COMMENTARY

The poetry and prose of the Russian elections

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Between 10 December 2011, the day of the first mass protest against fraud in the recently held Russian parliamentary elections, and 4 March 2012, the day of the presidential vote, Moscow was a transformed place. The suffocating atmosphere of Putin's rule was disturbed as if by a sudden breath of fresh air. People came onto the streets en masse, with demonstrations in Moscow organized by the opposition attracting up to 100,000 participants at a time.

Suddenly, the reality of daily life, with its empty consumerism and attempts to navigate the omnipresent circuits of favours and bribes, was changed. People's apprehension of each other and fear of indifferent and cruel authorities dissipated, and was replaced by an overwhelming sense that a better society was possible. The leaders of the opposition, while riding the wave of this energy, did not offer any strategic vision beyond the crowds' expectations of a general change for the better. Leaders and protesters came from a range of political camps, and on the whole political demands did not represent any specific agenda, left or right. Rather than uniting to promote a single challenger to Putin's power, demonstrators asserted their power as citizens, feeling that they could renegotiate their relationship with the state. In one of the demonstrations, an elderly man standing next to me was carrying a self-made poster with a quotation from Alexander Pushkin's poem 'To Chaadaev': 'For while of freedom we all dream, while in our hearts there still lives honour, let's dedicate to our land the highest promptings of our spirits.' Pushkin belonged to a generation of early-nineteenth-century Russian gentry who hoped that Russia would follow the road of European civilization, with its ideals of enlightenment and liberalism, and see the end of absolutist rule. These hopes were crushed after the failure of the Decembrist uprising of 1825, and future hopes of Russia becoming a free, representative democracy were never realized.

Now a belief that Russia could become a 'normal European country', with the rule of law, democratic freedoms and honest elections seemed once again to animate the people at the demonstrations. One of the leaders of the opposition, a popular blogger and anti-corruption activist Alexei Navalnyi, had successfully rebranded Putin's United Russia party 'The Party of Crooks and Thieves', a name which has taken root so firmly that it now appears prominently in the results of a Google search for 'United Russia'. Putin himself was now called 'Thief number one'. It was not the accusation itself and the ongoing investigations of corruption and theft of public funds by officials that mattered – after all, the extent of the regime's corruption is well known – but the disenchantment with Putin's power, the sudden removal of a mystical, magic veil from it.

While, as Lenin put it, a central question of a revolution is the question of power, for the protesters this question concerned not who they wanted to bring to power, but the nature of power itself. Unlike the so-called 'coloured' revolutions in Ukraine, Georgia or Kyrgyzstan, where protesters united around specific political figures, the current

Russian protest movement has united the supporters of a variety of parties and political platforms. The recent protests were led not by partisan interests, but by republican sentiments. Like those involved in the eighteenth-century revolutions, the opponents of Putin's regime wanted Russia to have a different *form* of government, focusing on the rule of law and the power of the citizenry rather than obedience to the rule of man over man. The protests were triggered by Medvedev's refusal to stand for a second term as president, and by Putin's announcement on 24 September 2011 that his return to power had long been agreed between the two. The concrete prospect of this prearranged succession, and another twelve years of Putin's rule, offended and horrified many who had allowed themselves to hope that Medvedev's presidency could lead to an era of change for the better.

Idealism was not only rediscovered by ordinary Muscovites, whose last major mobilization for political freedom dates back to protests against the Communist regime at the end of 1980s; after initial shock at the scale of the protest, Putin himself quite unexpectedly embraced his own version of idealism. In previous years, perhaps in the knowledge that his power was unshakeable and his poll ratings sufficiently high, the relaxed and complacent ruler had been content to play in public the role of a Hollywood superman: one day descending into the depths of the ocean in a submarine, the next flying a bomber and then, like some Russian Indiana Jones, uncovering ancient amphorae from the seabed. Now he suddenly turned to a more authentic and time-honoured Russian script of blood and sacrifice. In a speech at a pre-election gathering of his supporters, many of whom were bussed in to Moscow from provincial towns for the event, he called for the people to stand for Russia. Quoting from Mikhail Lermontov's poem 'Borodino', he made a rallying call to his audience: 'Hey, lads! Is Moscow not behind us? By Moscow, then, we die, as did our brothers die before us!'

