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## **Russia One Year After August 1991**

### **Moscow**

The last time I was in the USSR was the June before the events of August 1991. In analysing my impressions after this trip, I felt as never before the difficulty of assessing life in Russia. What I saw there could be interpreted in very different ways depending on what I chose as my yardstick: the world; Russia the nation-state; the former Soviet republics; various groupings of the Russian population; the long-term or short-term perspective; material well-being; political freedoms; national pride; the perpetuity of Russian traditions; or social equality. In these auspicious times, new criteria proliferate.

Never was it so difficult for me to make the distinction between surface developments and the processes evolving underneath and between the trends, which seem to go in opposite directions: while one pushes the nation toward a market economy and privatization, another makes the eventual return to totalitarianism appear inevitable.

At the same time, never in the past have I encountered such conflicting views on the same developments and events—even in the circles of my closest friends and colleagues. Trying to shape my own vision of Russia today, it was evident that the views of people who are benefiting from these profound changes are radically different from those who have lost or are losing their privileged status. Such new and disparate circumstances as access to foreign currency and age significantly affected my interlocutors' moods. Before assessing the opinion of anyone, I had to fathom his or her ethnic background, his or her views on emigration,

whether or not he or she has children living or studying abroad, and a whole range of other emergent influences.

### **August 1991 Was Revolution Indeed**

In the Fall of 1992, I found a new country and society. Old enough to have lived in Russia in Stalin's times, I have preserved a special sensitivity to people in uniforms—warnings of danger. Even thirteen years in America has not erased this. In my four visits to Russia after emigrating, I continued to be subconsciously alert for these people, even as I was cognizant that my American passport provided protection unavailable in the past. This time, however, crossing the state border in Sheremetevo, I did not catch the cold hostility that habitually emanated from the guards—the first Russians you meet upon arriving in Moscow. Customs only confirmed this good premonition: officials were as indifferent to me as were their colleagues in any democratic country. I would suspect now, however, that with the general decline of labor ethics they were somewhat less vigilant than their American colleagues. During my entire stay in Russia, this feeling that the state was no longer hostile to me never dissipated. It even revived some nostalgic sentiments that I thought had long since departed.

After August 1991, almost all Russians decided that they were free at last. This was based on good evidence, even if the KGB—despite the destruction of the monument to its founder Felix Dzerzhinsky—remains practically intact along with its network of informers. And this was the unanimous view of all the Russians with whom I spoke. In any case, even those few Moscow acquaintances who had shunned me as an emigrant even as recently as 1991 (in strong contrast to those who escorted me to Sheremetevo in 1979—a real act of courage at that time) searched me out this time to declare how much they had missed me all these years.

Regardless of the importance of the new political freedoms for people, especially the intelligentsia, the new state of the country is manifested not so much in the total enfranchisement of the press (in some ways it surpasses the American press in its disregard for numerous PC and other taboos), but in the complete autonomy of people in their everyday

material life. Russians now have the opportunity to make their own decisions on hundreds of issues: they can choose among hundreds of work opportunities; they can form any political party and attend meetings in favor of Communism or Zionism; and they can travel to any country in the world, vacation in Turkey or the Bahamas. They can even return from their travel abroad with the most exquisite goods in the world if, of course, they have the money to do this. All such opportunities were practically unknown to the majority of them only one year ago.

Unfortunately, the cost of this tremendous advance in freedom, which many people still regard as like something from a fairy tale, is rather steep. The collapse of the communist empire immensely undermined the Russian state and its order within the nation.

### **The Dark Side of the Revolution: No One is Afraid of the State Anymore**

Each day brings more news to the central authorities of the disobedience of local governments, as well as of various projects for the independence of Russian regions from Moscow. The regional movement is particularly strong in Siberia, though Moscow prefers to ignore it. National regions like Chechnia and Tartarstan continue to be arrogant toward a Kremlin that does not have the will to resort to force to curb the rebels. The conduct of the Cossacks, the former semi-military stratum in pre-revolutionary Russia, is another result of the feebleness of the state. Cossacks headed by former party *apparatchiks* recently seized buildings in Rostov-on-Don. They openly and brazenly challenged authorities, promising to use force on anyone disobeying their orders.

The fear of the disintegration of Russia troubles most Russians, including my liberal friends in Moscow. Most of them lament the fall of the Soviet Union and are afraid that the Russian Federation will suffer the same fate. The Alliance of Caucasian People publicly promises Russia a new, second, Russian-Caucasian war (the first ended in the middle of the nineteenth century with the conquest of the region by the Russian czar). Today, with the help of Abkhazians who are in a fight for separation from Georgia, this association is expanding its activity in one of the most important regions of Russia, and again Moscow is making no serious attempt to re-establish its authority there. The authorities, for instance, arrested Shanibov, the leader of the Alliance, only to permit him to flee

police headquarters a few days later to retake his position and openly challenge Moscow.

