

# THE COMFORT LEVEL THAT IMPEDES PROGRESS

Dmitry Olshansky



DMITRY OLSHANSKY – a journalist, political commentator, and the former Editor-in-chief of the ‘Russian Life’ magazine

All political subjects holding power constitute different kinds of businessmen and state officials, who are typically non-public people. They hardly use such categories as ‘progress’ or ‘reaction’ when making serious political decisions. To use these terms is a game which is played by intellectuals who are keen on ideological issues. They likely could argue with one another about questions regarding the attitude toward Russia before 1918 or before 1991. Accordingly, those claiming that some previous version was good and that the present one is not can be seen as reactionists.

We can say that 100 or 120 years ago, there were indeed people who more or less enthusiastically approached some forms of technological progress, wider access to education, and so on. There were people who resisted the processes

of democratisation and industrialisation, urbanisation, and other events of their times. There were also, for instance, people who mourned for the Russian village in the late Soviet period. They would probably be called reactionists. But this has nothing to do with modern state policy. The same goes for those people who are nostalgic about Soviet symbols or something else. **But the real policy of present-day Russia is not a matter of any ideas, connected to the images of the past, regardless of whether they are positive or negative.**

Those initiatives of the country’s leaders that can be considered as progressive are blocked, but not because somebody is resisting these initiatives. Rather, they are being blocked because they are almost unworkable within a context when the only motivation for real decision-making – not the one we hear about on the TV, but small-scale local and actual decision-making – is private profit. By private, in this case we do not mean that of private business, but that of particular individuals. It is very difficult to modernise a country if you do not build good convenient roads. However, virtually any mind would be frightened to imagine how much will be stolen during the process of its construction.

**Innovations are blocked not due to any reactionism but by what is mistakenly called ‘corruption’ – it is due to a non-functioning system.** I am also not sure that it can be modernised in any way. For many reasons, private interests did not manage to hinder the decisions taken by the authorities in the

Soviet Union, for example. In that system, there existed another kind of elite who were linked by other motivations, which, on the one hand, consisted of a certain ideological hypnotism and, on the other hand, of the fear of a rather strict state machinery. When all of that collapsed, nothing but material comfort and consumerism came to fill this vacuum – which happens to be both bad and good at the same time. A sense of comfort, coupled with consumerism, has changed people’s motivation dramatically. No longer fearing any dismissal and prison sentence, people simply became less and less motivated to do anything. People instead began to be increasingly motivated to solve their own personal problems on the basis of the bait he/she was being fed and ultimately became dependent on.

Thus, in a sense, it can be stated that a consumer society inevitably changes the perception of progress and supplants it with private interests. But, in certain places, there exist counter mechanisms of struggle. There is, for example, a strong university culture, which allows people to think not only about real estate, restaurants and the like. But unfortunately, in third-world countries, this does not seem to exist. There is no immunity, no counter-response, and everything is just decaying. I cannot see anything that could potentially overcome this situation easily and naturally, since it is really the system in general that we are speaking about here. ■

*Exclusively for the Yaroslavl Forum*