

Russia's Visionaries

Russia's Visionaries:

Direct Speech

By

Alexander Burak

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For Galya

CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	ix
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Introduction	1
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Part I—Context: From Crisis to Crisis to Crisis

Chapter One.....	14
On the Edge of an Abyss	

Chapter Two	37
Ideological Myths	

Chapter Three	71
Globalism versus the Nation-State	

Chapter Four	99
The Russian Revolutions	

Chapter Five	135
Racism and Russophobia	

Part II —Venues and Personalities

Chapter Six	162
Vladimir Solovyov's <i>Full Contact</i>	

Chapter Seven.....	186
Anna Shafraan's <i>Principle of Operation and Strategy</i>	

Chapter Eight.....	208
Dmitry Kulikov's <i>Formula of Sense</i>	

Chapter Nine.....	237
Yevgeny Satanovsky's <i>From Three to Five: Educating the Young</i>	

Chapter Ten	264
Sergey Mikheyev's <i>Iron Logic</i>	
Chapter Eleven	287
Russia's "Devil Buster"	
Chapter Twelve	310
Russia's Galley Slave	
Chapter Thirteen	338
Four Think Tanks	
 Part III—Visions	
Chapter Fourteen	372
What Makes Russia So Different from the West?	
Chapter Fifteen	392
On Russia's Historic Mission and Ideology	
Chapter Sixteen	411
A Visionary's Russia and Europe	
Chapter Seventeen	434
Two Kinds of National Idea for Russia	
By Way of a Conclusion.....	456
Index	477

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INTRODUCTION

Russia's Visionaries: Direct Speech examines Russia's ongoing attempts in its multiple media to articulate what is habitually called the "Russian national idea," "Russian identity," or "Russian civilization." The media protagonists examined in this book pursue their openly declared goal of counteracting any undemocratic and unconstitutional interventions in Russia's politics, economy, and cultural life. The book is written in the form of analects,¹ that is, it is a specialized reader comprising a series of previously untranslated-into-English excerpts from some key audiovisual materials by contemporary Russian thinkers concerning Russia's national identity in the twenty-first century. The "direct speech" excerpts translated from Russian are used as points of departure and illustrative material for my own introductory, contextualizing, and interpretive passages that discuss Russia's national-identity issues. I focus on the present-day, cutting-edge thinking of some of the most prominent Russian philosophers and cultural and political figures who are covertly and overtly shaping the current internal and external policies in Russia but whose "texts" are virtually unknown outside of Russia. The book's Russian audiovisual content is mostly inaccessible to foreign audiences because of the complexity of the language, tempo of speech, cultural-historical allusions, people speaking over one another, and the absence of Russian transcripts or English translations. The book focusses on the FM talk radio stations and a number of Internet portals that have been set up since 2011 and that have been especially prominent in promoting the Russians' prevailing worldview and understanding of their cultural identity since the reincorporation of Crimea into Russia in March 2014. The selected media's catchment areas include Moscow (estimated population 12 million) and St. Petersburg (estimated population 5 million), thus covering a population of up to 17 million (supposedly 20 million if illegal immigrants were somehow counted) in the two Russian capitals alone out of a total of Russia's 146.4 million people, with 111.6 million of them of voting age. The shows' staggered time slots

¹ Analects or analecta: a plural noun of Greek origin meaning selected passages from the writings of an author or of different authors or a collection of short literary or philosophical extracts.

fit in neatly with Russians' driving or other in-between activities when they would typically be tuned to their FM radios. It should be noted in this connection that there are 4 million private cars registered in Moscow and 1.5 million in St. Petersburg, and the majority of employees in the service sector (retail trade, office personnel, etc.) and housing construction are in the habit of having their FM radios on as an audio background. As for the Internet portals, an estimated 75 percent of Russians have access to the Internet, with about 50 percent of Internet users being concentrated in Moscow and St. Petersburg. It should be noted that the most radical antigovernment sentiments have always been concentrated in Moscow and St. Petersburg.

In a more general sense, and apart from analyzing and interpreting the untapped audiovisual materials, I attempt in this book to capture the most significant aspects of Russia's resurgence as a major participant in the growing national, political, historical, economic, military, religious, identity, and other uncertainties that beset much of the globalized world. Following Putin's "Munich speech" at the 43rd Munich Conference on Security Policy on February 10, 2007,² "the five-day" Russian-Georgian war of 2008 (also known as "the 08.08.08 war"), Edward Snowden's getting asylum and a residency permit in Russia in summer 2013, the unprecedented Russophobia campaign in the West around the Winter Olympic Games hosted by Russia in February 2014, the reincorporation of Crimea into Russia in March 2014, the military operation that Russia began in Syria in September of 2015, Russia's alleged intervention in the 2016 presidential election in the United States, the stunned reaction in NATO countries to Putin's unveiling Russia's superior hypersonic weapons on March 1, 2018, another Western Russophobia campaign around the World Soccer Cup hosted by Russia in summer 2018, Putin's declaring, in an interview with the British *Financial Times* before the G20 summit in June 2019 in Osaka—with the interview being immediately dubbed as Putin's "Munich speech 2.0"—that "liberalism and the liberal idea have become obsolete,"³ and the prominent Russia and Putin-centered developments up to the present, it is now obvious that Russia has become an influential geopolitical player and will likely remain so in the foreseeable future. It will also be remembered

² English translation of the text of the speech, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/02/12/AR2007021200555.html>, accessed December 16, 2019.

