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Russia Will Warm Up to Greta Thunberg, Eventually

The Swedish activist's speech has sparked a backlash in Russian society.

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Greta Thunberg **Justin Lane / EPA / TASS**

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Judging from my compatriots' angry reactions to Greta Thunberg's speech at the UN, it looks like Russia is proud to be a country that is stuck in the past.

Just as in the 17th century — when we imported chemists and metallurgists from Germany — and in the 19th century — when we accepted philosophies and political ideas from all of Europe — in the 21st century we are again borrowing new words and theories that, for some reason, we were unable to come up with ourselves.

A new revolution is unfolding now in the West, and we are once again observing it from our Russian periphery — the same place that Karl Marx envisioned us to be in his international division of labor. To truly be shocked into action by Greta's speech, we must definitively accept the backwardness of our social development.

Members of the Russian government have long accepted the truism that economic growth is good, but not many of them will be able to tell you what is so good about it — especially after a country reaches a certain standard of living.

Up until now, Russia's conception of economic growth has looked much like the following: Having two massive shopping malls instead of one, building monolithic apartment blocks in place of Soviet-era housing and making sure that every pothole on the street is matched with an SUV that is parked nearby.

Our collective vision of prosperity hasn't grown beyond this, which is quite unsurprising, given the events of the 20th century in Russia.

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Some of you may have forgotten, but the 2020s will begin in less than three months. At this juncture, Europe is now saying that economic development will be judged by its ability to ensure the prosperity of people while at the same time saving life on the planet.

These ideas are not new and have been discussed for decades, but the youth of Europe have now taken a concrete stand in this regard.

Among other things, this position says that one shouldn't travel by plane unless its absolutely necessary, that there's no reason to buy new clothes every season, that we should stop using dangerous household chemicals and plastic and that garbage shouldn't just be taken out of our cities to be buried in nearby regions — as happens in Moscow, one of the biggest cities in Europe.

Moscow's ecology looks especially barbaric when we consider that the Russian capital has a budget of around 1 trillion rubles ($15 billion) — one of the highest in the world.

That money is literally buried into the ground with the ubiquitous tiled sidewalks (*plitka*) of the city's touristic center. Meanwhile, neither the city government nor its residents have managed to set up even a basic recycling system.

It appears that most Muscovites are too preoccupied with their rising standards of living to notice the riots against landfills in the Moscow and Arkhangelsk regions. Much as with Russia's reaction to Greta Thunberg's speech, what we see here is a mismatch of values.

For many Russians, Thurnberg is an activist that is fighting to take away our personal freedoms — like the right to throw trash out of our cars.

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Ever since the end of the Soviet experiment, we have been a nation of individualists that avoids public service at any cost — our memories of endless Communist party meetings are too raw.

But at this very moment, the ideas that are coming out of Europe are truly radical. And if Russia's youth join the European movement for responsible consumption, our country's preconceptions about the good life will finally be defeated, however painful that might be.

Perhaps the emergence of a powerful ecological movement in our country — which is still demoralized by a post-Soviet imperial complex and is still trying to "eat to its heart's content" — will be the prologue to a new Russian democracy.

Anyway, when was the last time a speech at the UN sparked such heated discussions?

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