

The Antagonizing of the Educated and the Skilled New Source of Security Threat in Russia

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Since the end of Yeltsin's reign the debate waged in the Western academic and policy communities over the outcome of reforms in Russia has gradually subsided. The focus of security concerns has shifted to the Islamic world. Against this background, it often appeared (at least until the deadly hostage crisis in Moscow) as if Russia, with the exception of the North Caucasus, had regained stability, its people having come to terms with tectonic changes in their society, and with the new economic order in particular.

This misperception resulted from the fact that Russian critical thinkers—the voices of Russia's silent majority—are rarely heard at the international level. This is in spite of the fact that Russia's own elite, as well as a large strata of critically minded Russians, played such a central role in the formation of the present world order since 1989 by withdrawing unilaterally from the Cold War and by taking initiative in the process of the demise of the bipolar system. The current troubling failure of Russians outside the ruling circles to make themselves heard by a global audience gives rise to extreme forms of alienation and hostility, while the West is unprepared for the looming danger that this situation creates. The spontaneous mass boycott of the national census in Russia was just the latest reminder that the appearance of social calm and political stability in Russia proper (that is, after the Chechen tragedy is conveniently compartmentalized) has all the qualities of the proverbial Potemkin village. The gap between the pretensions of the ruling elite and the shadow reality of desperation and discontent is an explosive source of permanent instability—just as it was in the decades of narrowly concentrated growth coupled with international ambitions that ended in the state collapse of 1917.

By almost every social indicator—poverty, inequality, demographics, health care, the cost of labor, and the value of human capital more generally—post-Soviet Russia clearly belongs to the global periphery. Official statistics, while grim enough in themselves (e.g., 47 million—a third of the population—are below poverty level), give an incomplete idea of what is going on in real life; thus the poverty level in Russia is set below \$2 a day, much lower than international standards. Meanwhile, no other developing nation's government expends such a large share of its resources for the sake of its acceptance as an equal into the global elite and as a bulwark of the international status quo, while

neglecting the misery of its subjects and a population decrease that is projected to halve the number of Russians within some 50 years.

Another of Russia's sad distinctions is the inordinate proportion of the educated and the skilled among those stricken by poverty and excluded from productive activities by the monopolistic and oligarchical structure of the economy. The problem is particularly acute for those between 25 and 40 who did not belong to Soviet nomenklatura families and therefore have insufficient connections in the post-Soviet ruling class. Their critical period of education and professional development was shaped and often crippled by Soviet collapse and the spirit of the Big Grab—the takeover and dumping of national assets by the ex-Soviet ruling elite in its rush to integrate itself at whatever cost into the Western upper-class economy. And while Western governments and international financial institutions and foundations were feeding this elite's sense of entitlement with cash infusions, some of those considered Russia's best and brightest were left to starve.

Overqualified to Survive

Russia's deindustrialization, shift toward a more primitive economy, and addiction to the export of raw materials at the expense of its intellectual capital and technological legacy, contribute to a climate in which individuals, from scholars and engineers to well-educated military officers and highly skilled industrial workers, find themselves hopelessly overqualified for most income-generating activities. Even a menial job with a Western company pays better than scholarship or professional work in the public sector. Having been trained for the needs of an advanced industrial power, Russia's most valuable human capital is treated by the government as junk nowadays and consigned to subsistence salaries. While many of those who had built their careers in Soviet times were able to get through the 1990s by living off their Soviet-era inheritance (such as garden plots), their children and grandchildren are not thrilled by this option.

In the ever-growing world of Russia's educated but "superfluous" people, academic institutions in Russia's large cities are only the tip of the iceberg. But the academic establishment is most visible and comparatively more influential; therefore, its dismantling is viewed by some as a test case for other sections of the intelligentsia as well as the institutions that have provided for its subsistence and status in society. If metropolitan academics silently accept their own descent into poverty and disregard, there is little hope that other segments of society will speak out. Academia, except for applied science in the narrowest sense, is being downsized piece by piece. Those below 50, especially in social sciences and the humanities, including professionals with advanced and even foreign-earned degrees, are aggressively encouraged to shift to the business of public relations (called the "academic service sector"), accept dead-end jobs with slightly higher wages, or leave their country of birth. And a significant number of them are driven to the point where they may have nothing to lose by overtly confronting the system.

