

A Society of Political Indifference

Maria Lipman

The local elections in October 2009 demonstrated Russians' deep indifference to public politics. Party representatives and journalists spoke over and over again of flagrant cases of fraud, in particular in the election to the Moscow City Duma, but Moscow voters did not seem to care. Despite the fact that Moscow is home to the most enlightened, wealthiest, best educated, most entrepreneurial, and successful people in the country, they show as little interest in their own political rights as everywhere else in Russia.

People have taken to the streets in recent years, indignant that their will has been trampled, in Egypt, Tunisia, Bahrain, Georgia, Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan, and Iran, but in such cases in Russia people only give a cynical shrug of the shoulders and say, "What did you expect?" More than half of Muscovites had thought the Moscow City Duma election results would be rigged even before the election actually took place. Only a little more than a quarter of the capital's residents hoped for an honest election.

Voting is no longer a political choice, and those who still go to the polling stations and cast their votes see it as more of a voluntary ritual than anything. The public shares a deep-rooted belief that their votes count for nothing. "We" don't decide anything, they think. "They" decide everything. This conviction is an accurate picture of Russian life, and so it is no surprise that people seem so indifferent about election fraud. In the absence of public politics as such, the whole issue of civic activeness loses all meaning. It is impossible to tell the cause from consequence: is there no public politics because society does not stand up for its political rights?

Or does society see no meaning to these rights because there is no political process in which to take part?

This apathetic and fragmented society is an invaluable resource for the Russian authorities. All governments dream of being able to rule without having to share power or account for their activities to the public. This is an impossible dream in countries with functional democratic institutions, but in Russia, where the meaning of the institutions is distorted, this dream has become reality. The ruling elite has done its best to cultivate an apathetic, dissociated, and cynical public attitude, and it has been successful. In the Russian public's eyes political parties are no more than Kremlin projects, Duma deputies do not represent their voters' interests, the law is on the side of the strongest, the police threaten rather than protect ordinary people, and corruption is simply a fact of life. This is all seen as a given. You can try to adapt to it, but trying to change it is perceived as senseless, naïve, and simply foolish. The idea that the people have signed a sort of "pact" with the government in which they renounce their part in decision-making and the authorities guarantee them a tolerable existence is not entirely accurate. If such a pact exists, it is not with the masses but with the elite, who have indeed deliberately chosen to give up political representation and influence in exchange for privileges and opportunities for personal enrichment. The paternalist model of relations with the authorities is usual in Russia, and the vast majority of people have no particular desire to take responsibility for the country's development.

Such was the case in Russia under the tsars, emperors, and Bolsheviks. An all-powerful, and almost always harsh state dominated over a powerless society. The only two times the people ever had the chance to decide for themselves how to live was when the state simply ceased to exist: at the start of the 20th century, when the Russian Empire collapsed, and at the end of the 20th century, when the communist regime fell apart. In the first case, society was split and slid into a terrible civil war, followed by decades of bloody state terror. In the second case, Russia seemed to make an attempt to extricate itself from the paternalist rut without re-

sorting to violence this time. There was the feeling in the late 1980s-early 1990s that Russians not only rejected Soviet power but knew what to do and what direction to take. For a time it seemed that in freeing themselves from communism and choosing democracy and the market they not only saw hope for a better life for themselves and their fellow citizens but, most importantly, were ready to put their efforts and energy into making these goals a reality.

But the energy soon ran out. After discovering that political freedom and the transition to capitalism did not signal the start of a better life, people were disappointed and disoriented. The public enthusiasm of the late *perestroika* and early Yeltsin years soon melted away, leaving at best a feeling of uneasiness at having exhibited such a burst of earnest naïveté, and at worst the conviction of having been intentionally and maliciously deceived, forced to swallow harmful and alien values. The pendulum swung yet again and willingness to follow Western models gave way to anti-Western feelings and the conviction that foreign recipes would never work anyway, because Russia has its own special path. Western political institutions – democratic checks and balances, a multiparty system, competitive elections – were borrowed and even cemented in the constitution, but have not taken root in Russian soil. The state remained weak, but society did not become stronger.

The feeling of liberation that many Russians felt when they rejected communism in 1991 soon faded from the national memory. With Putin's rise to power, the Kremlin began steadily eroding political freedoms and restoring the traditional model of a centralized monopoly on power, but by this time the public did not perceive this as an infringement on its own rights.

Why, unlike the situation in the former Soviet satellite states of Eastern Europe, did the liberation from communism in Russia not help the country set a new direction for its future development? Why did the enthusiasm for truth and freedom that so inspired Russians twenty years ago give way so swiftly and decisively to disappointment and cynicism?

The difficulties of overcoming the communist legacy alone are not enough to explain it; after all, the countries of Eastern Europe also had more than their fair share of problems.

One possible explanation is that Soviet citizens did not win their freedom, but received it as a gift. The fierce resistance that many Russians put up against the Bolsheviks during the Civil War is a distant memory now, and the winners in that war did all they could to ensure that all memory of the losers was eradicated, either exiling them abroad or exterminating them as a class. The dissidents fighting for rights and liberties during the Brezhnev years were very few in number and had neither the public's trust nor support. (The situation was somewhat different in the case of the nationalists in the Baltic states and Ukraine – but that already is not Russian history.) By the mid-1980s, the dissident movement had been entirely defeated.

