on a Korean postal server or forum. This provision does not cover non-Korean forums or online stores.

The official reason for doing this was avoiding hate campaigns after several persons, including a well-known actress, had been “trolled to death” and committed suicide. But in fact it was done after the President Noh Mu Khyuno, who had won the elections largely due to young people’s votes and using Internet resources, had decided to control the process.

As of today, this is a subject of discussion in the Republic of Korea, and the issue is being discussed in the Constitutional Court. Some people regard it as violation of freedom, but there are people who believe that such methods help to defend persons from bullying in the Internet. A person who regularly humiliates other people and carries out “hate campaigns” can not hide under an anonymous nickname and – in theory – “has more chances to be held liable for his or her words”. But the problem is that this issue must be regarded in conjunction with the issue of the Law of National Security: any statements in favour of the North Korea are traced quite promptly. At the same time, one should not forget that while in Russia all the talk about “trolls wearing shoulder straps” are rather an idiomatic expression, in the Republic of Korea there was an officially recognized scandal as a result of which several high-ranking officials of the national intelligence service were dismissed from their positions. Let us remember that before the Presidential elections in 2012 the head of the cyber-security department of the said service directly instructed his subordinate officers to participate in internet forums and carry on propaganda against the leftist candidate supporting Ms Park Geun-hye (who however did not appreciate their activity). Given that formally intelligence service must be politically neutral and its representatives were engaged in the battles on the Internet not under their own names.

Spiritual bonds

South Korea is one of the few countries where criminal liability for adultery still remains, on condition that the unfaithful spouses have been “caught flatfooted” or have confessed. Last year there was a rather notorious process when one actress mentioned in her TV interview that she had had an affair with a married man. That resulted in two years of imprisonment for adultery. However as a rule men are not prosecuted, and if a wife catches her husband with another woman she has the right to sue not her husband but his mistress.

Here come the peculiarities of school education. Only five years ago a decree prohibiting the teachers to use corporal punishment in the senior classes was adopted. However it is valid only in Seoul and the capital province, in the other regions the teacher has full rights to shout at the pupils of 9-11 classes, using even four-letter words, throw chalk or staplers at them and beat them on the hands with a ruler. The customs were mitigated thank to the Internet, after some similar scenes had been depicted using mobile telephones and the video had been posted on websites making a sensation – not in Korea, actually, but beyond its borders.

State interpretation of history

Some elements of the Korean historical myth may be quite well integrated into the notion of “small-power chauvinism”. While in Russia the persons who dwell upon the five-thousand-year-old history of Old Slavs are rather beyond the academic mainstream border, in Korea books about the Old Korean civilization – the origin of the solar myths, which to a certain degree gave birth to the Maya – are published in academic series. These are part of history textbooks. Some topics are taboo for criticism, and an attempt to say openly, for example, that the Japanese colonial rule had not only negative impacts but positive impacts as well may end up a person’s career – whoever this person may be, and it will give rise to a tremendous upsurge of stigmatization.

Actually, we may recall that hate campaign which was unleashed in social networks after the 2014 Winter Olympic Games, when a Russian, not a Korean, athlete won a gold medal. If such thing had happened in the Russian
Federation after a Korean athlete’s victory, such bacchanalia would have been declared staged up by the Kremlin.

Of course, the period of 1970–80, when the North Korea headed by Kim Ir Sen and the South Korea ruled by the military differed from each other much less then it may seem, is distant past. It looks like the modern South Korea has more freedom of press and a working civil society (which, however, has paid quite a high and bloody price for its existence). But one should not imagine this country as a citadel of democracy. And so, I will repeat it: the talk about Russia soon “catching up with” the North Korea usually comes from those people who do not understand that in this case – from the point of view of limiting civil liberties – it will have first to “catch up with” the South Korea.

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