

“Attempts at Decommunization in Russia Upset de-Stalinization”

May 5, 2018 marked the 200th anniversary of Karl Marx’s birth. Whatever the attitude towards this philosopher, nobody denies that his heritage largely shaped the 20th century and that today’s demand for Marxist-related ideas is much above supply. What has happened to left-wing and Communist ideas following the collapse of the Soviet Union and how does decommunization influence societies? Russia in Global Affairs editor Alexander Solovyov discusses these and other related topics with Sergei Solovyov, editor-in-chief of Skepsis magazine.

– What made Eastern Europe and some post-Soviet republics launch decommunization?

– Firstly, it is the ideological embodiment of what in Eastern Europe is commonly called “regime change.” A key element of a newly-invented myth of the fundamental break with the so-called Communist past, which is a clue to the legitimation of the new elite. This policy, as far as I can judge, is enforced more radically the stronger the real ties are between the elite’s *nomenklatura* and the previous political regime. A clear example of this is Hungary, where the technocratic mid-level career functionaries began to insist (as soon as they laid hands on the previous regime’s property) on the most resolute ideological break with the country’s past. On this soil Hungarian nationalism soared and Jobbik—the Movement for a Better Hungary party—emerged in the limelight ... I should say that in Hungary today we have what I would

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describe as a wildlife preserve of ideological reaction, determined to whitewash the darkest pages in Hungary’s history on the pretext of decommunization.

The way I see it, the situation in Poland is slightly different. Lustration there was far more serious and the struggle over lustration was quite fierce, in particular, in the 1990s. But even there the Institute of National Remembrance has created its own ideological myth, and in doing so enjoys support from right-of-center and outspokenly rightist forces. If it is to be believed, Poland languished for a long time under the yoke of a Communist regime, utterly alien to the Polish people and Polish ethnic identity. That regime, they argue, was imposed by the Soviet Union. Some bad guys—collaborationists—had agreed to work for that regime, so the mission of the Institute of National Remembrance is to expose the criminal nature of that regime and let everybody see how very hostile it was to the rest of the Polish people. In other words, a pure snow-white image of a victim is contrasted to a no less pure dark image of enemies and butchers.

The purpose of such schemes is not new. It can be seen very well in the events in Ukraine, for instance: to distract attention from real problems stemming from the effects of an unbridled market economy, neoliberal economic reforms, the income gap between the overwhelming majority of the population and the relatively small group of the middle class and bourgeoisie that made fortunes in the process of regime change. The wider the social gap, the more vigorous the discussion over historical identity, over the ethnic identity of historical memory.

– Are these new elites somehow connected with the leaders of the dissident movement of the 1950s and 1960s? Is there any continuity? Or are they a new generation who has decided to capitalize on the dissidents’ heritage?

– It is hard to say anything for sure. In the Czech Republic, for instance, such continuity is far more obvious than in Hungary. Poland, I guess, is somewhere in between. The situation in Yugoslavia is totally different. In a sense, Yugoslavia stands far apart from common logic, because the nature of the standoff we see there is totally

different. It's between the nationalist ideology and the liberal, free market economic one.

Whatever the case, at first there did exist such continuity, but at a certain point most of the classical dissidents faded into the background—for reasons of age and also because their abstract system of humanitarian values did not fit in well with the new realities, where private commercial and concrete ideological interests mattered much more than they had wished or ever imagined.

Lustrations and disclosures in Poland were a very convenient tool of manipulation, in contrast to the situation of the early 1990s, when the process had just begun. In the Baltic states it all happened apparently in the same way, but the situation was more complex; firstly, due to the large Russian-speaking population and, secondly, because of far worse problems with becoming integrated into the European Union, which entailed terrible migration, depopulation, and the elimination of ethnic identity. In particular, this is true of Latvia. In situations like these, ideological manipulations are more valuable than the desire to discuss real problems and the second-rate status these countries have received in the European Community—the status of backyard and workforce donors.

– Can these countries find a common language on the ground of decommunization? Can it be the platform for unification, or is it a means of creating a purely national identity?

