

Ivan Krastev:

“We do not dream of the future anymore, we’re scared of it.”



*Why does the world increasingly look like a room with a wall of mirrors? What do Putin and Trump have in common? What identity will people have in the 21st century? **Ivan Krastev**, Chairman of the Centre for Liberal Strategies in Sofia and Kissinger Fellow at the Library of Congress, shares his ideas on these and other related subjects with Russia in Global Affairs interviewer **Svetlana Babayeva**.*

CHANGE THE COUNTRY, NOT THE GOVERNMENT

– At the recent session of the Valdai Club devoted to identity you said that the “rise of the majority” was a worldwide trend. Is it good or dangerous?

– As Samuel Huntington put it, “Identity, it appears, is like sin; however much we oppose it, we cannot escape it.” We are talking about the policy of identity as a new phenomenon, but in reality, it is a result of the cultural revolution of 1968. There are two types of identities. One does not depend on us—we were born with it. The fact that I’m a Bulgarian is not my choice, but part of my identity. The other type of identity is the one I chose. The individual decides on his or her own way to live, which candidate to vote for, and whether or not to believe in

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God. These days people are much more concerned with their acquired identity. They create their own history and life around it. To an extent this is because people have become more educated and mobile.

– But doesn’t greater diversity imply a rise of different minorities, and not the majority?

– A rise of minorities in politics occurred in the 1960s-1990s, when feminists and sexual and ethnic minorities wanted to become more noticeable and be represented in the political process. Their message was: “We want to be heard. We do exist!” As for the majority groups—ethnic, religious, and racial—they lacked the drive to declare “We are here!” because there was an impression that they had power anyway.

What happened next? It’s the Western world that I have in mind first and foremost. The demographic problem emerged there. Societies grow old, migration changes the ethnic composition of society, and then the fear follows: “We are a majority today, but will we remain a majority tomorrow?”

Psychologically, people have begun to behave as minorities. They have developed the feeling that their power is fragile and unstable. This kind of sentiment is strongest in small countries. Say you’ve always thought that you don’t have to prove that you are Bulgarian because 80%-90% of the country’s population are people like you. But now you feel scared: the world is different, your children have left to go somewhere else, and they no longer speak their native language very well. A surge of panic is imminent: what if my ethnic group and my nation will go extinct in a hundred years?

– If so, in the polices of the very same Europe we would now observe a process that would meet the interests of the French, the Germans, or the Czechs five times removed. But as we can see, it’s the other way around. Politicians tend to focus on the new strata of their electorate, including recent migrants.

– The populist parties are anti-immigrant. Italy for Italians. In the United States Trump says: “We, whites, are losing power. Is this society ours or not?”

People always find sudden shifts to be scary, but today everything is changing much faster, people move around much quicker and easier. You come to realize that since you were born in a poor country in Africa, the most radical thing that can be done is not toppling your government, but just changing the country. This is a one-generational change. It does not need an ideology or a political party of revolution to bring it about.

Quite often fear is felt not about something that is already happening, but about what *might* happen. For instance, in Bulgaria there are very few immigrants. But you've seen on TV how easily people cross the borders. And you begin to be afraid not of the people who have already arrived, but of those who *may* arrive. Also, you are afraid of those who have gone...

This is the main thing that has happened in Eastern Europe and which is rarely discussed. The 1989 revolution was a revolution of normality. We wish to live the way a normal society lives and our future looks like Germany. But if our future is like Germany, why should we waste time waiting for the day we begin to look like Germany? It is far easier to get up and move to Germany! To study, work, and live there. A tremendous share of Eastern European citizens these days lives and works outside of their countries. In the Baltic countries, that rate is over 20%. Over the ten years that Romania has been a member of the European Union, more than 3.5 million Romanians have left the country. And it's always young and active people who leave.

RULERS WHO HAVE NO PLACE TO GO

– But is it appropriate to discuss identity and values in the 21st century at a time when so many people are on the move?

– When does identity become a problem? When you have the feeling that you are losing it. First, it becomes far harder to understand what it means to be a Russian, Bulgarian, or Pole in the 21st century. And then you just do not know if it is right to insist on this or not.

What has happened because of technological progress and new communications, as well as other factors? They have changed relations

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between generations. In the 1960s, children revolted against their conservative parents. But in the 1990s, children felt sorry for their parents, who had lost not only wealth, but also the meaning of life. Parents had not just stopped being an example to follow, parents no longer knew what model of life they should offer their own children...

As a result, a very strange situation has taken shape. I spent a long time trying to realize the origin of Gayrope-fueled fears. Let us be frank, Russia is far from the most conservative country in the world, sexually or socially. The percentage of abortions per one thousand women and the divorce rate is higher than in the “permissive” and “liberal” West. Where does this rather hysterical demand for conservative values come from then?