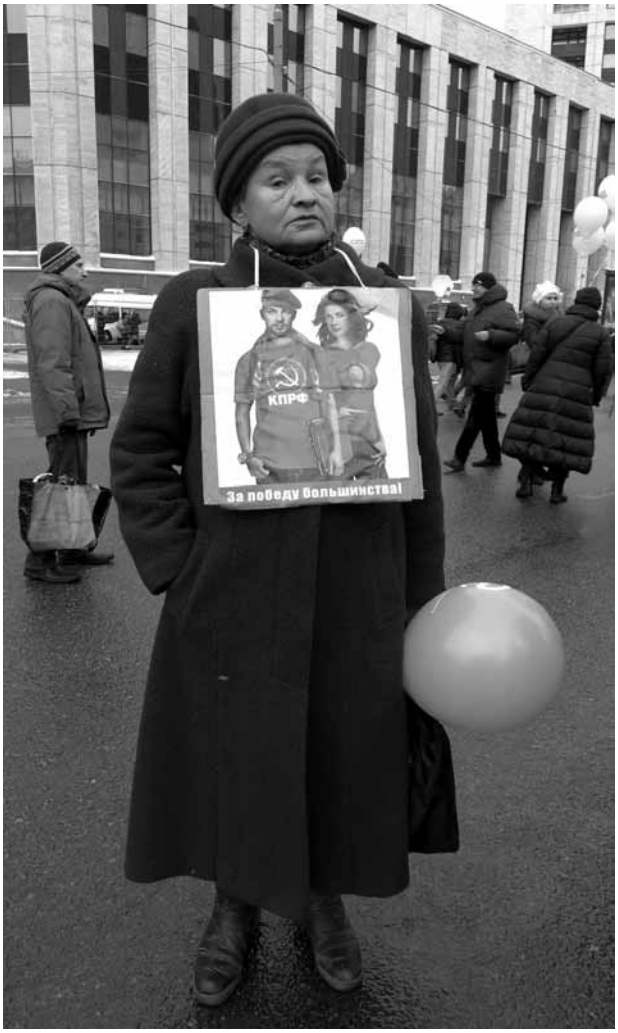
The call was met with derision by Putin's opponents, who questioned people's readiness to die so that he and his cronies can enjoy their wealth, kept largely in the banks and mansions of the perfidious West. But Putin, who was visibly moved by his own rhetoric, did not seem to see any irony here: people should love their country and their rulers unconditionally and be ready to sacrifice their lives without demanding anything in return. The feelings he sought to mobilize verged on the cult of death. After the presidential elections, at the rally organized to celebrate his victory, a tearful Putin said: 'I promised you we would win. We have won. Glory to Russia.' His victory (against opponents whom he himself hand-picked, while denying independent opposition leaders the opportunity to stand) was presented as a victory against enemy forces sponsored by the West. 'We showed that no one can direct us in anything! We were able to save ourselves from political provocations, which have one goal – to destroy Russian sovereignty and usurp power.'

Two Russias

The Russia that Putin seems to believe he leads is not a republic of free citizens, but a land of passive obedient subjects, where a person's only moment of heroic individuality, the apotheosis of his existence, can come at the moment of death for the motherland. The call for sacrifice at times of historical crisis has a long tradition, and has been used by the state many times since the war and the periods of forced collectivization and industrialization under Stalin, lingering on well into the Brezhnev years. As for the enemies plotting to usurp power in Russia, conspiracy theories have always played a prominent role in Russian social and cultural discourse, and Putin happily tapped into this paranoid narrative. The radical duality of a conspiratorial view of the world has historically had a particular relevance in the Russian cultural landscape. The Russian structuralists Lotman and Uspensky identified such duality as a particular feature of Russian cosmology, in which cultural values and cognitive perceptions (good and evil,

heaven and hell, Russia and the West, etc.), are divided by sharp boundaries without axiologically neutral zones. Contemporary Russian mass culture, with popular films such as *The Night Watch* and *The Day Watch* depicting Russia as a field of a messianic battle between forces of good and evil, is saturated with themes of plots and conspiracies. The theme of the 'West' conspiring to destroy Russia, undermine its moral order or confine it to a peripheral state had origins in, among other things, the Orthodox Church's anti-Western and anti-Catholic stance, and it featured strongly in Stalin's isolationism and his campaigns against the agents of the Western influence

At the same time, in the imaginary of the Russian rulers the masses have always been seen as children, who are by their nature innocent but can be easily seduced by evil, and who must be directed by wise ecclesiastical shepherds together with the benighted monarch. Indeed, Putin seems to believe that his position at the helm of the Russian state endows him with a quasi-sacred power, similar to that of the Russian tsars, to lead their charges through dangers and protect them from enemies. This belief finds its expression at both stylistic and rhetorical levels. Putin likes to present himself in this monarchical image at important state events. He appears to the collected dignitaries by walking through the golden gates of the Kremlin palace, or emerges on the Duma stage from behind the speaker's back. He constantly builds palaces for himself designed to emulate the splendour of the tsars' residencies. It is not for him to let the world know about his personal life, his children or even the fate of his wife (whose public absence has prompted rumours that, like several Russian tsars before him, he has sent his unloved wife to a monastery). Representative institutions like the Russian parliament are supposed to act as conduits of this power, with an added function of reconciling the interests of various lobby groups. (Boris Gryzlov, who until recently was the speaker of this institution, famously stated that 'Parliament is not a place for debates.')



