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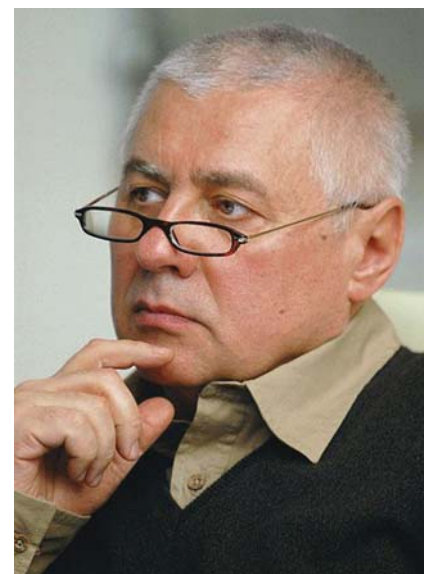
**RUSSIA — FROM ABOLISHER TO ABOLISHER?**

The Yeltsin jubilee and the ‘Russian taboo’ of Russia’s democracy

Just recently, President Dmitry Medvedev spoke about Russia as a ‘young country’, citing that it is only 20 years old. The reactive squall of angry screams has shown the president what bad memory young nations tend to have.

2011 seems to be the year of jubilees in the new Russia, which will wind up in December with the jubilee of the end of the Soviet Union. Boris Yeltsin’s jubilee is the first among the events to be commemorated. The founding president of the second Russian republic is fading into the past, but the battle of assessments about him remains polarised, just as was the case when he was still alive. The political Yeltsin is unexplainable; for some reason he forced open the situations that seemed to us politically unmanageable. Given Yeltsin’s formidable flair, why did he ‘press’ so hard? Why was Yeltsin so exuberantly argumentative and ambitious?

We should neglect the version about the fight of ‘czar Boris with the communist totalitarianism’ as was often said in relation to the super-liberal USSR under Mikhail Gorbachev. Mikhail Gorbachev was phased out by totalitari-



*Gleb Pavlovsky*

The sequence of catastrophes, the most recent of which was called ‘Boris Yeltsin, 1991’, is the eternal collapse of attempts to oust the phenomenon of Russianness from Russian history and to build a nationally anonymous state with the hands of the Russians themselves

anism, not by the person from Sverdlovsk. Even more absurd were the fawning comics with a Yeltsin-Santa, who ‘gave us freedom’: the maximum level of personal immunity that was reached in the post-Soviet society of 1980-90 has only declined since that time. But the dash of liberation at the end of the last century was also a fact. Having broken something powerful, Yeltsin freed up a colossal energy, but of what? The subject of this battle remains anonymous, and the reason for such anonymity remains a Russian question.

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# RUSSIA — FROM ABOLISHER TO ABOLISHER?

## The Yeltsin jubilee and the ‘Russian taboo’ of Russia’s democracy

Gleb Pavlovsky

*Continuing. For beginning see p. 1*

‘A multinational people’ instead of a nation. 1991 was the twentieth anniversary of the collapse of the Soviet Union. In that year, Russia was forced to pursue the path of factual self-determination, which hurt our national pride. The preamble of the Russian Constitution bears the scar from this trauma: ‘*The bearer of sovereignty and the sole source of power in the Russian Federation are its multinational people*’. Not the nation, but the ‘multinational people’, a plagiary term that was borrowed from the period of Stalinism. According to Stalin’s plan, the Russians were not to be allowed to form a civil nation. Having passed through ‘the epic past that included valiant *bogatyrs* and *narodovoltsi*’ to the leaders of the Soviet Union, Russian history as such essentially liquidated itself.

Stalin’s version of the national ‘end of history’ began to belong to the USSR and to the whole of humanity. Beginning in October 1917, the *multinational* Soviet people were building the *global communist* society in a *separate* country that consisted of *national republics*. The Russian Federation was the leading *national republic*, but it was prohibited to construe it as nationally *Russian* (just as it was prohibited to question its Russianness, as both of those shifts were viewed as *anti-Soviet*). **Russia’s society still maintains this Stalinist double taboo in relation to Russianness.** In the national democracy of today’s Russian Federation, its multinational people are apparently the source of power, and these people are neither *Russian* nor *non-Russian*. ‘**Dear people of Russia!**’ – this favourite expression of Yeltsin’s has recently been reintroduced to the country’s citizens by Putin himself. The Russian question is separated from the state in the new Russia and, as such, it is effectively removed from being framed as a question related to democracy.