– First, it is all about creating a national, in some cases, nationalist myth—in Hungary or, say, in Ukraine. As any myth, it should be devoid of internal contradictions and look homogenous, while everything that does not fit in with it must be excluded in one way or another.

But myths in different Eastern European countries are different, of course. In their common past there had been too many conflicts, and it is far easier for them to build bridges of ideological (and not historical) continuity. Poland, for instance, finds it far easier to do business with Germany than with Ukraine, which now and then enters into fierce debates with Poland over the Wolyn massacre.

Here belong the conflicts and rifts between Eastern European countries that have no immediate anti-Communist implications. For example, Poland and Czechoslovakia fell victim to Nazi aggression during World War II, while Hungary and Romania were among the aggressor states. Poland sees the idealization of the regime of Sanacja (Sanation) and resistance to what is regarded as joint aggression by Hitler and Stalin in 1939. While Hungary is idealizing the rule of Hitler’s ally Miklos Horthy. Even some monuments to him have been erected.

This is not exactly the type of situation that is good for unity. On the contrary, outright schizophrenia is growing far and wide. Just consider what can be heard in Hungary: We are against globalization, the Horthy regime was not very bad at all, Jews are the enemies of the Hungarian people, and the Soviet era is a gap in Hungarian history (but at the same time we are reliable partners of modern Russia). It turns out that one concept is good for domestic use and a quite different one for foreign audiences.

– Does Russophobia play any role in shaping new nationalist identity and if so, what is that role? In today’s Russia it looks like a favorite pursuit to look for and find Russophobia wherever possible.

– I should say that in Poland, for instance, and to a large extent in the Baltic states, the Soviet Union is portrayed as a reincarnation of the Russian Empire. So is Putin’s Russia. This picture is logical and devoid of internal contradictions. It comes in handy for domestic use. The Baltic countries, Latvia for instance, are discussing in full seriousness the risk of looming Russian aggression. Research being done by historians is seen as aggression, as ideological aggression, considered merely as part of preparations for military aggression.

– It turns out that the fear of Russian aggression is a commodity and it sells well enough, right? It can be traded for a chunk of NATO aid...

– Certainly. Preferences related to building an internal political order are unmistakably present here, too... Overdoing it is just impos-

sible. Any absurdity—however weird it may look—is highly welcome in the modern political context. Even if one imagines that Russian-U.S. relations get better someday, the financing of the Baltic countries' military and wider cooperation between Poland and NATO (although there seems to be no place for it to grow further) will not end. These variables are utterly independent from each other.

– These guys seem to have found a very convenient niche (which had never existed before) for interaction with Western Europe, a way of integration with its institutions and the sphere of its influence by monetizing their status of potential victims? In other words, the peripheral countries have gained an opportunity to exploit this threat and, in this way, to earn preferences. Is that correct?

– Absolutely. And it happened a while ago. It is a rather stable pattern of relations. Back in the early 1990s there was far greater openness in this field and the proclaimed goal was cooperation with a democratic Russia. But then there was a turn towards new isolationism (in no way related to the turn Putin's Russia made). That turn was very convenient ideologically. It paves the way—as you've stated quite correctly—for gaining preferences, both ideological and quite material ones. In addition, it allows for legalizing the existing state of affairs by means of fomenting fear. Everything that happens within the framework of the existing order becomes relatively easy to explain. It's all clear to the naked eye whenever statistics are released showing that social differentiation is growing and the income gap between the richest and the poorest is widening, the bugbear of a Russian threat is instantly brought to the forefront.

– Is it possible to compare today's decommunization and denazification in Germany?

– Some parallels can be drawn, of course. And the comparison will reveal fundamental differences. True denazification in West Germany at the level of official ideology—the analysis of the origins of Nazism and the underlying causes of Nazi crimes and mass complicity of a large share of the German people in these crimes—occurred only after

a long time. This happened under pressure from the left-wing movement, the movement of German intellectuals in the 1960s and 1970s. In a situation where a large segment of the German establishment would prefer to close the subject of Nazism, the intellectuals were keen to delve into the sins of the fathers.

