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The Age of Uncertainty

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The new year came to Russia along with the mass protests uncomparably stronger than anything we have seen since very 1993. An immediate reason was a Summer Duma decision about what had been called "monetarization of privileges" (or "benefits") - i.e. conversion of privileges concerning free medicine, transport etc. into money. According to the former Soviet order, many social groups did have certain kinds of privileges, but here they were mostly those of pensioners - i.e. of an extremely disregarded and disadapted group of a society. The trick about the privileges was that they got monetarized (a word everyone had learnt since these months), converted into money in such a way which was quite close to cancelling them; for an example, a free medicine was equalized to approximately 1.000 rubles (28 EUR) monthly. When the law was passing, there were already some protests, but not that much. While it was only a paper, people waited. But at January, 1 they started to demand payment from old people in the public transport, and the rage grew. Moreover: in a small unnoticeable line of the bill it was added that these are local authorities who are responsible for the payments, what meant full devastation: local authorities are ever off money, with quite few exceptions (like Moscow). In reality that all meant: first, cancelling of privileges for all country; second, saving some rest of privilieges for Moscow, the richest and the most explosive city, thus deepening the gap between capital and province. The humiliation was even harder

because quite many of pensioners are World War II veterans who live last years of their life. But from the other side, these pensioners are more socially involved and engaged, because they keep a socially constructive spirit of socialism (whatever to think about it), and that was proven many times by their participation in the Red opposition.

These two qualities gave an explosive synthesis. At January, 11 the crowd of old people in the far Moscow suburbs started a blockade of a highway leading to capital. Militsia felt unsure to offend them too aggressively, and the triggered reaction started. More and more cities, towns and villages joined a maraphon. If you open http://www.skaji.net (means "Say no!") you will see a map of Russia with flags marking multiple points of monetarization protests. Marginals from other social classes, some students, some professors, some protesters-by-profession started to happen there too. The solidarity appeared in the air, especially after some protesters showed up with orange flags. (For many of us, the Ukrainian revolution was considered a sign of people revolting against the power whatever it is, and especially against an omnipresent Kremlin.) This is how pensioners and veterans showed a path to the rest of a society: the most remarkable for me was an internet image of an old woman holding the banner: "Putin is an enemy worse than Hitler!"

Lets look at that from a more theoretical point of view. As Manuel Castells notes, under the informational paradigm the structure of a society tends to individualization: individual labour contracts, individual working schedule etc. This is one of decisive conditions for the phenomenon of a precarity, when an individual, the employee finds him(her)self unmighty before the all-powerful market forces, the employers. Solidarity is not in agenda, for everything is "your own business". As an arena of a dash capitalism invasion, Russia had experienced that phenomenon maybe twice

harder than Western countries. Atomization grows, enforcening alienation. There're no clear class stratifications, no group interests expressed, no stability, only an uncertainty - both on personal and social level. Boris Kagarlitsky had once noted that in the beginning of 90s all the post-Soviet population was changing its formerly firm status for an uncertain one: many factories were paying their employees goods instead of money, forcing them to sell them and thus to become one day worker, the next day seller, etc. In one place they were giving coffins. Together with an invasion of a consumption society, this had created a disbalance in minds. While the luckiest white collars in capitals have found jobs and agreed to live under capitalism, millions of folks in Russia and former republics just silenced, because they had no explanation to what's happening. And now just pensioners, who had at least common age and Soviet past as grounds of solidarity, plus a serious risk of being left to die without anything, stood up and triggered a wave of protest. Government renounced, gave many excuses and established some really complicated and weird model of compensating the monetarized privilieges from federal budget.

The next step is to be taken. The next target group is students. Under the consolidated Cops & Militaries attack, an another predatory measure had been taken at 2004: a cancellation of army service delays. The logic of militaries is, those students who study in the Universities do it with an only aim: to avoid military service. Army has critical lack of youngsters ready to serve. Noone wants to go to Tchetchnya or to experience cruelties of army orders - with regular news about deaths, sadisms of the older soldiers towards the younger ones etc. The military officials say, last years they get no more than 14% of a needed quantity in a call for service, and the youngsters avoid it by entering Universities. So they decided to cancel all exit options and bring students to arms.