To make things worse, the institutional culture represented by many of those currently in power (especially those from the security apparatus) has historically been hostile to the intelligentsia, which contributes to its feeling deliberately victimized because of its ideological or cultural incongruity with the present order. Some will point

to what they see as evidence of a financial blockade, even at the risk of being labeled conspiracy theorists. Most people are aware of the domestic and international constraints on the Russian government's spending power, but the widely different impact these constraints have on the elite and the rest of society is plain to see. In this context, abstract Western lecturing about the need to adapt falls on deaf ears and occasionally backfires.

Political and Security Implications

As another electoral season approaches in Russia, the Communists are leading in the polls yet again, in spite of their publicized internal divisions and the ineptness of their leadership. Because any other left-of-center opposition has been silenced, co-opted, or prevented from forming, Communist affiliation has become virtually coterminous with any discontent within the system. Over the past decade, the opposition has consistently led in opinion polls, except for brief intervals before and after presidential elections, when the country suddenly becomes enamored by the pre-designated winner. Contrary to the pundits' predictions, while old generations are dying out, the pool of protest voters and their potential leaders is not decreasing commensurably but expanding.

Dispossessed youth, often with advanced degrees from prestigious institutions, are filling the ranks of protest voters, while others, having lost faith in Russia's quasi-democratic electoral system, are embracing more radical right- and left-wing ideologies and organizations. Those who were rallying against the old system ten years ago are now saying: "It turns out that by voting for the reformers and going to the barricades in August 1991, we were supporting our own unemployment, humiliation and hunger."

"Nobody reads, nobody cares" is the proud motto repeatedly heard in response, from people in and around the government. They are unimpressed by the prospect of mass radicalism, having an unshakeable belief in human patience and the efficiency of the instruments of repression, which have been strengthened in recent years and are well-oiled, not least due to the keen interest of the new economic elites in its efficient functioning. The government policy of job creation is virtually nonexistent; moreover, the powerful interests that dictate government policy, apparently prefer to see the overqualified being pushed into the shadow economy, where might makes right, contract obligations do not exist, and the cost of labor becomes infinitesimally low.

But the international business and policy communities need not be as shortsighted as their Russian counterparts. Given the dramatic increase in anti-American sentiment, which is threatening to become one of the defining features of world politics, the power of words and the ingenuity of the desperate, are not to be discounted—at least not by those who care about their long-term security and legitimacy. Precious little time remains before a turning point in the alienation of Russia's best and brightest from the post-Soviet domestic and international order. It is up to concerned Russians and Westerners to grasp the scope of the danger involved in the exclusion and radicalization of Russia's educated youth and initiate a dialogue on what to do about it.

The creation of decently paying jobs for the educated and skilled, however difficult in today's economic climate, is the only substantive solution to the problem. In the absence of domestic political will or the capacity to act, those Russians and Westerners who understand the dangers created by antagonizing the educated class and driving it into the

corner should find ways to convince enlightened corporations and pressure the rest of them to undertake the equivalent of an affirmative action program for Russia's intellectual capital. Corporations operating in major cities where it is concentrated should open up their doors, with international government and developmental agencies' support, to educated Russians with different academic backgrounds. They should be given the opportunity to supplement their professional work with research and analysis, consulting, editing, interpreting, and so forth, and given the chance to learn the business environment and culture, with the opportunity of either integrating into it or returning to full-time academic occupations in a year or two, having enlarged their horizons and secured the prospect of joining the middle class.

While specific arrangements would depend on individual skills and the needs of the company, the crucial prerequisite for the corporations is to think of it as an insurance policy for those who are in Russia for the long term, and for the international community in general, against bitter hostility, radicalism, and potential violence—a more reliable insurance than the superficially strong hand of reformed KGB rule. Such a groundbreaking move on the part of the Western business community would be particularly timely in this electoral season, where the issue at stake is whether capitalism in Russia irreversibly assumes an exclusionary, monopolistic, and fundamentally insecure format of a peripheral dual economy. Alternatively, corporations may be able to benefit strategically from transforming the dangerously excluded stratum into a reliable bridge to the rest of society and thereby expanding the isolated enclave in which they exist in this country.

Granted, as long as the downward spiral in the world economy persists, and visionary leadership of an FDR magnitude is not in sight, this proposal may have a low probability of acceptance. Still, it is worth putting it on the table before the Western business community and initiating a dialogue. The most likely alternative is the young intelligentsia's further drift in the anticapitalist and anti-Western direction, with dangerously unpredictable consequences.

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