

Russia: Authoritarian Resurgence

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Partner organisation: Sakharov Centre, established in 1990, www.sakharov-center.ru/english.html

“The 90s are both condemned and praised as a period. However, I have always felt that the arguments of both camps are not arguments about the 90s as a historical period, but rather arguments about different world views, and different sets of values. Memories people have about transition are highly fragmented. This is not, for instance, a topic families and friends discuss among themselves. I often feel that whenever we speak of transition and the 90s, rather than analysing the past, we speak about the future. In other words, we speak of the time thinking of what should have been, rather than of what really was. The 90s are the time we have lived without Sakharov – he left us on 14 December 1989. But his hopes and fears for a new world yet to come have stayed with us as challenges and questions that remained not tackled. Following his legacy, we try to look at the 90s as a multidimensional decade in the history of our country and try to escape from a black and white reading of history that attempts to diminish its importance.”

Polina Filippova, Coordinator

Introduction

Conservatism and authoritarianism are the two most precise terms to describe the condition of the political system and the public mood in today's Russia. As applied to the past, these refer to nostalgia over the Soviet period, which is seen as an era of stability and dignity, while the years of rapid societal transition in the 90s are linked in the public perception with chaos, disorientation, and national humiliation. Any alternative views of the period of transition only exist within relatively narrow circles of liberal intellectuals and entrepreneurs, independent from the state.

These attitudes emerged at the end of the 90s, as a natural consequence of mass disillusionment in the outcomes of both economic reforms, such as unjust privatisation, a sharp growth in wealth inequality and the demonstrative consumption of the rich, and political processes, such as fraudulent elections, corruption, and the abuse of power, in particular, by authorities and law enforcement agencies.



People's march in Moscow, 19 August 1991
Source: Ivan Simochkin

From Communism to Transition

Many people see the transition as a time of a radical change of values, as well as a time of challenges. This is why they call it uncertain, obscure and maze-like as often they recall the unlimited opportunities and the chances they had to radically change their lives. *"A generation divided by the 90s. A very diverse generation. Some have met it with high hopes, while others have experienced horrors and a total collapse of the values they have been taught to share"* (interview excerpt).

“It is like a fish bowl that has suddenly got all messed up, and every fish is experiencing a cognitive dissonance of some sort. Some found themselves buried under the sand, others caught something in their gills, and a scuba tank has fallen on somebody’s head. But still, some fish swam out to clear waters. Everything sinks, yet something floats to the surface” (interview excerpt).

"It all went adrift in a way, because, on the one hand, the kids were growing up, and I knew it was time to talk to them about universally important things. On the other hand, I did not quite know myself what was universally important and how to respond to all that" (interview excerpt).

"I suddenly realised that I can do anything. I have got my brain and know how to do things, so I can earn money. There are limitless green fields all around, lots of opportunities, and nobody tells you what to do" (interview excerpt).

However, since 2000, government propaganda has been actively supporting negative perceptions of the transition period and has contributed to the reinforcement of these attitudes amongst younger generations. This does not assume a renaissance of communist or left-wing ideologies. Instead, statism and imperial nationalism on the edge of chauvinism have become mainstream. All periods of political

instability and weakening of the central power are condemned - the 90s, along with the revolution of 1917, and the troubled times in the early 17th century. This set of values is promoted in many ways, from propaganda events, such as large-scale expos "The Rurikids" and "The Romanovs" (held with the participation of the Russian Orthodox Church, Ministry of Culture and the Military-Historic Society, headed by Sergei Naryshkin, ex-State Duma chairman), to history schoolbooks. The Bolsheviks and Lenin are disapproved of, while Stalin gets a certain level of respect. The greatest anti-hero is Mikhail Gorbachev. Attitudes towards Boris Yeltsin are generally negative, though more restrained. The absolute leaders of opinion polls about national symbols and heroes are always the rulers and warlords (see, for example, the Name of Russia⁴⁴ project or the Public Opinion Foundation's research)⁴⁵.



Monument of Vladimir Lenin in Moscow
Source: Adam Bowie

⁴⁴ Name of Russia, <http://www.nameofrussia.ru/>

⁴⁵ Public Opinion Foundation, Russian Historical Figures Influencing the Country, (2008), <http://bd.fom.ru/report/cat/istdeotcet>

From Transition to Authoritarianism

Over the last few years, ideological denial of the basic values of the transitional period has added up to the denial of the achievements of that time. Everything that liberal values comprise of, such as human rights, freedom, openness and individualism, is marginalised and declared wrong and false. Censorship is not only imposed upon the mass media, but also upon cultural institutions that translate these values. The Soviet understanding of education and culture as, primarily, ideological tools serving the rulers' interests, has returned.

