

Subjective Notes on the Objective Situation Among Russian Intellectuals

Leonid Gozman

* **Leonid Y. Gozman**, Ph.D., founder and director of the *Perspective Foundation*, Moscow, Russian Federation (lgozman@mail.ru).

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A privileged class

It's flattering to feel you are a part of something so complex mere words can't describe it. I'm talking about the Russian intelligentsia.

So as not to end up drowning in definitions, let us be guided by the intuitive understandings that almost always suffice. We don't require precise definitions for a horse or a table – we understand what it is without venturing “A horse is...” With regards to the intelligentsia, it's clear that education is a necessary qualification for membership in this group, but not a sufficient one. The working definition must also include a certain system of values, lifestyle, and aesthetic preferences. At the same time, the professed moral ideals of responsibility to country and its people are not always put into practice. The very act of proclaiming these values does, however, inform one's sense of self. In the same way, a person can sincerely believe he loves the theater while barely attending any shows, with the love of theater remaining a part of his or her identity. The same is with books – a member of the intelligentsia must have books in his home. He may never read them, but the bookshelves nonetheless create a certain atmosphere in the apartment.

In the Soviet Union, everything belonged to the bureaucracy, and yet it was the intelligentsia that formed a privileged class. It wasn't about the money. Many of the Soviet intelligentsia members were not well off. University professors with higher academic degrees and the staff of research institutes made a decent living, but young engineers, for example, lived rather humbly. Still, almost all of them had clean – “brainy” – job. This was quite important in a country where a huge percentage of the population earned their living through physical labor, often toiling in terrible conditions. If you belonged to the intelligentsia, you didn't have to lift heavy loads, freeze on construction sites, or work in dirty overalls. This, along with the higher education, which became a widespread norm only in the post-Soviet period, gave him or her the sense of being among the elect, of belonging to a sort of nobility. Interestingly, the bureaucrats also considered the intelligentsia to be the privileged class – the *nomenklatura* sought to place their children into academic institutions rather than Party jobs. A comfortable life awaited the children of the party bosses after they defended their dissertations, which they did without fail.

The Soviet intelligentsia, even when working in the apparatus of state administration, identified with the pre-revolutionary Russian intelligentsia, whose members were held in high esteem and romanticized. Those who made the grade could claim the coveted status and fabled attributes, real or imaginary, that the *intelligent* enjoyed, along with the flattering sense that one serves a higher purpose in life.

Thus, just by obtaining a higher education, the Soviet intelligentsia guaranteed for itself a higher quality of life, the exalted concept of oneself, and a chance to look down at their less fortunate countrymen. All of that was taken away by the revolution that swept over the country in the 1980s and early 1990s.

Victims of a dream

The bloodless collapse of the Communist system may be one of the most joyful and hopeful events of the 20th century. But as any transformation of this magnitude, this one produced unanticipated consequences. And while the positive outcomes may outweigh the negative, the victims – and there are always victims in such changes, those dispossessed of money, status, or meaning – do not find their losses any less painful.

The intelligentsia, as it turned out, was the social group that suffered the most from the fall of Communism. The very first seedlings of the new market economy sharply increased the relative prosperity of those who stopped working for the state and dared to seize the initiative and try something completely different, like joining a cooperative or dabbling as a merchant. This new class was recruited from all segments of society, including the intelligentsia. The *intelligenty* of this ilk found themselves in an environment with a different norms of behavior and values. Ditching the intelligentsia habits was a precondition for success if you followed this route.

The others, who stayed behind in their research institutes and design bureaus, saw a catastrophic drop in their quality of life, in absolute as well as relative terms. The rampant inflation, rising prices, and delayed salaries swiftly turned this group of the intelligentsia into the new poor. The loyalty to old professions and values hobbled the survivors who were unwilling or unable to find a job on the side, grow their own food, or otherwise part with the institutions which ceased to take of you.

The sensation of defeat was exacerbated by the decline in social status. The old hierarchies were no longer in place. The symbols of success for the intelligentsia – a Ph.D. being a prime example – no longer did the trick. The young people who continued to study in colleges and universities university didn't see education as essential, nor did they find their professors to be appealing role models. The political changes robbed the intelligentsia of that “noble status” they once prided themselves on.

The sense of purpose and meaning in life began to fade. What the intelligentsia had dared to say publicly in the past, and then only by way of hints, intimations, and allusions woven into the fabric of novels, films and plays about other countries, was now published and discussed openly, splashed across television screens and shouted in public squares. Delight at hearing words banned for decades to thunderous applause blinded the intelligentsia from realization that their art of allegory, honed from generation to generation, was becoming superfluous.

The end of state censorship and the accessibility of previously banned books, songs, and films led to the erosion of the cultural codes that the intelligentsia had relied on to spot their own. For the well-educated intelligentsia, those codes were the songs of Okudzhava, or just a portrait of Hemingway on the wall. Being knowledgeable about a highly select group of “hot” cultural figures used to be a mark of distinction – not any more. We no longer recognized each other by our aesthetic sensibilities, or rather, such markers grew less reliable. It was as if we had joined different denominations and missed the fact that we are still all Christians. That wonderful feeling that you belong to a group of honorable, highly cultured people, which nourished our self-esteem, began to dissipate.

The Soviet intelligentsia that helped to hasten the fall of the regime (sometimes in their imagination and sometime by real deeds) fell victim to the changes they prayed for.