Moreover, it was a conflict of generations. West Germany’s entire judicial and prosecutorial system was a replica of the one that existed in the Third Reich. A tremendous number of mid-level civil servants successfully built careers in Adenauer’s Germany. Among the federal chancellor’s aides was Hans Globke, one of the authors of anti-Semitic laws passed after Kristallnacht. He was forced to step down only after a debate flared up. Wehrmacht generals responsible for war crimes in the Soviet Union became successful generals in the Bundeswehr. And so on.

Tensions boiled to a point where Karl Jaspers, a conservative rather than a left-winger, came out with a warning that there existed a real risk of the restoration of Nazism and that even civil war would be better than such an outcome. Suspecting that Jaspers shared the views that eventually began to be professed by the Rote Armee Fraktion and Ulrike Meinhof and Andreas Baadar?! That’s impossible! Nevertheless, in this sense they saw eye to eye.

Another important distinguishing feature of decommunization is that it relies entirely upon the ideology of victory: “We have overpowered the Communist regime.” Denazification implies hard internal work (following the loss in the war, of course, but that is less important) accomplished in the process of the hardest debate, clashes, including street unrest, skirmishes with police, killings of activists, ultra-left terrorism and the struggle of a large share of German intellectuals with Germany’s political elite...

As for the problem of decommunization, it was approached quite differently from the outset. As I’ve already said, a dualistic pattern was drawn: there are the collaborationists, there is an act of external aggression, and there is the martyr—the suffering people (at the initial phase of decommunization, though, many activists did have the right to position themselves as martyrs). It should be remembered, though,

that the Communist regime in Poland—it was only Communist to a degree—was established through the efforts of a tremendous number of Poles. The conflict between Armia Krajowa veterans, who went ahead with the struggle after the establishment of the regime, was tantamount to civil war. Each side enjoyed wide popular support. All this ambiguity and controversiality are now being erased.

– Was the “war over monuments” in the United States at the beginning of 2017 a similar type of phenomenon? A painful and emotional outbreak accompanying the quest for a new national identity?

– I believe that it should be compared with what is called historical policy and memory policy. When the idea that the state should pursue a certain historical memory policy turns into official policy, then I believe wars over monuments are next.

I suspect that what we are seeing in the United States today is an attempt to force the public to focus attention on the past instead of addressing current issues (the failure of health reform, for instance). The U.S. Civil War was one of the most sensitive issues because it was the bloodiest military conflict in American history. The Civil War claimed more American lives than World War I and World War II combined. The U.S. Civil War, just like any other civil war, involved terror on both warring sides.

I suspect one more detail may be involved here. I’m not very familiar with it, so I have to speak with certain reservations. These monuments are a result of the postwar reconstruction of the South, which in fact restored (and in some southern states accelerated) racial segregation. Possibly, we are witnessing not only superficial manipulation, but a fundamental attempt to interpret national reconciliation that took place as reconciliation achieved at the expense of a certain share of American society—mainly those with African roots.

– Decommunization as one of the varieties of memory policy implies, as we’ve just found out, intensive myth-making, and a rather primitive one, including the invention of conspiracy theories...

– If society does not control the government-orchestrated memory policy, if that policy is not a result of the widest and, as a rule, very painful public discussion and struggle in society, if there is nothing like that, then we have before us an ideological policy of some sort. And a conspiracy theory, of course, which may turn out to be very useful, for it makes it possible to draw a picture of the Universe with just two brushstrokes. Any conspiracy theorist always has an advantage in that he knows everything. He is faced with no problems. No complex mosaics have to be pieced together to make the man in the street believe.

But conspiracy theories cut both ways. A conspiracy theory is very easy to turn inside out. The Russian Empire’s failed attempts to shape such a policy, largely using German templates, is a clear illustration of this. Conspiracy theories were used very actively; the theory of a Jewish conspiracy at a certain point became the authorities’ official ideologeme. Suffice it to recall the Protocols of the Elders of Zion affair. This conspiracy ideologeme—as Boris Kolonitsky proved well enough in his works—backfired on the system later, because the political system’s own actions began to be easily explained from the standpoint of a German conspiracy against Russia during World War I. That was one of the ideological causes of the 1917 February revolution.