³ Transcript of the interview with Putin, <https://www.ft.com/content/878d2344-98f0-11e9-9573-ee5cbb98ed36>, accessed Aug 21, 2019, subscription needed.

that Russia is the largest country in the world in area (roughly twice as large as the United States); it has the largest estimated single-country mineral resources in the world; its arsenal of weapons of mass destruction is equal to that of the United States; the educational and cultural development level of its population is on a par with or higher than that of most developed countries; and its aspirations to regain its major world power status and to form one of the most important power centers in a polycentric (multipolar) world are being successfully implemented. In view of what one of this book's visionaries calls the West's "conceptual impotence" with regard to its future development,⁴ as well as Russia's complete disenchantment with its longstanding myth of the more-advanced capitalist world and its own secular religion of socialism and communism, Russia is working overtime to formulate a national idea, or its national identity project. Russia's present-day outstanding social philosophers, political scientists, and economists, whom I call "visionaries" in this book, are highly assertive in their attempts to dispel what they believe are the most harmful ideologies for Russia—ultraliberalism and transhumanism.

The COVID-19 pandemic has sharpened the ideological confrontation between the global neoliberal movement and the revived global drive toward "enlightened conservatism,"⁵ providing the latter with concrete proof of liberal capitalism's impotence in combatting the coronavirus. In times of crisis, there first appear critics of what is going on. With time, they are replaced by people who offer creative solutions. I refer to such people as "visionaries."⁶ In the 1990s, Russia was afloat in a morass of critical negativity. By the early 2000s, a group of visionaries began to emerge, many

⁴ "Sunday Evening with Vladimir Solovyov,"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0ZBv1AF2-9o>, accessed May 28, 2017.

⁵ D. Bakun, *Enlightened Conservatism: Russian Thinkers on the Ways of Development of Russian Civilization* (Просвещенный консерватизм: Российские мыслители о путях развития Российской цивилизации) (Moscow: Gryphon, 2012). A brief description of the book can be found at <https://www.labirint.ru/books/328294/>, accessed June 15, 2020.

⁶ I use the noun "visionary" in the sense of a person with original ideas about what the future will or could be like or "somebody of unusually acute foresight or imagination" (Encarta Webster's Dictionary of the English Language, Bloomsbury, 2004). This book's subtitle "Direct Speech" was thought up much earlier than the appearance of Putin's three-volume collection of speeches and decrees of the same title in spring 2016. See <http://www.labirint.ru/books/532555/>, accessed July 4, 2016.

of whom I introduce in this book. A similar process seems to be underway in the United States.

An understanding of the true extent of the global crisis and the crisis that has been unfolding inside the United States for a number of years is finally beginning to seep through into prestigious mainstream publications such as the *New York Review of Books*, for example. At this stage, no viable solutions are being offered, but a solid diagnosis is emerging. Marilynne Summers Robinson (b.1943) is an American novelist and essayist who has received numerous awards, including the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 2005, a National Humanities Medal in 2012, and the 2016 Library of Congress Prize for American Fiction. In 2016, Robinson was included in *Time* magazine's list of one hundred most influential people. In her June 2020 article "What Kind of Country Do We Want?,"⁷ Robinson writes that America "has been given the grounds and opportunity to do some very basic thinking" and is beginning to realize that it is experiencing "a decline in hope and purpose," which equals "a crisis of civilization":

The snare in which humanity has been caught is an economics—great industry and commerce in service to great markets, with ethical restraint and respect for the distinctiveness of cultures, including our own, having fallen away in eager deference to profitability. This is not new, except for the way an unembarrassed opportunism has been enshrined among the laws of nature and has flourished destructively in the near absence of resistance or criticism. Options now suddenly open to us would have been unthinkable six months ago. The prestige of what was until very lately the world economic order lingers on despite the fact that the system itself is now revealed as a tenuous set of arrangements that have been highly profitable for some people but gravely damaging to the world. These arrangements have been exposed as not really a system at all—insofar as that word implies stable, rational, intentional, defensible design.

Here is the first question that must be asked: What have we done with America? Over the decades we have consented, passively for the most part, to a kind of change that has made this country a disappointment to itself, an imaginary prison with real prisoners in it. Now those imaginary walls have fallen, if we choose to notice. We can consider what kind of habitation, what kind of home, we want this country to be.

⁷ Marilynne Robinson, "What Kind of Country Do We Want?" *New York Review of Books*, June 11, 2020, <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2020/06/11/what-kind-of-country-do-we-want/>, accessed May 23, 2020.

No theoretical language I know of serves me in describing or interpreting this era of American unhappiness, the drift away from the purpose and optimism that generally led the development of the society from its beginnings.

