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Russia

“Power Should Return to the People”

- IV Online magazine - 2023 - IV576 - January 2023 -

Publication date: Tuesday 3 January 2023

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What happens to Russia after peace is achieved? How can we overcome the consequences of the February catastrophe? What political and economic measures can we anticipate today? Historian Alexander Shubin contemplates the past and future of Russian society in conversation with the Russian/English site *Posle*.

— **What historical analogies can help us understand our complex present and imagine our possible future?**

Analogies can't prove any claims, but the historical experience is certainly significant. Let's draw lessons from a century ago, when the tedious World War I eventually led to an across-the-board crisis, including the Civil War and economic collapse, from which the country had to recover laboriously in the following years. At that time, Russia had to enter the course of modernization. After all these events, the shift was even more painful and sacrificial. We now also have to face the challenge of post-industrial transition if we want to move forward and not collapse. The sooner we throw away phony imperialist ambitions and focus on the country's real internal problems, the more chances we will have to avoid absolute tragedy.

— **How can the conflict possibly end, and what might Russia's postwar future look like?**

Very soon after February 24, I predicted how everything would end. The goals of the so-called military operation cannot be achieved, there will be no victory, and the consequences for Russia can be as dire as for Ukraine. So far, this prognosis seems accurate. The repressive legislation makes it challenging even to discuss the issue. But events speak for themselves, so one can already talk about what will follow in the next historical period. Unfortunately, it will start in a cul-de-sac, with a frustrated population and empty pockets. We will have to painstakingly restore relations with our neighbors, who could not even imagine that destruction and murder on such a scale were possible in the region in the twenty-first century. But state officials, to preserve their power and property, will do anything to turn people against each other. Making up with European neighbors will be formidable, but it is too early to discuss a potential compromise. Although one can see its general outline, the parties involved will not take it seriously any time soon.

Today it is more pressing to think about how to build everyday life inside the country. People will have returned from the war with crippled psyches, poverty will worsen in the cities, and squalor will spread over the vast spaces given to us by history, which we, in the pursuit of imperial grandeur, could not take proper care of. Only a common task of putting our life in order based on new principles can save Russia from the mutual resentment of people who are left high and dry. Not on the old path of peripheral capitalism, which has exhausted itself and, in the current conditions, can only pull us into a fatal vortex. The ideal course should rely on post-industrial technologies and proper social relations. This can provide a reasonably affordable way out of the country's crisis. We must turn our eyes to the issues inside the country, which can give everything for a happy life.

— **Can the geopolitical situation within which the February catastrophe continues to unfold also be interpreted as a change in the world order, including the transition of international hegemony from the United States to China?**

Geopolitical constructs focused on individual states wrestling over world hegemony no longer work in the twenty-first century since the states' economies are too intertwined. The processes we witness today in Russia, China, and the Middle East are episodes of the great crisis that started in 2008. This situation is reminiscent of the Great Depression of the 30s and its aftermath. Back then, the collapse of the capitalist “prosperity” of the 20s eventually led to a world

war. The “Arab Spring,” for example, did not bring about profound social transformation and can therefore happen again. We have also seen how deeply the pandemic disrupted the Western system. Military conflicts in the post-Soviet space and China’s attempt to change its peripheral position in the economy through social consolidation and a coercive foreign policy can also be interpreted as part of this ongoing global process. But true hegemony requires more than GDP growth. We need a shift to more advanced social relations adequate to the post-industrial era. We need a strategy that the world can see as progressive and attractive.

By 2008 the globalized world no longer had a single leader, and the system gravitated toward extraterritoriality. Opposing elites could reside on neighboring streets in New York and Seoul, for example, cooperating and competing internationally. However, the crisis weakened and undermined the system of global capitalism. This setback will end with a regrouping of forces and strategies, not with China becoming the world’s leader, as it lacks a clear blueprint for the people of the United States and the European Union. The idea that there is a hegemonic state (or even three or four) is outdated and was adequate only for the beginning of the twentieth century. Now we live in a different period when Ukrainian politicians can influence German policies, Russian politicians can influence American ones, Chinese politicians can influence Russian ones, and so on. While upholding the values of the world order, today’s U.S. leaders no longer have the ambition to rule directly over the world’s elites. Instead, they want elites to think similarly to guarantee predictability, security, and successful business. China’s elites do not seem to follow their mindset, which causes mutual mistrust and anxiety. While China was modernizing, there was a willingness to learn and adjust. With completed modernization, the state now claims to be the second center of a bipolar world. But from there to the decline of the United States, it is still a long way off. If the current crisis leads to revolutionary upheavals in the U.S. and the West in general, for example, this wave will also reach and devastate China. In my view, arguments about who rules over what country or some part of it are no longer valid in the twenty-first century. In terms of contemporary technology and culture, it no longer matters. For those who want to move beyond the frame of the Cold War, realizing the prospects of extraterritorial human interaction will help overcome territorial conflicts and nationalist attitudes.

