

Michail Butov (Russia)

In Russia today writers' statements about politics resonate only when they are colored by extremism. Since I don't consider myself an extremist in any area, with the exception, perhaps, of musical passions, the public podium for the presentation of my thoughts is inaccessible to me and I must content myself with Internet blogs. And that the opportunity to express myself presents itself in America, not at home, seems somewhat/quite strange.

I suppose that today's Russia doesn't have any kind of individual problems of a completely specific type. Russia is a part of the globalized world, and all the unfolding processes and the existing tensions do not leave Russia on the side. These are the questions of the relationships between the state and the transnational corporations, the national problems of multinational countries, the economic problems of "raw material" based countries, and, finally, the relationship with the projected future, determining one's place in the future world—the chances to get into the "golden billion" or be torn away and separated from the significant processes of the future, relegated to the "zone of death." Russia is troubled by the same concerns as everyone else in the world. But there are peculiarities, individual shadings of these problems. And this shading is infused by a problem of a different nature, also common for the majority of developed countries and even entire continents—the problem of self-identification.

None of the major countries or the international country coalitions is today what they would like to appear to be. Europe, for instance, is having a harder and harder time holding on to the image of preserver of cultural traditions, the cradle of tolerance, the zone of absolute humanism, careful attention to human rights. The world is changing rapidly; new economic and political realities apply terrific pressure on all the existing and not so long ago seemingly unshakable social institutions. Those who want (and have the opportunity) to assure for themselves a promising future, are decisively rejecting the former models of social, economic, and simply inter-human relationships. This, for instance, is disintegrating and is threatening to make disappear altogether the very concept of the social.

The problem of Russia lies in the fact that it doesn't even know what it wants to look like: a modern, open country? a communist state with labor camps? an archaic monarchy with a tsar and nobility? or a bit of everything at the same time? Most importantly, there are many in Russia who cannot let go of the memory of the times when everyone was afraid of us—and in this is seen the most important sign of the state's power. But today's political and economic condition of Russia does not allow it to return to the former state of affairs. And even if, let's say, a new communist regime is forcibly established in the country, it will still end up being powerless from the economic standpoint, and, consequently, from the military. There exists only one realistic way—to develop, to gain access, to learn to compete as equals with all the world powers. But how is this possible with monstrous lagging behind in the area of high technologies, and taking into account that the strong powers are not at all interested in a new competitor?

I used to think that when the generation that experienced the Soviet power disappears completely from the scene, everything will change in Russia. Today I don't think that way.

And I suppose Russia will never fully accept the liberal market ideology and, consequently, the western economic system—at least in its present form, although one cannot exclude the integration in the future with new economic models. And it has nothing to do with the still attractive and nationally popular slogan “Expropriate and divide!” Russia is a very traditional country and does not lose its traditional nature with the arrival of new generations, and sharp contradictions with many points of liberalism appear here literally on every step. I speak not of some sort of specific inflexibility—mental or political. It’s something different. I, personally, know young doctors who feel uncomfortable, ashamed of taking money from their patients—even though they get beggar’s wages—one can’t even live on them. They feel that such basic things like human health and human compassion cannot, must not, depend on the level of economic status of the patient, and must be accessible to all in equal degree. They think that it’s the state’s task to guarantee this equality, as well as the pay worthy of their work; otherwise it’s unclear why the state is needed at all. This, clearly, is socialism, but I don’t necessarily find these ideas repulsive.

In other words, Russia presupposes for itself the presence of some kind of special, unique road, perhaps having a precedent in history, perhaps completely different from the ones already laid out. Only in reality, no such clear concept exists— with the exception of the broadly circulating idea that it wouldn’t be all that bad if everyone would start fearing us again. It doesn’t exist—and, most likely, will not appear any time soon, first and foremost because we have oil. The gigantic stream of oil dollars, the oil “needle” does not boost the economy or political thought, but, on the contrary, paralyses them. The power is endlessly perverted, used to the constant and practically free monetary injection. The population of the country hardly plays any economic role at all, 99 percent of what is called in Russia “economic life” is the process of redistribution of money, gained from the sale of oil and other natural resources. And instead of well thought out strategies about the future, at this point we have mostly a radically mythologized notion about the past, which, Soviet to some, pre-Revolutionary to others, seems a golden age to which we should return at any cost.

Now a few words about culture. In my opinion, neither the years of Perestroika, nor the fifteen years of “new Russia” that followed, managed to create some kind of radically new cultural material, except on the level of pop culture and cultural trash. The new reality did not end up speaking its own language. Yes, some of the previously underground currents surfaced and emerged to leading positions. But, first of all, now even their time is passing, and, secondly, to my taste they still smell of the Soviet epoch, if only as its flip-side. In essence, today’s Russian culture does not appear as something united. Let’s say that a unified Russian contemporary literature does not exist. There are several of them and their representatives often don’t even want to know about the existence of others. There is, for instance, quite popular, especially in the provinces, the very traditional, “soil” literature, continuing the line, to a large extent of the official Soviet literature, to a lesser extent—of talented village writers of the 70s. There is modernism, avant-garde, post modernism (also Russian-style), and there is a trend of moderate literature of the ‘intelligentsia’ to which yours truly subscribes. There is—appearing most recently—extremist literature, connected to nationalist movements, with ‘new bolshevism’ among them. All these are different worlds, and they are not necessarily at war with each other, or despising each other—they simply are of no interest to one another.

Despite everything I said, of course, this does not mean that in Russia there aren't all that many talented, smart and capable people. There is a multitude. There are a lot of really good, meaningful books, large scale scientific discoveries happen. But all this exists in a disjointed state. People with a constructive outlook do not have the possibility of establishing communications, of presenting themselves as a social force. Not that the authorities disrupt such processes; rather they purposefully create conditions where such processes cannot materialize. Russian society fell apart into a number of ideological enclaves even before it had a chance to be formed, showing signs of life mainly on the Internet. Against such a mixed but otherwise anemic background the more radical trends stand out most prominently, of course—and today they actually occupy a more and more visible space on the ideological map of Russia; their influence grows. Official ideology, which in reality doesn't exist, cannot offer any alternatives, which is why the authorities try to utilize these trends. But, I have to admit, they are playing with fire.