

ELITES NEED TO BE REINED!

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■ *What are the pillars of loyalty to the political institutions of Russia, without which the entire political system would collapse? Is it economic prosperity, ordinary conservatism, or something else?*

It is something else. First, it is a sense of co-ownership, i.e. a feeling that this is in some sense my state, my political system. Second, it is a sense of fairness, a sense that even if an individual decision may be unjust, normally, and in the medium run at least, these institutions treat everyone fairly and intelligibly. Thirdly, it is a sense of protection by the institutions and protection against violence, fraud, hardship, and poverty. Fourthly it is a sense of opportunity, a sense of being provided for by the institutions,

and being given the opportunity to live the life I would like to live.

■ *The revolutions in the Middle East have shown that the previous social contract which kept Middle-Eastern societies afloat for many years is now breached. What can serve as the foundation for the ‘new consensus’ between power and society, for the new ‘social contract’? Does this problem of consensus between power and society exist in the West?*

Pressure has been building up in the Arab world for many years now, in societies where people under 30 make up about 60% of the population, most of them urban and educated, but very many without a proper job and therefore without possibilities of marrying (the only legitimate form of coupling). Professionals were fed up with rigged elections, media censorship, and authoritarian controls of civil organizations. Ordinary businessmen, as well as the population at large, hated the corrupt and crony political capitalism. The substantial economic growth over the past decade has not done anything at all to deter political fraud, authoritarianism, and corruption, and has done very little to improve mass unemployment. A new social contract, acceptable to the people, will require honest and fair government, and governments capable of providing socio-economic protection and opportunities to the whole society. Western countries are less vulnerable because they already have free and fair elections, a state of law, and only marginal police and bureaucratic corruption. There are internal variations, however, there is more corruption and foul play, and therefore more protest, in Greece, Italy, and France for example. Unemployed youth see themselves as excluded from a social contract, and

rebel, in France and Greece in particular.

■ *Who is the new majority (class, stratum, layer), the new political subject, that the Russian government can rely on if it decides to ‘rebuild’ society if it is required? Can the middle class become such a subject?*

A regime bent on rebuilding society should reach out to the whole population, providing protection and opportunities for all classes. Otherwise it will soon be undermined again. The middle class has become politically very active in many countries, taking to the streets again, like in 19th century Western Europe. But it alone is too narrow a base upon which to form a stable social contract.

■ *Is the problem of ‘unrecognized elites’ crucial now (in the United States, Europe or the world), when a society does not recognize those who call themselves elites and enjoy elite benefits? Are Western societies really meritocratic, its elites consisting of the people whose merits everyone recognizes?*

The recent, and recurrent financial crises (1997–98, 2001–2, 2008–9), creating unemployment and impoverishment, and forcing people to leave their homes, show that the financial elites are a major problem. Their power, their influence, their recklessness, and their ruthlessness, all following from their privileged isolation, are major threats to the world. These elites need to be reined in, not appeased by some new consensus. Many of them have a fast intelligence and a mathematical competence, but they have no great merits, and usually no social and civic merits at all. ■

*Julia Netesova
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