– In myth-making practices symbols are important. To what extent is the language of symbols used in the policy of decommunization?

– Symbols are of tremendous importance, as the whole history of the last century shows. They are charged with certain content, which is put across by means of molding public opinion and awareness promotion that emerged and developed in the 20th century. Here’s an unusual example. On every election poster in Nepal you can see the swastika sign. But this Nepalese symbol has nothing to do with Nazi Germany or the Third Reich at all. But the moment we see it, we begin to feel cognitive dissonance: What is this all about? How can it be, in particular, in a situation where only Communist parties compete with each other in Nepal’s elections? Almost no non-Communists are left

there. And they argue among themselves all the time who is the real Communist and who is Maoist and to what degree...

- Decommunization in Nepal...

- It's an urgent need, of course, some will say! The same applies to India, where different Communist parties govern entire states. But incidentally, this theme is a taboo in Eastern Europe and in Russia as well. Generally speaking, we have far poorer knowledge of what is happening in the East, although events there have a far greater impact on the world than events in the West. Which bewilders me, the further the more...

It goes without saying that history has an ethical side to it. And it is that dimension that is essential for education and upbringing. Since we are on the subject of symbols, I should say that to my mind there are two completely different approaches to symbols. One is that of Pavlov's dog: a response to a stimulus. The dog begins to salivate when the bell is rung. In other words, the moment you see a certain symbol—a red star or a swastika—an unreflective response follows. In some cases, when a truly dramatic historical experience is in focus, this is inevitable. But whenever the shaping of historical memory is on the agenda, and that job is done not by the state, but by historians (they do take part in the process whether they wish to or not, and if they stay aloof, the outcome is very nasty), the historian's task is to turn such a response in society (even if it does exist) into a reflective one.

When there is no reflective content (when the awareness of the symbol's content is absent), the symbol is very easily turned upside down. Remember the black joke from the post-perestroika era: A World War II veteran standing in line for a pint of beer hears his neighbor say: "Just imagine you were less brave fighting at the frontline. You might be sipping Bavarian lager today." It's all very simple—an unreflective ideological canonization of victory in the Brezhnev era. Incidentally, Russia today follows the same logic. All ideological postulates—in films, in patriotism-bolstering instructions and speeches by Culture Minister Vladimir Medinsky—follow the same template "Our good guys beat their bad guys." This will inevitably produce a

situation where the reaction to a set of proclaimed symbols can be easily overturned...

Thoughtless symbol- and myth-making can create terrible monsters that would do credit to Goya and Bosch. A while ago I saw a proposed sketch of a monument to the Wolyn massacre victims. A very peculiar one. The Polish eagle in the center with a cross-shaped hole in the middle and inside that hole, a baby's body impaled on a pitchfork.

– **How awful...**

– I was speechless. The method of expression was so plain that next to it even the monument to Kalashnikov would look an impeccable sample of artistic taste and ideological reserve.

– **Phasing out a symbol from everyday use automatically clears the ideological space of the entire string of ideas behind it, right? (Outlaw the swastika and all talk about fascism and Nazim will die down; outlaw the red star and the hammer and sickle and everybody will soon forget about Communism).**

– Such situations must be considered separately. In all likelihood each case is unique. For instance, banning the swastika without explaining what Nazism is will lead nowhere. The swastika can be reshaped in virtually no time. Or replaced, say, with a rhombus. But doing so will not make any sense because there is a tremendous variety of meanings behind this symbol.

What if we just prohibit the swastika without explaining to everyone in our country in the context of spreading nationalist sentiment why it should not be replicated, what links nationalism and fascism, what the genesis of fascism is, and why the Soviet Union's victory over Nazi Germany was not just a victory over yet another enemy, but a victory over fascism, and why fascism and Nazism are not totally different things, contrary to what many in Russia argue today... Clearly, far from everybody will take the trouble of reading Wolfgang Wippermann's *Europaischer Faschismus im Vergleich* (European Fascism: A Comparative Study). Apparently, that will be unnecessary. But even school curricula, let alone university ones,

must show that Europe and even the whole world have experienced the effects of a string of fascist or fascist-like regimes, which emerged for similar reasons and shared common features. It should be explained why the Soviet Union's victory over fascism was one of the main events of the 20th century, precisely because it was a defeat of fascism and not of Germany. Then we will have an understanding of why the swastika is a taboo.