— This said, we see that territorial conflicts are still ongoing. Does this mean that the project of globalization has reached a dead end? What can replace it?

International conflicts are a product of nation-building in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries when industrial society was forming. Globalization at the end of the twentieth century also developed within the framework of industrial society. Therefore, it could not overcome international conflicts and even aggravated them as borders were drawn to satisfy the interests of the elites. Since 2008, the crisis of globalization has spurred conflicts because elites, industrial in their origin, were regrouping. However, if the world restructures on a post-industrial basis, the ground for international territorial conflicts will eventually disappear. You will be more likely to communicate with someone who lives hundreds or thousands of kilometers away than with your neighbor. The language used in a given territory is fundamental in an industrial society. In the future, however, it will no longer matter as people will be able to live with neighbors whose native language they don’t understand. If you don’t like your neighbors, you don’t have to communicate with them. Because most jobs will be remote, you will be able to choose the circle of communication that you like from all the inhabitants of the planet, not just your fellow citizens. If people’s communication moves into subcultures, united by common interests, national identity will lose meaning. Not very soon, but we will come to that.

— What are these subcultures? How do you imagine them?

People will be united by what is most precious to them. It can be a profession, a hobby, an ideological desire to change the world, a spiritual practice, or something else. I see the subculture as something similar to a trade union, a cooperative, and a club for sharing experiences.

— Russia is a multi-ethnic state. What should its policy toward different ethnic communities be to avoid conflicts and violation of rights?

We live in a country that recognizes its ethnic diversity. On paper, ethnic minorities are respected, especially since they are numerous. But in reality, the state is trying to unite the [“Russian world.”](#) Why not the, say, Turkic world? And why, when discussing the history of our country, do politicians portray as something malicious the “Tatar-Mongol Yoke”? [note: This is the common name for the Mongol invasion of Kievan Rus’ and the Grand Duchy of Moscow; the age of Mongol rule of the thirteenth to the fifteenth century] After all, Russia is the successor not only (and predominantly) to Rus’ but also to the Golden Horde.

We should finally acknowledge that Russia is not equal to the Russian nation-state and that nationalism in any form (including the aspiration to lead the so-called “Russian world”) is destructive. We must stop treating different ethnic groups as “minorities” and constructing privileges according to the region. Citizens must have full rights everywhere, and traditions must be respected not only in the territories assigned to specific ethnic groups but everywhere equally, from Murmansk to Vladivostok. I am talking about traditions compatible with universal values. They guarantee a citizen’s right to live according to their cultural identity and those around him not to suffer if particular conventions are archaically associated with violence. Forcing traditions on anyone is unacceptable in contemporary society.

— What economic program for overcoming the post-war crisis do you think Russian society needs? And what can be done now?

First, it is clear that projects requiring significant budget expenditures will not work. As much as we’d like to fund the social sector, there will be a tremendous economic shortage under any outcome of the current conflict. In these challenging conditions, only a social shift can save the day. There must be a redistribution of profits within enterprises from owners and managers in favor of workers and guarantees of social rights. The capitalists must be first to tighten the purse strings. But as the crisis deepens, this won’t be enough.

Life in overcrowded cities will become far more challenging. Since life in towns and villages is uncomfortable and financially precarious, people come to the big cities, particularly Moscow. But Moscow will also lose financial flows from global trade and the fossil fuels market. It will be necessary to organize life with modest expenditures. And for this, we have an advantage: a vast space where you can settle in with maximum comfort. Suppose work is remote, so people can live, for example, in technologically advanced buildings with a local energy supply (which does not exclude urban energy networks but will be more economical), 3D printers, providing cheap household items and technologies, and hydroponic systems for growing crops. This way, self-sufficiency can be partially achieved. This is fantastic for cutting costs without sacrificing the quality of life. One can argue that these technologies are expensive, but once a personal computer, a printer, and a cell phone were luxuries. Now they are in the mainstream. If there is a demand for the technology, it becomes cheaper. And social demand can be formed not only through incentives from the state but also through social relations that make living convenient with these technologies.

