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## The Idea of State in N.M.Karamzin's Conservative Value System

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*Both in situational-functional and in the sense of its content, learning of N.M. Karamzin offers a conservative "programme" which represents format in which the civilizational and identity crisis in Russia at the beginning of the XIX century was answered by the "system" of arguments. This allows us to understand his intellectual effort as the moment in Russian intellectual history when unreflected traditionalism of Russian thought transforms itself into a rationalized hipostasis of reflected ideological conservatism, which became (in its various variants) spiritual "official" mainstream of Russian prerevolutionary thought. Key elements of the philosophical funding of his conservative worldview, its ontological, epistemological, axiological and methodological qualities- reproduce theirselves at the law and political level of his conservative learning. Without intent to present N.M. Karamzin's complex worldview evolution (in which he passed through the enthusiastic enlightenment cosmopolitan phasis in his youth, to become a "founding father" of Russian conservatism in his middle ages), we will try to situate his work in the complex map of Russian intellectual tradition, present key values of his conservative "system", and try to mark the importance of the idea of the state in it.*

*Keywords: tradition, conservatism, Russian conservatism, state, samoderzhavie.*

Autoritative figure of N.M. Karamzin stands at the end of the turbulent XVIII century and "opens" the big epoch of the Russian "long" XIX century by posing the questions which will constitute some of the key elements of the debate on identity between slavophiles and westernizers, liberals and pochveniks, and which in its newest metamorphosis polarizes contemporary post-soviet Russian value and law-political field.

Strong and original mark he gave to the first quarter of the XIX century in later evolution of the Russian selfperception made some authors to name it- "Karamzian age".<sup>1</sup> Omnipresent on Russian cultural scene he figures as a leading

representative of modern Russian prose, the reformer of Russian literary language, first literary critic, the founder of Russian periodic. Besides that, to N.M Karamzin belongs the glory of the first historian of the Russian state, even the "first philosopher", if it is accepted thesis of G.G.Spet, that "Russian philosophy" will always be nothing else but "the philosophy about Russia".<sup>2</sup> As a *primus inventor* of Russian literature, he is ascribed the status of the one of the key figures of the postpetrian culture, even the "founding father of the Russian intelligentsia".<sup>3</sup> In almost every cultural field we find Karamzin as a ancestor, iniciator, innovator, pioneer.

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Of the utmost importance for our theme is his engagement in the field of philosophy, history and law-political thought, which is in a unique thematic synthesis transformed in a specific Russian conservative “manifesto” in his work. By problematizing metaphysical, historical, state and every other identity of Russia, Karamzin is understood as one of the learned men which had enormous influence in thematizing relation between “Russia and West”.<sup>4</sup> This theme will become one of the key structural characteristics of the Russian XIX century “discourse”.

The “founding father” of Russian conservative thought sharpens the difference between Russia and West, searches for a original Russian historical way, and makes some sort of the “codification” of its traditional values trying to make them functional in the modern epoch. In Karamzin’s case, a “catastrophic” postrevolutionary “feeling” becomes philosophically founded answer to the imperatives of the time, and being transposed into an active conservative “doctrine”, ready for operationalization of its idea content. The analysis of the complete Karamzin’s learning goes beyond the frame of this article and the capacity of this author. We will only try in next parts to partly reconstruct the “map” of Russian conservatism which configuration Karamzin in his opus competently offers.

### **1. Conservative worldview of N.M. Karamzin**

Insight in the wholeness of Karamzin’s thought, especially his “History of Russian State”, “Memoirs on Ancient and Modern Russia...” and articles from the “Messenger of Europe” period, allows a content analysis which exposes certain problem-constants having key role in forming, not only his thought, but in structuring complete problem-field of the Russian prerevolutionary conservatism, determining its “inner logic”

and defining status of this author as explicitly conservative.

Wider context for thematization of not only Russian, but European conservatism as a whole, is spiritual and historical background of the French Revolution. But, we can indicate a *differentia specifica* of Russian conservatism which Karamzin’s example illustrates, and that is that Russian conservatism cannot be understood only as a *reaction* to this particular event of worldly historical importance, but more as a reaction to the complete radical westernization to which Russia was exposed since the times of Peter I. “Galloping” *galomania* of the leading layers of Russian society, liberal projections of the law-political transformations of Russian political system *a la* Speranski, ideological unsoundness of the first decade of the Alexander I rule and Napoleon *ante portas* made in Karamzin’s perception dangers without precedent. Thus, concrete ideo-historical circumstances of the European Enlightenment epoch as the reason and opening further uncritical installing of the western value patterns in Russian society as the main cause, became initial motives for a strong conservative attitude in Karamzin’s case.

Being acquainted with some of the central motives of European conservatism of the time, Karamzin operationalize them in Russian context. Having that in mind we point to the fact that Karamzin takes as a negative normative starting point spiritual and historical experience of the French Revolution, and moves methodologically from the specific “critic” of the “critics” towards affirmation of the values which constitute *condition sine qua non* of the Russian conservatism. By distancing his position from the radical Enlightenment *credo* of his youth, Karamzin will be the first who will publicly in Russia question the value and the sense of the ideas of European Enlightenment.<sup>5</sup>

Limited space in this article doesn't allow to give some deeper and wider insight in Karamzin's conservative world view. That is the reason why are we just to proceed to the listing the taxonomy of most striking conservative characteristics of his thought.