– Those in Europe who have removed the red star and the hammer and sickle from the public space, do they explain why Communism is bad and so terrible?

– The problem is they do explain why Communism is bad and so terrible in a very primitive, straightforward way. It is not so much Communism itself that really counts. It's an attempt to clean the ideological space of left-wing ideas altogether. It is an attempt to do away with ideologies that place social justice above everything. That the neo-liberals and nationalists go hand in hand in this respect is a clear confirmation of this fact. In Hungary, for instance, decommunization results in creeping, or possibly no longer creeping, attempts to whitewash Hungarian fascism. In the political space the left-wing forces—the Socialists, let's call a spade a spade—are not represented at all...

This is a means of manipulation and brainwashing, too. The opponent is literally drowned in Stalin-Beria-Gulag rhetoric. And you are forced to keep arguing in return that Stalinism or the Rakosi regime in Hungary or the Gomulka regime in Poland had as much in common with Communism as Jesus Christ had with the Spanish Inquisition. That it is a very handy ideological weapon to clean the ideological space and gain a monopoly there. Incidentally, this surprised many European and even American intellectuals (and still keeps surprising, as far as I can tell), because they regard a certain set of left-wing ideas as a quite legitimate component of the academic community. Whenever in Eastern Europe they come across such a primitive and savage variety of anti-Communism that smacks of the era of McCarthyism, they cannot but feel amazed.

– Is a socially significant process of decommunization afoot in Russia or is this a minor aspect in the search for national identity? And in broader terms, to what extent is decommunization in Russia an element of national identity?

– I would begin with something like this: An attempt at decommunization in Russia has brought about the failure of de-Stalinization. This happened because from the very beginning the Yeltsin regime positioned itself as an opponent of all Soviet history. In full conformity with Eastern European logic, the entire Soviet period was portrayed as a gap in the whole history of humanity.

But this entailed massive grassroots resistance, because an overwhelming majority of our fellow citizens was reluctant to see a larger part of their lives thrown into the dustbin. The process was artificial and ostentatious. That was quite obvious even intuitively, just like its link with the social disaster that swept in Russia in the 1990s and continued in the 2000s. The decommunization of that sort triggered such powerful denials, because decommunization began to be associated with Yeltsin’s rule.

In response, there followed an upsurge in grassroots Stalinism, and it was not connected with comrade Stalin personally or recollections of the Stalinist period, the more so since those who might have offered their own eyewitness accounts had died by then. It was idealization of the past that counterbalanced present-day realities. In the end it was impossible to show the real impact of the Stalinist period on the country, why the Stalinist era had planted a delayed action mine that eventually ruined the Soviet Union, bred corruption among career functionaries, and turned them into a group of people who would carry out regime change in 1991 to become the main beneficiaries of that transformation.

Russian decommunization was deeply unhistorical, alien, and hostile to the day-to-day experience of a huge number of people, and it was not accepted by society. It was very easy to see, so Putin and his ideologists produced a new ideological model—a combination of the Russian three-color state flag and the Soviet anthem. It was declared (that declaration has remained just a fine pronouncement, but still)

there will be no condemnation of the Soviet era. That earned truly massive support...

– In other words, this can be regarded as successful manipulation of symbols. Is that right?

– Certainly. How real the changes behind those symbols are is a totally different matter. The way I see it, no fundamental changes took place. Somehow the regime gained a foothold. The process of forming classes was more or less completed. The situation in the ruling class stabilized and social mobility, upward and downward, formed certain strata of post-Soviet society by and large. All this required an ideological framework. And that framework was created.