Today the country’s resources are concentrated in the hands of the ruling elites, primarily in Moscow and a few other cities, and people gravitate toward these resources in their pursuit of well-being. If resources remain local, people will live more or less evenly throughout the territory of Russia (maybe, except in places with harsh climates). We need decentralization of power to keep resources from being absorbed by the center. Russia should change from a de facto empire into a federation (incidentally, in line with the constitutional principles of the Russian Federation), with autonomous regions of equal rights and effective self-governance. Power should return to the people; the local authorities should make most decisions and allocate to the federal government as much as the people deem necessary. The management of the central authorities should be strictly limited to areas of common concern: civil rights; social and environmental standards; foreign policy and security within borders; the crime control. Everything else people can decide within their communities. In brief, I call this program “2S-2R”: social transformation, self-government, regulation of the economy, and re-modernization on post-industrial principles.

— You often talk about post-industrial society, but your concept differs from that in textbooks. How do you

understand it, and how can it be achieved?

There is no single point of view on this issue in textbooks. As the author of one, I am sure of it. This is a broad topic, so I will answer briefly here. The reader can find out more in the published [“Informaliat Manifesto”](#) [in Russian]. There is a widespread belief that modern Western societies already live in a post-industrial era, but it is incorrect. To be considered post-industrial, a society must differ from traditional agrarian and modern industrial urban society; otherwise, it is not “post-.” Industrial society is based on hierarchy, top-down management, and narrow specialization of a worker, who functions as an instrument in an organization and production cycle. The contemporary world is still primarily organized according to this principle: “You’re the boss; I’m the fool.” Instead, post-industrial society should be entirely different, not hierarchical but self-governing and horizontal. People’s activities will not be functional but predominantly creative. The social division into ruling and laboring classes will die, and the primary social strata of the future, which I call the “informaliat,” will combine creative, organizational tasks with the realization of the idea: “I decided, so I did it.” Automation and self-sufficiency can provide for this social arrangement, and creative human activity will dominate over “labor” that implements other people’s ideas.

Post-industrial society is also post-capitalist, essentially socialist in the original, pre-Stalin sense. Many movements and organizations that raised the red flag were not organized according to socialist principles: they were hierarchical and authoritarian. Genuine socialism is a society of equality, self-government, self-organization, and creativity, i.e., post-industrial.

Today, thanks to computer and information technologies and a new level of communication, we can begin the transition to the society that humanists, socialists, and futurists of the past were dreaming of. But this also requires a transformation in consciousness, a cultural revolution. We need to stop clinging to the old fetishes of wealth and power, the pursuit of financial triumph and greatness of the state.

Even the first steps in the transition can make some bleeding-edge problems of our time disappear. A comfortable life is possible almost everywhere, not just in metropolises. The demographic outflow from cities will also improve urban life: traffic jams and crowds will disappear, and crazy high-rise development will stop. The ecological situation will improve. That means better health. Many people will be able to work remotely and leave factories because automation is actively developing. Accordingly, these people will be able to engage in creative activities and inventions. But even in the industry, self-management will improve production and working conditions. When I was young, I worked in a factory. Some workers expressed exciting ideas about improving labor organization, but the bosses did not need it. The bosses feared change and had a snobbish attitude toward the grassroots. So wrong.

We need to create a society in which creativity and equality reign. It’s a long way off, but it begins with small steps. Of course, the elites will do everything to prevent this because it means a social death for them. However, the severe consequences of the current “operations” can significantly undermine the power of the elites in our country. The failure of their old methods can cause a split and encourage some from the ruling and lower classes to live in a new way. Then it will be possible to move on to post-industrial society. There are already many components at hand that just need to be brought together. A critical mass of organized activists inspired by this idea must come together. If this subjective factor does not materialize, Russia will continue falling into social decay or become an archaic country holding others at bayonet point. The world, in general, is at a grand junction, just like at the end of the Middle Ages before the beginning of industrial modernization. In Europe, it might have begun already in the XIV century, but the people at the time did not dare to break with the old way of thinking and lifestyle. Only in the XVI century, with the beginning of the Reformation, the transition became irreversible. It is up to the new generation to determine whether this century will be characterized by a prolonged crisis or a step toward a new peaceful future.

26 December 2022

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