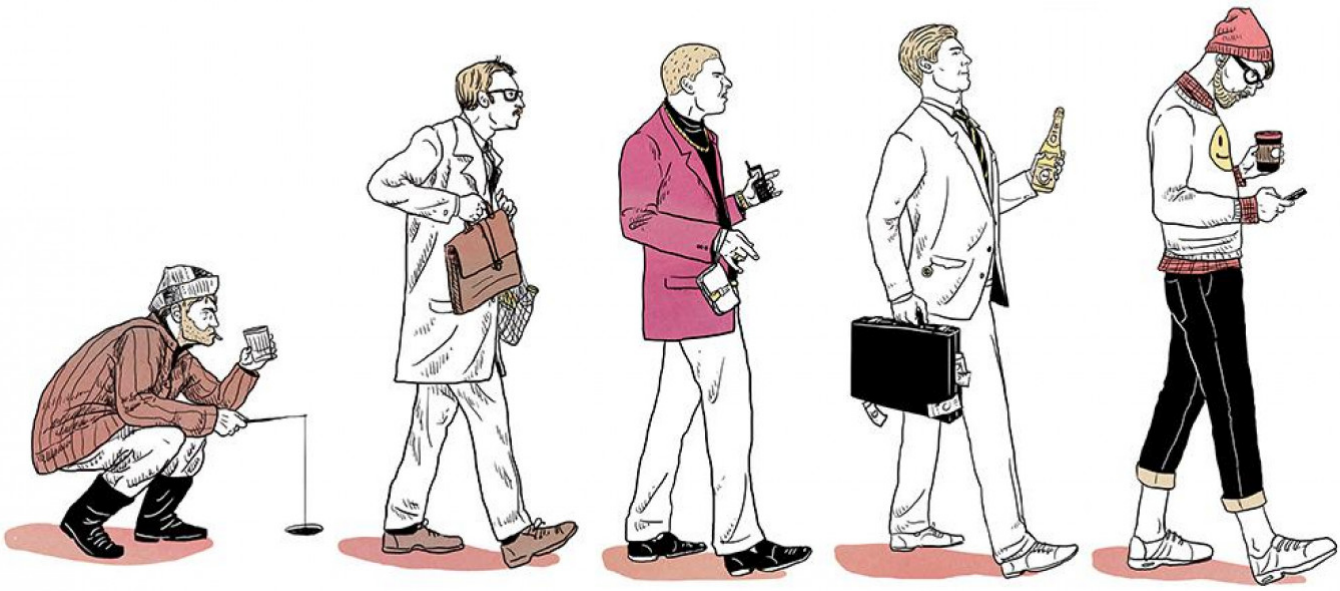
The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

The Evolution of Homo Sovieticus to Putin's Man

The tumultuous decades have left their mark on Russians' inner life

By Lev Gudkov and Eva Hartog

October 13, 2017



Evgeny Tonkonogy

Lev Gudkov remembers sitting in his Moscow office as a young sociologist, surrounded by stacks of letters.

It was 1989, and for the first time after decades of hushed conversation around kitchen tables, Russians had been asked for their opinions on a range of economic and social issues.

The response was so overwhelming that the nearby post office was instructed to stop deliveries so that the team would not be barricaded in, says Gudkov, head of the independent Levada Center polling agency.

After almost 30 years of sociological research, The Moscow Times asked Gudkov to describe

Russians' changing attitudes and beliefs from perestroika up to today.

Soviet Man

Sovyetsky chelovek (Soviet man) is the archetype of a person born in and shaped by a totalitarian regime. Life in repressive conditions has made him crafty and skilled at doublethink. He knows how to bypass the authorities' demands while simultaneously maintaining informal and corrupt relations with them.

They pretend to pay us, we pretend to work. They pretend to care for us, we pretend to respect them.

Soviet man demonstrates his loyalty to the authorities through collective symbolism and performance. But his real values and interests are in the private sphere — his home and family.

He has few demands: he knows he has little to no power and deeply mistrusts everyone but those closest to him, expecting nothing good from anyone else.

After living through countless restrictions — the traumas of war, collectivization, modernization, miniscule salaries, residence permits — he just wants one thing: to survive.

Russia and the World

In the 1990s Russia was oriented towards the West and Europe, ready to follow their path. Then, 40 percent of Russians thought their country should join the EU and even NATO. Only 13 percent could name any adversaries: Islamists, the CIA, communists, democrats, and the mafia.