An end to goals

The Soviet intelligentsia may have differed in their assessments of the role played by Lenin or Peter the Great, the thaw or Alexander's reforms, but they always knew what they wanted – freedom and democracy. The sentiment was hardly new. “Freedom shall greet us joyfully at the door” prophesied Aleksandr Pushkin long time ago, and then everything will be just right. Or at least, similar to what the civilized people enjoy.

Enlightenment was the means of reaching that natural state of freedom when, to cite the Russian classic again, “all enlightened people shall gather under our holy banner!” This is why the intelligentsia hailed education. A cleansing revolution, even terrorism, could be justified as long as it serves that exulted end. The much hoped for freedom never came, however, and the reevaluation of values commenced.

Most Russian people shared the intelligentsia's expectations. The obvious defeat of democracy in modern Russia, the evisceration of government institutions, and the narrowing of freedoms had a devastating effect on the intelligentsia and its cherished values. The defeat crushed the faith in the possibility and even desirability of freedom, democracy, and a European destiny for Russia. For some *intelligenty* that was a signal to start looking for a "special path" germane to Russian culture and divergent with the European ways. This kind of search inevitably exaggerates the differences between Russia and the West, between Moscow and Rome, between Eastern and Western Christianity. In this reckoning, Russia emerged as the true successor of the Christian tradition degraded in the rest of the world. Those immune to such delusions succumbed to feelings of hopelessness and despair, to the dark notion that the defeat was more than a temporary setback. The old saw endorsed by the intelligentsia – "The government is the only European in Russia" – fell by the wayside. Along with this assumption, intelligently stopped cherishing democracy as a realistic or even desirable goal. My generation had nothing left to strive for. In the past, we lived in our country like ambassadors of the future and harbingers of freedom yet to be fully appreciated by the ignorant countrymen. Now those of us who haven't discarded old convictions come across as crackpots lost in the hostile land governed by the forces of unreason.

A disappearing class?

Many Russian people, including the intelligentsia, believe that (a) this class is disappearing, and (b) it is no longer needed. To be sure, such sentiments are not uncommon in history. The "attacking class," as Vladimir Mayakovsky called the proletariat, had little use for the useless social classes, be this bourgeoisie or intelligentsia. But the doomsday scenario the revolutionaries painted for the Soviet future failed to materialize. Now the bourgeoisie has come roaring back, and it looks like a spitting image of its pre-revolutionary counterpart.

We should bear in mind that the Russian intelligentsia is more a matter of self-identification than a social entity defined by some objective characteristics. Like people and religious confessions, it will live on for as long as there are individuals, no matter how few, identifying themselves as such. In a sense, each one of us claiming to be a member of this class proves its existence. The question is what functions it fulfills, what makes it relevant in modern conditions. The intelligentsia is useless and bound for extinction if its members accept their own uselessness and act accordingly.

The Russian intelligentsia emerged in large part as a reaction to the archaic structure of Russian society. Its activism compensated for the absence of a free press. The *inelligenty* shape public opinion in the state that lacks proper institutions or even an interest in having a dialogue with its people. Does that mean the intelligentsia is inextricably linked to a feudal society and consequently is destined to disappear in a modernized Russia?

In times of greater even if relative freedom, the intelligentsia's functions are fulfilled by specialized institutions – newspapers, radio stations, clubs, political parties. In modern Russia, protest movements and their leaders carry on this mission. Now you can add social networks to that list. Educating the people is no longer the task for dreamers and sages – it is a big business.

And yet, I want to stake a claim that while specific functions of the Russian intelligentsia have changed in the era of greater freedom, the need for its leadership persists. Neither newspapers nor political parties engage in serious social reflection, and it's impossible to imagine Russian intellectual life without that, especially in light of our "literature-centric" culture. The latter cannot be measured simply by the dwindling circulation of thick journals and the proliferation of competing information platforms. True, under the conditions of greater freedom, the intelligentsia will have to justify its relevance and carve out a niche for itself in public life. That's a task for the future, the task all the more relevant now that the democratic development in Russia has been cut short.

Contrary to the common, we are not witnessing a revival of the USSR. There is no going back to the habits cultivated by the Soviet intelligentsia, even though some of its old functions must be reclaimed, notably the moral imperative to take a stance and get politically engaged. A new state is evolving in Russia, or it has already emerged, neither democratic nor communist. Many challenges facing the responsible part of the intelligentsia today are different, especially if we take Russia as a European nation following its general path of development.

Preservation and education

Two kinds of problems confront the Russian intelligentsia today – self-preservation as a social force and the willingness to act as an agent of enlightenment, the latter understood not so much as a commitment to disseminating knowledge as the imperative of standing up to lies.

Putting the welfare of the country and its people above personal wellbeing has always been the cornerstone of Russian intelligentsia's creed. Like all rules undergirding a group identity (e.g., gender identity), this one is not always honored in practice. Yet they bear powerfully on one's sense of self. With this principle in mind, let us explore the task of education, of aiding fellow citizens in acquiring an adequate worldview.

Truth against lies

The current Russian system is based on lies. These incessant lies are not just a means to achieve some specific result, like tricking voters and increasing the turnout in an election. Falsehood has truly become a national idea.

The government lies constantly for any reason. It falsifies the data about the Russian economy, pretending it is thriving when the country's economy is stagnating. We hear about the ascendance of the "Russian world" when in fact the number of people speaking and learning Russian decreases every year, as the empire's former vassals abandon Cyrillic for Latin. The authorities swear by the Constitution while violating the nation's laws every step of the way, applying the laws a hoc or even ad hominem, as was the case with the law passed to keep Aleksey Navalny from the last presidential election. Lies about "banderites"¹ in Crimea or a story about how there was a celebration in New York of Putin's birthday with a "Putin Burger" weighing 1,952 grams made in his honor. And, of course, there are lies about the wars in the Donbass and in Syria.

