The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

# Russian Officials Are Dangerously Out of Touch

By Mark Adomanis

January 25, 2015



Pauline Kael was a film critic for The New Yorker magazine who entered the American political lexicon with a now-infamous statement about former U.S. President Richard Nixon's re-election: "I live in a rather special world. I only know one person who voted for Nixon. Where they are I don't know."

In the conservative, and later public, consciousness this was somehow translated to "how did Nixon win? No one I know voted for him." Ever since, Kael's comment has been remembered as an example of the liberal elite's growing disconnect from "real" Americans, and as an almost cartoonish example of political ignorance and naivete.

Now the actual point that Kael was trying to make was rather more sophisticated than she was given credit for. In reality she was trying to underline her understanding of her privileged and unrepresentative position in American society.

Nonetheless, because her words lent themselves to such easy distortion, and because that

distortion was so politically potent, she has gone down in history as a shorthand for aloofness in a way not too dissimilar from Marie Antoinette.

While Kael was unrepresentative of American society because of her status as a member of the liberal elite, Russia might have just had a similar moment in its history thanks to a certain Ilya Gaffner, a United Russia legislator in Yekaterinburg. Though hardly a member of a 'liberal elite,' he is certainly a member of a privileged social class.

Interviewed on television, he offered a novel solution to Russia's increasingly severe inflation crisis: eat less.

"To put it bluntly, if you're short on money you need to remember that we're all Russian citizens — Russian people — and we've survived hunger and the cold. We just need to give some thought to our health and eat a bit less."

Now Gaffner's solution is in a narrow factual sense entirely correct: If you eat less food you will indeed spend less money on it.

However, from the standpoint of the Russian "man on the street," who according to statistics will spend around 40 percent of his disposable income on food, Gaffner's comment is almost laughably out of touch. The fact that a politician would propose "eat less" as a solution suggests that the elite is pretty much out of ideas: it is tantamount to releasing a public statement that says "we have absolutely no idea what we're doing."

Gaffner's comment reminded me of Alexei Navalny's campaign to "stop feeding the Caucasus." This campaign has achieved such political potency because many ethnic Russians don't feel any real kinship with the people of the North Caucasus. Instead, people from the region are frequently considered foreigners and outsiders undeserving of any special assistance.

There is an intuitive attraction to policy that argues that "we" should stop subsidizing "them." Crude populist appeals to identity politics are, unfortunately, extremely common even in mature democratic systems like the United States. I don't care for them very much, but it's easy to see why they gain traction.

Gaffner's suggestion, however, is a sort of reverse populism, a campaign that is based on a slogan tantamount to "stop feeding yourselves!" For reasons that really ought to be obvious, this campaign is unlikely to be terribly effective or popular.

At a deeper level, Gaffner's gaffe (oh, how history has a sense of irony) reflects not simply an inability to speak off the cuff but some extremely serious underlying political problems now facing United Russia and the Kremlin.

The party built its popularity on the back of President Vladimir Putin and he, in turn, built his popularity on the back of Russia's post-1998 economic boom. The story had certain Russian characteristics, but was essentially an iteration of one of the most boring narratives in all of politics: "economy booms, government becomes popular."

United Russia made a lot of hay out of wage growth, job gains, and the average Russian's increasing material prosperity. "Trust us, we made you rich." But that is a story that it is no

longer able to tell because the economy isn't growing and because wages, after adjusting for inflation, are actually shrinking. "Trust us, we crashed the economy" doesn't really work as well as a slogan.

Will Russians actually be willing to "eat less" to show their support for the Kremlin? Well it looks as if we're going to find out, but I have my doubts. Russia certainly has some unique characteristics to its culture and politics, but I don't think it's so unique that the population will react positively to an enormous downturn in its economic security.

It seems as if United Russia and various members of the Russian elite started to believe their own press and started to think that their popular support wasn't rooted in improved economic conditions, but in some kind of deeper philosophical agreement on Russia's unique role in the world. We'll see what happens, but if past history is any guide, things don't usually end well when politicians have to resort to "eat less" as a rallying cry.

Mark Adomanis is an MA/MBA candidate at the University of Pennsylvania's Lauder Institute.

*The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.*

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2015/01/25/russian-officials-are-dangerously-out-of-touch-a43200