The weakness of the state also manifests itself in the impunity of bureaucrats at all levels and in all offices. This impertinence is unprecedented in Russian history. Citizens who are compelled for any reason to solicit the positive decision of administrators are totally at their mercy. Today's official is not afraid of anything. The time is gone when the fear of "putting the party card on the table" checked the arrogance of bureaucrats. The threat of exclusion from the party used to maintain relatively high morals among the *apparatchiks*. The popular consensus now is that Brezhnev's officials look like nuns compared with the inveterate gangsters of the new Russia. Today, people who came to power as "democrats" are not respected. One of the leading members of the Russian parliament's democratic faction did not deny in our conversation that the term "democrat" is now universally associated with corruption and incompetence.

But it is in their everyday life that Russians feel the weakening of their state most. Criminal mafiosi have become a part of private businesses. Entrepreneurs must now pay fees either to guards or racketeers. The gangs—the Caucasians are particularly notorious in Moscow—put the lives of ordinary people in the big cities in real jeopardy.

Two incidents occurred in Moscow very close to my lodgings at the home of friends. One gang blasted a car with dynamite in the Cheremuchkin market in order to punish their rivals for selling potatoes. Another gang, using a sort of Stinger missile, tried to kill the staff of a hospital that did not follow their orders. President Yeltsin mentioned the last event in a recent speech but did not promise to do anything to end the criminal spree in the capital.

Common crimes are also thriving in Russia. My friends persuaded me not to stay in a hotel because hotel guests, particularly foreigners, are often the targets of criminals. Apartment robbery is also a fixture of life and each home I visited resembles a fortress, complete with an armored door and an array of locks. Women do not wear jewels and most people try to look as inconspicuous as possible.

In general, two thirds of the Russian people (64.9 percent), according to a national survey of 2000 respondents conducted by the Institute of Sociology in May 1992, think that "the Russian leadership does not

control the situation in the republic." Almost half (45.3 percent) supported the statement that "the danger of complete anarchy is great," while only one tenth (9.7 percent) maintained the opposite view.

### Freedom for Anti-Semitism

With the weakening of the state, open ethnic conflicts are becoming routine in Russian cities. For instance, in the past the ruling elite determined the level of anti-semitism for any given moment and did not permit anyone to surpass it. Now, anti-semitism is as acceptable as any other ideology. Its adepts can publish dozens of newspapers with the most vitriolic propaganda against Jews, without employing such disguises as "Zionists," popular with Brezhnev's ideologues. They can even find ink at liberal presses that want to be touted for their pluralism.

During my stay in Moscow I read an article in *Nezavisimaia Gazeta* (*Independent Gazette*) and was struck me by the ingenuity and modernism of the young theorists of anti-semitism. One of them, a certain Kravchenko who poses as a man of vanguard views, boldly rejected as wrong the stereotype of identifying Jews with cosmopolitans. Advocating globalism—anathema for traditional Russian nationalists and anti-semites—he accused Jews of being an egotistical nation that is against the cosmopolitan tendency of this world and that turns "any small vibration like the Dreyfus or Beilis case into a big international scandal" in order to promote its interests.

In the minds of Russians this barrage of anti-semitism is counterbalanced by the entrance of Jews with their cultural and religious issues into open public life. Rabbis, along with the representatives of other religions, now attend many official ceremonies. Russian TV, as I witnessed, congratulates its Jewish viewers at Rosh Hashanah, and programs hailing Zionism do not bother most viewers.

However, these positive developments do not calm Russian Jews. They watch with horror the violent clashes between Russians and Caucasians for the markets in Petersburg and other cities. They are convinced that if this violence continues they will eventually become its targets in Russian and non-Russian cities. No one so far has liberated Jews from the role of scapegoat in Russia. When they see the mass support for slogans like "Russia for Russians," and with German Jews

watch the pogrom against refugees in Germany, they understand that the bell tolls also for them.

### **The Eager Search for Progress in Economic Life**

Who is aware of the crucial importance of economic progress for Russia? Any visitor would eagerly and easily discover several obvious positive developments. Economic freedom gave a tremendous boost to millions of energetic and active people, a monetary and moral bonanza more for the young than their seniors. Though there are great difficulties in building a new life, most young people I met (and surveys confirm this) are rather optimistic and enjoy the vistas they see before them. Even among people of my age there are those who not only savor the collapse of Communism but relish their new-found freedom in a newly-created universe of economic enterprises.

