

# RUSSIA: NOT RULING POWER AND SOCIETY, BUT NOBILITY AND PEOPLE

Alexander F. Filippov



ALEXANDER F. FILIPPOV – sociologist, philosopher; editor-in-chief of the ‘Sociological Observer’ journal; professor of State University – Higher School of Economics; Head of the Center for Fundamental Sociology

■ *Do you think there is a demand at present for the state and its institutions in society?*

If we are to believe sociologists then I would say the answer is more likely yes than no. It is unlikely that there are no demands at all. The institutions are there formally, yet in reality we experience a certain lack of them. I would say that it's a lack of an adjusted device.

■ *On the one hand, society needs some institutions and regulation, however, at the same time it has a certain distrust of the ruling power. So what could serve as a foundation for a new consensus? Could there be the formation of some new social contract between the ruling power and the people?*

As a matter of fact, we've never actually had a social contract at all. I do not adhere to the opinion that there are two parties with an agreement between them, one of which is called the ‘ruling power’ and the other called ‘society.’ To my mind, neither of them properly describes what's going on. We can appeal to older and more traditional categories of political philosophy, which were in use when no theories of social contract existed, such as ‘nobility’ and ‘people.’ Machiavelli wrote about nobility and people. **The nobility and people never had any contract between them, rather they always had huge problems with each other.** In the history of Rome there was a fortunate period when their struggle promoted republican freedom. But such fortunate times were never repeated later on. I think that this reasoning, which is five hundred years old, can be more fruitful in our case than many of the modern theories. Your question presupposes the idea that our people can wish for something, inform the nobility of their desires, be heard, and then make things better or even very good. However, the problems we are facing did not come about because the nobility has suddenly forgotten about the people. An interference has occurred here, a mutual superimposition in the same space and time of two devices: from the one side, we have decomposition and decay of the legacy of past life, i.e. the social-police state. From the other side, we see a return to a more primary and basic social relationship between nobility and people. This is why the problems that people were supposed to inform the nobility about are in fact the byproduct of its actions. A destruction of social and police orders should then necessarily occur, for example, in the form of dwindling social assistance, security, and general safety.

■ *What do you think can be done to solve the problems if they are actually created by the present elite? Could the path that the Arabic countries are presently following be a solution?*

Comparison with the Arabs is very tempting, they naturally come to mind; however, it should be said that we generally do not know what's going on there, we might be very superficial in our judgment, so I would abstain from drawing too many conclusions. But I can't say that in the wake of disturbances some new order is coming. It is sure to come, of course, and it will be studied then. What we see on the surface is some sort of power redistribution, a change of certain elements in its design. If, on purely theoretical grounds, we were to imagine something similar taking place in our country, I don't see how this course of events could lead to the creation of a more reliable and comprehensive order.

It seems to me that we shouldn't expect a reprisal (in the literal sense of this word) of the events we are now observing in the Arab countries. It is more likely that **our life will become harder and harder because in those areas where we would expect to find at least some remainders of order we won't find any.** From the point of view of those who are ruling the country it will look like a loss of control or an increase in the number of unexpected events. And this will become a problem. Generally speaking, all the radical changes of recent decades at first looked like a sudden loss of control. One or two events, even if they are successful, can not change the general picture. On the contrary, I would rather be apprehensive of what a few years ago I called ‘triggers of absolute events.’

Triggers, critical developments, and similar things are all quite possible. There's a lot of talk on this subject now, which means that everyone has got an idea.

■ *How do you explain such a destruction of the existing order, this decrease of order in reality? Is it due to some problems within the present elite?*

The increase of manageability, which was aimed at for a long period of time, is in itself a source of serious problems in a longer perspective. There's no doubt that in case of emergency those who have power can ensure that most of their orders are executed. But then many unpleasant things will start happening. Suffice it to mention such a famous example as a 'complexity overload.' Management experts are well aware of this. But there is another important aspect: one integral component of our social life has always been something that is not revealed but is hidden. It's not necessarily corruption as such but it's all about various silent agreements, implied rules of the game, which are presented as intelligible and evident. There are many things of this sort. We know very well that a combination of things revealed and concealed plays an important role in any society, in any country. A certain combination becomes more stable and prolonged in opportune circumstances. In adverse circumstances, when the balance is shifted due to this or that reason, the more we seek clarity and intelligibility, the more the rules that worked for the preservation of balance behind the scenes, so to say, start to work against it and lead to general degradation.

In such situations we shouldn't forget that there are many things that are out of our control and many events do occur contrary to our intentions. It is then merely a question of how effective and appropriate is our response to such occurrences. There's a great number of cataclysms that no one can be blamed for fully or partially, starting with natural dis-

asters and ending with terror attacks. Such cataclysms are very interesting, because they demonstrate how fragile this order is in all respects and how inadequate responses can be to its disruption.

It is important to see one simple tendency here. **Every disruption, any unexpected event, triggers a response that might look adequate but will in the long run eventually bring about quite serious negative consequences.** Finally, there's one circumstance that I would take into account: it's the fact that we're entering a pre-election year. Hence my next argument. It is known that when social life becomes saturated with intractable contradictions and there's tension in the air, one of the ways to restore social accord is through a *vicarious sacrifice*. The task of choosing such a sacrifice is a difficult one. Competition in power struggle always presupposes the existence of winners and losers. However, a loser is not a vicarious sacrifice or someone who is found to be guilty of all misdeeds. Let's remember Machiavelli once more. He says that he puts all his hopes in the new Prince. He says that everyone is corrupted, both the nobility and the people. However, the Prince can sometimes rely on the people but never on the nobility. The tense, demanding, spoiled people, and the greedy, intelligent and corrupted nobility and the valiant Prince (whose valor doesn't exclude his perfect villainy) enter into strained opposition with an unknown result. In such circumstances the search for vicarious sacrifice needed in order to restore peace and accord might result in a sort of manageable chaos. I am generally against conspiratorial thinking, but we should take into account this element of manageable chaos.

■ *Is this an element of social and political life that is characteristic for any country or is this propagation of manageable chaos specifically Russian?*

It is more or less employed by those who can do it and wherever it is

necessary. I wouldn't give too much importance to it or else we would come to the conclusion that all our known history was the result of someone's schemes, which is pure nonsense. However, I would find it strange if no one would have realized how much can be accomplished in this field and tried to contribute to the setting up of uncertainty and chaos.

■ *Is it possible to say that loyalism as an ideology and 'protectionism' are now in crisis?*

They are indeed. I try to avoid harsh judgments, however, as a rather conservative person, I am myself inclined to loyalism and can see how hard it is. Because, in principle, as a rule it is just like this: bad order is better than good disorder but any revolutionary would, of course, disagree with this. But let's suppose order is better than disorder and the predictability of a situation for some normal routine life is, as a rule, preferable for the majority of people. If, nevertheless, we observe the growth of dislike for this routine and distrust, then **it has to do with one thing: it's not the order which is bad, the bad thing is that we are not finding order where it should be present.** I am far from praising just any order and there is no need for me to prove that breaches in a horrible order may be more preferable than keeping the order. Generally speaking, the order can change and struggling against a bad order for the sake of a better one is a normal thing to do. And, of course, in case of conflicts, wars, coups and such things it is known in advance that nothing can be done because it's a revolution, the old order is vanishing and a new order is being born. However, if no revolution or coup is there, then a situation where we don't find the order we expect in important cases and places will be perceived very negatively. ■

*Kseniya Kolkunova  
exclusively for Yaroslavl Forum*