**Self-segregation?** The democratic identity of the Russian Federation has



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been officially confirmed, but constitutionally it remains separate from the Russian people. When choosing people who shall represent them in government, the Russian people (80% of the country’s population) still tend to segregate themselves along the lines of the national principle. They become anonymous in order to form democratic institutions, and herds of ‘folklore-related’ individuals come out to the voting stations. Voters shape the authorities in Russian-wide federal elections, and when electing the president and the Federal Assembly. However, they do so *not as a nation*, but as part of a certain administrative-ethnic or administrative-territorial entities known as the subjects of the Federation. Having voted for their country’s government, the herds return home to their apartments and to their amateur talent groups.

The taboo on all things Russian in the new Russia is not a formal prohibition. Rather, it is a summary of specific attempts to dodge a specific civic identity. We are forced to transfer the nation to the plane of evasive euphemisms – the population or the electorate. However, the place of the authorities is separated from the place of the nation, which is submerged into the folklore chaos of ‘many nationalities’, and is still practically viewed through the prism of ‘kin-based blood relations’ behind the scenes. **The process of formation of the new author-**

**ities in the new national Russia is undetermined, in national terms, by itself.**

The issue of the *political nation* and the issue of *political power* are disjunctive. Dodging the political, not the ethnic-gear definition of the Russian nation undermines debates about the future of Russian democracy. But what kind of a future does democracy have in a country where 80 percent of its citizens fall into the category of an unacknowledged nation?

**The national language...of what nation?** The Russian language is the state language in the Russian Federation – at least that is its constitutional status. But whose language is it, and of what nation? Who generates it – is it all citizens of Russia, and do they do so on an equal footing? Everyone – Tatars, Kalmyks, Russians, Yakuts? The country does not officially have a nation that is the author and bearer of the official Russian language! Inside our political system, the structures of the Russian experience remain largely non-state ones, even where they bear the status of ‘state-level phenomena’. The Russian language, which is officially the state language, remains officially silent about its native speakers.

**‘The Russian anonymizer’.** The Russians have the right to participate in the authorities, and they use this right. However, they do it in a politically anonymous way, rather than publicly. The Russians are not detached from power and the authorities, but they are not discernible in terms of the process of its formation. Being close to power becomes the personal substitute for the possession of rights. ‘The state person’ acquires a power identity instead of a civil one. In order to be Russian fully, it is best to be an influential functionary, thus making up for the deficit of identity with your position.

We used to dwell in the pores of a totalitarian system. In contrast, right now, we live in the womb of a democratic one. We constantly visit our own state in the capacity of ‘non-Tatars’ and

‘non-Chechens’. When forming the authorities, its structures and its personnel, we actually **infiltrate separately and ‘seep into’** our positions in the authorities, leaving our ‘Russianness’ behind, relegated to our private lives. Russians are a nation of shadows, a multimillion ‘masonry’. The authorities, our national anonymizer, are transforming the Russian people into a nation without an address. However, out of all brotherhoods based on ‘kin-based blood relations’, the Russian one is today the weakest. And it is not that we are pressed by ‘outsiders’ either. The matter is that **the high Russian culture is a political Republican so to speak**. Even being unacknowledged and politically annulled, it resists the process of ethnification, with its very blood and soil. However, only a political nation can become an alternative to the ‘nation of adats’\*.

***The Russian nation – is it feasible?***

Boris Yeltsin did not like the word ‘nation’, and we heard (maybe erroneously) something relating to the general population when addressing the crowd with his ‘dear people of Russia’. Only recently have the authorities begun to use the thesis of Russia being a democratic political *nation* in their rhetoric. **(The notion of nation was officially rehabilitated by Putin in 2002).**

‘The multinational people of the Russian Federation’ is now deciphered as an allegory for *the Russian nation*. Debates on democracy in the national Russia have become more intense. However, can they become political, bypassing the democratic determination of the majority of the country’s citizens – the Russians? In debates concerning democracy, the authorities and the opposition discuss only the different versions of options for managing power and people. The Russian people, devoid of a stable legal shell, continue to lead an anonymous life inside the Russian state machine. Does the democratic development of Russia really require that the Russians, and not only them, should not have an acknowledged political determination?

