

POLITICAL ISSUES IN RUSSIA'S LITERARY DISCOURSE

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Abstract: Russian novels dealing with political themes typically paint the Russian state as ineffective, but inescapable. These works show society as voluntarily submissive. Indeed, individuals are willing to subordinate themselves to the state even though it professes no big ideas. The opposition is also devoid of any ideology, reducing it to what one observer calls “pure violence.” Overall, recent Russian literary works offer a pessimistic view of power exercised for its own sake.

Contemporary Russian literature is instrumental for understanding the nature of power, the state of society, and the sources of resistance to the establishment. Literary discourses deserve attention for at least two reasons. First, literature in Russia has become increasingly politicized in reaction to the shrinking (and degenerating) space for public politics in the country. In this sense, literature appears to be one of the relatively free discursive genres capable of challenging the Putin–Medvedev triumphalist narrative of putative national revival. Second, the intellectual influence of the most popular contemporary writers can outweigh the impact of discourses by traditional policy actors, such as political parties and the government. The critical potential of literary narratives is qualitatively higher than the declarative rhetoric of the seemingly oppositional groups who, in fact, form what appear to be rather stable relations with the Kremlin.

The literary works of authors, such as Dmitry Bykov, Zakhar Prilepin, Vladimir Sorokin, and Viktor Pelevin, provide important insight into the most acute challenges facing Russia today, including the painful process of identity building, which is severely complicated by the rise of nationalism, extremism, xenophobia, and political radicalism, all of which flourish against the background of a predominantly technocratic state that is largely insensitive to cultural and identity-related requests. This article examines how contemporary Russian literature analyzes the state, society, and the opposition in Russia today.

The State

What seems to be common among this group of authors is their description of the state as a de-politicized and faceless structure, deprived of normative resources, including values, beliefs, and ideology, and lacking the capacity to mobilize its citizenry. Thus, Prilepin, in *Sankya*, aptly draws a picture of a dysfunctional state, which is essentially an empty place without a soul. The order that the state is eager to establish is void of any distinctive features due to the moribund and incapacitated nature of the ideology behind it.

In Bykov's *Evacuator* the state is universally perceived as irrational, erratic, helpless, and degrading.¹ Echoing the argument widely propagated by some New Left thinkers, Bykov assumes that, to some extent, the borderline between the state and its radical challengers, including terrorists, becomes blurred: against the background of pandemic indifference among the public, it is not an issue any longer whether it is terrorists or the state itself that should be blamed for the demolition of the social order. In Bykov's imagery, society decomposes not only because of escalating security breaches (like technological catastrophes that gradually become routine), but also due to the lack of an object for symbolic revenge—even immigrants, targets of permanent discrimination and the embodiments of "internal others," have eventually run away from the country, leaving it without scapegoats.

No wonder that the state fails in the most important domain—providing security. In *Sugar Kremlin*, Sorokin depicts the state as being subdued by Chinese economic, financial, and cultural expansion.² Tacit submission to Chinese power entails obvious effects—in Sorokin's anti-utopia, Russia starts building the "Great Russian Wall" to fence itself off from myriad external enemies, including bearers of all possible differences—religious, ethnic, territorial, etc. The collective mentality of Sorokin's Russia is reduced to simplistic dichotomies: citizens are either "friends" or "foes" of

¹ Dmitry Bykov. 2004. *Evakuator*, Vagrius Publishers.

² Vladimir Sorokin. 2008. *Sakharniy Kreml*, Moscow: AST & Astrel Publishers.

Russia. Despite visible signs of technical progress, the country is becoming more and more archaic, enmeshed in retrograde administrative and social practices. Mass-scale proliferation of sophisticated gadgets paradoxically co-exists with public flogging, endless religious prayers, and other symbols of bygone times. Regardless of the ideological and normative void, well articulated by Sorokin, the de-politicized state is as repressive as Stalin's Soviet Union: torture and incarceration become inalienable methods of the state apparatus, reviving memories of Solzhenitsyn's Gulag Archipelago.

