

Kafka's Castle is collapsing
Andrei Loshak, 19 March 2010

You can't reason with the absurd, as IKEA found when it tried to build a model business in Russia. Institutional corruption is out of control. Kafka's Castle is finally collapsing. This is good news, as Russians, ordinary Russians are losing their fear. Now they're just angry, says Andrei Loshak.

Absurdity reigns, OK?

The saying «We have been put on earth to make Kafka come true» has been well known since Soviet times. We have been so steeped in absurdity since childhood that we haven't even learnt to distinguish any of the rules that regulate it. We are on the other side of the looking glass but somehow manage to function, work out what moves to make and make careers for ourselves.

When Europeans first come to Russia they apply their boring rationalism to the situation, attempting to discover in it the logic to which they are accustomed. I remember English people from MAPS (Moscow Architecture Preservation Society), itself a kind of absurdity, talking about an 18th century mansion that was being knocked down in order to put up a pseudo-baroque restaurant «Turandot» in its place. They kept on exclaiming «It's absurd! Absurd!» Most of them eventually get used to things here and some even start obeying the rules of through the looking glass etiquette, where pies are handed out first and then cut up.

In this context events at the Russian branch of «IKEA» are revealing.

From the start the company announced that even in Russia it would be adhering to its clearly-formulated Swedish rules, based on the Protestant work ethic and unanswerable logic. As a result, Khimki officials turned off the electricity just before the first Moscow shop opened. There was no practical reason for this. They just wanted to «give them a hard time» for their excessively strict principles. By the time they opened in Petersburg, the Swedes already knew that they had to have their own generator in each of their Russian stores – just in case.

A wise decision, as subsequently emerged. From that moment the Swedes did all they could to minimise their dependence on local authority whims, when building their stores in Russia. «We are pleased with our solution to the problem. Better hire a generator than stick our head into a noose,» said Krister Tordson, a company board member.

The victorious Swedish advance came to grief in Samara. You could say it was another Poltava [1709 defeat of Swedes by Peter the Great ed.].

Their store there was built three years ago, but its opening was postponed nine times. The company has opened 230 stores all over the world, but was unable to overcome the implacable cupidity of the Samara officials. Their last complaint was that the building was insufficiently hurricane-proofed. The Swedes were unable to obtain any information about destructive tornados wreaking havoc on the left bank of the Volga and took umbrage. IKEA's legendary founder Ingvar Kamprad announced that investment in

Russia would be scaled down. But local officials were unlikely to be fazed by such trifles. Their actions are, after all, not dictated by narrow personal interest. They are supporting the normal functioning of an irrational system.

A further blow was in store for Ingvar Kamprad (5th in Forbes Magazine Rich List) a couple of months later. It emerged that the company had overpaid 200 million USD for the use of their generators – IKEA's prize-winning idea – which virtually wiped out the profit from all their Eastern European stores for the last few years. The Swedes had seen themselves as Sir Lancelots cutting the head off the dragon of corruption. What they forgot was that through the looking glass the rules dictate that another head immediately grows in its place. Forensic investigation revealed that the Russian employee responsible for the hire of the generators was receiving kickbacks from the leasing company, so had been considerably inflating the service costs. The company tore up the contract with that firm and was fined 5 million euros by a Russian court for breach of contract. «We had come up against something way outside what we usually encounter,» said a puzzled Krister Tordson.

But this was not the final blow to the convictions of 83 year-old Kamprad. A couple of weeks ago the Swedish tabloids revealed that the company director for Russia and Eastern Europe Per Kaufman, who was well known for his public criticism of Russian corruption, had been turning a blind eye to his contractors bribing local officials. When Kamprad was told about this he was devastated. Eyewitnesses said he was crying like a child. Kamprad remained true to his principles, of course, and ordered that Kaufman, who had been his very close assistant for 20 years, should be sacked forthwith. Essentially this granite-hard old man was signing his own defeat. Probably for the first time in his life. The Swedes had repeated the mistake of the surveyor K in Kafka's «The Castle», who tried to use the powers of reason to overcome the absurd. A fruitless attempt. Reason has limited possibilities, whereas the absurd knows no limits. I made the same mistake and was overly optimistic last summer when I wrote in a column dedicated to the 300th anniversary of the Battle of Poltava that IKEA had triumphed. The victor was actually Kafka.