The claim to the sacred power of the tsars dates back to the time of Ivan the Terrible, as does the accusation that anybody who challenges this power is the country's enemy. Ivan expressed this view in his famous correspondence with the nobleman Andrei Kurbsky, who escaped to Lithuania and questioned Ivan's absolutist rule. Kurbsky was condemned by the tsar as a traitor and an enemy of Christians. Putin in his own way continues this line. He accuses the opposition of consorting with the West and asks people not to 'betray their motherland and be with us, work for it and its people and love it like us, with the whole heart'. The ruler is equated with the country, and any attempts to challenge him are seen as Western-inspired treason. This logic is unfalsifiable, despite the lack of any evidence of Western involvement in the recent protests, and the angry reaction of the protesters themselves to the accusation.

In his election campaign, Putin tried to present himself as a kind tsar, a benevolent father of the nation. He made expansive promises to every possible social group. And his efforts were not in vain. During the election campaign, after an initial tumble, his

ratings started to rise, support for the protest movement decreased, and on 4 March, according to official election results, he collected 63.6 per cent of the vote. Even though independent observers gathered evidence of mass falsifications, it is undeniable that he would have won the elections even if no vote rigging had taken place, if not in the first then in the second round.

In Moscow the festive mood turned sour. The elections pitted two Russias against one another. In one Russia, people in large urban centres are longing for political freedom, open and honest elections, an end to corruption and police violence. In the other Russia, a country of small towns and villages, and areas where livelihoods are dependent upon the state, people seem supportive of Putin's quasi-monarchical rule and antagonistic to the West and the Westernized big city dwellers. This second Russia has won, and plunged the other half into despair.

But the key to the 'other' Russia's support for Putin's power lies not in his successful invocations of the spirit of the tsars, but in the need for a strong centre. The Kremlin undoubtedly retains much symbolic power, and remains the central point in the Russian universe. Where society is so unequal, and people's lives are lived in increasing isolation from each other, there is a need for a centre of gravity which can overpower the centrifugal forces. The figure of Putin himself is perhaps less significant than this need for common signifiers of nationhood. Following the trauma of the 1990s, with the mass dispossession and spectre of lawlessness associated with the transition to market capitalism, the fear of a new crisis remains ripe. The anti-absolutist, republican discourse that animates many Muscovites is lost on those who have few resources that would allow them social and economic autonomy, and who remain dependent on their local bosses and provincial patrons.

'Europeans' and others

The chorus of disappointment in the masses' inability to hear the call of freedom is as old as republican sentiment in Russia. Pushkin wrote of the people, 'O passive nation that will not rise to honour's call. What need have sheep of liberation? A hand will shear and slit them all. They leave to every generation a choking yoke and slaughter-stall.'[1] These days Internet blogs and public commentary by Moscow intellectuals are full of scathing references to Putin's voters and supporters, whom they call *gopniks* (chavs), *bydlo* (cattle) or *anchousy* (anchovies). Unlike the members of the self-proclaimed 'creative class', these are seen as the slaves of the regime; parasites unable or unwilling to work for themselves, who prefer to rely on state handouts. These days metropolitan snobbery finds a new ideological basis in the neoliberal discourse that equates failure with dependency and a lack of entrepreneurial spirit. As elsewhere in Eastern Europe, people occupying the social or geographical periphery are stigmatized by this discourse as 'losers', uneducated masses or cultural aliens, incapable of sharing the values of their more 'advanced' middle-class compatriots.[2]

While longing for a normal, 'European', life without corruption and bureaucratic oppression, the 'creative class' is not overly concerned with the lives of the distant poor. As for the poor who are nearer, they simply form part of this picture of normality, the 'prose' of urban life. In November 2009, a well-known Moscow liberal online magazine, *polit.ru*, published an article by one of its cultural commentators, the writer Leonid Kostyukov. The title of the article was 'Normal Life and its Meaning'. Here, the author claimed that the Russian intelligentsia needed to acknowledge the self-evident fact that everyday life in the country has become more normal. A part of the new everyday normality was the presence of homeless people in public spaces. He wrote:

> Not being a fan of Yeltsin, Putin and Medvedev, I have to admit: for the last fifteen years … I have been leading a normal life at the place where I live. I will concede straight away: this is a courtyard in the centre of Moscow, but these are not the most prestigious buildings;

ordinary families live here. People go to work, walk their dogs or children, they gradually get old. Children play, grow up, finish schools, enter universities and fall in love. Sounds of music come from the music school. A couple of alcoholics had been loitering, one of them has quietly disappeared. Homeless people swarm around the rubbish bins.