Society

Yet, the characterization of society as easily suppressed does not reflect the entirety of the Russian crisis. What adds color to the desperate picture is the inherent readiness of society to legitimate all forms of oppression, which makes it powerless.

Bykov's anti-utopia *Spisannye* (an adjective that can be translated as "The Written-off," yet bears some semantic connotations with "The Enlisted"), in a metaphorically sharp form, describes the self-reproducing mechanisms of voluntary submission.³ The plot is based on the circulation of a secret list that includes those citizens who are believed to be placed under special scrutiny by the state. The existence of this mysterious list is universally recognized, but its substance is never explained. Bykov's story, however, reaches beyond the parallels with the Stalinist purges and repressions against "the enemies of the people;" the state is not necessarily physically coercive, it only imitates violence by means of unspecified and mostly symbolic threats that ultimately reveal the scale of personal "un-freedom." Most of the "enlisted" lack any proclivity to resist; instead of protesting, they start the painful and comic search for their presumed guilt (from misbehavior on public transport to unsanctioned political activity). These self-accusations only sustain the tyrannical logic of the state. It is exactly the profound feeling of the indispensability of individual guilt that makes governmental control almost total. For Bykov, this absolute susceptibility to control is the most nefarious of genetic traits among his compatriots. It is more a social diagnosis than a political predicament, since it is routinely executed primarily by citizens themselves (neighbors, colleagues, postal workers, etc.). The list reveals the level of the existential lack of freedom within society and becomes a social condition that forms and sustains deficient communicative bonds. Paradoxically, the list, void of any certain meaning, turns into the structuring foundation for quasi-social relations: the "enlisted" start virtually and physically communicating with each other, thus making clear their inability to "think outside the box" and reach beyond the "list mentality." People not only tend to peacefully

³ Dmitry Bykov. 2008. *Spisannye*, Moscow: Prosaik Publishers.

accept their arbitrary placement on the list, but readily acknowledge their new pseudo-social roles designed beyond their will. The national-patriotic rhetoric gradually emerging among them (epitomized in slogans like "Long Live Russia!") looks particularly ironic.

In fact, Bykov, in his own way, depicts the resilience of century-old traditions of voluntary submission to authority even in the absence of any ideological substantiation. He describes the first post-Soviet generation that became used to constant deprivations and keeps acting not on its own will, but out of an abstract and loosely articulated necessity defined by others. People keep thinking that their roles are masterminded from above, and their choices are predestined by their superiors. Fear of the state is deeply rooted in their self-disciplined bodies, which turns their social existence into an expectation for inevitable repressions.

This type of society might be easily manipulated even without "great ideas." The mechanisms of governance are rooted in people's semi-voluntary invention of their own guilt: the post-political state does not bother itself with proof, and entrusts this task to the governed. Only people with a deep sense of insecurity may be so permissive to the authorities, Bykov argues. This explains why the metaphoric list is not based on any tangible criteria (professional, social, etc.) but represents the pure technology of manipulative power that does not need any ideological justification.

The other aspect of the new "un-freedom" is examined by Pelevin in *Generation P*.⁴ In his interpretation, the post-Soviet generation has chosen Pepsi (hence the title of the novel) as the symbol of the present exactly on the same grounds that their predecessors chose Communism: all of them are convinced that there is only one truth. *Generation P* is a sarcastic story of the world of commercial advertising with its two post-political pillars: entertainment and consumption. Pelevin unveils the emptiness and virtual nature of social roles and identities that can exist and sustain themselves only in endless references to materially consumable objects. For Generation P signs are more important than reality, though they inevitably lose their authenticity, as epitomized, in particular, by politicians who are manipulated by spin-doctors in order to achieve the purposes of the elite.