But ideological schizophrenia took place precisely at this point. That system made everything taboo (and in that sense the situation was akin to the one in Eastern Europe) that concerned the revolutionary past, the content of Soviet symbols, and the struggle for social justice that had been officially professed to the very end of the Soviet era. But without that revolutionary component the official history lacks the essence of our common past. The massive enthusiasm of the 1920s and 1930s and the Krushchev thaw are unexplainable without the real confidence a tremendous number of people had in the values and ideals of social justice that materialized with the October Revolution (not to mention its international importance).

What I'm saying is this. The current model denies all that. It agrees to take only one component, that of sovereign statehood. Imperial style continuity. First, there was the Russian Empire, then the revolution followed, when everything was very bad. Then the Soviet Empire took over. Everything got very bad again in the 1990s, and then the Empire was restored. A very simple, linear model. But where does the victory over Nazi Germany belong? Was it a victory attained by the Empire? But it doesn't fit in with this pattern at all, for the victory was won not under the three-colored flag or the imperial eagle, or the eagle of the Military-Historical Society, which sticks its emblem to monuments honoring Soviet military commanders. A monument to General Ivan Chernyakhovsky was unveiled recently not far from where I live. On

the back side of the basement you can see a double-headed eagle. That victory was attained under the Soviet symbols, and behind those symbols was the idea of social justice. Otherwise there would have been no victory at all.

As for the ideological policies of Culture Minister Vladimir Medinsky, both naïve and aggressive at the same time, this discrepancy surfaces now and then. It also explains the terrible mistakes he makes all the time.

– His dissertation explains very well his amateurish approach to history, to historical memory, and to shaping it and what its gist is. From this viewpoint his dissertation is crystal-clear.

– In that sense, yes, I quite agree. His approach to history is purely mechanical: everything on our side is good and everything against us is bad. Period. He stops right there. Foreigners are outsiders and strangers, so they can never say anything nice. So they must be exposed. As simple as that.

But this attitude can backfire just like any conspiracy theory. Take the ridiculous debate over the film *Mathilde*. It will never be possible to portray Nicholas II as a holy national leader, however hard one might try. Now there are some people—I even had a discussion with them on an online Internet channel—who would like Rasputin to be canonized. This surely sounds like a bad joke. An ideological policy like this invariably produces such ridiculous ideas.

– Possibly, it’s our newly-acquired national trait: the moment we try to build some new ideology or to mate old and new ones, nothing sensible comes of it. Possibly, it is even good that such attempts fail? Possibly, this is normal? Possibly, in this way we merely live through an infantile disorder?

– My school teacher’s favorite proverb was “Where something is thin, that’s the place where it tears.” Sometimes he rephrased it this way, “Where something is thin, lies are fast to creep in.” It is precisely this type of situation. The blend of the Stalinist anthem and the tricolor state flag can work only for a while. It is true that society wants to see

the restoration of what can be described as a strong social state, if not an empire. Our ideologists are well aware of that by and large. You don't have to be a Nobel laureate to notice that.

The St. George's Ribbon and the Immortal Regiment movements both were very successful. While the St. George's Ribbon was an official initiative, the Immortal Regiment idea originated at the grassroots level...

– And as soon as it saw the success of the Immortal Regiment, the establishment preferred to intercept that initiative and spearhead the spontaneous popular movement...

– ... and the moment it did, all sorts of oddities began to occur. Even if we leave aside Mrs. Poklonskaya carrying a portrait of Nicholas II during the Immortal Regiment procession, many other such curious incidents keep happening every so often. And since they occur so frequently, that means they are not fortuities resulting from the subjective traits of individual personalities. This is a system error and it sends warning messages to the monitor screen.

The umbrella of statehoodness, if you don't mind my using this hardly pronounceable word, will always develop a leak where the cloth is thin.

– Roland Barthes said Frenchness was an inalienable feature of French mentality and French identity. It looks like our distinguishing feature is this inarticulable statehoodness.

– The word looks and sounds odd, I agree.

– Statism? Imperialness?