Verbal lies are complemented with behavioral ones. Demonstrations are staged to show people's solidarity with the government, with street sweepers, state employees, and students, recruited for a small fee (or a passing grade in school). On television, paid audiences are assembled to cheer the official views in staged debates. Thugs, pretending to be members of outraged public, destroy undesirable art objects or disrupt unapproved plays. There are fake political parties, existing on Kremlin's handouts and established with the sole purpose of preventing real parties from sinking roots.

Amazingly, the same lies don't seem to bother our citizens. The contradiction between what people hear from their television screens and what they experience in daily life generates little outrage. It is met with a shrug – what else do you expect? Sometimes the authorities lie without any attempt to hide what they are doing. When Putin said in 2014 that there were no Russian armed forces in Crimea, he practically winked at his audience: "We all understand, I'm saying this for the West." And that's how many Russians they took it. So, when he did admit that our soldiers had operated in Ukraine, it took no one by surprise. The president's lying to his people didn't concern arise the people themselves. It was just a game in which everyone

¹ A term used to refer to the Ukrainian nationalists historically associated with fascism.

understood the rules and played the part. The Russian state and its people were playing on the same team against the West. The same applies to official statements about the military actions in the Donbass which, the president told us, were carried out by “tractor drivers and coal miners”. And such lies win Putin an approval, not condemnation, from the people.

Those partaking in official rituals know that they are not meant to achieve the stated goal. The Russians vote in various elections, knowing full well that the outcome is predetermined, and not just by the winner’s popularity but through large-scale manipulations, especially by the obstacles placed in the path of the real opponents prevented from entering the fray.

The system needs lies because, in the absence of real achievements or clear vision of the future (the president has never spelled out what Russia’s future he envisions) the people rally around the state propelled by illusions about the real state of the world, imaginary victories, and conniving enemies within. Lies work not only because the state fosters them but also because people find them comfortable. Still, their effectiveness, demonstrated by election results, requires an explanation. What happened was that after the annexation of Crimea, Putin restored to Russians their national pride and made them feel as part of a larger whole.

The desire to feel good about oneself, including one’s national identity, is a natural one. Any state strives to support feelings of national pride. The only problem is that, in our case, the pride is based on illusory rather than real achievements. The Russians inhabit an imaginary world where everyone is hostile to their country, where Russia is surrounded by implacable enemies, where Russia possesses the military and moral superiority over the rest of the planet.

Every day, TV commentators bombard the citizens with the stories of their nation’s greatness, past and present. World War II victories, a core element of the Russian national identity today, are presented as the sole achievement of the Soviet Union. Watching Russian TV, you would never know that the USSR had allies in war against Hitler; not knowing better, you might end up thinking the country fought against the entire West. Nowadays, you hear that the English were always our enemies, that the U.S., following a mythical “Dallas plan” (which smacks of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion), works overtime to bring Russia down. The key point here is that the world’s hostility toward Russia is eternal. The leading voice of Russian propaganda, Dmitry Kiselev, has recently announced that Sweden’s position on Crimea is tied to the “desire of the Swedish military brass to get revenge for its defeat at Poltava,” the 18th century battlefield that pitted Russia against Sweden.

This vision of the West as innately antagonistic to our country is not a new one. It flourished in the Soviet times in popular songs, still played on the radio, like “Where does the Motherland begin?” The very first couplet asserts that motherland “can’t be taken away from us.” We don’t know what exactly “they” want to take, but we are certain the enemies are bent on doing so!

Even then, the official Soviet propaganda has never been as extreme as what we are hearing today. In the Soviet era, we were led to believe that Europe and America were decent countries run by indecent people, the imperialists. The “ordinary people” living there weren’t responsible for their rulers; rather they were cast as our natural allies or, more accurately, the Soviet people’s younger brothers. Now, the people in those countries are cast as inimical to our unique system of values.

Homophobia has become a surprising focus for anti-Western attitudes. Russian citizens are told, in all seriousness, that heterosexual people are discriminated against in Europe, that homosexual marriages are encouraged, while marriages between men and women are practically banned. That children, prohibited to call their parents Mama and Papa, must instead refer to them as “number one” and “number two.” And so on. These stories are accompanied by the tales, familiar from Soviet times, of poverty and lawlessness in the West, including atrocities committed by migrants who force good folks to stay indoors to avoid sexual harassment.

This propaganda is an important factor in the stability of Russia’s current political system. Enemies seeking to destroy Holy Russia save the government from the need to answer uncomfortable questions about pensions, health care, quality of life – there’s simply no time for

such trivial matters when the enemy is at the gate. Moreover, the government has a moral justification for its actions. The myth, for example, about the ban on speaking Russian in Ukraine, or atrocities committed by the “Ukrainian fascists,” the genocide of Russians in Crimea and Donbass, turn Russia’s aggression against its neighbor into the rescue operation on behalf of fellow countrymen.

The Russian government has a long history of lying about its wars. In 1968, a good many Russians believed the official line that NATO was prepared to occupy Czechoslovakia. The Afghan war, with all its devastating consequences, was also justified by an official lie about thwarting the imminent American intervention. The authorities encouraged rumors of gold deposits in the Afghan mountains, to make the invasion appear more rational.