Karamzin's thought is primarily *antirevolutionary*. He insists on the primacy of order to the revolution, pleading for an evolutionary road for Russia. As a reaction to the socio-cultural and law-political modernization of Russia, Karamzin is one of the first thinkers who ask about the price which has to be paid for the reforms in western spirit and mechanical import of the western patterns of living on the Russian soil. Second characteristic of his conservative thought is *antirationalism*. On this epistemological level Karamzin's critic is especially directed towards such tendencies in Russia which manifest rationalized revolutionarity regarding state and law. He opposes to these intentions Russian historical ethos and basic traditional values. What should be emphasized is that this kind of antirationalism, which would become one of the methodological constants of the Russian conservatism, does not exclude rational method as such, only putting stress on the mistake of absolutizing this human faculty. Karamzin's critic of rationalism is logically transformed into critic of individualism, cult of progress, bourgeois spirit, thus becoming critic of the "West" in its fundamental modern value and institutional forms. Karamzin pays special attention to the value freedom in its liberal interpretation, finding its reduction to the "outer" attribute of man as completely wrong. He pleads for understanding freedom in orthodox Christian spirit as "inner value", given by the God. What makes his antiwestern attitude serious is the fact that it is mediated with earlier prowestern inclination, which would become one more

characteristic of Russian conservatism - that its antiwesternism is not "the fear of the unknown", but of something that is known "too good".

The key "guardian" and transmitter of conservative values is in Karamzin's perception-*the state*. Almost whole his intellectual effort and political engagement is centered around its preservice, thus making law-political learning central part of his conservative worldview.

## 2. N.M Karamzin's idea of state

Searching to "immunize" Russia from the "virus" of the French Revolution, Karamzin addresses himself to the Russian history to find value constants that helped preservation of Russians through centuries. Key value he finds in a specific monarchical form-*samoderzhavie*. It represents unique law-political and socio-culturological form which frames Russian normative-value order and central integral force which corresponds to ethos and mentality of Russian people. Being parallel to the western concept of sovereignty<sup>6</sup>, *samoderzhavie* is a specific product of Russian history, Christian orthodox faith and "national spirit" what makes it almost impossible to be translated in the western law and political terminology.<sup>7</sup> Evenmore, some of the most authoritative proponents of *samoderzhavie*, completely in conservative spirit, question even the possibility of theoretical founding of this central political concept of Russian history. To define *samoderzhavie* in this perception means to "belittle" it, to "limit"<sup>8</sup> and deform its essence. Thus *samoderzhavie* represents the fact of supraiuridical character, the fact that cannot be "capsuled" by means of law and political terminology, the fact that steps into the "field of faith".<sup>9</sup>

To Karamzin, *samoderzhavie* is an absolute value, it is Russian "Palladium".<sup>10</sup> He reveals its paradoxical law-political essence in one of the most prominent *topoi* of Russian conservatism:

“If Alexander (...) should lift a pen and prescribe himself laws other than those of God and of his conscience, then the true, virtuous citizen of Russia would presume to stop his hand, and to say: ‘Sire! You exceed the limits of your authority. Russia, taught by long disasters, vested before the holy altar the power of autocracy in your ancestor, asking that he rule her supremely, indivisibly. This covenant is the foundation of your authority, you have no other. You may do everything, but you may not limit your authority by law!’”<sup>11</sup>

This means that the only legal limitation of the *tzar* is his obligation not to accept any legal limitations!<sup>12</sup> Any “constitutional” intent is in Karamzin perception illegal and illegitimate act directed against the whole heritage of the ancestors. He rejects all the modern political theories of the time which include “division of power”, saying that “Two political authorities in one state are like two dreadful lions in one cage, ready to tear each other apart; and yet law without authority is nothing.”<sup>13</sup> He sees the Russian state as a system in which full sovereignty is “vested in one person”.<sup>14</sup> Karamzin is not in dilemma regarding this question: “ (...) In the Russian monarch concentrate all the powers; our government is fatherly, patriarchal”<sup>15</sup>

There are several reasons why the Russian people should obey the authority of the *tzar*. Some of them are pragmatism, like the size of the state which demands the centralized system of government, the others are historical (“Autocracy has founded and resuscitated Russia. Any change in her political constitution has led in the past and must lead in the future to her perdition...”<sup>16</sup>). But beside them, there are political, moral and the reasons of faith, which tie in “secret” way Russian people to his *tzar*. So, the concept of

*samoderzhavie* cannot be interpreted without reference to *pravoslavie*, and specific “national spirit” for which the term *narodnost* is coined. This triad formula which would be posted by Uvarov, can be found in its embryo form in Karamzin’s worldview. Undivided authority of the *tzar* is limited in Karamzin’s perception only with “national spirit”. This synthesis of national Christian orthodox faith, ethos, habits and patriotism make this spirit and represent the fundamental level of Russian political culture. *Narodnost* stands over all political authorities, including the *tzar*’s. One who tries to destroy this spirit and impose foreign principles and laws, steps in the field of tyranny.