The operating system

Corruption is irrational: its very existence is fatal for a state. This makes it an ideal accompaniment to the realm of the absurd, its operating system. You don't have to understand how it works, but it has a very convenient function which any idiot can grasp. Press the button and you get a result. Survival in such a state depends on not looking for sense. If you do, then any acquaintance with the news bulletins in the Russian internet soon turns into a psychedelic bad trip. You experience a veritable avalanche of negative emotions: fear, horror, shock, outrage but, try as you will, you cannot find a cause-effect link:

«Managers at the State Bank VTB have run a scam which has robbed the country and the shareholders of hundreds of millions of dollars. One person has been dismissed.»

«Telman Ismailov, the disgraced 'king of pirated goods' has returned to Russia. He 'got in' via President Kadyrov of Chechnya. A new 'Cherkizon' [Cherkizovsky market, site of a recent scandal ed.] is already under construction on the outskirts of Moscow».

«In the absence of a legally defined crime General Vladimir Shamanov, commander of the elite Russian Airborne Troops (VDV), will not be prosecuted. The general attempted to interfere with the work of the officer investigating the case against his son in law, a criminal boss with the nickname Boulder who is on the international wanted list. The general brought in two detachments of his VDV special purpose forces to deal with the police officer. The case has been closed, as Shamanov explained, because he himself subsequently cancelled the order for the arrest of the investigating officer.»

There are thousands of such reports. It could be that they are all edited by one person – some aged writer from the „Oberiuty”, Russian Absurdist school of the 1920s. The trance-like feeling engendered by the streams of such information is reinforced by the Orwellian oxymorons in the speeches of the higher echelons: «conservative modernisation», «sovereign democracy», «Parliament is not the place for discussions». These oxymorons regularly force their way into our consciousness, increasing the feeling of disorientation and existential weightlessness enabling one to accept without question the most fantastic and contradictory information from on high. Which is why no one is surprised to hear that «United Russia» received 102% of the votes? How can anyone be surprised when the title of chief liberal democrat has been held for the last 20 years by Vladimir Zhirinovskiy [leader of the Lib Dem Party of Russia ed.]? Another typical absurdist politician is the environmentalist Oleg Mitvol whose activities are a succession of paradoxes in the spirit of Lewis Carroll. The most sinister oxymoron of all is the term «law enforcement agencies». They are organised crime.

«This could be a Kafka story» is how the American businessman William (Bill) Browder begins his video message on YouTube. Some years ago 3 investigating officers from the Central Directorate of Internal Affairs embezzled 200 million USD from the State Budget. They were assisted in this by several firms which had been illegally «seized» from the American, who was then denied entry into Russia. He hired the lawyer Sergei Magnitsky to state the case for fraud in the courts. «New Times» recounts how another pair of investigating officers used a bribe of 6 million USD to get Magnitsky put in prison. He was held there illegally for a year and died in agony in solitary confinement. There was an international outcry. Prison bosses were sacked. Browder, who is well known in the West, said on the BBC World programme Hard Talk: «I don't recommend anyone to invest in Russia» and many people with money probably heeded his words. The two investigating officers who arrested Magnitsky are still working for the good of their country. The journalist Olga Romanova told «New Times» that it was these same two who had been «contracted» to institute proceedings against her husband Alexei Kozlov. The client had, according to Romanova, spent 8 million dollars on it. One of the officers, a woman, personally demanded 1500 (USD naturally) from the journalist to ensure that her husband was not put away. He was sent down for 8 years,

actually on the very day that the President called for a halt to the «terrorising» of businesses.

The man behind the contract should also be mentioned, though indirectly: he's a senator, whose name is better not said aloud. People who have done this too often are now six foot under or behind bars. But, to return to the officers who stole 200 million USD from the budget i.e.

from you and me and are assumed to have been the paymasters in the Magnitsky case. They are big time tough guys, Russian style – it's not for nothing that these men, like Russian folk heroes, come in threes.

The magazine «Ogonyok» reminded us that four years ago all three (one for all and all for one) were named in an extortion case. The sum was 20 million dollars, a businessman was kidnapped and his wife and children threatened. A classic of the genre. The businessman was freed in a special operation. He said that the criminal guarding him described his bosses as «the scourge of the Presidential Administration with the right to accept bribes of any size». The case was soon hushed up and the liberated businessman was sent to prison, indirectly confirming the truth of the guard's words. Last week «Vedomosti» published the news that this inseparable threesome had been promoted to the central management structure of the Ministry of the Interior. I shouldn't be at all surprised if they were awarded something like the «Scourges of Russia» there.