The enlightened conservatism that characterizes Robinson's thinking has become the majority mindset in Russia. By the look of things, it will constitute the basis for a new Russia project combining, in a creative mixture, the more humanity-friendly elements of capitalism and the more humane aspects of the erstwhile radical Soviet socialism. Judging from the reactions of the global mass media, Russia seldom fails to surprise the world both by its internal and external policies. Thus, for example, President Putin's visibility during the course of the US presidential election of 2016 was unprecedented, and the extent of the defeat of the liberal parties in the Russian parliamentary elections in the same year, as well as the liberal opposition's presidential candidates' crushing defeat on March 18, 2018, came as major surprises outside Russia but were completely expected in Russia itself. In short, Russia's surprise potential and global influence have been growing but not—as simplistic explanations would have it—because of its leadership's alleged growing primitive authoritarianism. The real answers are much more nuanced. Russia's prominence in the world has been growing because the ongoing intensive struggles inside the country among several powerful ideologies (etatism, neoliberalism, neoconservatism, neo-Slavophilism, neo-Westernism, nationalism, neo-communism, neosocialism, democracy, and others) have been translated, covertly and overtly, into Russia's external policies that tend to have worldwide repercussions.

In the meantime, the actual content of the complex ideological discourse unfolding in Russian print and virtual media is practically unknown in the United States. At best, some of these processes and their results are presented in a black-and-white format. What complicates the American pundits' monitoring of these ideological debates in Russia is the fact that the majority of these "texts" are posted online as audio-visual files without any typed-up transcripts. Moreover, the amount of such materials has been growing exponentially, while the number of people proficient enough linguistically and culturally to follow and translate them into English (even roughly) has hardly increased.⁸ Faced with this avalanche of material,

⁸ See, e.g., Lynda Park, "Decline in US Expertise on Russia," Association of Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies, March 8, 2014, <http://www.aseees.org/news-events/aseees-blog-feed/decline-us-expertise-russia>; or Jason Horowitz, "Russia

foreign pundits, in general, and American commentators, in particular, tend to rely on safe but outdated stereotypes. Put bluntly, the surprise index of Russia's internal and external policies is directly proportional to the level of ignorance of those who try to interpret them. Former Secretary of State John Kerry gave a piece of constructive advice during his commencement address at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government on May 24, 2017. "I'm often asked what the secret is to have a real impact on government," he said. "Well, it's recently changed. I used to say, either run for office or get a degree from Harvard Kennedy School. With this White House I'd say, buy Rosetta Stone and learn Russian."⁹ The audience cheered.

Political discourse is often fraught with bizarre situations, misunderstood humor and allusions, deliberate omissions, misconceptions, misinformation, and mistranslations. Russia's number one political talk show *Sunday Evening with Vladimir Solovyov* devoted one of its segments to discussing Megyn Marie Kelly (b. 1970), a famous American journalist, political commentator, and former corporate defense attorney. From 2004 to 2017, she worked for *Fox News*, but on January 3, 2017, she resigned from Fox News to join NBC News. She became a sort of Russian media celebrity (even something of a household name) after moderating a plenary session and interviewing President Putin at the annual St. Petersburg International Economic Forum (SPIEF), which took place from June 1 to June 3, 2017.

In his interview with Kelly, Putin remarked, in his trademark ironic sort of way, that he was worried about her career prospects after her spending so much time with him. He was jokingly concerned that, given his only brushing acquaintance with Michael Flynn,¹⁰ which resulted in Flynn's

Experts See Thinning Ranks' Effect on US Policy," *New York Times*, April 6, 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/07/world/europe/american-experts-on-russia.html>, both of which note a precipitous drop-off in the US-Russia expert pool in the last twenty years; both sources accessed June 14, 2020.

⁹ "Buy Rosetta Stone and learn Russian": John Kerry Bashes Trump at Harvard Commencement," RT, May 24, 2017, <https://www.rt.com/usa/389637-kerry-harvard-trump-commencement>, accessed June 12, 2020.

¹⁰ Michael Flynn was President Trump's national security adviser for less than a month. He resigned on February 13, 2017, amid allegations that he had had inappropriately close contacts with Russian officials, which he had not revealed prior to his appointment. As of July 30, 2020, the full bench of a federal appeals court in Washington, D.C., has agreed to consider whether a lower-court judge should be forced to dismiss a felony charge against Michael Flynn. See Josh Gerstein

resignation, Kelly might very well end up in prison, since her interaction with him was much more substantive. The prison reference was conspicuously absent in the *NBC News* reporting of the conversation.¹¹ “You and I, personally, have a much closer relationship than I had with Mr. Flynn,” Putin told Kelly in Russian, translated to English. “You and I met yesterday evening,” Putin continued. “You and I have been working together all day today. And now we’re meeting again. When I came to the event for our company *Russia Today* [in 2015 to commemorate its tenth anniversary of operation] and sat down at a table, next to me was some gentleman. There was another gentleman on the other side. I made my speech. Then we talked about some other stuff. Then I got up and left. I was told afterward, ‘You know there was an American gentleman sitting next to you. He was involved in some things. He used to be in the security services.’ That’s it—I didn’t even really talk to him. That’s the extent of my acquaintance with Mr. Flynn.”¹² [There is one missing sentence here: “Вот если у нас с Флинном был краткий контакт, и его уволили с работы, то

and Kyle Cheney, “Appeals Court Will Rehear Case about Michael Flynn Prosecution,” *Politico*, July 30, 2020, <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/07/30/appeals-court-michael-flynn-388384>, accessed August 10, 2020.