Many more, 47 percent, said: Why are you looking for foes when all our problems are caused by us? This inferiority complex was, in a sense, a condition for reform. People said they'd trade their status as an influential nation in return for calm and stability.

For people accustomed to socialism, the 1990s were pure chaos, with hyperinflation, salaries not being paid on time and job insecurity. People lost their sense of self-respect and dignity.

Then Vladimir Putin arrived on the scene and said: "There's nothing to be ashamed of. Everyone has skeletons in their closet. Let's turn a new page in our history."

With that came the conviction that Russia had a right to use force, especially on its borders. Russians' pride was hurt when former Soviet republics changed alliances. When they had color revolutions or moved to integrate with the West, aggressive feelings spiked, fueled by state propaganda. In November 2013, before the Maidan revolution, around 75 percent of Russians said that Ukraine's integration into Europe was their own business and that Russia should stay out. Attitudes shifted sharply when media warned against a potential "genocide" of Russians in Donbass and Crimea by Ukrainian "fascists."

Today in polls, Russians describe the West as coldhearted, lacking in spiritual values, extremely formal and aggressive. Russians no longer believe the Western model is for them — their country has its own "special" path.

A national inferiority complex and imperial arrogance — these are parts of the same mechanism that allows Russians to come to terms with their lowered status following the collapse of the Soviet Union.

But while Putin's foreign policy enjoys tacit support, it has serious limits. Only around 7 percent of Russians say they're prepared to make a personal sacrifice to advance the country's interests abroad. Because people feel they have no decision-making power, they don't feel responsible for the outcome.

Individual vs. the State

Russians came out of the 1990s with an acquired taste for consumption.

Buffered by the "golden rain" of high oil prices, the market economy finally appeared to be picking up after the 1998 crisis, bringing prosperity.

Under Putin, the state has largely returned to its previous role as a paternalistic caretaker with the redistribution of resources as its main function. "Putin takes care of us" is a frequently-heard response in polls.

Human rights and individual freedoms are just words for the majority of the population. At the same time, attitudes towards repression have softened. Josef Stalin, whose popularity is steadily rising even among those who suffered most under him, is seen as an effective manager who deserves respect. This return to the Soviet concept of governance is most common among the elderly who live in the countryside.

People in cities are more educated, have a broader range of employers other than the state, and have access to several sources of information. But politically active liberal democrats, hardcore conservatives, and communists only make up about 15 percent of the population. The vast majority is completely uninterested in political life. Asked whether they want to be more involved, 85 percent of people say no. Politics, they feel, has nothing to do with them.

Conservatism

On the one hand, Russians describe their own society as brutish and uncivilized. On the other, they consider themselves to be open and warm, as opposed to the cold, closed, hypocritical people in the West.

Like Snow White's stepmother, they look in the mirror and ask, "Who is the nicest in the world?" and then answer, "We are!"

After the protests of 2011, religious conservatism was presented as a counterpoint to demand for reform and political opposition. Being Russian has become synonymous with being an Orthodox Christian.

As with most ideologies, this belief is superficial. Orthodox crosses and icons in cars and homes are more elements of superstition than deep religious feeling.

The number of people who describe themselves as religious has increased from 16 percent

several decades ago to 77 percent today. But 40 percent out of those "religious people" say they don't believe in God. Many have never even heard of the pillars of Christian dogma.

Soviet Man 2017

Sovyetsky chelovek has somewhat changed. He's been fed, he's changed his clothes, he's bought a car and owns a home. But he still feels insecure and vulnerable. And he's just as aggressive towards his neighbor because there are no institutions that have laid down rules that people follow.

Today the average Russian expects a minimum living standard — work, a home, and some social rights. Private property is valued, but no one expects any guarantees. People know that the government can take away everything they have at any moment and for any reason.

In polls, people say the government represents the interests of the security services, oligarchs and bureaucracy — but not the interests of ordinary people. And they believe this cannot be changed. So, in Soviet fashion, they adapt and make deals with the authorities. Corruption is perceived as both serious and commonplace.

The theory that Russians are somehow not prepared for a liberal democracy is false. Russians today simply reflect and respond to their circumstances. In a different situation they'd behave differently.

Now there is no desire for change. The idealism and romanticism of the perestroika era has evaporated.

The young people who participated in Alexei Navalny's anti-corruption protests are an exception to this rule. But the narrative that a new generation will bring change is a false one. Today, Russia's Soviet-era institutions stamp out any idealism. It will take more than one generation to change that.

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2017/10/13/the-evolution-of-homo-sovieticus-to-putins-man-a59189