It's no longer just «absurd», but more like a really tough Dostoevsky trip. However, strange as it may seem, it's the limits of moral degeneration in the police that could save this country (not so sure about the state). At some point the absurd (something contradicting common sense) reaches a critical point and becomes arrant nonsense i.e. madness.

The state versus the people

The slaughter carried out by Major Denis Yevsyukov was one such turning point. Shooting harmless shoppers in a supermarket is not just a contradiction of common sense, but a complete abnegation of it. It was 100% schizophrenia, which is why it seemed so particularly horrific. As if in response to the command «Fire!», the passive stage of degeneration has moved to the active and a real war has been unleashed on the Russian people. Now we hear every day that people in uniform have killed someone, robbed them, run them down in a car or raped them. For me personally the apotheosis was the statement from a court: «There followed the interrogation of Roman Potemkin, former CID officer of the Local Police Dept, who took part in the arrest of Denis Yevsyukov. The witness was brought to the court in handcuffs, as he himself has been under investigation for extortion since October.» This is effectively the collapse of the law enforcement system.

As often happens, the individual madness of one man, Yevsyukov, contains the iron logic of a social process. The system should have gone ballistic. The uniformed services in a healthy state, as Lenin wrote all that time ago, are machines of oppression unquestioningly carrying out orders from above. As machines don't (and shouldn't) have

a brain and the commands don't come in every day, their daily life is strictly regulated by instructions and rules. In any country these resemble the human robot technology rules of Isaac Asimov: «Law 1: a robot cannot harm a person or through his inaction permit harm to be caused to a person. Law 2: a robot must obey all orders from its master, except in cases when these orders contravene Law 1». The machine starts breaking down when the master's orders go dramatically against the laws of robot technology. There's a short blip, after which more than two million malfunctioning robocops embark on a reign of terror against the population of the country. Those very few who saw «Space Odyssey 2001» to the end will remember how sadly this duality ended for the commander of HAL-9000. The machine started killing people and had to be destroyed.

It's strange, but did the ruling elite really think the law could be broken selectively? That while some representatives of the state are breaking things up, corporate raiding, racketeering and wrecking, others (like complete idiots) will be honestly fulfilling their part of the social contract? Falsehood gone mad has infiltrated the machine of state from top to bottom, poisoning the minds of the junior and middle ranks. Our police today is a huge army of bad lieutenants, capable at any moment of turning into mad majors.

Incidentally, Yevgeni Chichvarin's [founder of the largest Russian mobile phone retailer Yevroset ed.] blog carried a very convincing account of how Major Yevsyukov finally went completely mad. On the eve of the massacre the local police department «Tsaritsyno», of which Yevsyukov was in charge, was literally besieged by investigating officers from the «K» Directorate. That would be the same people that once confiscated a huge delivery of mobile phones and then tried to sell them on illegally. They got caught and now it was pay-back time. These officers arrived at the police department to collect compromising documents relating to the case of Andrei Vlaskin, a Yevroset employee. They tried to force members of the local police department to confess that the Vlaskin case, which they were running, had been ordered by Chichvarin. Yevsyukov was put under pressure. Then, on that unfortunate evening there was a ring at the door. The major went green and started staring into space. Then he talked to his flowers, put on his coat, took his pistol and left. A short blip. We all know what followed.

The people versus the state

When the absurd transmogrified into the lunatic, the system activated the command to self-destruct. The Castle, impregnable from outside, starts collapsing from inside. Two eagle heads tear into each other, only feathers fly. But, strangely enough, the stronger the entropy in the state, the faster everything disintegrates and the easier it becomes to breathe. As if there's more air. I think that society has lost its fear: the people perceive the government's inability to keep control of itself as a sign of weakness. Such a state cannot have enough strength for repression. The animal nips of the enraged system have woken people from their hypnosis. Fear and apathy have been replaced by rage.