¹¹ Kailani Koenig, “Vladimir Putin on Dinner with Michael Flynn: ‘I didn’t even really talk to him,’” *NBC News Exclusive*, June 4, 2017, <http://www.nbcnews.com/politics/politics-news/vladimir-putin-dinner-michael-flynn-i-didn-t-even-really-n768016>, accessed June 5, 2017.

¹² The Russian full transcript of Putin’s exact words goes as follows: “У меня с вами, вот с вами лично гораздо более близкие отношения, чем с господином Флинном. Мы с вами вчера встречались вечером, мы с вами сегодня целый день вместе работали. Вот сейчас опять встречаемся. Когда я пришел на мероприятие нашей компании *Russia Today* и сел за стол, рядом сидел какой-то господин с одной стороны, с другой стороны кто-то еще сидел. Потом я выступил, еще о чем-то поговорили, я встал и ушел. Я с ним даже практически не разговаривал. Я с ним только поздоровался и сел рядом, потом попрощался, встал и ушел - все мое знакомство с господином Флинном. *Теперь после вот, если у нас с Флинном был такой контакт, а с вами целый день, Флинна уволили с работы, а вас можно просто арестовать и посадить в тюрьму*” (my italics); Kirill Brainin, “Putin answers questions about Russian-American relations in an interview with NBC” [В интервью NBC Владимир Путин ответил на вопросы, касающиеся российско-американских отношений], *Perviy Kanal (First Channel), News*, June 5, 2017, https://www.1tv.ru/news/2017-06-05/326495-v_intervyu_nbc_vladimir_putin_otvetil_na_voprosy_kasayuschiesya_rossiysko_amerikanskih_otnosheniy, accessed June 6, 2020.

вас нужно просто арестовать и посадить в тюрьму.”¹³ “If Flynn and I had a brief encounter, and this led to his being fired, then, by the same logic, you have to be arrested and sent to prison.”¹⁴

Besides bashing American political correctness, Solovyov (who is a fluent English speaker) never tires of reminding Russian audiences of the distortions of original direct speech by omission, misquoting, quoting out of context, and mistranslations, which have become very common in many English-language media due to the dramatic drop in journalistic integrity and plain linguistic incompetence. This is especially relevant to translating direct speech in a simultaneous mode, which is radically different from translating written-down transcripts of direct speech. Thus, in the course of the plenary session at the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum on June 2, 2017, mentioned earlier, many mistranslations occurred on the part of the English-to-Russian and Russian-to-English simultaneous interpreters. To give just two examples, Megyn Kelly’s reference to Donna Brazile (first the vice chair and then interim chair of the Democratic National Committee, who was forced to resign her post due to indiscretions in arranging presidential candidates’ debates) was translated into Russian as “Brazil” (the country), and Putin’s allusion to the sturdily made but impossible-to-wear suit in the famous Arkady Raikin stand-up comedic sketch ridiculing Soviet craftsmanship was completely lost on the English-speaking audience—it simply did not make sense in translation.¹⁵ The Russian

¹³ The relevant part of the interview can be watched at <https://news.mail.ru/video/472106/>. A *Lenta.ru* report on it can be read at https://lenta.ru/articles/2017/06/05/gone_crazy/, accessed June 6, 2020.

¹⁴ Putin’s jocular apprehensions proved prophetic, although for a different reason. After a short stint with *NBC*, Kelly fell victim to the US political correctness diktat and was fired (with a hefty compensation of \$69 million, though) after making some fairly innocuous (from a Russian point of view) remarks about “blackface” and Halloween costumes during an episode of her morning show on Tuesday, October 23, 2018. Expressing casual indignation at the “rules” prescribing who wears what, Kelly said in that fateful episode: “You do get in trouble if you are a white person who puts on blackface on Halloween, or a black person who puts on whiteface for Halloween,” adding that “it was O.K. when she was a kid.” See Doreen St. Félix, “NBC’s Firing of Megyn Kelly Is as Cynical as Her Hiring Was,” *New Yorker*, October 27, 2018, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/nbcs-firing-of-megyn-kelly-is-as-cynical-as-her-hiring-was>, accessed June 14, 2020.