– As far as statism is concerned, many have developed this awareness already, but, sadly, mostly at the intuitive level: In a situation where statism does exist, but at the same time the individual is treated like dirt, there is no way of hiding it. Now back to the question that came first in our discussion of the situation in Russia. I believe that we certainly do need de-Stalinization. But it should not look like a government program for putting up new monuments. It will not

work. It will not achieve the desired effect. That the Wall of Grief has emerged —although I’m very critical of this work by Frangulyan—is not bad at all, because there is a certain point of departure, there is understanding (although some may still lack it, if we remember FSB Director Alexander Bortnikov’s interview) that certain things have been determined in the end. Not completely, as we have seen. At a certain point it might seem everything had been smoothed over. Not yet, as it turns out. So here we go again...

– Then possibly it is not worth trying to smooth things over? If they’ve been smoothed over, that means the issue has been settled and the theme is dead? The little thing is it is not dead at all... but has been buried.

– There should be a fundamental, open public discussion. There must be some sort of new version of *Narodnichestvo*—*Neonarodnichestvo*, if you wish, a movement of historians appealing to the popular masses... I know some people at the regional level who have accomplished tremendous work to restore the memory of those repressed—although the very same people have Stalin’s portraits at home. I know relatives of those repressed who keep icons and pictures of Stalin on the same wall, or who at least feel deep respect for Stalin. This is our reality and allowances have to be made for that.

It is much easier to throw a veil of statism over all this. But that means that with the advent of another economic crisis or some new ideological process all this will break loose sooner or later. In the near term this system is viable, it has proven that. But in the long term it will inevitably begin to fall apart and crumble. Because it is a purely mechanical combination. A scheme. Incidentally, the comrades that make up the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF) today have managed to fit in with this scheme perfectly well. Everything is good for them. They make the sign of the cross with their party membership cards and their leader Gennady Zyuganov is now telling us how sympathetically the Church reacted to Vladimir Lenin’s death and what messages of condolences its hierarchs sent. He argues that

the relationship between the Communist Party and the Church has always been excellent.

But the real trauma suffered as a result of the Soviet Union's breakup and the 1990s is still there. Some have been trying to apply makeup to the wound hoping to make it less flagrant. But the scar does not heal. It's an attempt to conceal an abscess. It will come to a head sooner or later.

The task of our left-of-center socialist-minded intellectuals is to actualize this problem. To expose the conflicting nature of official ideology and to encourage discussion on this subject—albeit with not very pleasant opponents. As for smoothing things over... Only a bald head is ideally smooth. Attempts to smooth things over will fail. Controversies will surface sooner or later. And they already do, as experience shows, one way or another.

– Are you saying that the CPRF and its leader Gennady Zyuganov personally are an imitation? That they are not real Communists?

– Of course, they are not. They have nothing to do with Communism. They are a normal populist party, a legalized feature of the modern political landscape. Within this framework the party performs its function of keeping protests under control and working as a safety valve.

– But at the same time, they create in a sense the image of a “friendly Commie,” who can be easily shown to the Eastern European enthusiasts of decommunization—look at what real Communists are like. They don't have to be afraid of them. They are God-fearing. Christ himself was the first Communist. Zyuganov breathed new life into this renovationist idea (and Putin in January 2018 confirmed that the Ten Commandments and the Moral Code of the Builder of Communism were practically identical, and that Lenin's body was something like the relics of a saint to a believer). And they are respectable, too. Or is this the wrong way to defend the left ideas?

– This is the surest way of discrediting left-wing ideas. Firstly, there isn't a trace of commitment to principle. It's classical opportunism. One can see only the wish to be blended into the existing political model and lead

a comfortable existence: Mr. Grudinin’s presidential nomination from the Communist Party is evidence of precisely this type of attitude. Just think about this: a former member of the United Russia party (up to 2010, if I’m not mistaken), a millionaire, who was suspected of nationalism, apparently not without a reason, becomes a Communist Party candidate. A capitalist candidate from the Communists. That’s really funny.

In other words, it’s all about the image of a friendly Commie. Not a Communist in general. We have before us a populist party that, by virtue of its origin, has to use certain left-wing rhetoric. Mind you, only part of it. And in this sense, they find Stalinist rhetoric closer than Leninist. And they will stick to the ritual of protesting proposals for the removal of Lenin’s body from the Mausoleum. Noblesse oblige.