One of the constitutive elements of Generation P is its overtly imitative character: its entire social existence is possible only through constant references to Western linguistic culture, lifestyles, managerial norms, and patterns of consumption. Yet in spite of this overt mimicry, Russia is doomed to failure in its attempts to become a "second West." As the explicit semantics of one of the commercial slogans suggests, being a European means simply to smell better. Such a value-free worldview is exactly what distinguishes Russia from Europe, which, unlike Russia, went

⁴ Viktor Pelevin. 2008. *Pokolenie Pi*. Moscow: Exmo Publishers.

through a painful normative rethinking of its own history and, ultimately, found a new set of values in its own tragic past. In Pelevin's judgment, it is simply impossible to imagine Germany at the end of the 1940s with a group of former Nazi officers, turned into businessmen, at its head.

Russia is losing its identity precisely because of its value-free post-Soviet thinking. Pelevin gives a metaphoric example of forging a commercial slogan, in which birch sap (often used in Russian poetry), is mechanically replaced with Sprite. He also mocks attempts to contrive a Russian national idea: a businessman who is eager to pay for this doubtful intellectual exercise explains that he needs it only as proof of his equality with the Chechens and as a counter-argument against the worldwide perception of Russia as a corrupt country. This double argument, translated into the language of political science, means that the desperate search for Russian identity is inherently reactive and defensive, and fails to contain positive meanings and impulses.

The Resistance

The strategies of resistance to the de-politicized state are also void of strong normative grounds. In *Sankya*, Prilepin tells the story of a young Russian nationalist who adheres to an overtly primordialist version of patriotism: "I am Russian, and it is sufficient for me. I need no ideas. I need neither aesthetic nor moral foundations for loving my parents." He continues: "All the genuine defies substantiation...Neither justice nor honor necessitate ideology." His grass-roots primordialism smoothly transforms into the negation of the liberal idea of choice: as soon as it comes to love, there are no alternatives, he asserts.⁵

In his unpacking of the spirit of Russian nationalism, the author claims that it is the feeling of non-authenticity of the post-Soviet Russian state (its inability to properly take care of the nation) that kindles radical protests. Yet, this radicalism remains as void of meanings as the power against which it is geared. With almost post-modern irony, the main character discards his political and material ambitions, and recognizes the contingency of his engagement with the politics of radical protest. Without ideological landmarks, his worldview is an inconsistent mixture of loosely tied maxims like: "We are the best" and "My guidelines are dignity and fairness."

Yet it is this explicit lack of ideology that reduces the resistance to power to what Slavoj Žižek dubbed "pure violence," a reactive force void of strong ideological connotations and political prospects.⁶ Violence (against immigrants from the Caucasus, the Russian nouveau-riche, and anyone associated with officialdom) becomes for Prilepin's *Sankya* a

⁵ <http://sankya.ru/chapters/> (accessed June 7, 2012).

⁶ Slavoj Žižek. 2008. *Violence. Six Sideways Reflections*. New York: Picador, 64-65.

precarious substitute for ideational emptiness.

Conclusion

Contemporary Russian literature offers a rather pessimistic view of Russia as a country in which power is exercised for its own sake. This view not only reflects public opinion within Russia, but also largely overlaps with independent policy analyses. By using literary discourse, Russian authors challenge the idea of “conservative modernization,” which, as many analysts (for example, Dmitry Trenin) point out, constitutes the main pseudo-ideological tenet of the Putin–Medvedev regime, which, should it voluntarily disconnect itself from Europe, will ultimately fall victim to Chinese “force projection.” As seen from the perspective of Russian writers, the alleged conservatism—that in the Western tradition presupposes a respect for institutions—hides the revival of the most parochial social practices. This implies strong skepticism about the feasibility of Russia's modernization, as advocated by Medvedev, which is basically reduced to the proliferation of technical gadgets that seem to be quite compatible with the existence of completely unreformed mechanisms of power. Ineffective yet inescapable power thus becomes the verdict of both pundits and literary writers who all agree that Russian political life is more and more unthinkable without artistic—and sometimes absurdist—performances.