Students are not that unified as pensioners. Actually, noone knows what is today Russian "youth". Is it teenage ravers or hip-hoppers, the first Russian generation grown up on MTV? Are they blinded with technological rush, media brainwashing, capitalist hysteria? Or not? That is the question. But for sure, if there're sources of social consciousness between the youth, they have to be found in the Universities. During the Spring 2004 action against road militsia, when drivers were raising a white kerchief on their cars as a sign of protest, the cars of that kind could hardly be noticed between the others throughout Moscow, but in the parkings of a Moscow State University there was majority of such cars. Students have to express themselves, they have to stand for their interests at least to show that they are a certain group of people, not an atomized quantity of elements lacking identification.

That concerns all other classes as well. On the one hand, we have an uncertain state of many atomized individuals; on the other hand, we have multiple dangers coming from the power and targeting everyone. The uncertainty brought to us in the 1990s has to be overcame, people and groups have to find their identities. The capitalism is interested only in contunuing this situation where the most predatory ones can prolong their predatory practices and stay unseen, therefore it has no other way but to hide the true order of things. And the true order of things is frightening. There seemed to be quite many myths about the "logic of capitalism", for an example the one that the cheap labour force exploitation (like the children labour) was possible only in an early stage of capitalism, in a so-called "primary capital accumulation" phase. But look - now in a post-industrial society we again see sweatshops, child and women labor, guarantess diminishing, oppression growing. And the fact that it all takes place far from

Europe doesn't make it lighter, on the opposite, this all comes back to Europe as precarity.

The elimination of social rights and working guarantees, the cancellation of all former people defense mechanisms is an agenda of a Russian "precarity". Taxes grow. Apartments, water and gas payments grow too. It might be curious, that even one writing activist from Tomsk recently decided to implant the word into Russian soil and suggested to call the poor working conditions in Russia "prekarnost'". "Precarnost'" in Russia concerns labour but it also concerns everything else, the very basic conditions of life. The main slogan of a first Russian Social Forum coming (April 16-17) is "No - to cancellation of social guarantees!", although all other key topics such as war, privatization, mass-media etc. are also present. Under it socialists and anarchists, trotskyists and ecologists, human rights defenders and working unions are gathering.

For the older people, protests come parallel to nostalgia about the good old secure Soviet. Of course, as uncertain is today's capitalist society, the same certain was the former Soviet society. I would say, it was too certain. As is known, Soviets was a state of social guarantees and welfare. Even in the memories of my generation who saw the very rest of it, it was firm like an ancient Egypt. All classes were stratified, everything was made clear; for the late Soviet dissidents, this offered a good opportunity for a so-called "internal immigration": having a primitive handy work and a regular salary, you could live without much problems and think about Eternity.

Once in the Moscow magazine "CompuTerra" a trialogue between Graham Seaman, Richard Barbrook and the editor Leonid Levkovich was published (therefore it's a text existing in Russian

exclusively). The Information era prominent theorists trace origins of XXth century utopias and say, that Russians lived worse but they had better future: communism in 20 years! So the Western politicians had to explain their citizens that they have good future too, and that's why the CIA ordered Daniel Bell to invent his post-industrialist utopia. Russians had social programs and guaranteed income - so the Western politicians also had to proclaim the "welfare state". As soon as the Soviet Union ruined, there was no more need to proclaim this, and the Capitalism-the-wild came back.

As for Russia, there had never been any delusions that capitalism will bring any social guarantees. Some pro-democratic illusions did take place, that's true, but not pro-capitast. Liberal ideology (and especially the mostly beloved by our liberals Friedrich von Hayek) never promised social care or guarantees but advocated capitalist Effectiveness instead. In the times of perestroika Russia was in a deep depression about its former economy ineffectiveness, its technological lag, its socialist unmanagement, multiple disfunctionalities, excessive wastes of energy etc. The Union was stable, but not effective. That's why Gorbachev's principle number 3 (after "glasnost" and "perestroika") was "uskorenie", i.e. speeding up. That's also why the post-Soviet reformists started asking grants from IMF justifying it by rhetorics that they will teach us how to run the economy effectively.

But the people never expected any social or humanitarian benefits from capitalism and never had any delusions about its predatory nature. From the very beginning of privatization, from the very first bankruptcies and robberies they knew, capitalism is precarious.