Thousands of state enterprises are already transformed into private concerns, and their managers, released from the old bonds, energetically explore new avenues for raising production and sales. According to some calculations, no less than forty million people are already involved in the private sector. However, western businessmen still have not swarmed over Russia, though foreign firms are everywhere in Moscow. Office rent, in hard currency, approaches the American level.

Perhaps even more important, so far more than half of the Russian people accept the ideology of the free market and private property. However, the stability of these views that contrast so sharply with the fundamentals of socialist society that were so deeply internalized by many generations remains in some doubt. Despite the outburst of energy in the country, the change in the attitudes of the population and the evident moves toward Milton Friedman's model, the decline of the economy continues. The consequences of price release deceived the local and foreign architects of Russian economic reforms. Instead of stimulating the production of goods in short supply, it led to their reduction. As a consequence, instead of "the structural fall of production" predicted by Gaidar's team—the decline in production of military and investment goods and the growth in the manufacturing of consumer goods—Russians have watched with consternation since January 1992 the dwindling of production in all branches of the economy.

Of course, in vivid contrast to the last months of 1991, Moscow stores are not empty—mostly because few products are affordable by the majority of people. In addition, many consumer goods of Russian origin, for instance cloth and shoes, have almost totally disappeared. The void is filled by the products of foreign countries. Hundreds of thousands of Russians spend their effort not on production but on making regular trips to neighboring countries to bring back the cheapest goods made in Turkey, China or Poland. I was told that this business, one of the most prosperous in the country, involves refined techniques that skirt the laws of any nation.

Nonetheless, even with exorbitant prices and the steady supply of foreign products, I felt the threat of shortages hovering over Russia. The rate of inflation accelerated in the fall and reached seven percent a week. Many durable consumer goods like refrigerators and televisions were absent once again from stores.

### **The Prevalence of American Dollars**

Nothing epitomizes the deeply contradictory developments in the Russian economy as well as the role of American dollar in Moscow. As the greatest of Gaidar's achievements, along with the liberalization of prices at the beginning of this year, dollars became internally convertible. Anyone can now buy and sell foreign currency at hundreds of private booths in Moscow or St. Petersburg. This is an unbelievable phenomenon for a country where even the mere possession of foreign currency was, until recently, a high crime. Civilized young men ensconced in these booths, well protected against racketeers by armed guards, also conspicuously demonstrate something new to Russia. They honestly conduct their business and precisely calculate their transactions. You can confidently stuff your pockets with the big bundles of bills without counting them.

Dollars have become a second currency and probably will remain so for a long time, despite Yeltsin's promise to change this practice. American "greens" are accepted eagerly and openly by everyone. Peasants take them as payment for food in the market. Taxi drivers prefer them to all other currencies and convert them as easily and honestly as the kiosk entrepreneurs. State agencies even take them without so much as a wink, as opposed to most developing countries which at least make a pretence

of making exceptions to their elaborate currency laws or slyly transact under the table.

What is more, a cursory glance at mass media employment searches shows a growing number of people only interested in jobs that pay in hard currency and government institutions have begun to follow suit. The editors of the popular weekly, *Literaturnaia Gazeta*, learned recently from the government agency that owns its building that rent payments will be received only in dollars. This forced the journalists to reduce the number of their offices and sublease, again for dollars, to foreign firms.

The dynamic of the dollar is a central concern of public and private life. No less than sixty percent of Muscovites avowed in a recent survey that they watch with significant interest the game between the dollar and ruble. Dollars and good food are, I was told, main topics in the conversations of elementary school children. As my many encounters with Muscovites eventually confirmed, members of the political and cultural elites can maintain their decent standard of living only by travelling to the West and collecting hard currency as honoraria for their lectures and publications.

At the same time, there is no more important indicator for the leaders of the country than the current dollar-ruble exchange rate. The first casual and largely ephemeral drop of the dollar in the spring of 1991 pushed Egor Gaidar to boast of their successes. Since that time the dollar has soared from 90 to 650 rubles. Of course, the precipitous drop of the ruble is now used by Gaidar's critics as the main evidence of his failure. Gaidar retorted that, despite this devaluation, thanks to his policy the Russian economy has never been more open to the world. With the acquisition of dollars as the main goal of most active people in the country, managers and workers in both the state and private sectors of the economy increasingly evaluate economic performance by Western standards.

The official statistics of the new Russia are no more reliable, though for other reasons, than the old Soviet economic data. But it is evident, for perhaps the first time in her history, that Russia has a relatively reliable indicator of her economic performance, as well as her political stability as perceived by her citizens. This makes the work of Russian watchers somewhat easier. Regard the rate of exchange of the American dollar on the streets of Moscow and you can feel the pulse of Russia's health.



