The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Moving Backward: Russia's Moral Decay (Op-Ed)

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December 28, 2015



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The Public Opinion Foundation conducted a survey this month asking Russians two questions: "What was the main event of the year in Russia?" and "What was the main global event of the year?"

Noteworthy is that fully 40% of the respondents had trouble answering either question. And

the most brutal political murder in modern Russia – the assassination of my father – did not even figure in the responses. State-controlled television hardly mentions it, with the exception of the first few days after the killing, when commentators spoke of him in contemptuous tones.

But the problem is not only the silence of the Kremlin's official propaganda. The problem is the condition of Russian society. A Levada Center survey conducted in March of this year found that one-third of all Russians are indifferent to my father's murder. That is a moral numbness best conveyed by the popular Russian sentiments of "It does not concern me" and "That does not affect me." The well-known military journalist Arkady Babchenko refers to that type of thinking by his countrymen as "infantilism." Perhaps he is right.

This attitude finds expression not only in widespread apathy, but also in people's inability to recognize even obvious causal relationships. It is understandable why some people cannot see the medium-term and long-term negative consequences of the annexation of Crimea, but it was not so difficult to predict that consumer prices would rise as a result of Moscow's food embargo and the hefty tolls imposed on trucks traveling on federal highways.

The political system that President Vladimir Putin has built robs the Russian people of the ability to think, analyze, ask questions, formulate positions or remember the past. It offers no stimulus for that: Putin's Russia has no need of people who think for themselves. It has reduced competition to a minimum in all areas, including the political field. And it is not always the smartest that succeed in this system.

It is a sad and potentially dangerous situation when the political playing field lies decimated and debates and discussions have been replaced with sometimes violent pressure from the authorities. That has also compromised the quality of the opposition itself and made it a truly heroic feat to even take part in the opposition movement in Russia. There are no democratic institutions and the activists are fighting for survival. Under such conditions, opposition figures have no chance to become public figures and the public has no way of knowing who is who.

People have short memories, and that makes life easier for Putin and his inner circle – who are constantly confusing their facts. First they claim there are no Russian soldiers in Crimea and eastern Ukraine, and then they admit to their presence. First they promise not to raise taxes and fees, and then they impose new tariffs on long-haul truckers. Forgetfulness is a handy human tendency, and the Kremlin's television propaganda exploits it to the fullest.

This explains why leaders have no personal reputations and remain unaccountable before the public. Perhaps the social apathy and the public's lack of interest in politics is a defense mechanism, people's way of responding to the flood of lies and aggression from the authorities. Nobody can figure out where the truth lies, and so it is best not to even go looking for it.

All politics in Russia are situational and as volatile as oil prices. Even loyal politicians and officials do not always manage to fall into line exactly as they should. For example, it is amusing to see how famed film director and die-hard Putin fan Nikita Mikhalkov gets outraged over the way his own patriotic show on state-controlled television is subjected to censorship.

The authorities and the ruling elite are out for their own survival. That end justifies all means, including the tactic of keeping military tensions high at all times. As a result, Russia is increasingly moving away from humanistic values and toward a confrontational relationship with the world. But perhaps that is not putting it strongly enough: maybe Russia is moving toward total apathy. However, war is becoming the context for all other issues in life.

Russian journalists often ask me why I fight for a fair and impartial investigation into my father's murder. For me, the very wording of that question is sickening because it shows that medieval values now reign supreme in Russia: nobody understands that it is not just I who needs such an investigation – but all Russians if this country is to ever move forward.

We must wage a long and grueling fight for human rights. If we simply give up that struggle and accept the fact that, in Russia, someone can just go and kill a prominent public figure, a statesman and leader of the opposition with absolute impunity, then we must also come to terms with the fact that the same thing could one day happen to any of us.

Today's opposition members are now at greater risk than ever before. I see the condescending attitude shown toward the small handful of people who continue to struggle for democracy in Russia. I have grown accustomed to the eternal question: "What do they offer?" But just imagine if one day even that small group would no longer exist. Who, then, would conduct anti-corruption investigations, participate in even nominal elections, initiate investigations into wrongdoings by Duma deputies or provide support for political prisoners? No one, that's who.

My father long experienced that condescending attitude from others who behaved as if they were looking down on him from on high. And now he has been murdered – for his views, for daring to express his position, for his unwillingness to be indifferent or apathetic. And suddenly, his absence is sorely felt.

Putin's Russia has not brought a revival of spiritual values, as state-controlled TV tries to convince us. It has caused Russia's moral decay. And as long as Russians approach every problem through the filter of whether it will affect them personally, this country can move in only one direction – backward.

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