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Alikber Alikberov:

“The strategic turn to the East is a wise, correct, deeply thought-out and absolutely objective movement in the right direction”



Director of the Institute of Oriental Studies Dr Alikber Alikberov celebrates 60 years!

The conversation with Alikber Alikberov, Doctor of Historical Sciences, Director of the Institute of Oriental Studies, turned out to be incredibly interesting, rich and thorough. We touched on a wide range of topics, talking about current issues and reflecting on eternal ones.

Why does today's society need objective knowledge about the East? Why is it said that a good Orientalist, like an old cognac, starts to age after 50? Why do strong and intelligent states base their policies on science? If you are interested, read the first part of our interview.

– Alikber Kalabekovich, this year is full of anniversaries for you. You are 60 years old, 25 of which you have devoted to our wonderful Institute of Oriental Studies. On the occasion of an anniversary, it is customary to sum up the results. I propose to break with this tradition and talk about your plans as a scholar and as the head of a scholarly institute, say, for the next five years. And a few words about the life of the Institute of Oriental

Studies – the largest and oldest academic centre for humanitarian research in Russia – today.

– The Institute of Oriental Studies is my home. After completing my postgraduate studies at its St Petersburg branch, I have worked at the same institute practically all my life. Speaking of anniversaries... Five years ago, we celebrated the bicentenary of the Institute of Oriental Studies. It is the anniversary not only of our Institute, but also of the Institute of Oriental Studies in St. Petersburg, because historically the Institute was first established there, and later some of the staff moved to Moscow and the Institute of Oriental Studies was organised here. Our full name is the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences. This year the Academy celebrated its three-hundredth anniversary.

The Institute has many branches, centres, departments. For example, we are about to celebrate the 75th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations with China, and last year was the centenary of the establishment of diplomatic relations with Mongolia.

The Russian Academy of Sciences, the oldest in the post-Soviet space, once helped to establish academies in the former Soviet republics. Their anniversaries are therefore linked to our common history. An anniversary is an opportunity to look back and remember what has been done and how it was done, to reflect on the path taken and outline future steps, and, if necessary, to rethink something in order to move forward in the most optimal and productive way.

I'm not going to talk about my birthday because the date of 60 is not so happy because you belong to the cohort of seventy-year-olds. Although orientalists have such a peculiarity – a specialist gets better and better with age. Mathematicians peak at 30. With us, the older you get, the more experience you have in terms of knowledge of languages, culture, intercultural communication. That is why, with very few exceptions, good Orientalists start to work after the age of 50.

– *Like a good aged cognac ...*

– Quite right. Experience and knowledge allow us to better understand the subject of our research – the East in its various manifestations. The East is a very diverse and, in many ways, unexplored world, which we can only really begin to understand after a strategic turn.

– *That's on a national level. But Orientalists have always turned to the East, which has always been the focus of your research...*

– You're right. Orientalists have not had to turn anywhere. The country has turned to us, to where we have traditionally looked. So, we can say that there is now a unity of aspirations, views and hopes.

We study the East comprehensively, with a multidisciplinary approach. We have many different areas of research, the most important of which is the classical cycle, which involves basic research in the fields of classical texts, archaeology, history, philology, literary and cultural studies, ethnography and sociology, and religious studies. In this way, it is possible to obtain holistic knowledge of the East, which is very important. This is the main direction that distinguishes us as the largest academic centre of humanitarian profile in Russia. About five hundred people work within our walls – leading scientists, academicians, doctors, postgraduate students.

Our second direction is also fundamental research, but already in the field of the study of modern Eastern countries. The most relevant form of the non-West is the East. So is Latin America, and so is Africa. But we see North Africa as part of the East. So, it turns out that we are studying the most relevant forms and countries of the non-West for Russia.

The third direction is applied analytical research on current problems in relations between countries. Society today needs objective knowledge about the East. At the same time, we should be useful to the state in its current policies. That is why our projects deal with very topical issues, including the modern development of Eastern countries.

– Alikber Kalabekovich, Yevgeny Maksimovich Primakov was at the origin of our course in the East. He was a unique person, who once headed the Institute of Oriental Studies, an outstanding politician, statesman, diplomat, journalist and scientist of international reputation, who is called the luminary of Russian Oriental Studies. In his time, he developed a new direction of analytical work in international relations with direct access to politics – situational analysis, which made it possible to predict and prevent the development of various military, political and economic situations, including at times of aggravation of international conflicts in the Middle East and South-East Asia. And today, in the context of Russia’s strategic turn towards the East, can we say that Oriental Studies are experiencing a certain upswing, becoming more in demand in the new realities?