Renationalisation of the economy has been rapid. The share of state-owned companies in Russia's GDP has doubled over just ten years and now exceeds 70%. While in the 90s most young Russians wished to work in private companies, they now usually aim to get a job with state-owned corporations, public agencies and power-wielding structures.

Simultaneously, the removal of the last remains of the Soviet system in social support, education, healthcare and science continues. These sectors have undergone what is called "monetisation" and receive budget funds depending on their efficiency indicators, such as how many people have received their "services", while the share of paid services is growing. It is quite possible this is what has caused the increase in the number of people who prefer to rely on their own resources and possibilities rather than on a state support (according to the Levada Centre, 78% in 2016). It is, seemingly, the only indicator which demonstrates certain social progress over the entire 25-year period.

On the whole, the recognised and valued fruits of the transition comprise of the understanding of people's own potential, and the absence of any "universally correct" templates for life trajectories and multiplicity of social norms. *"Nevertheless, for me, the bottom line of those years is comprehension that one could live in a different way, one could be free. And that one does not need to depend on the state; one would rather want to deal with it as little as possible"* (interview excerpt).

“Business and entrepreneurship emerged. People are more capable of fulfilling themselves, their inner resources. Not everyone is ready to march in lockstep, go to work every day, bow to the bosses. There are no forced obligations, some independence emerged” (interview excerpts).

Sakharov Centre

Maintaining Academician Sakharov’s humanistic legacy, the Sakharov Centre strives to contribute to the continuity of the civil rights movement in Russia, to pass on traditions, values, and experiences. This is the strategy that joins our work together with historic memories and with civil education. We aim to raise a new generation of civil activists who perceive themselves as part of a continuous movement that roots down to the Soviet dissent and who know how to employ modern civil practices, from international civil society.

“However, our country is not hopeless. It seems that many bad things have come back, yet people have changed. They’ve learnt how to protect their rights and how to do it together” (interview excerpt).

“People came to know better what their rights are and how to fight for them, or, at least, where to go to seek protection if they feel their rights are violated” (interview excerpt).

Work to understand the transitional period, or rather, the transformational era in Russia, is just beginning. Its task is modelling a coherent perception of this historical time. Meanwhile, traumatic experiences of social and economic transition often obscure a whole range of new practices and opportunities that people very quickly get used to and see as something natural (e.g. liberty of movement and residence, new consumer practices, new educational choices). It is highly important to trace the political and social history of the transition period, to put together a consistent concept of the reasons for the transition and transformation of the Soviet state. Our discussion programme aims to close the gap between generations and to keep alive and share the traditions of humanitarian and critical thinking.

Sakharov Centre strives to work with the practices of solidarity, to strengthen existing traditions and build new ones, to teach Russians how to be citizens. These are not easy tasks. Today's Russians remember the social collapse that followed the Perestroika and the mistakes that occurred during the transition: notions of "democracy" and "capitalism" are closely associated with ones' powerlessness and poverty and others' omnipotence and excessive wealth.

"Of course, it is sort of a global shake-up. Literally, over months, people lost everything when the factories they worked at closed down, or did not pay salaries month after month. For many, it was too much to withstand, so they succumbed to alcoholism, depression and misery. Nevertheless, those with some entrepreneurial talent were able to earn huge money. So, they did, and some did so by deceiving people" (interview excerpt).

Thus, a typical emotion for the transition period is disillusionment. Disillusionment is both "retrospective", (i.e. via reappraisal of this period over the last few years, within the context of negative government propaganda and official attitudes), and genuine old disillusionment that appeared back then, by the end of the transition period. The latter kind of disillusionment occurred due to a turnaround in the perception of authorities and the business circles closely connected to them. However, these feelings then extended to disillusionment in the values of democracy and liberalism.

“You see, it was like a romantic crush. We were full of high hopes and dreams of freedom and democracy, and then, by the end of the '90s, it turned out that most of them were actually pursuing their interests and simply wished to become rich, that they did not think of any public good” (interview excerpt).

In other words, it is necessary to reconsider the ideas of "democracy" and "liberal values", to explain, again and again, what they mean. To drag democracy out of the debris of the transition, this explanation

should rely on the values and skills that most people had at the beginning of the transition period.

Lessons for Civic Education

Civil education should be based on the transfer of values, provisions for continuity, the maintenance of historic memories, and participation in specific civil practices. Therefore, programmes for civic education should be multidimensional, so that they include components that are related to all of the objectives mentioned above. This, in particular, means involving both experts and actual civic activists, working out mechanisms for volunteer participation, and supporting communication networks to build up a community for the activists, volunteers and the supporters. Sakharov Centre's Moscow Open Human Rights School is an example of this type of programme. It comprises of lectures on the history of the human rights movement in the Soviet Union, meetings with prominent human rights advocates who began their work at the start of the 90s, and courses on human rights theory and practical civil advocacy cases.

About the authors

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