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Back to the Future in Russia

By John Freedman

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What a week. What a mess. What farces! What tragedies!

For your information, my appetite for irony is at zero. Don't read anything into those exclamation points except what grammar blandly intends. Merriam-Webster declares that an exclamation point is "a punctuation mark used to show a forceful way of speaking or a strong feeling." I'm with both Merriam and Webster on that.

Do I write about the scandal that exploded when playwright and comic writer Viktor Shenderovich published a piece that, in part, compared Russian president Vladimir Putin's affection for figure skater Yulia Lipnitskaya to Hitler's suport of Olympic shot-putter Hans Welke in 1936?

Do I discuss the relatively small group of protesters, including Pussy Riot members Nadezhda Tolokonnikova and Maria Alyokhina, actor Alexei Devotchenko, writer Lev Rubinshtein, critic and journalist Ksenia Larina, actress Yelena Koreneva, who gathered outside a Moscow court on Friday to show solidarity with eight defendants facing prison terms of five to seven years

for their participation in an anti-Putin rally on May 6, 2012?

Do I make an effort to synthesize the hundreds of thousands of commentaries that artists in Ukraine and Russia made as the Maidan protests in Kiev peaked with appalling violence and bloodshed?

Do I turn to the short-lived performance by an expanded Pussy Riot group in Sochi that ended almost before it began with a man dressed like a Cossack lashing Tolokonnikova and others with a horse whip?

Do I attempt to illuminate the moves being taken to weaken the Echo Moskvy radio station, one of the last bastions of free media in Russia, by way of replacing its longtime general director, even as efforts to squeeze Rain (Dozhd) TV out of existence continue?

Or how about college student Yulia Arkhipova who, in regards to the tragic events in Kiev, twitted, "Were they able to get the wounded out?" and was shortly thereafter attacked by radio journalist Vladimir Solovyov as a member of the "Maidan underground" and a "terrorist organization" in what became a national scandal bringing into doubt the patriotism of the entire institute where Arkhipova studies?

I'm telling you, I don't care how big your appetite is for this stuff, you couldn't possibly swallow all of this week's events in and around Russia.

As such, let me pick something relatively small. An added plus is that this gives me the opportunity to remind people that opinions are split on hot button topics even within groups where one might expect to find commonality.

An open letter addressed to Ukrainian president Vladimir Yanukovych on Friday called for him to stand strong against opposition Ukrainian forces. "Unfortunately," it declared, "all your efforts and calls for peaceful negotiations and rational action have been ignored by those who have taken up arms, rocks, Molotov cocktails and are straining to sieze power. They don't care anymore about Euro-integration, about the well-being of their nation, the flourishing of their country, or about the historical legacy of ancient Rus."

"On the streets and squares of Ukraine," the letter continued, "we see portraits of Bandera, the fascist swastika, and we hear anti-Russian appeals... The instigators of all this chaos must immediately be arrested and tried."

The letter was signed by 26 Russian residents with familial ties to Ukraine. Among them were the famous singer Iosif Kobzon and the popular actors Vasily Lanovoi and Elina Bystritskaya.

All three performers achieved the peak of their popularity in the mid-Soviet era, beginning in the 1950s. Bystritskaya became a household name in 1958 when she performed the lead in the classic film "And Quiet Flows the Don." Lanovoi also achieved fame early for his performance of the lead charcter Pavel Korchagin in "How the Steel Was Tempered" in 1956, as well as for his performanaces in classic screen adaptations of "War and Peace" and "Anna Karenina" in the 1960s.

Bystritskaya was born in Kiev in 1928, while Lanovoi was born in Moscow in 1934 into a family of Ukrainian peasants who escaped famine near Odessa in 1931.

Retaining all due respect for these artists, and fully recognizing that various life experiences and points of view understandably affect anyone living in the former Soviet space, it is nevertheless difficult not to see in this open letter a hard line approach that could have been employed during the Hungarian crisis in 1956, the Czech uprising in 1968 or the Polish Solidarity movement in 1980.

What I am trying to say politely and as my sense of irony returns, is that the letter these performers signed sounds wickedly old-fashioned. As if it were written by individuals who failed to draw any conclusions from the rich and complex history of their nation.

The reference to the "historical legacy of ancient Rus" (Kiev gave rise to the land of Rus, which, in turn, gave rise to Russia) sounds as though it is drawn from one of those Soviet history books that is no longer (and never was) readable. Soviet ideological historians spent decades attempting to prove that the Soviet Union, and, thus, the partnership of all the Soviet republics, was history's logical, moral and inevitable goal, a process that led the people of the nation from chaos and darkness to happiness and light.

It wasn't true then and it certainly is not now. But this language and this point of view, seemingly debunked decades ago, is again increasingly prevalent. Hence the catalogue of scandals and events that lead this blog off.

Lev Rubinshtein, writing on his Facebook page on Saturday, addressed this phenomenon.

"I won't be the least surprised," he wrote, "if in the coming days I see a passionate appeal from a group of 'prominent representatives of Russian society and cultural figures' to the Russian authorities, asking them to provide military aid to brotherly Ukraine, which has been plunged into bloody chaos and lawlessness by destructive terrorist and fascist powers acting under the orders of the money of the U.S.A. and NATO."

The language, the actions, the slogans, the phrases, the methods, the expectations and the motivations for almost everything happening in Russia today are borrowed from a social and political structure that collapsed over two decades ago.

As such, we find ourselves once again standing with Nikolai Gogol who, in his great novel "Dead Souls," asked "Rus, whither do you race?"

I hesitate to do it, but as the biographer of Nikolai Erdman I cannot fail to add the answer that Erdman provided to Gogol's question in his classic tragicomedy "The Suicide."

In that play the revolutionary writer Viktor Viktorovich quotes Gogol's famous query and receives an immediate response from a mailman named Yegor: "Straight to the police, mark my word," Yegor snaps.

Addition: On February 28 Rain (Dozhd) TV reported that the open letter signed by Kobzon, Bystritskaya and Lanovoi was at least doctored, if not falsified. Kobzon and Bystritskaya stated that they agreed to sign a letter warning about dangers in Ukraine, but that the letter read or showed to them before they signed contained nothing about arresting anyone.

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