– As far as decommunization symbols are concerned, isn’t it the right time to remove the body?

– By no means. It’ll just be a way of triggering another meaningless discussion, of producing an impression of political activity. It’s not a political problem, but a dummy. It’s true that turning Lenin’s body into an object of worship was part of the Stalinist model of creating a cult of Lenin and then his own cult. Historical traces of this can be clearly seen. Suffice it to recall that Lenin’s wife Nadezhda Krupskaya was firmly against handling her husband’s body in that way. On the other hand, burying Lenin now would herald a ritual victory of the anti-Communists—the ultra-right ones. So, the easiest solution—and our authorities are well aware of this—is to do nothing. To leave everything as it is. And in this respect the authorities are quite rational.

It’s not burying Lenin’s body that constitutes a problem. The CPRF will have to be buried sooner or later as a political corpse. It fits in too well with the modern political system. CPRF hierarchs still fear, though, that they may be kicked out of this system and replaced by somebody else.

– By whom? Udaltsov, for instance?

– However popular he may look, Udaltsov can hardly be called controllable, the way I see it. In other words, he will not be visiting the office of the Presidential Staff to get permissions.

– What is the chance that such a controversial and uncontrollable personality can breathe new life into the Communist movement in Russia? Where are the young ambitious ringleaders who will get into politics? Udaltsov, Yashin, Navalny? Are they the types?

– When the Bolotnaya Square demonstrations and other similar protests were just beginning, I maintained that our liberals would use the leftists only to dispose of them in due time. And this is what happened. The left-wingers were not just thrown away. Some were put behind bars. Take a look at what happened. Ponomaryov was not jailed, but Udaltsov was. It was pretty clear to me from the outset that everything will have precisely this sort of ending. The ways of our domestic liberals, as they are, it could not have happened otherwise. All attempts at extra-ideological cross-breeding of different political species are doomed. Such political figures can exist as long as they are marginal.

What is Udaltsov's potential to unite? Incidentally, he has realized that trying to do business with the liberals will boomerang on him and the effects may be dire. He learned that from his own sad experience. I suspect, though, that a tremendous amount of reflexive work has not been accomplished yet. All along there have been just mechanical unification attempts... Let's pool all our left-wing forces outside the CPRF and nominate somebody on their behalf. In order to unite left-wing forces, such forces have to be created first...to begin with. There are none at the moment. It will take enormous intellectual and theoretical work to realize what Russia is today economically and ideologically. What social groups exist there, what ideals these social groups might find attractive, and what is to be done for that. And how awareness raising and communication campaigns work in the current conditions... There is a tremendous amount of theoretical issues our political personalities do not care about at all.

– Can the Communist myth be eliminated from the ideological space altogether?

– No, it cannot. Because it is not a myth. The value of social justice ideas continues to be generated by capitalist society regardless of

whether we want this or not. At a certain point Francis Fukuyama proclaimed the end of history: Left-wing ideas were buried together with the Soviet Union and liberalism triumphed. On the face of it everything looked fine. But what’s happened in reality? In 1994, God-forsaken Mexico’s God-forsaken state Chiapas saw the Zapatista Rebellion, which triggered the anti-globalist movement. The rebellion largely ended in failure, but nevertheless it heralded a leftward turn in Latin American countries, an upsurge in the trade union movement, and mass protests in Western countries.

However hard one might try to do away with this specter... it will be back some day in one form or another. As long as capitalism exists as a system, it will generate its antagonist. The faster we, Socialists, accomplish the analysis of the Soviet Union’s experience—both positive and negative, which has regrettably not been done to this day, as well as the experience (categorically negative) of the past quarter of a century—the sooner we will come up with a sound alternative. That such an alternative is in great demand is seen in the entire political process. That alternative can come in different disguises—the Islamic State or a new Communist, left-wing, socialist idea. Hungarian Marxist Istvan Meszaros, a participant in the 1956 events, who eventually emigrated to Britain (where he died in October 2017) wrote a book called *Socialism or Barbarism* (an allusion to the well-known phrase by Rosa Luxembourg). I’m certain this is the alternative we are faced with today.