The victorious expansion of the dollar's influence on the post-Communist economy suggests very serious negative consequences for Russian society. In most cases, Russians yearn for the dollar only as a protection against rampant economic and political instability. Its role as a hedge against increasingly possible chaos explains its high value and the willingness of Russians to sell everything at outrageously low prices in order to obtain it.

As various sources suggest, the majority of new business tycoons are not interested in using their dollars for re-investment but horde them in Western banks. There are various estimates—up to fifteen billion—of the amount of hard currency which old and new managers have sequestered from their export revenues in western banks. It is also well known that a significant part of their domestic dollar receipts, also several billion, is also sent abroad. The amount is probably comparable to the amount of promised Western credits to Russia.

Furthermore, in aiding the flight of meager Russian capital from the country, American firms started selling American assets on the Russian market as if it is the US and not Russia that craves foreign money. Of course, all this helps render the statements of Russian conservatives about the deleterious effect of the dollar all the more compelling.

Each rise of the dollar immediately generates countless conspiracy theories involving various villains. From one side comes tales of conservatives who want to discredit the government. Victor Gerashchenko, the new chairman of the Central Bank, is usually the democratic press's main antagonist. They accuse him, among other things, of creating an artificially high dollar. This makes it difficult to import foreign goods. Thus, he inhibits the formation of private capital since new businesspersons cannot invest in productive ventures and are left with the less lucrative endeavor of trading.

At the same time the other side tells of democrats who are responsible for the same inflated value of the dollar. Along with their notorious ally, the West, they conspire to destroy the Russian economy and plunder its resources. The best minds offer various and sophisticated ideas as to how to stem the dangerous rise of "greens." Of course, the claims of both sides are accepted by the public with the same scepticism.

### **Russians Change Their Style of Life and Consolidate the Family**

With the falling economy and the ruble's devaluation, the standard of living in the country has dropped, by various estimates, from 30 to 50 percent. No less painful for Russians was the disappearance of their old paternalistic state which took care of employment, housing conditions, health services and education, and the sudden declaration in word and deed that citizens were being left to their own devices.

Those who in the past predicted such a tumble in the life of Russians also prophesied a national catastrophe with starving millions and mass riots across the country. Democrats and conservatives both believed in January of 1992 in the likelihood of mass unrest—the first with fear for the fate of their reforms, the second with hopes of destroying them.

While conservatives were preparing their structures for exploiting popular anger, Yeltsin's administration hoped to avert popular uprisings with a program of privatization and promises of stock ownership of former state property. This strategy failed as a political and psychological action, and had dire economic ramifications. The October distribution of vouchers, each allowing the purchase of stocks for ten thousand rubles, about US \$25 at the current exchange rate, did not raise the popular mood a bit. At the time, only 14 percent of Muscovites displayed some positive emotions about this operation. No one was amazed to learn that thousands of people did not trust government promises of future profits and the high market value of the vouchers, and started selling them almost immediately at half price or exchanging them for bottles of vodka. What is more, the gigantic and obvious machinations of the old nomenclature and mafia in grabbing state property engendered the hostility of the general public against the regime. This attitude is well fomented by the opposition and the hostility can only increase.

However, despite the failure to make Russians happier with the prospect of profits from stocks, the fears and hopes of political adversaries did not materialize and the Russian masses remained calm during the whole year of ordeal. The behavior of 600,000 Khabarovsk residents last winter amazed everyone in the country. The heating systems of the city broke in the midst of the Siberian winter and people boiled water with public fires on the streets. There were no meetings, demonstrations or even threats to depose the local administration. The head of the local administration, Alexander Sokolov, could leave the city of suffering

people for a trip to North Korea in order to congratulate "the great leader," Kim Il Sung, on his jubilee. The same tranquillity dominated other Russian cities and villages during 1992—even if they dreamed about the restoration of the quality of life which they enjoyed in Brezhnev's times: Russians, according to various national surveys, regard this period as the best in their history, at least as five to six times better than now.

What is more, concomitant with their increasingly sour economic state is their political apathy. As the survey of the Institute of Sociology found, 94 percent of the respondents considered themselves not to belong to any political party or movement. Only half were able to name a party that they could trust. Sixty-four percent of Russians were against any mass actions and considered them useless.