¹⁵ Arkady Isaakovich Raikin (1911–87) was a Soviet stand-up comedian, theater and film actor, and stage director. He led the school of Soviet and Russian humorists for

visionaries' and top officials' imaginative—at times to the point of being “unprintable”—use of the Russian language presents challenging translation problems. While some turns of phrase have ready-made, if not entirely appropriate for polite company, correspondences, others push linguistic boundaries to their limits. Thus, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov characterizes Russia's “partners” as “fuckin’ morons” (“Дебиль, блядь!”—Дебилы, блядь!) in front of a multimillion audience—he allegedly thought that the microphone was off—and this is easily translatable, if unacceptable, in polite company. In the meantime, President Putin offers another of his numerous trademark exercises in verbal calisthenics with his reference, on February 20, 2019, to the US-dependent “little piglets” in Europe that “oink along” (“подхрюкиват”—подхрюкивать) with the big swine, and this particular metaphor belongs in the category of “translation difficulties,” and it did cause a lot of trouble for translators worldwide. (I give some more examples of Putin's linguistic creativity in chapter 12.)

By relying extensively and intensively on the protagonists' “live” direct speech, I hope to bring authentic Russian thought on burning present-day issues closer to English-speaking audiences with a view to at least marginally reducing the extent of misunderstandings and mistrust between Russia and the West.

In the last thirty years, Russia has demonstrated its ability to adapt, change, make mistakes, correct them, stage comebacks, and develop like any genuinely living-and-breathing organism. What Russia has been through during this period defies description. The September 18, 2016, election of a new Duma (the lower chamber of the Russian parliament) and Putin's reelection as president in 2018 demonstrate a complete disenchantment of Russians with liberal values. From a historical perspective, the developments in Russia are a stark example of how quickly one set of ideas can be replaced with another. If the United States is interested in influencing Russia's internal and foreign politics and policies, it has to make a deep study of the mechanisms engaged in forming Russia's current national identity. I expect that some readers will not like the material I analyze and/or the conclusions I draw. However, if the American trend to publish mostly books that say what the average American reader has got used to hearing about Russia in the last five to seven years or so, the American audiences will not get any

about half a century. The sketch in question—“Who Made This Suit?”—can be watched at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=heUq31_Zyd0, accessed June 6, 2020.

nearer to an understanding of the Russian-American relations that hit rock bottom already during the Obama presidency and remain at an all-time low. In other words, unless more expert views break through the language-and-cultural barrier separating Russia and the United States, Americans will continue to read and hear what they are accustomed to reading and hearing about Russia. To reiterate, I offer and analyze the latest thinking about Russia's situation and the Russian-American relationship that is having a strong effect both on Russians' views of their own country and Russia's relations with the outside world. I aim to bring the American reading audience closer to understanding Russia's motives, interests, and expectations. America needs a strong collective interlocutor like the sharp-minded analysts I introduce to lift itself out of the deep analytical crisis it finds itself in. America needs a narrative of itself that is much deeper than the tired banalities permeating its media.

The ideas discussed in this book were brought into being, in large measure, by the US-Russian ideological confrontation, in which Russia has always considered the United States as a formidable opponent and a kind of template to gauge its own activities in most spheres of life. Hence, the constant presence of America in practically all serious Russian theoretical discourse and on popular talk shows. Now that the United States is going through a major political and economic crisis, it needs, as never before, a strong, resourceful, and creative opponent that Russia is becoming with every passing day in order to reinvent, reimagine, and reassert itself under the new global conditions.

The book's extensive footnotes and intratextual glosses make it accessible, in equal measure, to Russia's friends, enemies, and people with only a cursory interest in Russia; but it will be especially useful to framers of American policies toward Russia as well as college undergraduates and graduates specializing in Russian studies. In other words, the detailed reference notes contained in the book will prevent the casual reader from getting lost in the narrative, while a thoughtful undergraduate or graduate student will find sufficient material to bring their facts about Russia up to date as well as to stimulate further studies of the subject. At the same time, experts or commentators on Russia will find some challenging, cutting-edge material that will help them shed some outdated Cold War clichés. It is my sincere hope that this book will help to significantly dispel the ignorance about Russia permeating the United States and other countries' mainstream media. The book consists of an introduction, three parts, and a conclusion. Part I examines Russia in the context of its global and domestic challenges; Part II considers Russia's defense and offence mechanisms in the global

information war; and Part III introduces some of the better articulated visions of Russia's nearest future.

PART I—

**CONTEXT:
FROM CRISIS TO CRISIS TO CRISIS**

CHAPTER ONE

ON THE EDGE OF AN ABYSS

Speaking at an annual youth festival, The Territory of Significance, in August 2015, the Russian minister of foreign affairs Sergei Lavrov said: “We are witnessing the end of a very long epoch of Western domination in economics, finance, and politics.”¹⁶ This dominance had prevailed for many centuries. But today the historically dominant West is being challenged by the new centers of power. ... There can be no denying that a new, polycentric world order is coming into being, although, admittedly, this is going to be a rather lengthy process.”¹⁷ The waning dominance of Western civilization is consistently denied in Russia by the so-called nonsystemic opposition, that is, those social groups that are not represented in the Russian Federal Assembly (the Russian parliament comprising the lower chamber—the Duma—and the upper chamber—the Federation Council). As the Duma elections in 2016 and the presidential election in 2018 have shown, their active cohort constitutes about 2 percent of the political