It was Mikhail Gorbachev who began to gradually loosen the screws of state repression. The first and last president of the USSR was no freedom fighter, of course, but he saw the profound decay of the Soviet system and the approaching economic disaster and realized that the state would soon have no further means at its disposal for ensuring the population's loyalty. It was beyond his capabilities to improve the economy and the system of governance in general, but he decided to give the Soviet people freedom, and they responded, though not immediately, to his gift with mass enthusiasm and support, despite the fact that the economic situation continued its rapid decline. If this fervor proved short-lived, perhaps it was precisely because the freedom was obtained so easily and people did not view it as the fruit of their own struggle.

To be fair, however, not all of the former socialist bloc countries experienced a resolute struggle against a repressive regime. Resistance continued practically the whole time in Poland, which witnessed what would have been for Russia an unthinkable alliance between the intelligentsia and the workers movement. Poland was unique, however, in the intensity of its struggle. In a number of countries – Bulgaria, for example – the

people settled down quite peacefully to their existence under a communist regime and in the end received their freedom and independence from Gorbachev's hands. Gradually, however, all of the former "fraternal countries" came to see themselves as victims of Soviet imperialism, and this helped them unite their societies, mitigated the hardships of the post-communist period, and helped shape the consensus on where to go from there.

Herein lies another very important difference from Russia: the former Warsaw Pact allies could declare communism an evil imposed on them from the outside, but Russia could not call itself a victim and communism an outside force, and therefore it could not make liberation from communism the basis for a new national identity.

Furthermore, the Warsaw Pact countries saw the collapse of the socialist bloc and the bankruptcy of communism as a chance to restore continuity with their pre-communist European past. In some of these countries this past is a historic fact, while in others it is a product of the imagination (some of these countries only became independent states in the last ten to fifteen years), but everywhere it was envisioned as a return to a "golden age." This notion has spread even beyond the former socialist bloc and encompasses all of the countries that have recently joined the European Union or hope to do so in the foreseeable future. For example, a series of documentary films about the countries of southeast Europe released by an international non-governmental organization is titled "Return to Europe." The "returnees" include not only Macedonia, Bosnia, and Croatia, but also Turkey, which was never a part of Europe, and Greece, which seemingly never left Europe. The name of the series sounds foolish, but its sense is eminently clear: Europe is envisioned as a valuable (democratic) reference point and a desired region that other countries should make their destination.

Unlike the new and future countries of Europe, Russia does not have a common national vision of a "golden age" to which it should return. For various reasons neither Bolshevism nor the Russian Empire fit this role. The former socialist bloc countries had no trouble deciding to celebrate

their newly obtained independence from Soviet communism as a national holiday and the departure point for their new statehood. Russians rejected the introduced June 12 holiday (Russia Day) and were greatly puzzled by the authorities' decision that they celebrate National Unity Day on November 4 in place of the old anniversary of the revolution on November 7. People still have not figured out the starting point for Russia's current statehood. However, without knowing where we came from we don't know what to use as a foundation for building a nation today or which way to go from here. If we reject borrowed values, then what are our own values, apart from hostility to those of others?

Such a society is easy to manipulate, not because it is gullible, but because it believes in nothing. For the ruling elite, whose primary goal is to hold onto and consolidate their own power, such a society is no less a blessing than big oil reserves. But for Russia's development, both are curses. The lack of national consensus on Russia's direction is as much a brake on the country's development as is dependence on oil and gas exports. The situation is further complicated by the fact that Russia cannot follow the road taken by its former "younger brothers": it is too big to become a part of something else.

In Russia today, no one calls openly for a return to the past. On the contrary, the authorities call incessantly for modernization, but in reality there is no blueprint for the road ahead. The vacuum is inevitably filled by fragments of old models and symbols: paternalism, an anti-Western outlook, single party and single ideology projects, the Soviet national anthem, and Stalin in the Moscow metro.

"Back to the USSR" is nevertheless more of a metaphor than a reality, and the last two decades cannot be seen as having been entirely lost. Of course, the absence of public politics turns political rights into a hollow concept, and the civil liberties written into the constitution are violated at every turn, but compared to Soviet times, the space of individual freedom has become practically unlimited. The Soviet regime imposed restrictions on people at every step: it declared private property and making profit

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a crime; banned travel; and decided what people could or could not read, watch, and listen to, and what they could or could not write, film, and perform. These restrictions no longer exist, and a whole generation that cannot imagine any other kind of life has grown up. But can we hope that these personal freedoms will gradually give rise to a civic spirit that will inspire people to seek something not just for themselves but for their fellow citizens as well? Will this help to shape a national consensus, or can the acquisition of new meanings come only through new cataclysms? The answer is not clear today. However, maintaining the paternalist model threatens Russia with inevitable decline, and sooner or later the country will have to reinvent itself.

