The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Mirror of Kushchyovskaya

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December 19, 2010



Russians' attitude toward self-government seems a bit like St. Augustine's stand on chastity: Give it to us, Lord, but not now.

In theory, shifting power from the center to the regions is a good thing. It seems natural that in a country as big as Russia — territorially, the biggest in the world — people must be free to decide what is best for them and that more federal powers will be shared with regional governmental bodies.

But when it comes to actually using their freedoms, regions often fail to build something remotely democratic. It's been 20 years since the Soviet collapse, but we have witnessed tragedies that would seem unimaginable during the Soviet period.

The November Kushchyovskaya murders are a chilling example. At first, the vicious cruelty of how 12 people, including four children, were killed evoked images of the "Texas Chain Saw Massacre." When more information became available, the

storyline changed: A local gang has been terrorizing the town for years, and all that time the authorities have been covering up murder, extortion and rape.

Crippled by fear, it is natural that people often give up fighting. What is baffling in the Kushchyovskaya case, though, is that residents are not leaving the town.

In reality, Kushchyovskaya is a wealthy, even prosperous, town. Its booming economy, based on the growing demand for the locally grown food, is in many ways a role model for many of the country's regions. It is a relatively rare example of economic success that has nothing to do with export of oil, gas or other natural resources.

The peculiar social order in

Kushchyovskaya is a part of its well-being. On the surface, the town had a police force, investigators and prosecutors, but they were all focused on their own interests instead of upholding and protecting the law. A powerful and violent local mafia established its own laws for the town, and local residents obeyed them — perhaps because some order is better than no order at all.

"Laws are only servants of culture," wrote German poet and philosopher Friedrich Schiller. "Nations in their adulthood require a different guidance from that of their childhood."

What the people of Kushchyovskaya managed to build was the most primitive legal system of all: blood vengeance. A criminal offense — including rape or murder — became essentially a private matter, with the state having no control over the matter.

The history of Russia is dominated by hierarchical rule. In many ways, Russia is ruled like an army. The country has always responded to historical challenges by strengthening power in the center. This was seen, for example, in response to the 250-year Tartar yoke from the 13th to the 15th century, the Novgorod siege by Ivan the Terrible in 1570 and the reforms of the Peter the Great, as well as during the Soviet period.

President Boris Yeltsin, tried to change this when he introduced a new Constitution in 1993. It is based on a clear-cut division of powers between the center and the regions. Furthermore, the 1995 law on local self-government was very liberal, and it seemed that the state really wanted to pass some authority to the regions.

But Yeltsin's attempts at institutionalizing federalism were reversed when Vladimir Putin came to power. He was against everything that was local and independent. In December 2004, direct elections of governors were abolished and replaced by presidential nominations. Now, proposed police reforms make the country even more centralized than it was during the Soviet period.

Historians believe that the social order is the truest reflection of the nation and its values. That is why many collections of laws are known as "mirrors." Once something gets into the public eye, it tends to start popping up all over the country.

It seems that Kushchyovskaya is not unique. Self-government has failed in many regions. As such, Russia is taking backward steps. It is become an overcentralized and overbearing state — not unlike its predecessor, the Soviet Union. Hopefully, it will be the lesser evil.

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Original url: https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2010/12/19/mirror-of-kushchyovskaya-a3871