¹⁶ Today most Russian political analysts use the designation “the West” as a sociopolitical construct/handy cliché to refer collectively to the United States, Great Britain, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, the other NATO members (minus the already named US and Great Britain), and the rest of the EU members, especially its leading members, Germany, France, Italy, and Sweden. The term “the West” is as good a political cliché as any others currently in use: “identity politics,” “Tea Party,” “neocons,” and so forth. While acknowledging its somewhat imprecise nature, I use the term throughout this book in the sense defined above. The phrase “the collective West” became especially common in the Russian media in 2012 when preparations for the 2014 Winter Olympics were entering their final phase; it was used in response to the unprecedented “Western” Russophobic campaign.

¹⁷ S. V. Lavrov, “We Are Witnessing an End of the Era That Was Dominated by the Historical West” [Мы наблюдаем конец эпохи доминирования исторического Запада], REGNUM news agency, August 24, 2015, <https://regnum.ru/news/polit/1956258.html>, accessed August 11, 2020.

spectrum in Russia, although tacit sympathizers may constitute, at the very most, 12–14 percent of the population.

The American Connection

Especially since the attempted *maidan* in Moscow in fall 2011,¹⁸ the majority of Russians, who opposed the protests, have begun to habitually refer to them—quite uncharitably, not to say vulgarly—as “liberasts” (in imitation of “pederasts”) or “white condom carriers” (“belogandonniki”) on account of their wearing, during demonstrations in late 2011 and early 2012, white ribbons on their chests that looked embarrassingly like unrolled condoms. One of the opposition’s mantras is: “The West is said to be decaying and rotting, but we wish we could decay and rot in the same way.” The so-called red patriots (or “kvass patriots”¹⁹), in contrast, are counting on a crash of the Western capitalist-imperialist world any day now and are expecting a reinstatement of a Soviet-style socialist system. The truth, as they say, should be somewhere in between. But is it? The Russian visionaries, considered in this book, all argue that the truth gravitates toward a crash of the still domineering West. As events following the 2018 presidential election have shown, 86 percent of Russians are inclined to think this way. The US economic and financial systems have been on a bust-to-boom-to-bust rollercoaster since, at least, the Panic of 1837, which brought about a major recession lasting until the mid-1840s. The recession of the late 1830s to mid-1840s followed a period of economic expansion roughly from 1834 to 1836. After the recession came the Civil War, Reconstruction, and the Gilded Age.²⁰ The Wall Street Crash of 1929 touched off the Great Depression that engulfed the whole world. The

¹⁸ “Maidan” means “square” in Ukrainian, and the reference is to Independence Square (Maidan Nezalezhnosti in Ukrainian) in downtown Kyiv (Kiev). Beginning with the first “orange revolution” in Ukraine in 2004–5, which, following riots on Independence Square, brought to power president Viktor Yushchenko, any unconstitutional, violent, or just mass protest has begun to be referred to in the Russian mass media as “maidan.”

¹⁹ Kvass is a traditional fermented Russian beverage, containing little or no alcohol, made from bread, often flavored with fruit. “Kvass patriots” refers to irrationally extreme adherents of everything Russian or Soviet in its original, uncorrupted purity.

²⁰ The Gilded Age in United States history is the late nineteenth century, from the 1870s to about 1900. The term for this period came into use in the 1920s and 1930s and was derived from Mark Twain’s 1873 novel *The Gilded Age: A Tale of Today*, which satirized an era of serious social problems masked by a thin gilding.

situation was saved by the outbreak of World War II, whose end in 1945 left the United States in an advantageous position; the nation had profited by financing the war effort of other countries, with the second front only opening in Western Europe as late as June 6, 1944, roughly a year before the war ended and when its outcome was obvious.

Keynesian economics pulled the Western world away from the edge of the abyss during the Great Depression and set the stage for the post–World War II economic boom lasting from 1945 through the early 1970s.²¹ One might say that Keynesianism saved capitalism from capitalists by giving it a more human and humane face. But the effect of Keynesianism gradually eroded. Black Monday, October 19, 1987, shook the world again. On this day stock markets around the world crashed. In 2000 came the dot-com meltdown. The rating agencies had claimed that the aggregate capital valuation of the dot-com companies was around 8 percent of the total capital value of major US corporations, whereas, in fact, most of those companies had been making only losses. The dot-com bubble that had been growing as the result of a Ponzi-like speculative frenzy of purchasing the mostly worthless stocks of Internet companies burst with a resounding bang. The latest crisis, dubbed the Great Recession, had been brewing for some time, culminating in 2008 in the form of a catastrophic housing-sector bust. As with most other crises, the Great Recession has shown, in graphic detail, how debts are socialized by spreading them across society while profits are privately appropriated by the few companies and banks that are “too big to fail.” As John Lanchester wrote in the *London Review of Books*, “That is literally no one’s idea of how the economy and the financial system are supposed to work.”²²

²¹ The British economist John Maynard Keynes (1883–1946) proposed the influential theory, now commonly known as Keynesianism, according to which government spending must compensate for insufficient business investment in times of recession. See his view: “Modern capitalism is absolutely irreligious, without internal union, without much public spirit, often, though not always, a mere congeries of possessors and pursuers.” Keynes, *Essays in Persuasion* (London: Macmillan, 1931), <https://www.gutenberg.ca/ebooks/keynes-essaysinpersuasion/keynes-essaysinpersuasion-00-h.html>, accessed August 11, 2020.