In this sense, Karamzin makes on of the first and the sharpest critics of the rule of Peter I, and he does that completely in conservative manner, *in concreto*, trying to warn Alexander I not to repeat Peter I’s errors. Developing his position regarding law in contrast to the projects of Speransky, Karamzin opposed to the possibility of “universal laws” insisting that Russia has its law principles too, “just like Romans”, and pleaded for a “codification” of Russian law as a barrier to the revolutionary French law.

### Concluding remarks

As a functional equivalent to the conservative “canon” of Edmund Berk, Karamzin’s learning figures as the “canon” of Russian conservatism, as Russian civilizational answer to the questions of European (post)revolutionary epoch. His life and work represent living example of the struggle for preserving Russian identity, which in *samoderzhavie*, *pravoslavie* and *narodnost* has its eminent forms. The idea of strong paternalistic Russian state, although went to significant metamorphosis since Karamzin, has its actuality today, and Russian conservative tradition has its revival without precedent in newest history.

- <sup>1</sup> J.L.Black (ed.), Introduction, Essays on Karamzin: Russian Man of Letters, Political Thinker, Historian, 1766-1826, Mouton, The Hague-Paris, 1975, p. 12
- <sup>2</sup> Д.В. Ермашов, А.А. Ширинянц. У истоков российского консерватизма: Н.М. Карамзин, Изд-во Моск. ун-та, М., 1999, p. 76
- <sup>3</sup> See in: См.: Страда В. В свете конца, в предвестии начала// В раздумьях о России (XIX век), М., 1996, p. 134
- <sup>4</sup> Ю.М. Лотман, Сотворение Карамзина, М., 1987, p.318
- <sup>5</sup> Op.cit. p. 48
- <sup>6</sup> Richard Pipes, "Karamzin's conception of the monarchy", y: J.L.Black (ed.), Introduction, Essays on Karamzin: Russian Man of Letters, Political Thinker, Historian, 1766-1826, Mouton, The Hague-Paris, 1975, p. 113
- <sup>7</sup> This fact admits R.Pipes, when he points that translation of the Russian *samoderzhavie* in English *autocracy* "has implications which may be misleading". (Ibid.). To equate *samoderzhavie* with western concept of absolutism is especially semantically and stillisticly unacceptable.
- <sup>8</sup> В.Розанов, О подразумеваемом смысле нашей монархии, СПб, 1912, p. 49
- <sup>9</sup> П.Флоренский. Около Хомякова, Сергиев Посад, 1916, p. 26
- <sup>10</sup> Н.М. Карамзин. Записка о древней и новой России в ее политическом и гражданском отношениях, p. 105
- <sup>11</sup> Richard Pipes, Karamzin's Memoir on Ancient and Modern Russia: A Translation and Analysis, Cambridge, Mass, 1959, pp. 138-139
- <sup>12</sup> Richard Pipes, "Karamzin's conception of the monarchy", p. 120
- <sup>13</sup> Richard Pipes, Karamzin's Memoir on Ancient and Modern Russia: A Translation and Analysis, pp. 138-139
- <sup>14</sup> Richard Pipes, "Karamzin's conception of the monarchy", p. 114
- <sup>15</sup> Richard Pipes, Karamzin's Memoir on Ancient and Modern Russia: A Translation and Analysis, p. 197
- <sup>16</sup> Richard Pipes, Karamzin's Memoir on Ancient and Modern Russia: A Translation and Analysis, pp. 138-139

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## **Идея государства в консервативной системе ценностей Н.М. Карамзина**

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*При изучении работ Н.М. Карамзина как в ситуационно-функциональном плане, так и в плане содержания обозначивается консервативная «программа», составленная в формате «системы» аргументов, касающихся кризиса нации и кризиса личности в России начала XIX века. Данный факт позволяет нам понять идеологию автора в тот период развития Российской интеллектуальной мысли, когда не нашедший отражения ее традиционализм трансформируется в рациональную основу идеологического консерватизма, который (в различных его вариантах) становится «официальной» духовной основой российской дореволюционной идеологии. Ключевые элементы философских идей консервативных взглядов писателя, их онтологические, гносеологические, аксиологические и методологические качества проявляются на юридическом и политическом уровнях консервативного учения. В данном исследовании не будет представлена общая эволюция взглядов Н.М. Карамзина (которая прошла через фазу восторженного просвещенного космополитизма в юности и привела его к статусу «отца-основателя» российского консерватизма в среднем возрасте), здесь будет предпринята попытка рассмотреть его работы в комплексе трудов российской интеллектуальной традиции, представить ключевые ценности его консервативной «системы» и обозначить важность идей о государстве.*

*Ключевые слова:* традиция, консерватизм, российский консерватизм, государство, самодержавие.

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