Four different hypotheses were advanced in Moscow to the explain Russian behavior during these difficult months. Several social scientists, with a pride or anger that depends on their political position, pointed to the eternal and seemingly unfathomable Russian patience and fatalism as the most important Russian characteristics. A number of their colleagues (and Iurii Levada, a famous Russian sociologist, is among them) praised the masses for their wisdom in understanding the absence of alternatives to reforms and their cost of implementation. In the opinion of many Moscow sociologists, such political apathy is rooted in the fear in deeply pessimistic Russians that any radical political change would make their bad situation even worse. There are also experts who credited the government for a deft policy of concession to the most radical groups of the population (the salary of miners was raised several times at once). In any case, instead of challenging a government they mostly disrespect, Russians decided to address fighting famines and other tribulations with their vast past experience and were determined to survive the myriad problems they had to face despite the abrupt regress of their quality of life. And in 1992 they managed to do it.

Russians did it because they radically changed their ways of life and they simply ceased to satisfy many of their wants. Eighty-six percent admitted that they buy fewer cloths and shoes. Fifty-three percent acknowledged that their vacations are now worse. Ultimately, it was the Russian family that saved the nation.

Soviet official ideology and policy, after a short flirtation with "the free style of life" in the aftermath of the Revolution, were always on the side of the family, strengthening it as the main unit of society. However, the Communists were only moderately successful in their implementation. Stalin, for instance, made divorce and abortion extremely difficult. After his death the Soviet family as an institution went downhill as the frequency of divorce increased by almost eight times in the last five decades.

In their dark days of last year, most Russians found that their survival depended on the solidarity and resources, both intellectual and physical, of the family. The struggle to put food on the table remains the major problem for the majority of Russians. No less than two thirds of total income is now spent on foodstuffs. Past topics of conflict in the family, such as the soundness of expenditures on vacations, trendy clothing, appliances and even the husband's secret ("under skin") pocket money, have disappeared almost completely. Old and young now think and speak about edibles and cannot enjoy a good meal in a friend's home without pondering its price. It is remarkable that most Russians have stopped having lunch in their factory or office cafeterias because it is too expensive.

The necessity of growing vegetables and fruit in family gardens demands a harmony between members, particularly concerning the uses of their free time. This free time was a very contentious issue for most Russian families in the past. Russian cities are now moribund on weekends because most residents work in their garden plots. Few family members attempt to avoid their chores for entertainment or various adventures—too much is at stake. What is more, home is now a factory producing literally hundreds of canned food items. This activity demands close cooperation, especially in the search for such scarce items as tins and other necessities. All members of the family, from school children up to the oldest babushka, are mobilized in the quest for affordable prices for the table and pantry. In many families, stocks of food can allow people to survive even if the situation reverts to that of December 1991 when food stores were absolutely empty. Besides guaranteeing people a minimal diet, home and family fulfil other needs that are impossible to satisfy through state or private enterprise because of exorbitant prices. Russians have discovered the various talents and skills of their family

members, who now cut hair, make clothes, repair appliances, clean clothes with homemade chemicals and perform a myriad of other tasks.

Emergent children's hardships in the new Russian society also substantially invigorate the family. Schoolchildren now spend much more time at home under family supervision because the state has ceased to finance various extra-curricular activities like excursions and club circles. Even movies are too expensive. Summer and winter pioneer (scout) camps as well as children's sanatoriums have already become inaccessible to most Russians.

Teenagers present the family with other problems. The criminalized market, a major aspect of capitalism in Russia, involves millions of youngsters in speculation, stealing and prostitution. These activities promise quick enrichment while they destroy morals and deflect the young from their education. Even little children who dream about chocolate and bananas, not to mention unattainable toys, now lend money to their classmates at high interest rates and demand money for aid in cheating. No one, including the most intellectually refined parents, is able to dissuade them from this behavior. All these developments terrify parents who are trying to save their sons and daughters from a looming abyss.

In this context, the choice of schools for children is a vital issue. Newly organized private schools promise pupils and parents a much better environment and education than the increasingly neglected public schools. New acquaintances in Moscow recently declared that their near-term goal is to amass enough money to send their kindergarten-age daughters to a good school two years from now. They estimate that each can afford only one pair of shoes every six years.

Families are now much closer to each other if only because they spend more time together. Since they must seize any opportunity to earn money and perform new and numerous household chores, Russians have no time and energy to continue their previous lifestyle. Where visiting and receiving guests once played a crucial social role, Russians now miss the birthday parties of friends. This would have been an extraordinary social *faux pas* in the recent past.

This new lifestyle somewhat reintroduces the traditional division of labor into the family. The time is gone when the salaries of husband and wife were almost equal. Now the main provider is the husband, who must

be able to hold several jobs. The wife, without losing in most cases her professional employment, now labors as a domestic jill of all trades.

### Woman's Plight Outside the Family

The new economic reality has changed human relations and morals in the country and not always in the same positive direction as is the case with the family. It is all too evident that the first and most numerous victims of nascent mass unemployment are Russian women. Combined with this is their migration back to domestic labor. It is remarkable that women number less than one fifth of all successful entrepreneurs.