²² John Lanchester, “Cityphobia,” *London Review of Books* 30, no. 20, October 23, 2008, <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v30/n20/john-lanchester/cityphobia>, accessed August 14, 2020. The *London Review of Books* ran a series of articles devoted to the sequence of booms and busts, illustrating how, in Lancaster’s words, “huge

Apart from everything else, economics also faces a crisis of its key concepts. Growth is one such sacred cow of economic reckoning, along with stock exchange quotes that are not backed up by physical economic output. Analysts and commentators are happy when the economic growth rate is high, and they fall into despair if it hits the low figures. On the *Formula of Sense* radio show on March 29, 2019, the anchor, Dmitry Kulikov, asked his longtime collaborator, Timofey Sergeytsev, what exactly the criterion of growth represents and why such great significance is attached to it. Is growth worthy of being worshiped as a quasi idol? The question seemed counterintuitive and the answer self-evident, but Sergeytsev put forward a sobering conceptualization of the growth phenomenon of his own.²³ He began by reminding listeners that a substantive discussion of the concept of growth began on the initiative of the Club of Rome as early as the 1960s. It was concluded then that growth always has its limits and it cannot be used as a strategic (long-term) indicator. He elaborated on this conclusion:

Sergeytsev: Applied to human beings, for example, the criterion of growth is of low efficacy. A person grows up to a certain point and then gets old and dies. This means that, from the perspective of growth, a human life has no significance beyond the point of growth. This also means that the mechanisms of analysis work while growth continues but become irrelevant when growth stops. ... Consequently, a period of growth should be followed by a period of qualitative development. The same dynamic applies to economic development. As a strategic concept development means acquiring qualities that were absent previously. As the world population is growing, a reorganization of the economy is needed in order to accommodate this growth. The problem is exacerbated by the fact that the current population growth does not happen in “the remnants of Western civilization” (and, numerically, those are indeed remnants or “leftovers” of Western civilization) but in the least-developed parts of the world.

unregulated booms, in which almost all the upside went directly into private hands, were followed by gigantic busts, in which the losses were socialized.”

²³ *Formula of Sense*, Vesti FM, March 29, 2019. For details, listen to the whole relevant segment of the program (beginning roughly at minute 41), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QnPenXIATcI>, accessed May 24, 2020. Dmitry Yevgenyevich Kulikov (b. 1967) is a Russian political scientist, author, specialist in Ukraine, film producer, radio and television host, and member of Rossiya Segodnya's Zinoviev Club. Timofey Nikolayevich Sergeytsev (date of birth unknown) is a philosopher, author, member of Rossiya Segodnya's Zinoviev Club, and cofounder of the Archive of the Moscow Methodological Club Foundation.

Can one seriously believe that the “leaders of the free world” are prepared to provide these rapidly growing populations if not with economic means for flourishing then at least with a minimum of means for existence? Who is going to provide the severely disadvantaged areas with industrial and agrotechnical resources for development that are not confined to extracting mineral wealth? The global tendencies do not inspire one with confidence in this respect. On the contrary, it seems that everything possible is being done by the miniscule group of people and companies that control the developed world’s technological core, which itself stopped developing in any significant ways, to preserve that control. ... The problem of providing for the “superfluous” population of the world is not confined to the diminishing natural environmental resources. There is also the problem of the limited structural potential of the existing economic system, and the political systems as well. ... The markets are essentially stagnating. And a restructuring of economies and markets is predicated on genuine technological breakthroughs—on creating something that has not existed before. This is not happening. In any case, if we are to accept the “golden billion theory,”²⁴ then seven billion people will need to be offered some means of economic existence. But, again, whoever is prepared to provide such means? Neither the technological breakthroughs nor any political will is available to accommodate billions of people who are becoming “unnecessary” as the digital and AI revolution (artificial intelligence, “the fourth technological transition” [четвёртый технологический уклад]) is unfolding. ... In the meantime, we talk about economic growth and try to measure it with the