***Defacement of the Republican experience.*** Russian history has a unique, intractable experience of acquiring

\* Adat can be explained as the customary law of certain Moslem peoples

independence, both in terms of the state and at the personal level. Russia’s history is the history of fighting for the freedom of the Russian and non-Russian people. It is a sequence of case experiences of both personal and political emancipation. However, today the mantras about the ‘great past’ of the non-state nation is merely *political folklore*. Debates on Russians deeds today are politically useless. Those are optional rumours about ‘the quality of Russian language training’ and about the ‘Russian Cossacks’, with snivels and complaints about the enemies. But in these histories about ourselves, we are saying that our enemies are much more interesting than we are.

**Outside of Russian history, the second Russian republic, the Russian Federation, is devoid of cultural tradition and a serious foundation.** Just like a sick conscience, our history has fallen apart into conflicting fragments – imperial, bolshevist, and post-belovezhsk. Outside of the Russian republican experience, democracy in Russia seems to be a whim on the exit from yet another ‘geopolitical catastrophe’. However, all our catastrophes are not really haphazard. Each Russian break-up of our own state can be equated with a rebellion against anonymity. The result is always the same: once the nation-shadow is tired of penetrating its own state anonymously, it calls an ‘Abolisher’, so to speak, to its aid. **The sequence of catastrophes, the most recent of which was called ‘Boris Yeltsin, 1991’, is the eternal collapse of attempts to oust the phenomenon of Russianness from Russian history and to build a nationally anonymous state with the hands of the Russians themselves.**

***Deficit of loyalty.*** So, let’s follow the whole chain. The identity is separated from constitutionality. Submerged into private life, it leads a non-public existence. This leisure identity – ethnicity plus folklore – has nothing to do with citizenship. This is *post-factum* citizenship, applied to ethnicity from the outside and not necessarily connecting an individual with yet another ‘post factum citizen’. Citizens do not relate to a national community, and their belonging to the constitutional community is formally achieved via the ‘leeway’ offered in the context of citizenship. As well, constitutional loyalty is also

rather ceremonial.

The so-called ‘folklore citizens’ tend to practice loyalty only as a reasonable caution when dealing with the authorities. **Such loyalty will never become constitutional; thus, their loyalty to the Constitution is also problematic.** Constitutional consensus largely remains a dream for Russia. Hence the paradox: the deficit of loyalty in the system is approved by the majority of the voters. For some people (in the Russian ethnocratic regions), loyalty is defined in terms of an ethnically justified solidarity. In Russian territories, it is a private affair of the inhabitants. Such loyalty is undistinguishable from conformism, and it is just as unstable. **It has nothing to do with loyalty as a value and as a citizen’s choice in favour of his state.**

The Russian political system has always been threatened by a heavy, multimillion ‘peak of disloyalty’. This scares the authorities and the entire political class. Being isolated from its national community, Russian democracy serves to create a ‘substation for generating loyalty’. While these generating capacities are created by the authorities, they are serviced by ‘post factum citizens’ (who are not completely loyal) and by functionaries (whose identity has been substituted by their nomenclature affiliation). This is basically a risky and poor foundation for building a democratic future. It is not by chance that the thuggery seen on Manezhnaya Square caught all of us off balance.

**The deficit of identity in the democratic Russia is a catastrophe that is occurring ‘in instalments’.** The thesis about the so-called ‘Russian power’ is naturally qualified as an extremist one, because there is no constitutional foundation for claims to power by the folklore-related or ‘blood relations’ camps. Russian political culture also resists that. However, no one is capable of *democratically determining the Russians’ identity*. It undermines the domain of public politics. The second Russian republic lives in eternal fear before its anticipated ‘Abolisher’. There is no doubt that, if he eventually appears, he will emerge from the darkness of Russia’s unacknowledged Russians. That’s the place where the great Boris Yeltsin – the Russian breaker and the Abolisher of the multinational USSR – originally came from. ■