Few Russians take this picture literally, its partial acceptance is widespread. The situation resembles a drug addiction. An addict is a person incapable of living in the real world, which is an alien, and sometimes unbearably cruel, place to dwell in. After a fix, the world has changed – it looks friendly and feels comfortable, and the addict at last attains happiness in this new world. He is, of course, slouching towards his imminent death, yet he doesn’t realize that, or, which is worse, banishes the thought of a dire outcome. What I am saying is that our politico-psychological situation cannot be laid solely at the feet of the evil propaganda machine – Russian propagandists operate with the consent of its targets. After all, a drug addict buys drugs voluntarily; when his dealer is arrested, he will find another source rather than quit. All too often, our citizens accept the government lies, and eagerly wait for the new ones, which could be even more monstrous.

While the authorities deliberately deceive the people, they are apt to believe their own lies. Phrases full of genuine emotion sometimes break through Putin’s prepared speeches, suggesting he isn’t just fabricating facts but actually believing that the U.S. is plotting to conquer Russia. My own experience communicating with high-ranking Russian officials indicates that many of them are inclined to swallow their own propaganda. A young girl, a video blogger who recently spoke at the State Duma, told the parliamentarians that she had tens of millions of subscribers whereas she had a fraction of that number (several thousand would be a generous estimate). After she gave a loyalist speech, many elected representatives concluded that the Internet wasn’t opposed to the system, as they had previously thought, but is supportive of the Russian government. The essential point of this story is that the country’s political elite took targeted actions to fool itself.

A government believing its own lies is a dangerous thing. A person not fully oriented in space and time will make mistakes, but if he is armed, as the government is, those errors of judgement can lead to tragic consequences.

The government’s conscious agenda of distorting reality has fostered a general anti-intellectual, anti-scientific atmosphere in the country. The authorities are systematically dismantling the Academy of Sciences which, despite all its faults, had true scholars and scientists, and replace them with incompetent administrators imbued with no scientific ethos. The Ministry of Education, the agency running our schools, is headed by openly reactionary figures. The president of the Academy of Education proposes introducing Orthodox Christian teaching into the schools, and deputies have suggested decreasing the number of classroom hours for foreign languages. Television merrily disseminates the wildest superstitions – magicians and wizards are the constant protagonists on TV shows. An hour-long film recently broadcasted on TV sought to prove that the earth was flat. Instead of ostracism by the professional community, the creator of that film received the most prestigious award handed out by Russian television. Science, education, and educated people themselves have become strangers in their own country. That is what the intelligentsia must fight against, because no one else will.

The situation today is more serious than in the Soviet era, when the natural job of the intelligentsia was to expose the lies of Communist ideology and propaganda, and the hypocrisy of political tactics. At that time, few believed in the foundational ideas of Communism, nor did

the state or its representatives have much standing. Today, many subscribe to the government's chaotic, poorly structured view of the world.

As with all stereotypes and misconceptions, today's illusions are deeply functional, as Freud knew well. People don't need the truth; they can't live without illusions which supplant the real and put in its place the desirable. Therefore, any information damaging to those illusions will encounter fierce psychological resistance. Reliable information about the condition of the country, its relations with the outside world, and about its history is readily accessible – through well-written books, respected speakers, the Internet. But people don't want to avail themselves of the information which would upset their current cognitive stability and wound their national pride. That is why anyone trying to provide realistic information about socio-economic, historical, or political topics immediately becomes the target of the propaganda machine, encounters smear campaigns, finds oneself without a job... Such educators often face the enmity of their intended audience. Again, this is a well-known historical collision.

The current situation requires as much courage and self-sacrifice from the Russian intelligentsia as from their historical predecessors. Let us now consider the main myths and illusions the Russian intelligentsia must combat today.

The country's image

The most distorted segment of our countrymen's worldview today is the image of the country they live in. In this unrealistic picture, Russia has always been victorious, it has never waged unjust wars, it consistently sided with righteous causes, and hardly committed any crimes. If it did, its offences were nothing compared to those of other countries. While we were forced defend ourselves, our enemies committed their atrocities because their nature is evil. In today's picture of the world, the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact was morally justifiable. We didn't conquer Poland or the Baltic states – we freed them. Russian officers were not involved with the slaughter at the Katyn forest; there were no barrier troops shooting soldiers retreating in WWII battles; the Stalin purges targeted exclusively enemies of the people, and the scale of his terror has been exaggerated by Russia haters. Many more examples could be added to that list.

The problem is not the lack of truthful information. Many crimes of the Communist regime – the shameful treaty with Hitler, the NKVD atrocities – were publicized and condemned even in the USSR. The problem lies in the moral degradation of a large part of the population in recent years when the difference between Good and Evil has been erased. Innocent people might have perished in Stalin's campaigns, but their death was understandable, even justified, if it resulted in the economic growth (it didn't, in fact, but many think otherwise!).

The country has succumbed to a kind of infantilism – if I am good, I couldn't possibly do anything wrong. Yet awareness of one's own sins is a necessary condition of personal growth, not least because we strive to avoid the actions we know are shameful. Moreover, the memory of such instances does not prevent an adult from having a high self-esteem, because he or she knows that no one is without sin. The conclusions you draw from past mistakes and your future actions are more important than what you once did.

The same holds true at the level of countries or civil societies. The memory of crimes committed by the Nazis, and the preservation of that memory – through museums at the sites of concentration camps or a memorial to burned books in the center of Berlin – does not prevent Germans from respecting their home country; it does prevent a return to the condemned past. In our home, the work of memory was thwarted at the start. Russians take any conversation about crimes once committed by their state as an accusation leveled against them personally. Hence, they reject such information, holding anyone disseminating it in contempt.