– Right behind you is the complete work of Yevgeny Maksimovich. Undoubtedly, he brought new dimensions to our research. Primakov, like the previous director Bobojon Gafurovich Ghafurov, was not only a director and researcher, but also a statesman. And in this sense, Primakov was also an analyst. It was this attitude to the state that enabled him to understand the processes that were taking place. He achieved this, among other things, through his new methodological approaches – the formats of discussing situational analyses when forecasting scenarios: the first scenario, the second, the most probable, the least probable. As a famous philosopher of history used to say, there is such a thing as the historical future. If you know

the main historical trends, you can use them to draw the contours of the future. And Yevgeny Maksimovich knew how to do this. In a mass of complex facts, he was able to competently identify them, see them and build the internal logic of events.

Primakov, and this is why he is particularly close to me, was also an Islamic scholar. Vitaliy Vyacheslavovich Naumkin, our supervisor, is not only an Arabist, political scientist and researcher of classical texts, but also an Islamic scholar. It is one thing to understand politics, and quite another to understand, in addition to politics, the specifics of social processes in society. And these specifics are determined by religion. It is a comprehensive approach.

Within religion, Primakov distinguished between destructive forces and positive, intra-religious political currents. And this is already the highest pilotage, which allowed him to show how much science can be in demand and useful for society and the state. Politics can be different, but if it is based on a scientific foundation, it can be successful. In strong and intelligent states, policy is usually based on science. Then there is a strategy, approaches are developed that lead to success in the implementation of plans and programmes.

When NATO forces began bombing Yugoslavia in March 1999 and Primakov made a famous historic U-turn, he did so not only as a politician but also as a scientist. Some philosophers and methodologists say that historians should be absolutely politically impartial. But any science gives you a picture, and you should use your knowledge to do the most good for your country. If you know what is going on in the East, and the East is half the world, you can assess what is going on in other parts of the world and have a deep understanding of what is going on.

– In the East today, as always, the same global players are present – the United States, Western European countries, former colonial powers, now trying to maintain their leadership and dominance through various formats...

– Yes, they have not gone anywhere. And if you look at the history of any country, for example Syria or Iraq, you remember very well which metropolis considered that territory to be its colony. This is a part of history that cannot be forgotten and glossed over by saying that it did not happen. The East is very closely linked to the West. And it is easier for someone who digs deep and understands historical hindsight to make more general assessments. Generalisations must necessarily be based on empirical material. And Yevgeny Maksimovich knew this empiricism well, as did our scientific supervisor, Vitaly Vyacheslavovich. And indeed, as you said, we were practically given a new lease of life.

Times of stagnation have not spared us either. The usual problems that arise in closed systems have also affected us. Today, policy is more science-based, so we have to produce

results that are realistic and reliable. They have to be verifiable. If you can't reproduce a result based on different data and different approaches, then you don't need to present it. The level of responsibility is incredibly high. After all, the wrong expert judgements can ultimately lead to the wrong policy decisions. We can't take that risk. And if we're not sure about something, it's better to say right away that there are certain limits to what's possible, and beyond that, there are too many variables. You have to generalise so that there are no claims against you tomorrow. The golden rule is: if you don't know, don't say.

– When the turn to the East took place, did you begin to develop new methodological approaches that were appropriate to contemporary life, taking into account communication, integration processes and globalisation?

– Quite right. Take the Chinese model of globalisation. Despite the fact that globalisation is mainly in the interests of the Western world, China has managed to fit in perfectly and reap the benefits. At this point, the limits of its growth within this model have been exhausted; China can no longer be seen merely as a global factory. It has already become a political force competing with the West. This rethinking, including methodological rethinking, has led to the development of new approaches.

One of them is the transdisciplinary approach that I am developing in relation to our country and our research practice, which implies the exploitation of opportunities based on scientific disciplinary and polydisciplinary practices. Theoretical knowledge and even the recognition of empirical material do not always guarantee complete and exhaustive knowledge because there is also practical knowledge that must also be taken into account. And it goes beyond the academic skills of researchers. For example, if you study international relations and do not include the practical experience of diplomats, you may miss something. There are many internal processes in international relations that are very difficult to study from the outside. We have achieved excellent results by involving practitioners. It is no coincidence that at the last meeting of the Valdai Club, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Viktorovich Lavrov mentioned the Institute of Oriental Studies twice and our academic director V.V. Naumkin three times. We are incredibly proud to be useful to the state and society.

To be continued...

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