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Russian Capitalism Is More Pure

By Boris Kagarlitsky

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In Mikhail Bulgakov's "The Master and Margarita," the devil appears as a character named Woland who, when confronted with a man who does not believe in his existence, gives the ironic comment: "Well now, that is interesting. Whatever I ask you about — it doesn't exist!"

The attitude of Russia's liberal intelligentsia regarding capitalism follows roughly the same logic. If you read political analysts, bloggers and sociologists, the only possible conclusion is that there is a complete absence of any presence of capitalism in Russia. According to these pundits, Russia lacks a real bourgeoisie, middle class or liberals worthy of the name. To their thinking, Russia does not even have a real market, much less capitalism.

It is not difficult to guess that this pessimistic assessment of reality is the flip side of liberal idealism. The West is taken as the standard, and everything in Russia differing from it is considered "abnormal." Nobody bothers to recall which stages and struggles European countries passed through to achieve the prosperity and well-ordered society they enjoy today. With a little effort, Russians would easily discover many similarities clearly demonstrating that the capitalism and bourgeoisie in this country are not only the real thing, but that the

Russian version is even closer to the pure form. This is because Russia does not have Europe's checks and balances that are provided by a developed civil society, strong labor movements and strict legal requirements.

But its divergence with the West is far from being the only criterion for the "incorrectness" of Russian capitalism. The ideal of the West exists only in ideologists' books and in the imaginations of their readers. That concept does not see the West as a society full of contradictions, where democracy is a battleground of different and often incompatible interests, as a constantly changing social and economic system with various advantages and disadvantages, but as a changeless ideal and an image of eternal perfection.

It is therefore not surprising that Russian society fares poorly in such comparisons. How could Russia's harsh reality ever compare to such a lofty, pie-in-the-sky ideal? Even the European reality fails to live up to such standards.

That is why Russian commentators who encounter aspects of daily life and politics in Europe or the United States tend to react with astonishment and anger. This has given rise to a new brand of anti-Western literature written not by nationalists or advocates and defenders of Orthodox holiness, but by the most fervent supporters of the West who have become disillusioned with their belief in liberalism.

Although they continue to believe in the ideal of perfect capitalism, trouble-free society and a market guided by an invisible hand that never errs, they now condemn Europe and the United States as not living up to that ideal.

But nobody seems interested in discovering the cause for this divergence. They often see the root of this evil as stemming from too many foreign immigrants. At that point, Russian liberalism dovetails easily with fascism and racism, and that brings us back to reality. After all, nobody would argue that Russia does not have fascism and racism.

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