With declining chances to find employment, women are now more exposed than ever to various abuses. Managers, especially the "new" businessmen, often and openly hire a woman only if she will be responsive to their sexual demands. A typical advertisement in a Russian newspaper says, "a cultured man invites a woman without scruples for a job as a secretary and for sexual contact." As a female reader of *Literaturnaia Gazeta* recently said, "a job for a woman now means at the same time to be a woman of easy virtue."

Of course, the sexual abuse of subordinates is not entirely new. However, superiors at least used to be afraid of the party committee and to harass women rather cautiously. Now, with the party gone and public morals at ebb, a woman is completely at the mercy of those who can hire or fire her. Even women with Murphy Brown characteristics are forced to capitulate in such power asymmetries.

So it is not amazing that women looking for jobs and unwilling to sell their bodies warn in their advertisements, "do not render sexual services." At the same time, the plight of single women, and in particular those with children, is so terrible that many of them are totally demoralized and openly seek managers who will appreciate their appearance and offer eventual liaisons. The announcements in the popular ad magazine *All for You* are full of self descriptions of women looking for various professional jobs: "a blond with long hair and the face of a model," "an elegant and attractive Muscovite," "young, slender, impressive, with long legs."

In addition, the decline of women's activity in the emerging economy accompanies a diminishing role in politics. High demand for her time in the family and the end of the affirmative action policy of the previous

regime are creating a radical decline in the number of women in political institutions. With the November firing of Galina Starovoitova, an active fighter for democratic ideals, there are no women in Yeltsin's power structure.

### **The Dangerous Ambivalence in Culture**

Never in her history has Russian cultural life been as diverse as now. Russians now have access to a wide range of cultural values. They can choose newspapers, journals and books of any political color, attend temples of any denomination, send their children to any type of school, including religious ones. The moral constraints imposed on Russians by the totalitarian state also have disappeared and almost all lifestyles are now accepted by Russian society either as "normal" or as in "the domain of personal tastes." But having released herself from the grip of Communism, Russia has moved with all available speed from one moral extreme to the other.

A major task of Soviet ideological policy was the promotion of Russian nationalism and cultural traditions in order to isolate Russians from degenerate Western lifestyles. It associated such lifestyles with arrogant affluence, violence and libertinism. For instance, foreign movies were viewed mostly as bearers of hostile ideology and morals. They made up a very tiny part of the films permitted by the authorities. Even these select few were divested of any strong violence or, and in particular, sexual scenes. Soviet censorship did not hesitate to cut undesirable episodes from the movies of such respected foreign directors as Federico Fellini and Stanley Kramer.

Now, the vast majority of movies I saw advertised on Moscow's billboards are foreign. They are represented by their crudest scenes of violence and their most sexually explicit highlights. Old and new Russian movies have almost totally disappeared from theatres. Because of this, Russia now looks much more cosmopolitan than other countries that, despite Hollywood's global influence, continue to promote their domestic cinema. Russian nationalists are, of course, outraged at the present turn of events. Recently, a foreign film entitled *Through the Sewage* played in a leading Moscow theatre. Yuri Vlasov, a former democrat, in an article in Pravda used the title symbolize the reprobate morals caused by

the invasion of imported movies. Such movies he depicts as dragging his compatriots through filth.

The bookstands in Moscow present no less striking a contrast to the recent past, as well as to bookstores in any developed country. It is almost impossible to find the works of Tolstoy or Dostoyevsky, or a serious book on history or philosophy. Such reading was once regarded as a characteristic feature of Russians, in stark contrast to America's preference for pulp books. Now Russians are offered a cornucopia of books on mysticism, occult science, parapsychology, magic and sorcery. In addition, of course, there are numerous treatises on how to make love. American criminal and mystery stories also abound. In comparison to their Russian counterparts, any bookstore in the United States with its usual eclectic assortment of books, even cookbooks, would look as if it served only the intellectual sophisticates of the country.

Russian TV also surpasses American networks in catering to the lowest common denominator of the audience. A leading program offers viewers each day an astrological prophecy that suggests what people should do or not do the next day. Russian newspapers made similar about-faces. In their disregard of moral taboos they far surpass the Western press. The very popular *Moskovskii Komsomolets* (*Moscow Young Communist*), which retains its title from the past, publishes in each issue the following succinct listings with telephone numbers: "Beautiful girls," "extra massage 24 hours," "sexual services," "beverage and the rest after 7 pm," "express acquaintances." What a contrast to the Soviet puritanical press of the past where even a hint of sex was impossible! *Nezavisimaia gazeta* (*Independent Gazette*), another Moscow popular newspaper, seriously and with the apparent approval of its readers, wrote about a novelty in Russian life—an auction which offered to put males at the disposal of successful females for a full four hours.