The imperative task of the Russian intelligentsia today is to continue exposing the crimes of the Communist system, building on a commitment first made under Khrushchev. Until that nightmare is acknowledged – not just formally and piecemeal but full-heartedly, until the names

Cheka, NKVD, and all the rest inspire the same horror and disgust as the SS and gestapo do, this country will not be healed, as a man suffering from PTSD will never get well if he refuses to dig the roots of his trauma.

Who is to blame?

The familiar search for enemies and the propensity to blame the West for all Russia's troubles is not just farcical. The idea that the country is hated by the entire world, that it is the prey of countless enemies, breeds a special attitude.

If our problems don't result from our own mistakes but are caused by our enemies, then it stands to reason that to resolve the problems must destroy those enemies. War with that ever-expanding multitude seems an inevitable, defensive, and morally justified act. Similar feelings were widespread in the first years of Soviet power, and they served to buttress the militarization of the economy and everything else in the USSR.

The idea of personal responsibility shouldn't be taken to the extreme. Outside threats exist, and they can be destructive to a person as well to a country. A robber on the street or an aggressor invading the country cause real damage that can't be attributed exclusively to the mistakes of the victims deemed unprepared, insufficiently careful, etc. Even in such extreme cases, it is more productive to focus on one's own responsibility for the event to fend off its recurrence. Modern social practice in Russia starts from an opposite premise – the outside world is blamed for things it can't possibly be responsible for, while every effort is made to obscure the responsibility that falls squarely on the country's leadership, on its citizens, on ourselves. These efforts could never be 100%-effective – witness the proliferation of jokes about obnoxious Obama increasing food prices in our stores, littering the entrances to our buildings, and keeping our pensions low. Still, the locus of control over our country's problems is clearly externalized.

The image of the country as a victim hinders the formation of civic positions on a broad range of issues, and it undermines the development of civil society as a whole. Learned helplessness and a passive attitude do not stimulate a search for solutions that you, alone or with others, can develop; rather, it encourages waiting for help and looking for protection from stronger actors. In our country, that strong actor is the state. And even if the ineffectiveness, indifference, or even hostility of the state lead to political protest, the paternalistic attitudes prevails.

The notion that Russia's troubles are caused by external enemies nourishes the abiding belief that the Soviet Union fell apart because the West plotted against us, and/or because the elite betrayed the people. ("Betrayal" is another type of external influence – a traitor acting at the behest of external forces). The foremost among the perfidious elite members is Mikhail Gorbachev. This view precludes even an attempt to analyze how and why the USSR came to the point of collapse, and, most importantly, prevents those who hold it from seeing that the same factors that led to the fall of one government are reemerging in the current one.

Exposing this and other myths about Russia as a victim of the hostile world involves more than refuting the false worldview and returning to reality as it is. It is a blow to one of the core points of the current system of propaganda.

The special path of a special people

It's not in our power to foretell how the words we utter will be read. The iconic phrase of Tyutchev – "Can't fathom Russia by your mind alone" – has been repeated by more than one generation. As the joke goes, the soviet people developed "the sixth sense of rightful pride for their political system."

It is natural to see or imagine your uniqueness. The devil, as always, is in the details. Today's official version is that the differences between Russians and Russia on one hand, and everyone else on the other, lie in the former's preference for spiritual rather than material values (which other ethnic groups within Russia can emulate if they absorb Russian culture and accept its hegemony). In that respect, a Russian is said to differ dramatically from that of a Westerner. But those divergences are never specified. Indeed, it's hard to say what they really are. It's difficult to fathom the Russian spirituality, its renown communalism, and all the other attributes supposedly inherent in the Russian character.

One of the few clearly defined differences between Russians and everyone else is their relationship with the state, which, according to numerous assertions by ideologues of Russia's spirituality, is more important than liberty or even life to a "real Russian," i.e., someone who has the right to consider himself Russian by heritage and spiritual makeup. This attitude toward the state comes to the fore when Russia faces external or internal threat, real or imaginary, which unites Russians into a single Russian people.

It is pointless to argue the validity of such constructs. They are supported by neither study or practice. They contradict the day-to-day behavior of the vast majority of ethnic Russians and other Russian citizens who, as Maslow noted (not about Russians but about Indians), act as people first, and Russians second. But these kinds of ideologues talk about what should be rather than what is, what they wish for rather than what is right. And sometimes people come to believe this is indeed who they are or should be. This common stance begs the question, however.

Let us say that a true Russian person is, in fact, fundamentally different from a Westerner, that he is contemptuous of material goods and money – the West's only God, as TV tells Russians. Does it follow that a Russian person need not be paid fair wages for his labor, that the socialist practice of working for free or for in-kind payment dovetails with the mentality of the Russian people? And if the land is mother to Russians, and cannot therefore be sold or bought, does it mean that the country should incur the economic losses that would result from land being excluded from the market? In other words, what price are the country and its people prepared to pay for their uniqueness?

The point is not that these questions are superfluous. Proponents of Russian uniqueness fail to inquire whether the presumed national personality traits are a product of strict enforcement rather than the result of a natural disposition, e.g., whether they stem from a conscious choice to pay church taxation, fork over the lion's share of their wages to the state, to aid the people of the Donbass fighting for their freedom, or what not. And so, the canon contains not just a strange system of priorities but the denial of the natural right to choose what kind of Russian you want to be. Belonging to Russia or the Russian people predetermines everything in a person, leaving little room for an individuality, for any deviation from this imaginary standard propagated by self-appointed authorities.