My guess is that quite a few parents, including elitist ones, have appeared who are far from certain that they will be able to pass their values down to their children. They want the government and the state to do that for them. What happened to the elite in the 1990s? Their children went to study in the West. Many of them returned, but with different social perceptions. Their children lived in an environment where homosexuality is no longer a problem. And the older generation began to feel that their children were no longer their children. As if somebody had stolen them and reformatted them in accordance with different values.

I believe this largely explains where the specter of traditionalism came from. It is not just a Russian problem. I can see the same in Eastern Europe. It’s a crisis of parental power, which occurs in a situation where you do not know if you have something to teach your own children. Because you have problems with your own life.

Demand for conservatism and attempting to renationalize the next generation of elites—that’s the gist of the response to these fears and globalization.

– In other words, the elites set their eyes on more traditional things because they did not know what else they could cling to, right?

– That’s right. There is a great problem resulting from globalization, people began to think that they are governed by foreigners. This feeling is particularly strong in small countries. An elite has appeared that speaks

foreign languages and travels around the world. Then you begin to think: all right, these rulers might be very smart and competent, but what is their attitude to me personally? This gives rise to populist movements. The emphasis on the elite that has no exit option. No other place to exist.

– So, our rulers might have no place to escape to?

– The most attractive feature of the populists is that the larger public likes the fact that they do not speak foreign languages, that they have few international contacts, and that they are not liked abroad. They are eagerly voted for not because they are trusted, but because they have no place to run away to when the crisis really hits.

– So, it turns out that in the world there is a great demand not for leaders, but for those who are “of the same blood”?

– Who will never abandon you because they have no place to go.

TODAY’S TREND SETTERS ARE POLITICIANS

– Stage and film director Konstantin Bogomolov said at a meeting of the Valdai Club that Russia, in contrast to the West, retains “the right to madness.” In other words, in Russia it is still possible to display feelings and emotions, and not just love and tolerance. But we can see the same happening elsewhere around the world. Alongside the demand for those “of the same blood,” insanity in the political and social process comes into fashion.

– The right to madness is a holy right, but it is not to be overused. Ours is a transitional era. Zbigniew Brzezinski called it “a global political awakening.” We are witnesses to growing social inequality and the accompanying triumph of egalitarian culture. The elite is no longer an example to follow. Authenticity has become today’s number one value. I know better what is good for me. I may be talking nonsense, but I am what I am. And you cannot ban me from this.

The emphasis on authenticity brings about radical changes in the nature of political representation. Today’s politicians represent not interests, but a lifestyle and outlook. Many are curious: How come the

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poor voted for billionaire Trump? Imagine you do not know who is Black—Barack Obama or Donald Trump. All you can see is the way they dress, you hear the ideas they voice, and know the way they behave. Then it will turn out that Obama is a classical WASP, a White Anglo-Saxon Protestant. No pathos, full self-control, and a good education. On the other hand, there is a person who speaks differently, who may turn eccentric and take some liberties.

Now, about the main change that has happened in the world the way I see it. We have made a transition from a political life centered on the economy to a political life focused on culture.

– Then it turns out that President Vladimir Putin was fifteen years ahead of the times when he dropped his casual warning “We’ll whack them in the outhouse.”

– Yes. He did not even have to act or impersonate, because Russian society was on the one hand deeply hurt after the breakup of the Soviet Union, but on the one hand it was not structured yet.

Then the Putin-led majority took shape. It was cemented around common fears and not around a joint project for the future.

But such cultural identification is no good for building a long-term policy. Putin’s legitimacy stems from the experience of the majority that lived through the turmoil of the 1990s. But the next generation has no idea of what life was like in the 1990s. How do you go about doing business and communicating with it? What can these people be offered? What can be shared with them?

Also, the great problem of pension reform has emerged now with a well familiar generation. I believe it is not so much about the money that those people have lost. They have lost the feeling of stability that constituted the basis of the social contract in Putin’s Russia. After the adoption of the pension reform, the people in the provinces, I reckon, have the same feeling that the urban residents had after the 2011 reshuffle (the decision that Vladimir Putin would be president again while Dmitry Medvedev would take over the government—Ed.). They were offended. The presidential campaign had just taken place a few months prior. Not a word was said about pension reform then. Then

the 2018 FIFA World Cup finals followed. The news of the pension reform came like a bolt from the blue.

I suspect that had this theme been discussed during the presidential campaign, the front-runner would have lost 3%-4% of the votes, but the people would have been better prepared. A new contract would have taken shape. Now a very different kind of feeling has developed: the changes being made do not matter as such. You make these changes as if we do not exist. It is an insult.

– But haven't you just said yourself that this is a fading generation? It is very unlikely that young people stop to think about their pensions today. They need something different.