Changes in cultural life are no less remarkable. Russian intellectuals always cherished the idea of their cultural superiority over Americans. They viewed Americans as people who do not read good literature, and who can only entertain at parties through small talk. Russians viewed financial talk as the most serious issue discussed by Americans and even this was considered distasteful. Today, Russia's refined intellectuals (without mentioning the mass intelligentsia) have lost interest in highbrow literature, ignore their famous "thick" literary magazines and do not go



to theatres to see classic plays and movies. They discuss their material life much more intensively and in the same American manner that was once so despised. The famous Moscow kitchen, where people fed on vodka and herrings with potatoes and discussed until dawn the meaning of life and recent philosophical treatises, is gone.

I recently met one of the most sophisticated literary critics in Moscow. In the past she could not tolerate anything but lofty subjects for even a few minutes. With her new position as an editor in a commercial institution, she vehemently discusses only business issues. The turning off of such intellectual endeavors is a sign of the abrupt decline of the role of literature, arts and sciences in Russian society.

However, the most arresting of moral developments in Russia is the change of attitude toward inequality. Of course, social equality as hailed by official Soviet ideology never materialized and the gap between the life of the nomenclatura and the rest of the population was huge. The party regarded the privileges of *apparatchiks* as a high state secret. Special stores and hospitals were not only hidden from the eyes of the populace, party committees strongly punished party members for demonstrating opulence. Ultimately, this policy worked and the special material status of superiors did not irritate people on a mass scale. It also did not hamper the efforts of propaganda to present Soviet society as based on the principles of a social equality that permitted only limited differences in income that depended on workers' qualifications and the intensity of their labor.

Now, the new political and economic elites are not concerned about the visibility of their well-being and privileges. They are not at all worried that the standard of living for most people has fallen immensely and that their conspicuous consumption now looks extremely arrogant. They are sure that, with the collapse of Communist ideology and its slogans about social equality and justice, it is possible and even necessary to praise the extreme opposite of the old ideals. They regard social differentiation as stimulating efficiency and as a desirable goal for the nation. Of course, new businesspeople are in the vanguard of those who commend inequality. They are sure that true capitalists in present-day America behave exactly thus. So they brag about their wealth and denounce poor people as deserving of their fate.

*Kommersant*, the main organ of the *nouveau riches*, does not mince words in its contempt for the less fortunate while praising its readers as "the cream of the nation," as "the most advanced group of the country," and as people "with the most progressive mentality and style of life." Recently, it boasted that most of its readers earn fifty to seventy times more than the average worker. They can afford luxurious apartments, Mercedes autos, the most expensive vacations and clothes in shops that accept only hard currency. These people already have hotels, restaurants and hospitals working only for them. In fact, as a casually dressed individual, with invisible dollars and credit cards in my pocket, I was not allowed to enter two exclusive cafeterias at lunchtime in Moscow.

It is remarkable that Yeltsin, Gaidar and most other officials have ignored the deeply rooted egalitarian tendencies in the Russian masses. They have not said one word against the social impertinence of the new bourgeoisie that, in its frenzy of blind emulation, ignores the rules of etiquette observed by such people in democratic societies. Jumping from a socialist society to a new one whose label is still unknown, the Russian political and economic establishment has managed to surpass in social cynicism even the most ardent American conservatives.

### Conclusion

The future remains problematically uncertain. Russia is now at the period of its history when its political, economic and social structures are very "soft." When a society is in such a state the number of factors influencing the course of events increases enormously. In comparison, in times when a society is in a state of equilibrium, it has a "hard" structure. In the 1960s and 1970s Russia found itself in a state of relative equilibrium, with a well-defined political structure. It needed only a few factors (the economic and demographic processes, the changes in the army and the military-industrial complex and few others) to determine the evolution of Soviet society. Forecasting its future was a relatively practical matter. Whatever the differences between western Sovietologists with conservative or liberal tendencies, there was almost always a strong consensus among them about the short-term future of the Soviet economy, and relatively few discrepancies in their comments about the evolution of the Soviet political order.

Now, in 1992, the future of Russia not only depends on the above factors but also on the character of privatization, foreign trade, the professional skills of workers and a host of other elements that can't be treated here. There is also a myriad of nascent political factors that beg to be considered, including some that are presently thought of as accidental or insignificant. Among such factors are the ability of conservatives and democrats to create unity in their ranks, the existence of political leaders who can compete with Yeltsin from the right as well as from the left, the threshold of patience of Russians as they struggle to deal with economic hardships, the strength of their optimism (or pessimism) about the future, the activity of local political elites in Russian as well as non-Russian regions of the Russian Federation, the amount of financial assistance from the West, the policies of the new state governments toward Russian minorities and how physically strong President Yeltsin is. Each of them can have a strong impact on Russia at the present crossroads. By the time of the publication of this article the Russian political, economic and social landscape will no doubt be radically different than it is now in November 1992.

