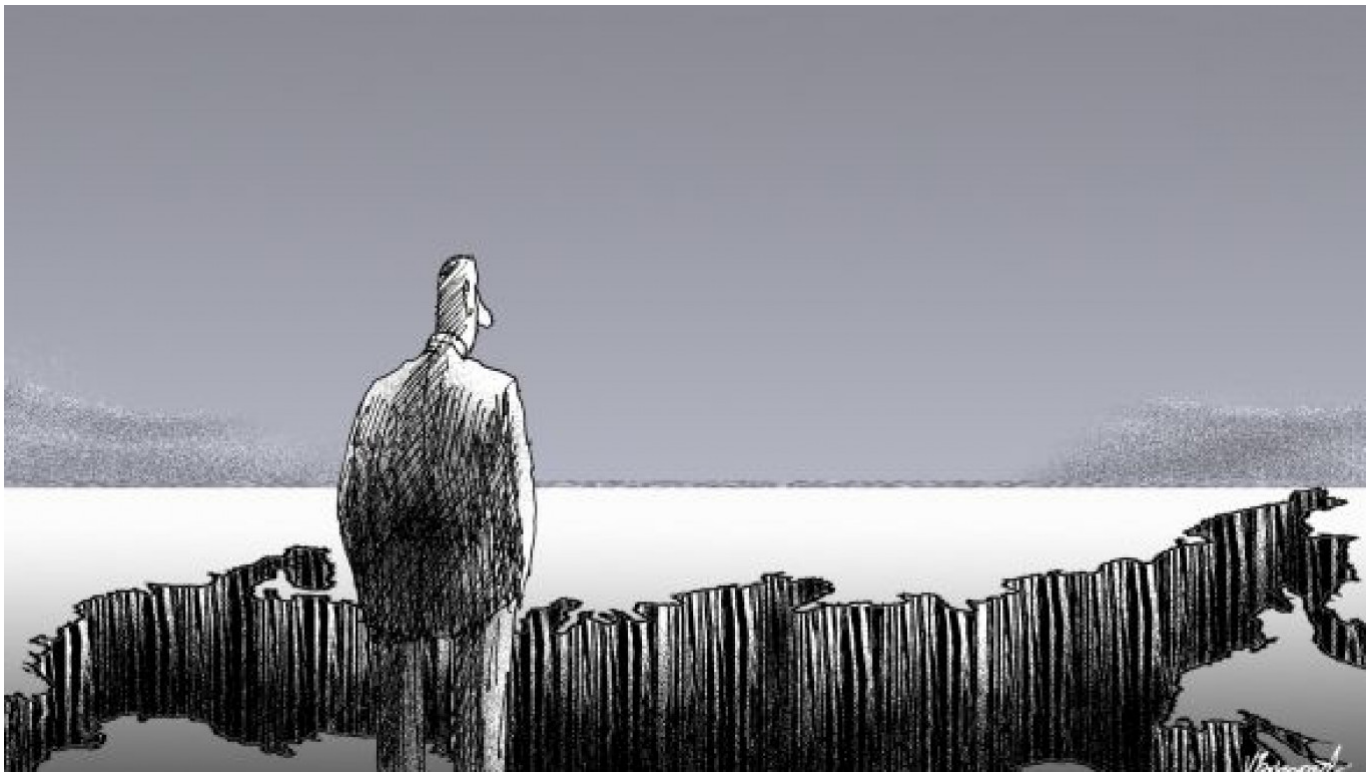
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# Avoiding Russia's Apocalypse

By Zakhar Prilepin

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Start with yourself" is one of the most irritating phrases I know.

Do you want to change the country? "Start with yourself."

Do you want to change the government? "Start with yourself."

If we continue this reasoning, we may very well hear: "Do you want to punish criminals? Start with yourself."

If I start with myself, the criminal will get away.

I have a big axe to grind with our government. That is precisely why I will not "start with myself." While we are "working on ourselves," they are working on us. Thus, I have a better idea: Let's start with our leaders and bureaucrats instead.

