

FOREWORD TO THE 4TH EDITION

Что такое хорошо, и что такое плохо¹?

Russia spent the 1990's being run over by a truck, for that was the effect of the change to capitalism. The Soviets were not just a government, they were a whole system: rewards were not in the form of money but of praise and privilege. Most of the praise went to those in the arts and sciences and the upper echelons of education. Most of the privileges went to Party leaders and successful factory directors. Display was not rewarded so that even jewelry was limited, less by law (i.e., jail) than by suggestion. By our standards these people sometimes seemed outright poor, though everyone able to work had a job. Imagine a society in which the bus driver makes more money than the doctor. Community and mutual help was a major tenet of conduct in school texts. But since the system didn't work, friends meant a lot to them. Actually, the huge advantage these people had was time; time to think, to dispute, and write. They did read and write books, perform and compose music, dance classic ballet with particular elegance, and even win Nobel prizes in the sciences.

By now (2010) they are beginning to notice what has been taken away. On many occasions I have asked Russians what they think is good about the new society, and what they don't like. Out of consideration for me, they list the (several) good things first. That doesn't take too long, and then they embark upon an ever more agitated description of what isn't working.

For a moment I wish to stop long enough to say that in outward appearances Russia seems re-born. The churches shine in the sunlight, the city parks have mown grass which is interrupted by large swaths of flowers that are changed according to the season, the night lights in downtown big cities are stunning, as are some of the people walking the streets, drivers actually pay some attention to what lanes they are driving in, and maybe half the time a salesperson will *smile* and say, "Thank you." It's enough to leave an old lady in shock.

So what are the good changes the Russian notices?

- The lines are gone! No longer is an unreasonable length of time spent waiting to buy things, first in one store and then in another.

¹ The title of a famous Soviet-era poem by Vladimir Mayakovsky.

- You can buy anything you want! The former system of shortages has disappeared; of course, you do need money to buy things, and some people, mainly pensioners, require more than they are getting. But the middle class is growing swiftly—the middle classes are now getting a larger share of money—and now the difference between the very rich and the middle class is not so large as it was several years ago. People are borrowing money and taking trips with it, they have begun to dress better, and build good houses. People now have the right to collect any foreign money they want, dollars, pounds, euros, and they have the right to take up to \$10,000 out of the country legally.
- Many conveniences have appeared: restaurants of all sorts and stripes abound and decent restrooms are now available (for a small price).
- The railroads are more comfortable, convenient and cleaner (and much more expensive).
- The government no longer has total control of your working life. People have begun to think freely. (The young have finally discovered that without learning, you are nothing but a bug. **Без бума́жки, ты бума́шка.**) The Internet gives them access to the rest of the world; even country schools have computers.
- The press has opened up some, but recent crackdowns on television and newspapers by the Putin regime has some Russians worried that a return to Soviet-style control on information is imminent. (As examples, Russian friends cite the facts that The Puppets **Куклы** TV program was shot down in about 2003, and Shenderovich was kicked off television. His program was called Free Cheese **Беспла́тный сыр**. Now available on Echo of Moscow **Эхо Москвы** radio, the program has been rechristened Processed Cheese—it's **Пла́вленный сыро́к.**)

And what's bad?

- A sense of overall insecurity: one can't plan for the future because no one knows what will happen in the financial sphere, or what direction social reforms will take.
- Lack of any socializing organization that might take the place of Komsomol and Young Pioneers (similar to the Boy Scouts, but on a higher level). While not everyone joined the Komsomol, practically everyone joined in pioneer activities. Now the youth has nothing to do but hang around the streets.
- Education is much worse off. Neither teachers nor professors are given enough money to compete with other professions. The best students don't want to stay in the Academy and a life of relative poverty. The **духо́вность** of the intelligentsia is dying out and there is no longer any pleasure in discussion, no time for an intellectual life these days. Marathon kitchen-table discussions of philosophy, literature, politics, and the arts are a thing of the past.
- The individual reigns supreme. In the early nineties people in high places in the government saw a chance to inherit the good life, and did. Those best able to fool the rest of the population took over, proud of their accomplishments. Corruption among the Soviets existed, but it was very minor compared to corruption today. For example, absolutely nobody pays taxes on the "gray earnings" they have gotten illegally (which are invariably many times greater than legal

income). The tax system is so complicated as to be a complete mystery to many ordinary Russians.

- The old system of government-sponsored social services has been severely crippled. Medical care had its drawbacks, but now things are worse; for example, there used to be a check-up everyone had to take each year. Tests included your temperature, your blood pressure, a urine sample, and the like. Now, you are on your own—you can get these tests free of charge at your local clinic if you have insurance, but the real difficulty begins if you receive a serious diagnosis and have to undergo more complicated testing or procedures. While this is an acute problem for many Russians, it is especially grave for pensioners. (They don't get enough to live on, yet they make up perhaps one-third of the population.)
- The government does not develop its technology; the economy is weak: oil, gas, gold, and the military (guns and equipment) are the only sources of income that matter. Throughout the former communist world Russian goods are not useable (salable) abroad. Russia has good relations with small countries of the Far East and South America in large part because they want to buy her weapons.
- Only Moscow is benefiting from the new wealth. (The government could have major offices in smaller cities all over Russia. Not all business has to be concentrated in Moscow.)
- We have only one viable political party! How can a democracy survive on less than two?
- The Orthodox Church opposes the existence of Catholicism, Judaism, Islam, or Protestantism in Russia. Each of them represents a loss of power to its hierarchy. Therefore you don't hear them complaining about the skinheads roughing up members of other sects.

Finally, I cannot restrain myself: is there not some small political advantage in the new system? No, it's the same as it always was: there's the big guy in control at the top, and as long as you mind your own business and don't complicate life for him, he'll let you live and die in relative peace. It's practically a monarchy. What we really need is a political party strong enough to form an opposition to the one in power. "Right now the only party that has a chance is the communists, so I'm voting for them next time."

That's capitalism for you.

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