Of course, even with all my scepticism about the human ability to forecast Russian developments, I listened attentively to my Moscow colleagues who have not lost any confidence in the Sibylline trade. Some of them advanced an optimistic prognosis which suggested that all negative processes in Russia are the result of the country releasing itself from the bonds of bureaucratic socialist society and blazing its own trail toward efficient liberal capitalism. A new, energetic, risk-taking businessperson who does not spend time on abstract issues and watches movies only for entertainment is the real future of Russia and the model for its citizens. These colleagues believe that in the coming years Russian capitalism will become civilized and Russian capitalists will become the generous benefactors of a Russian renaissance in morals, culture and science. A number of sociologists, including old friends at the Center for Public Opinion, reject the alarmist interpretation of their data and are inclined to believe in the dominance of positive trends everywhere—in politics, the economy and culture.

However, few people share this optimism. Other social scientists believe that the cumulative effects of the negative processes in the economy (the abrupt decline of investment, the low level of maintenance

of equipment in all sectors of the economy, and the deprofessionalization and the decline of labor discipline) will produce the results that pessimists have predicted, albeit incorrectly to date, over the last few years. The first negative scenario supposes the slow disintegration of Russia as a great nation. In this case, the Russian Federation will fall apart and the central government will look like a helpless emperor from the Holy Roman Empire. Permanent military conflicts will rage in the country and only the world community will be able to protect the nuclear weapons against severe odds. The best Russian minds will continue to leave the country and Russia will cease to be one of the major pillars of modern science and culture.

Another scenario many Moscow experts found much more plausible is that many Russians will not easily reconcile themselves to what they regard as the economic, moral and cultural degradation of their country, or to their being dominated by a corrupt and criminalized elite. This scenario also supposes that there is a limit to Russian patience and that credit to the reformers has a ceiling. In addition, and despite its potential, the Russian family cannot long endure in this latest crucible of hardships. Its resources, materials and morals also have limits. If the decline of the economy continues, the family as a bastion of Russian society will eventually disintegrate. As we see in other countries, economic disenfranchisement of marginalized communities (e.g. African, Hispanic, Gypsy, immigrant) threatened many families.

Nationalists and Communists, who continuously exploit the growing anger of the masses against "democrats" and "businessmen," are attempting to instigate mass riots for a final assault against Yeltsin's regime. They want to stem the evolution of Russia and install a new totalitarianism based on nationalism, isolation from the West and Russian Orthodoxy. One of their goals is the restoration of the Russian empire and its status as a superpower. As a major argument in favor of this scenario, my Russian friends pointed to the remarkable conduct of the political, economic and cultural elites, apparently sensing the dangers that are so far invisible in quotidian life. Most of them look at their present position as temporary. By all accounts they are already planning what to do in case of emergency. About a quarter of business people, readers of *Kommersant* at least, confessed in a recent survey that they would like to have apartments in Russia and abroad. Politicians, cultural figures and

new businesspeople, many of my friends and colleagues suggested, have their accounts in the banks of countries that they consider safe havens. For instance, Gavriil Popov, the former mayor of Moscow, was denounced by prominent Russian journalists for secret dealings with foreign firms and his acquisition of real estate in America. Mikhail Gorbachev's travels abroad are also linked in the minds of many Russians with the amassing of coveted hard currency should he need to flee the country. Along with elites, most professionals nourish the dream of the move to the West, at least in order to help get through these dire times. The engineers of the Military-Industrial Complex, people whose patriotism was beyond reproach, are not immune to this either. Two thirds of them, as a recent survey detected, want to leave the motherland. Do all these people feel a stronger premonition about the coming Russian social earthquake than those who, substantiating their optimism by referring to the cemetery of failed bad prognoses, still believe à la Fukuyama in the nice liberal capitalistic future of Russia?

It is hardly arguable that Russia has not entered into a course of history that has led it far from the Communist society which existed for seven decades and that, at the beginning of the 1980s, seemed to be built "for ever." But what form this society will take is unknown. The immediate future promises several dramatic developments between "right" and "left"; "liberal capitalism" and "authoritarian society," market and planning, absolute political pluralism and strongly controlled political diversity from above, centralization and decentralization, Russian chauvinism and ethnic tolerance, and economic decline and rise.