– That's where the most interesting part begins. Take Russia, the United States, Britain, or the European Union. All of us have one thing in common—we all lack a vision of the future. An imaginable future is nowhere in sight. It's gone.

All the talk about the future you hear today is about technologies. But these technologies are not the future. You remain a human being and you've got to know what you want. Otherwise you'll have an unending fear of what is happening. Because you do not know whether it is good or bad for you.

We no longer dream about the future, we are afraid of it. Even in the Soviet Union there was nothing like this. Its people might have felt afraid of the present day, but still they hoped that in the future a better life was in store for them. The legitimacy of the Soviet Union relied on the certainty that the children will have a better life. These days people fear that their kids will not have a better life even if they live longer. Moreover, we can no longer imagine what kind of life they will be living in principle... For instance, in your country nobody is eager to discuss post-Putin Russia.

THEY DIED LIKE EQUALS

– And is this so not because Putin will never step down?

– He will step down one day, I think. But both those who like him and those who hate him suffer a paralysis of the imagination ... What

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is the most characteristic feature of the electorate of Europe’s populist parties? There are numerous attempts to probe into this matter. These people have far greater certainty than everybody else that life was better 50 years ago.

The surveys have highlighted another remarkable phenomenon, though. When people get a university education, this promotes tolerance in public life. This is true of ethnic and religious tolerance. But when it comes to political tolerance, it is all the other way around. More educated people are less tolerant towards those who do not share their political views. “I’ve invested a lot into the views that I have, and I feel insulted when somebody does not share them.”

All this has one more side to it. What’s been lost? The collective experience and collective space. War was the main collective experience for us all. War is disgusting, but it is impossible to imagine, for instance, the emancipation of African-Americans in the United States without World War II.

– Why do you think it’s impossible?

– Whites and blacks were dying like equals. Then it was easier to explain why they should live together like equals, too.

Today’s idea of a nation looks more like a football fan club. As if we were onlookers watching our own history unfold. It’s true that there is an emotional affiliation, but nobody expects you to risk your life. Just supporting your team is quite enough. But being a citizen is something quite different.

– Do you agree that today an individual is no longer required to display heroism or self-sacrifice?

– I do. From this standpoint what is the difference between Crimea and World War II? During the war, tens of millions lost their lives. We remember well the war generation. It was a generation of victors. They wished to be treated differently. Crimea was a gift from the country’s leadership. It was akin to Russia outplaying Spain in the last, sixteen round of the World Cup.

- **The price is different, right?**
- Yes. And it is not just Russia's problem.

WE LIVE IN A ROOM WITH MIRRORED WALLS

– But if it is true that countries are so much alike when it comes to their fears and problems, then why has Russia become the arch enemy for everyone?

– In Russia the situation was far more complex than in many other countries. Consequently, events took more radical turns. But what do we see today? I believe that many are not afraid of Russia grabbing world domination, but of their own society beginning to look different from what it used to be. You begin to look more like someone you do not like. This is where the real fear comes from... The world is being populated by twins and clones.

– On the face of it, Russia is part of the Western world, yet it is somewhat different. And now it turns out that it is not so different at all?

– Absolutely. You've always thought that "only those Russians have such problems." All of a sudden, the same problems show up on your doorstep. One cannot but ask why do we have the same problems the Russians have? Some say it's the Russians who created these problems, and others argue that the Russian government has done its utmost to make us believe in this.

What has the Russian government done in reality since the 1990s? Its policy was to deny everything. There appeared a stable inability to recognize what has been done. Today's Russia denies even the most obvious facts. The others have learned to do the same too. This is a serious problem. A Saudi journalist was killed and cut to pieces, but the Saudis claimed for ten days that there was nothing of the sort, that it was a fake.

The same kind of attitude is projected onto home policies and even extends to personal relations. It is far harder to persuade people to recognize that something has not worked, but we will keep trying. Nobody wants to listen.

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It cannot go on like this indefinitely. It turns out that each individual exists in his or her own world and does not allow reality to get into this world. Because everything is denied. People are talking about traditional values, but the main value is factual truth. Today it looks like there is no such thing as truth at all.

– Apparently, this is what will cause the world to start collapsing, as some participants in the Valdai Club’s discussion said. Comprehensive denial and negation.

– Remember the 1947 classic film *The Lady from Shanghai*. In the final scene, the main female character, played by the incomparable Rita Hayworth, points a gun at her husband; in fact, at innumerable reflections in the mirrors and says: “I’ll kill you.” But he has a gun, too, and looks ready to pull the trigger.

Today we live in a room with mirrored walls. The feeling of a common reality is gone. Each person stays in his own little world. People used to have the right to their own interpretation, but the facts were common. Now everybody has the right to his own facts. Ours is a life in a room with walls of mirrors. It is a bad life. We all live in different spaces and nobody recognizes anything or feels remorse about anything. It’s no wonder that we are scared of each other.