In modern Russian ideology, national and cultural specificities aren't an ornament framing the content – they are the whole picture. The assumption is that since the Russian people possess unique traits, then the economy and the political system should also be uniquely Russian. And while the authorities continue to mouth platitudes about democracy, the nationalist ideology spurns the separation of powers as a foreign invention inimical to Russian culture, along with other supposedly western values such as respect for the rights of minorities, free elections, and so on.

This nationalist ideology appeals to the Russian Orthodox Church. Its proponents prefer to speak specifically about Russian Orthodoxy rather than Christianity, underlining the difference between Eastern and Western Christianity. The chasm separating the two them is glaring. The moral superiority of the Russian Orthodox Church is proclaimed over the Catholics and Protestants, and Eastern Orthodox churches outside Russia. Without any factual support, the official ideology proclaims powerlessness and authoritarianism to be an authentic expression of the Russian Orthodox spirit, the very symphony of power to which the dominant church aspires.

Historical and religious grounds are also sought for the idea of a special brand of Russian liberalism and a special kind of Russian liberty, popular with some Russian intellectuals. Disregard for human rights and/or the rights of individual groups, deference to the state (the ruling bureaucracy, really) at the expense of the general welfare – these are the cultural characteristics of the Russian soul, the emanation of Russian civilization, rather than a shameful retreat from the achievements of human civilization.

Ideas about the nature of power occupy a special place in the nationalist belief system. That the top authorities must be elected and changed periodically is an idea foreign to many Russian citizens. They can understand a referendum designed to approve or disapprove the actions of their leaders, but they can't really imagine having the power to choose which candidate deserve to hold power. In the current system of values, a leader is not an elected figure, not a winner in a fair competition, but the embodiment of the national spirit, a standard precept in the archaic psychology of leadership. The president at the helm is not an elected servant of the people but a chieftain sent by God. Not surprisingly, the political elites are now talking about Vladimir Putin in archaic terms as a manifestation of Russia's the best traits, billing him as an irreplaceable figure.

The Russian intelligentsia have traditionally adhered to universalist views, acknowledging that the same laws of physics operate in Russia as elsewhere, the same being true of socio-economics laws. This attitude prevailed in the 20th century – whatever cultural differences, similar institutions and practices were expected to produce similar results. Private property, political competition, and the separation of powers may not be sufficient to ensure a high quality of life, but they are necessary throughout the world. In their absence, countries are doomed to poverty, and, often, violence.

The Russian intelligentsia has no place in a country that sees itself as unique. Thus, it is necessary for the *intelligenty* to fight against the idealization of Russia's "special nature," cultural or religious, for their own good as well as for the good of Russia people. They must work hard to explain that Russia is, as Catherine the Great put it, "an essentially European nation" bound to follow the path taken by the more advanced part of humanity.

Moral opposition

The nightmare of the Russian authorities, their dreaded Room 101, is a color revolution. The phenomenon they describe with this term is not ideological in nature. It is not a fight between the left and right, or nationalist and liberals. People from every point of the political spectrum are gathered in Tahrir Square, in Maidan, alongside the Berlin Wall just before it went down in 1989. We are no different. During the putsch staged by the party stalwarts against Gorbachev, I myself met an activist from *Pamyat*, a nationalist Russian Orthodox movement, outside the White House, waiting to fend off an attack. We were on the same side of the barricades! Color revolutions, if we are to use the term, feature a conflict between the state and the people, between the active and passive forces fighting over moral issues. At a certain point, people are no longer willing to put up with lies, hypocrisy, the arrogance of the authorities, their feudal attitude towards the rabble. Those who came out to protest on Bolotnaya Square didn't just demand a recount in the election so that the Communist Party or Just Russia party would get a few extra seats. They simply didn't want to be lied to, to be fed official falsehoods, to be treated as less than people. Not for nothing did Ukrainians call their uprising "the Revolution of Dignity." The unwillingness to accept further humiliation, the feeling of "I've had enough of their lies!" unites people better than any ideology. And better than any leader.

The danger of this kind of moral protest for the government is not just the its significant unifying power. More importantly, it's nearly impossible to defeat through conventional political methods. When trust is lost, arguments, even rational ones, won't do. And if the protests and moral rejection of the system become so widespread that they deserve to be called a

“revolution,” then the state’s only argument is force. Water cannons, bullets, and prison can shut down a protest, for quite a while, but not forever.

Hence the Russian government’s relatively relaxed attitude toward domestic political protest. Various programs of economic and even political reform are written and discussed freely. After all, programs have very little meaning as long as those in power can’t be replaced – what does it matter what you’ll do about taxation when you become president, if you’ll never become president? The populace, therefore, pays little attention to these programs, even the most well-developed ones, and their creators have no chance to gain popularity or influence. People are eager to hear that things will be different under a new government – no more hypocrisy and lies. That’s to say, it was not the right to private property or an end to the foreign trade monopoly that we were hoping for at the mass demonstrations at the end of the 80s-start of the 90s. It was a moral stance, an indignation about the corrupt system rejection, the kind that recently resulted in ouster of President Sarkisian in Armenia. That is why young people respond to Navalny, not because of this or that point in his political program, which is unknown to most protesters anyway.