He insisted that this idyllic picture of his courtyard could be generalized to the whole of Russia, where, in contrast to the abnormal existence people had in Soviet times, with the perennial shortages of consumer goods and pervasive control of individual's lives by the state, 'life is normal'.[3] While homeless people are mentioned in passing (Kostyukov uses the word *bomzhi* – a derogatory term commonly applied to the homeless), the figure of a homeless person has become normalized as part of the urban landscape. For a member of the 'creative class' it is quite possible to look at homeless people 'swarming around rubbish bins' with the same gaze as one would look, say, at pigeons swarming around the statue of Nelson in Trafalgar Square. Together with alcoholics, the homeless are part of the poor that are 'always with us'. They are the poor who are not even threatening, but quietly form a background to the 'normal', relatively stable and prosperous lives of the urban middle classes.

This 'othering' or neutralization of the poor is a sign of how deeply neoliberal ideology has penetrated the mindsets of the Russian metropolitan middle classes. As elsewhere in post-socialist countries, social inequality, social exclusion and a living wage have not been part of the reform agenda, and to express concern about these issues would either be stupidly beholden to old Soviet ways, or be populist or nationalist.[4] The neoliberal 'expert' community see proposals to introduce progressive taxation and other methods of limiting economic inequalities as threatening macroeconomic stability and unacceptable for the most 'modernized' sectors, the urban middle classes, which represent 20–25 per cent of the population. The latter are seen as the vanguard of the nation, as people with 'European values'. They are more individualistic, less supportive of redistribution, and tend to believe in equality of opportunity rather than equality of outcomes. This is in contrast with the 'traditional' statist and egalitarian values of those who do not belong to the affluent minority. And yet there is an obvious blind spot when it comes to other resources of these self-reliant 'Europeans', which the masses lack: the connections that allow them to access good hospitals, the opportunity to make successful careers, and to get their offspring into a good school or university, or find them a good job. According to one recent poll, among the middle classes only 40 per cent 'do not have connections that would allow them to solve all of the above problems', while among the rest of the population this figure rises to around 65 per cent. Yet the authors of the report, which discusses both the 'European' values of the modernizing class and its parochial practices, noticed no contradiction here.

There is a profound disconnection between the lives of liberal 'individualists', who in fact are well plugged into the state and non-state distributive networks, and the mass of 'dependants', who struggle to keep their jobs, to find money to pay for their children to go to university and to afford even substandard health care. The leaders of the opposition movement have been unable to bridge this gap and offer a unifying and attractive narrative to a mass electorate. By contrast, Putin's propaganda machine has tried to fill this gap, stoking old phobias about the West and the treacherous intelligentsia, ready to betray their compatriots for the Yankee dollar.

So what is the future for the Russian opposition? Will it be suffocated – by the regime and by the indifference of the 'other' Russia? Is it Russia's destiny to remain a country where, as the Russian historian Klyuchevsky famously said, characterizing Ivan the Terrible's regime, 'The state grew bloated as the people wasted away.' In contrast to the Western Oedipal archetype, where the son must kill the patriarch to find his place in the world, the Russian archetype has been the father killing the son. This is a key trope of Russian history and fiction. Ivan the Terrible killed his son in a fit of rage. Peter the Great killed the son who was plotting with his Catholic enemies to overthow him. In Nikolai Gogol's novel *Taras Bulba*, the hero kills his son, who had forsaken his Cossack heritage for a Polish girl. In Mikhail Sholokhov's story 'A Birthmark', the father kills the son during the Civil War without recognizing him – and then, in a reversal of Oedipus's story, kills himself. In Russia the old seems destined to kill the new. Will the old kill the new again, or will the civic idealists find ways to mobilize the country?

Notes

1. Translated by A.Z.Foreman, http://poemsintranslation.blogspot.com/2010/10/alexander-pushkin-freedoms-sower-from.html.
2. M. Buchowski, 'The Specter of Orientalism in Europe: From Exotic Other to Stigmatized Brother', *Anthropological Quarterly*, vol. 79, no. 3, 2006, pp. 463–82; T. Zarycki, 'Orientalism and Images of Eastern Poland', in M. Stefański, ed., *Endogenous Factors in Development of Eastern Poland*, Innovatio Press, Lublin, 2010, pp. 73–88.
3. www.polit.ru/analytics/2009/11/07/normalnayazhizn.html.
4. Z. Ferge, 'Wellfare and Ill-fare Systems in Central Eastern Europe', in R. Sykes, B. Palier, P. Prior and J. Campling, eds, *Globalization and European Welfare States: Challenges and Change*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2001; T. Zarycki, 'Socjologia Krytyczna na Peryferiach', *Kultura i Spoleczenstwo*, vol. 53, no. 1, 2009.