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Russians Are Sleepwalking Into Chaos

By Ivan Sukhov

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The end of the long New Year's holiday has always been depressing in Moscow: The fireworks and good food are all finished, and the time has come to shake off the hangover and return to the real world — with its traffic jams, slush-laden roads and constant time pressures. And this year, many of us returned to work not after vacationing in Thailand or the Maldives, but after a stint at our dachas in the suburbs. Now every morning we are faced with signs declaring the ruble's latest woes, updates on the falling price of oil and, to cap it all off, alarming news reports.

In fact, the news has once again become interesting — if only for its shock value. No matter how we complained about the limits imposed on freedom of speech, now the news freely shows us how everything to which we had become accustomed is falling apart: the value of the ruble, our salaries and whatever pleasures it once afforded us, the types and variety of foods we can buy, and our confidence in the future.

We Muscovites had become accustomed to traveling abroad several times a year, but now we don't know when we will have the next opportunity. Some of us planned major surgery for the current year, but now we don't know whether our doctor will still be working and, if he is,

whether we can afford his services.

We used to feel confident that nothing major would change in the next few years, but now we don't know if we will be able to withdraw 3,000 rubles ($45) with our debit card or safely get from one end of town to the other if riots or other unrest should break out. In short, dark storm clouds have descended and there is no sign of light on the horizon.

The current mood differs significantly from the one with which we emerged from last year's holidays. Then we had only vague concerns — for some, concern that those disagreeable people in Washington and Brussels had seriously decided to pull Ukraine away from its brotherly embrace with Russia, and for others, concern that Moscow's reaction to that possibility was inappropriate for the modern era.

They understood that the Foreign Ministry's sudden use of rhetoric last heard in the 1940s — language that no other country would ever consider using — meant that Russia would quickly find itself isolated.

Then came the heart-stopping news of the annexation of Crimea. Most Russians were overjoyed, but others literally shook from the dread and fear of what it might mean. And yet, one year ago, even the most anxious of us took comfort in the knowledge that the barricades and burning tires remained in distant Kiev, and not in Moscow's Manezh Square.

All of 2014 was like one long New Year's holiday, with some rejoicing that Russia had "risen from its knees" in imperial revenge and that a "Russian Spring" was at hand, and others because the shootings on the streets and the mortar fire remained somewhere far away.

There was something disgustingly infantile about this perception of the war — the first full-scale war in Europe in many years. Its foot soldiers were either volunteers or those who consented to blindly obeying orders and keeping quiet about their activities.

For most Russians, the war remained a series of images on their television screens, and although each successive news broadcast, dose by dose, only increased the level of hatred in society, it also united those who outwardly professed their readiness to sacrifice everything for the greatness of the empire with those who sympathized with the Kiev protestors and feared Russia's growing isolation.

The height of absurdity came during this New Year's holiday, when Russian television mustered its full entertainment might to completely ignore the war in Ukraine — the very focus of its full propaganda prowess during the preceding months.

Truly, 2014 was a difficult year for government propagandists. On one hand, they had to present the conflict in eastern Ukraine as a just war in defense of national interests that had been violated. On the other hand, the Kremlin never officially acknowledged its involvement in the war. But the propagandists pulled through: They managed to concoct a complex blend of tonics and euphoria-inducing info-drugs for a propaganda cocktail that they served over and over to the viewing public.

But on New Year's Eve, someone's invisible hand clamped shut this potent IV drip — leaving only songs, dancing and the ubiquitous fireworks in place of the usual images of mortar

fire near the Donetsk airport.

Now that the holidays are over, a number of nagging questions penetrate the fog of that party-induced stupor. If this really is a war for national interests, how could Russians have so easily forgotten it? If this really is a war for national interests, why is the most obvious result of defending those interests a more than halving of our salary's buying power? And why can't the Russian people have the satisfaction of expressing solidarity with those who are fighting for those national interests — because their leaders won't officially acknowledge that Russian troops are even involved?

It is very disconcerting after the general bacchanalia of the holidays to discover that we are surrounded by the authorities' clumsy and ubiquitous lies. After all, everything intended to inspire us — right up to and including the "Russian Spring" — has turned out to be a lie. Worse, those falsehoods are covered with a layer of aggression so great and so menacing that it seems a single word might unleash an avalanche of violence.

And in carrying flowers to the French Embassy in Moscow, Russians do not admit to themselves that the story of Charlie Hebdo concerns this country more than it might seem at first glance.

The boundaries of what is acceptable have been erased. Everyone is prepared to fight everybody else. One will fight because he is Russian, the other because he is not Russian, a third because he doesn't like the way someone parked his car, and a fourth because he doesn't like the way somebody looks.

No public institutions or law enforcement agencies are capable of combating this phenomenon. The only thing holding back this avalanche of chaos seems to be the lack of a coherent plan of action among those who are poised to act.

All of Russian history indicates that this period will not last long. Those groups will develop their plans of action, and the groundwork is already laid. For those of us who find this turn of events truly alarming, only two options remain.

The first is to create a true political party because Russia still does not have one. But that is a long-term task, and political parties depend on grassroots support. But with Russia's civil society in ruins, it is next to impossible to create a viable political party that could work to improve the country's outlook.

The only other option is to leave the country — but where to go? The closest and simplest destination is Europe, but there terrorists have killed the editors of Charlie Hebdo, and the euro costs more than most Russians can afford. It seems that a very difficult year has begun, and not only for Russia. The best all of us can do is to somehow get through it together.

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