In this context, the opposition faces rigorous moral demands. People want to combat evil, to side with what is good. They shun lies, blackmail, and threats. They act bravely. In the face of this moral opposition, the officialdom is unconcerned with the minutiae of the oppositional programs and manifestos. Instead, the propaganda machine is focused on discrediting protest leaders as moral human beings. They mount smear campaigns, picturing their opponents as bribe takers, holders of vast wealth, beneficiaries of Western think tanks and spy agencies fomenting protests in Russia. They televise nationally the doctored videos of political opponents having sex with their lovers. It doesn’t matter that the recording is made illegally, that it was doctored, that it was surreptitiously made by the security services. This type of operation isn’t always effective. Thus, the authorities tried, and failed, to malign Navalny as a bribe-taker; his image as an honest person living in a modest apartment in a lower-class neighborhood remains largely intact. Nevertheless, the propagandists managed to do irreparable damage to several other politicians critical of Putin’s regime. There is no substitute for personal courage and honesty.

In some ways, the situation resembles the Brezhnev era. Sakharov grew into a moral leader not as an author of position papers and manifestos, but because he was willing to sacrifice his liberty and life for what he believed. The dissidents didn’t tell something we didn’t know; they showed personal courage and fortitude.

Fear has made a comeback in modern-day Russia. Whether it is seeing the judicial corruption, or simply out of a sense of tradition, many are again afraid to speak publicly. And that fear undergirds the system; this mighty pillar is as important as the lies. The fear is built on the sensation that everyone is afraid, that no one dares to violate the ambiguously defined prohibitions. That is why demonstrations of fearlessness are an essential duty of the intelligentsia. Taking a public stance is what the country needs, what makes the intelligentsia what it is and what is essential for its psychological survival.

Moreover, in most cases this doesn’t even require heroism, or joining an outdoor protest. It’s enough to express in the media, or in person, what almost everyone knows at some level – that the war in Ukraine is immoral, that the losses in Syria are amounting. The value of these statements isn’t that they convey something new – everything is already more or less public – but that people witness that the prohibition to speak publicly is futile, and that the barriers to truth are insurmountable only in our minds.

Many of the new laws passed are not meant to stem criticism so much as to instill fear. Their legal enforcement would be practically impossible or too politically costly for the government. In 2014, for example, a law was passed that made it illegal, and punishable by a prison term of up to five years, to equate the actions of Stalinist barrier troops with their Nazi German counterparts. The day after this law came into effect, I published an article detailing the argument for which the new law demanded reprisals. The article ended with a call to open a criminal case, with the hope of meeting my opponents in court. Nothing happened, although my

violation of the law was demonstrative. The state had made the political decision – a luxury they have in the absence of an independent judiciary – to look other way. The downside involved in a public trial clearly outweighed the potential benefits.

This type of action does not, of course, always end well; the consequences are impossible to predict in advance. Each successful step of this kind, however, reduces the level of fear in the country. And that is the duty of the intelligentsia.

Public moral opposition has two more objectives. The scariest part of the fairy tale about the naked emperor is not that the subjects pretended to agree with the official lies for pragmatic reasons. What is truly terrible is that some, under the influence of propaganda, actually did see his new clothes. Modern Russian intelligentsia must do what the child in the story did – we have to say that the emperor is naked. Then those who had believed in his new clothes may see the truth. Meanwhile, those who already knew that the state was lying, and there weren't any new clothes, will realize that they no longer have to pretend.

However, the key function of moral opposition lies elsewhere. Members of the Russian intelligentsia, especially those living in somewhat isolated conditions (e.g., in provinces) are told every day that they are alone now. The entire country is marching together to the same beat, and you should be thankful that you haven't been thrown in jail, that you have air to breathe. It's quite difficult for those people to live in modern Russia. When those people hear their own thoughts coming out of someone else's mouth, especially on television, they understand that they are not alone, and, therefore, not all is lost.

The necessity of preserving the intelligentsia

We can argue about whether the intelligentsia will be needed, and therefore continue to exist, in a democratic Russia, if that ever comes to pass. But it is clear that the transition to a European type of society will never happen without the intelligentsia.

The system in Russia today is not eternal. At the very least because a regime focused on a specific leader inevitably undergoes fundamental changes when that leader leaves office, either due to natural causes or in a revolution or coup. But the direction of those changes depends on whether there are a sufficient number of people in the country who can keep the new leaders within the bounds of acceptable behavior, to resist pragmatism, or, more precisely, to supplement pragmatism with a certain system of values. Without moral opposition (there will most likely be political opposition), the new government, perhaps with the best intentions, will establish a regime infinitely distant from European principles. If all the intelligentsia have left, turned to drink, or fallen into depression by the time of this transition period, the country will once again miss its chance. Comparing today's Russia with Mussolini's Italy, we can say that the goal is to prevent Hitler replacing Mussolini.

In fact, moral opposition to certain reform initiatives is necessary now, when real changes are still far off. Otherwise, the post-autocratic leaders are likely to misbehave and their reforms backfire.

The preservation of the Russian intelligentsia is hindered by its old code of honor, which calls for caring for others before oneself. The intelligentsia rushes ahead to aid miners or truck drivers fighting for their rights; they rarely pick a fight to uphold the rights of their own. The intelligentsia might stand up for a professor whose firing was politically motivated, but never for the thousands of professors, who see their salaries dwindle. The intelligentsia organize demonstrations about the oppression of anyone in the world except themselves. There wasn't a single protest, for example, against the insane and pointless bureaucratization of universities, with its accompanying humiliation of professors that left them no time for professional work. There are no protests against the revival of "first departments," the monitoring of the foreign contacts of scientists, the reactionaries at the head of scientific and academic institutions, or many other things.

Protecting the rights of the intelligentsia is an endeavor with no less moral justification than the protection of any other group or class. Taking care of oneself is no less natural or moral than taking care of others.