²⁴ “The golden billion” (золотой миллиард—*zolotoy milliard*) refers to citizens of the industrially developed nations. According to Sergey Kara-Murza (b. 1939), the “golden billion people” consume the lion’s share of all resources on the planet. The developed countries, while preserving for their nationals a high level of consumption, endorse political, military, and economic measures that keep the rest of the world in an industrially undeveloped state, a raw-material appendage area for the dumping of hazardous waste and as a source of cheap labor. The differences in incomes between first-world and third-world countries cannot be explained by differences in individual productivity. The low standards of living in the greater part of the world are the result of multinational corporations appropriating a disproportionately high share of the surplus value in “developing” countries. The continuation of this exploitation retards the development and prosperity of most of the world. Hence, globalization and modern capitalism benefit mostly “the golden billion,” while people in the developing countries get the short end of the stick. Sergey Kara-Murza, *Manipulating Consciousness* [Манипуляция сознанием] (Moscow: Algorithm, 2000). According to the *Zeigeist* rating published by Google in October 2007, *Manipulating Consciousness* was in the top ten of the most popular nonfiction books on the Russian-language Internet: *Commerzant-Money* [Коммерсант-Деньги] 42, no. 648, October 29, 2007.

help of numbers on stock exchange electronic boards without really understanding the essence of economic processes. In real life, the stock and commodity exchange quotes have very little relation to tangible objects. It is an exercise in economic irrelevance. It is a matter of faith that something is behind those numbers. In the Soviet period, the economic policies were guided by the idea that, in the real world of objects and services, there was enough work (gainful employment options) for everyone. And the Soviet system had worked out a way to provide everyone with employment.

Kulikov: Of course, the system was inefficient. But you are raising an interesting issue. After the period of “superexploitation” of the Soviet people by the Soviet authorities in order to protect the country from external aggressors and to carry out a massive program of industrialization, collectivization of agrarian production, and liquidation of illiteracy inside the country, which drew to a close by the 1960s, the amount of “fictive work” to ensure universal employment was already on the increase. The idea was to somehow involve everyone in the growing population in some economic activity. Nobody was left out in the cold. Jobs for everyone were guaranteed by the Soviet Constitution. In a sense, this was a losing battle to disprove and counteract the processes predicted by Malthus, who said, in a nutshell, there won’t be enough of everything for everyone if the birth rate increases exponentially, which it does. ... If consumption has to grow but there is a shortage of resources and a growing population, then we are in a terrible predicament.

Sergeytsev: This means that growth of the GDP or any other parameter cannot be used *as an absolute strategic indicator* [my italics]. When is growth undeniably needed? It is needed when something has been completely destroyed—as in a world war. Everything needs to be done from scratch, with a chance of doing things better than they had been done previously.

Kulikov: We have agreed that growth has its limitations. But the no-less-important question is, “Exactly what is it that has to grow?” It is being drummed into all and sundry that it is consumption that has to grow forever and anon; it is the overriding aim of capitalist production. The idea of unconditional consumption is so deeply entrenched in the popular psyche that even when there is a slowdown in consumption, people like the Yellow Vests in France take to the streets. Lack of growth creates the likes of the French Yellow Vests.

Sergeytsev: The world population is growing fast. That is a hard fact. What else is growing in real terms? It is the amount of real and virtual money in circulation that is growing and, correspondingly, national and individual debt. The debts, especially the national ones of countries such as the United States and Japan, for example, are already impossible to be paid off. This fact is a closely guarded secret. The United States cannot pay off its debts in

the foreseeable future. In comparative terms, Russia is doing all right. It is virtually free of debt. Anyhow, money is a convention, a fiction that exists while it is universally accepted. The problem is that the growing international debts are not matched with the quantity of things that can be bought and used. Nor can even the amount of money in circulation be backed up with goods and commodities. The idea of consumption is against nature. Consumption annihilates. Nature recirculates. ... If growth is not strategically viable, then a total annihilation of whatever is still serving needs must be planned and carried out so that a new cycle of growth can begin from scratch. Russia has been through it all during the Great Patriotic War [World War II]. The German bombing of London cannot be even remotely compared with the devastation in the European part of the Soviet Union and Europe. Fortunately, countries like the United States have never been bombed; they have no perception whatsoever of having large chunks of their territory bombed out of existence. The inefficiency and the environmental damage caused by the relentless need to produce more of the same with professed significant improvements, which are oftentimes not improvements at all, can be seen everywhere all the time. In regular everyday life, iPhones are made and controlled in a way that presupposes their replacement every two years. The same goes for cars (maybe three to five years at most), as well as for less-sophisticated consumer goods that are not expected to last because, if they did, the process of growth and its evaluation parameters would slide into low or negative values. What is more, the key objective is not so much production of a variety of goods to satisfy a variety of often discretionary needs as the volume of sales. There is a catch in that, though. In the final analysis, it is the possession of authority that can make or break any market economy.

An ever-increasing volume of sales is the goal of market economies, and this presupposes the existence of a large and solvent middle class. The prosperity of the middle class has always been touted as a major achievement and advantage of the capitalist system of production. But it has now driven itself into an economic dead end.²⁵

Degradation of the Middle Class

Defining the middle class is tricky due to divergencies among the criteria used. In a very general sense, “definitions of the middle class tend to fall into one of the three broad categories, based on economic resources; on

²⁵ *Formula of Sense*, Vesti FM, March 29, 2019. For details, listen to the whole relevant segment of the program (beginning roughly at minute 41), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QnPenXIATcI>, accessed May 24, 2020.