I have been elevating my soul, observing cleanliness and generally behaving myself, but can anybody tell me what that has to do with the Russian army, the population of Siberia, the activities of the transportation minister or the collection of taxes?

Even if I did start with myself, what changes could I possibly make in my personal life that would have any effect on whether the country's passenger ships sink or whether our airplanes crash?

It is time to stop making such ridiculous generalizations as, "If everyone would overcome his weaknesses, then the world would improve."

That is a questionable proposition at best. We are adults, and we know that half of the world's population will never become enlightened. Ordinary human stupidity, greed and lust cannot be overcome or extinguished. They will disappear only when human life on this planet ends.

The condition of our soul is a private matter. The condition of the state is our common concern. We should never confuse what is private with what is public, much less substitute one for the other.

If you were to corner someone who loves saying "Start with yourself" and ask him about a concrete problem, he would answer, "It's not my responsibility." That is because he is responsible only for himself, and everything beyond that is just an abstraction.

Even the country in which such people live is an abstraction. They are often reluctant to speak of Russia as their motherland because that is also an abstraction.

But they are wrong.

The country is a concrete thing — even more real than we are individually. Russia is something you can touch with your hand, see on a map and read about in a book.

Russia is a vast country spanning much of the globe and more than a millennium of human history. For me, Russia is a living organism.

I hope we can finally stop using the shameful but popular mantras of "It's not my responsibility" and "I pay my taxes — what else do you want from me?"

Those words are an insult to the memory of people who never held such thoughts.

If we rarely reread Russia's rich classic literature, we should at least recall the basic storylines of our great works, such as Nikolai Gogol's "Taras Bulba," Alexander Pushkin's "The Captain's Daughter," Leo Tolstoy's "War and Peace" or Mikhail Sholokhov's "And Quiet Flows the Don." They accurately capture the Russian character that has been formed over the past 400 years.

You will not find one hero in these novels who says: "It's not my responsibility" or "I pay taxes — what else do you want from me?"

The idea that someone has no ties or obligations to the land on which he was raised or to the other people who inhabit it is a sign of deep infantilism. That is how children behave.

And these adult children will say: “Why should I be the one who has to do it? Let someone else do it.”

Then the “father” steps in and, with a single look of stern reproach, tells the country’s “children” why they must do this or that for the benefit of the country. And many children believe it.

For me, our motherland is by no means the people who work for the Kremlin at a particular point in time. They do not mean anything at all. The motherland is a complete whole, unchanging over time. It is like God. Can the God of 1812 be any different from the God of 2012?

The motherland also bestows gifts upon us from time to time. At other times, it punishes us. Sometimes it is benevolent, and other times it is ugly and detestable. But the motherland always leaves us the freedom to choose to be worthy or unworthy of it.

In the end, the most worthy will be those who remained faithful to the simplest of all constants: Holy Russia.

Men should be masculine, women should be feminine, and both should have many children. And the land on which we live should belong to us because it is permeated with the blood and lives of those brave men and women who protected and preserved it for us throughout our history.

Anyone who publicly says, “I am not responsible for anything” should have the soles of their feet flogged with a stick in the city’s central square.

When asked about our leaders’ corruption, cruelty and immorality, if anyone answers that we should “start with ourselves,” we need to teach them that this mentality is indecent and unworthy of Russian citizens. Otherwise, we will fashion our own apocalypse with our own hands.

That apocalypse will be the disappearance of the Russia I know.

I think that if things continue as they are now, Russia’s end will come slowly, even sluggishly. But later, only a few years on, one of my children will shout toward the east and then toward the west, and not even an echo will come in answer. And if one does come, it will be in some unknown dialect.

Either we understand that we are not the highest point of creation, but only a link, or else we understand nothing at all.

And our children will not understand us because they will forget the language that we are now speaking.

Zakhar Prilepin is a writer and publicist. This comment appeared on “From the Pulpit” (“Проповеди”), a joint television project between Dozhd TV and The Moscow Times. “Проповеди” can be seen on tvrain.ru

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