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Mikhalkov's View on Order

By Victor Davidoff

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In 1998, film director Nikita Mikhalkov produced and directed the epic saga "The Barber of Siberia" in which he played the role of Tsar Alexander III. Apparently, Mikhalkov liked the role so much that he decided to play it again in real life. So he did what tsars often do: He issued a manifesto.

His manifesto on "enlightened conservatism" is called "Pravo and Pravda," which involves some Russian wordplay. The word "pravo" has three meanings: a right, law or legal order. The meaning tends to depend on the speaker's political leanings: When liberals talk about pravo, they tend to mean rights; when conservatives use the word, they usually mean law and order.

In Mikhalkov's manifesto, the word "pravo" appears 25 times, and — much befitting a conservative &mdash it is used in the sense of "rights" only once. He qualifies rights as "the public obligation to answer for one's actions within limits of traditions and norms set by society and supported by the state." This immediately brings to mind the last Soviet Constitution, which stated that civil rights were permitted only to the extent that they

"strengthened and developed the socialist system."

It's not surprising that Mikhalkov's manifesto didn't get a lot of support. In a country with a chronically dysfunctional political system and an average monthly salary of about 10,000 rubles ($330), a call to defend the status quo is like a cheer to keep up the good work of stagnation.

Bloggers didn't appreciate Mikhalkov's appeal to Russian traditions. Blogger avn475 tried to imagine the response to a document like this overseas: "Imagine the reaction if, for example, an American professor produced a manifesto about how blacks should work on plantations, obey and respect the master &mdash and that this is their great heritage."

The popular actor Stas Sadalsky posted a funny but accurate paraphrase of Mikhalkov's manifesto: "Brothers and Sisters! Our Homeland is in danger! For 20 years, we stole everything that was created over 70 years of inhuman labor and hardship. There's still something left, but there might not be enough for our children. You must tighten your belts and in a great burst of will &mdash for Mother Russia, the Orthodox faith, and so on. Thrust your shovels into the frozen earth to bring forth for us, your masters, the nation's new wealth. Then we'll privatize it all. Thanks in advance."

But there seem to be some supporters of Russian traditions in the ruling circles. For example, Constitutional Court Chief Justice Valery Zorkin commented in Rossiiskaya Gazeta on the decision of the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg, which called the ban on gay pride parades in Moscow illegal.

Well-known gay activist Nikolai Alexeyev, who had appealed to the European Court in Strasbourg, responded to Zorkin's comment: "On the one hand, all citizens are equal before the law and court. But Zorkin states that there is a certain 'cultural, moral and religious code' that considerably alters this equality." Alexeyev fears that the Constitutional Court could ban any action by any group of citizens if it is not, in Zorkin's view, in keeping with the culture, morality, and religion of Russia.

The new Russian conservatives, who love to appeal to Russia's history and traditions, ignore everything in the country's past that speaks to the importance of human rights. None of them took part in the traditional reading of the names of people who suffered from Soviet repressions, which was held on Friday on Lubyanskaya Ploshchad. People came and read names for 12 hours, while a virtual reading was held on the Internet.

The blogger blaginin posted a list of people with the same last name who were repressed in the 1920s and 1930s. There were 56 Blaginins on the list, men and women, who were given sentences from exile to execution. The majority of them had committed no crimes. They were simply kulaks, or successful farmers.

It's a pity that these new conservatives don't take part in these readings. Maybe they'd realize that there are some traditions of the Russian government &mdash traditions like the trampling of human rights &mdash that would be much better to reject.

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