The intelligentsia, as a group, will survive only if society supports its agenda, if its life has a meaning for the whole country. The traditional business of the intelligentsia is education. This is needed more than ever today, not less, than in other periods of Russia history. There is practically no infrastructure for it., yet there is also no explicit prohibition against it. The government is wary of educational activities, but they are not yet penalizing the educators. So, one can get involved in education without risking severe penalties from the government. Education today requires intellectual courage, the willingness to take an oppositional stance, but not necessarily self-sacrifice. There is public demand for education. Thousands of lectures and seminars are held throughout Russia, where local experts and visiting scholars from major educational institutions speak for free. Their audience is numbered in the hundreds of thousands, if not millions. Continuing and expanding this practice is no less vital than charity or political fights. Without this, the Russian intelligentsia will disappear, dissolve into the new practices, with little hope for resurrection.

Personal risks

In conclusion, what risks do members of the intelligentsia living in Russia and fulfilling its mission today face?

There are risks. The government doesn't hesitate to deploy its puppet courts against opponents – the expression “Basmanny justice” referencing the notorious district court in Moscow is well-known. The state also has at its disposal the police, the National Guard, and other repressive forces prepared to suppress mass dissent. Finally, there are street thugs, disguised as Cossacks, Russian Orthodox activists, or simply just as thugs with no masks. The state is not restricted by morality or law – it is above morality and law, even though pragmatic considerations put certain limitations on repressive measures. The authorities understand, for example, the economic inexpediency of repressive actions and the undesirable consequences of closing borders. But against certain opponents they'll pay any price to put them down or out.

There is no proof that the murders of Nemtsov, Politkovskaya, Estemirova and many others were committed on orders from the government. But opponents of the regime are the prime targets of political murderer. The investigation of these crimes often degenerates into farce. The organizer behind Nemtsov's killing, for example, was found to be the driver (!) of a deputy commander of a Chechen special forces battalion. His superiors were never questioned. Moreover, the crimes are committed in a very demonstrative fashion – Nemtsov was murdered right around the corner from the Kremlin. With all due respect to the presumption of innocence, suspicions are inevitably aroused regarding the people at the very top.

But murder remains, at least for now, an extraordinary measure. What is happening on a broader scale of repression?

The intelligentsia is not public enemy number one of the overbearing state. That place is reserved for the politicians and political organizations able to bring people out onto the street, scaring the country's leadership with the shadow of a color revolution. The organizers of such events are jailed for 15-30 days, and occasionally beaten up. Sometimes they the authorities take hostages by jailing a family member. They also jail ordinary participants. Such people may get sentences of 3-4 years and are often chosen at random. The arrested may even be a passerby with no connection to the protest. The goal is to sow fear, to make people realize that joining even the most peaceful protest could land you in prison or, make you the subject of physical violence.

Journalists are close second on this list. Not all of them but the better ones are, at any rate. They are threatened, they are attacked (usually without lasting harm, but cases vary – the

most severe consequences usually await the journalists who run foul corrupt local authorities and not federal leaders. Many are forced to leave the country, as the authorities realize that the impact of public criticism from abroad is less severe.

Murders, prison time, or beatings for simply expressing a moral judgment or for highlighting the realities the government finds unpleasant are still a relatively rare occurrences. The officials implicated in such actions are usually fired, the street things are rough to the police station for an “instructive conversation.” On the whole, traditional intelligentsia activism is less dangerous than street protests. My hand was broken when I was detained at one of the unsanctioned protests I joined, for example, while the consequences of highly critical articles and public statements have been limited to my losing the job and ending my teaching career.

So, yes, there are risks. But not enough to make us give up.

* * *

I like to be part of something so complex that words can't describe it. I'm talking about the Russian intelligentsia – the best thing, in my opinion, that the Russian culture has to offer. It's hard to say whether it will survive, or whether many of those who identify with the intelligentsia today will retain their sense of special identity. But we can be sure that its preservation as a unique social group is necessary to the continued survival of the country.

About the Author:

Leonid Gozman is a psychologist (Ph.D. in psychology from Moscow State University earned in 1983). Born July 13, 1950. Upon completing his university degree in 1976, he worked in the department of social psychology, specializing in emotional relationships (sympathy, friendship, love), as well as psychotherapy. He was head of the Association of Practicing Psychologists, the first professional association of Soviet psychologists. The author and editor of several books. An active participant in the liberal reforms in Russia. In 1992 and 1993, an advisor to Acting Prime Minister Yegor Gaidar. In 1994-1998, he was an advisor to the head of the presidential administration, and subsequently, to Deputy Prime Minister, Anatoly Chubais. From 1998 to 2008, member of the board of RAO UES of Russia, the country's largest energy monopoly, which employed over a million people. As a result of a reform campaign, carried out over those 10 years, a competitive energy sector was created in Russia. From 2008 to 2013, he was a director of RUSNANO, a government-controlled company involved in the development of nanotechnology in Russia. In 2013, he left RUSNANO, and now directs the small foundation Perspektiva (Prospects). Leonid Gozman was one of the developers and leaders of the party founded by Yegor Gaidar, the Democratic Choice of Russia, and the party that succeeded this one, the Union of Right Forces (SPS). After that, he was part of the party Right Cause (Pravoe Delo). In recent years, he has been an active participant in public political discussions and the author of numerous publications in the liberal Russian media. A co-founder and member of the board of trustees of the Gaidar Foundation, created after the death of Yegor Gaidar by his friends and allies. He won an award instituted by the Liberal Mission Foundation “for courage in the defense of liberal values.” Leonid Gozman is married, has a daughter and two grandsons. His wife and daughter are both psychologists, his grandsons are students.