The 19th century anarchist Mikhail Bakunin wrote: «There is nothing more dangerous for personal morality than the habit of giving orders». When power degenerates one wants to be above it and to oppose cynicism with dignity, moral degeneration with composure and humanity. The libertarian philosopher Murray Bookchin called this the «organic renewal of society». The beginnings of the process are already in evidence. Before people only went to demonstrations when the bulldozer was getting near their house. Now it's almost become quite fashionable to express one's protest and people have started intervening on each other's behalf. Two weeks ago a drunken policeman in a Merc knocked down a woman at a bus stop. Just one of the regular brainstorms among the uniformed services who have taken leave of their senses. How did these representatives of authority behave? The policeman at the wheel couldn't say a word and the uniformed man sitting next to him jumped out of the car and ran away.

Then colleagues from the Basmanny district police station were called in. They and the traffic police tried to hush the whole matter up. How did people behave? Three senior bank managers, who had by chance witnessed the accident, gave the woman first aid and summoned an ambulance. When they noticed the police taking the number plates off their car, they rang the press. It was only because of the fuss made by the journalists that the Prosecutor's Office knew anything about the accident. A major row developed. Heads rolled again, as if new ones won't grow again just like the old ones. It was a small victory over the system.

Now the internet is full of cross-postings about a car accident in Lenin Prospect. People are looking for witnesses so as to prove that the oil magnates are in cahoots with the traffic police, trying to offload the blame on to the victims of the horrific accident. The very next day the rapper Noize MC wrote an angry composition «Mercedes S666» in support of the protest. And it worked: witnesses came forward. Just like last May when the computer programmer Alexei Shumm went on LiveJournal to find witnesses to his wife's death. She too was knocked down – on a pedestrian crossing by a police sergeant in a Subaru. She was six months pregnant. It was a hit and run. The police never stop. About a month ago a drunken police investigator knocked down and killed a woman on a zebra crossing. He tried to run away. The other day he was given a suspended (!!!) sentence. State madness can only be opposed when the critical faculties of its citizens have been awakened. Then, like Macmurphy in *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*, one can say with a clear conscience «Well, I tried.»

That a people gets the government it deserves is an odious lie. At times of great difficulty simple people, who are not damaged by the «habit of giving orders» don't react in a dog eats dog way, they extend a helping hand. The further a person is away from power, the better he is. I have seen this for myself in far away Ural villages built by lumberjacks before the Revolution. These villages' link with civilisation was the only one-track railway in the country. Five years ago the authorities decided to tear down the villages and pull up the one-track railway.

People who had been born and grown up in the forests were offered a flat in a high-rise block on the outskirts of the regional centre. First the trains stopped going there, so food and pensions were not able to get through. There were people in the villages who hadn't seen money for several years. They baked their bread, fed their cattle, shot game in the

hunting season and wanted only one thing: for the state to leave them in peace. When their electricity was turned off, they used locally improvised materials to build their own hydroelectric station on the river. I have travelled a fair amount around these villages. As a rule the spectacle of total degradation is depressing, but the people who lived in these autonomous forest villages were completely different. The men were strong – their children had grown up and they were determined to die in the place where they were born. In spite of the hard living conditions, their wives had somehow managed to remain neat and womanly.

Doors were not locked here, as there had been no thieving in these forests for many years. People moved from one village to another in railcars, a cross between «Minsk» motorcycles and wagons, on a narrow gauge railway, a construction that was as exotic as it was dangerous. I was told confidentially that one of the men was on probation. Representatives of the regional administration had come to take up the railway and he had fired a warning shot and then one at their feet. When we were getting ready to leave, this man said, as he stroked his double-barrelled shotgun, «Just let them try to poke their noses in here. We're hunters. We all have guns. And licences for them. We'll chase them into the taiga, like rabbits.» These people were full of dignity. You don't often see people like that in the cities.

Once the «repression machine» no longer inspires fear, the age old antipathy between the Russian and his government resurfaces. The philosopher Nikolai Berdyaev wrote that «Russia is the least governable country in the world. Anarchy is a manifestation of the Russian spirit and has been an essential part of the make up of our extremists, both left- and right-wing. The Slavophiles and Dostoevsky are essentially anarchists like Bakunin, Kropotkin or Tolstoy». History has proved that all imperialists and supporters of Russian autocracy are the enemies of simple people. We have interests which are diametrically opposed: «the state becomes stronger, the people grow feeble». It was Vasily Klyuchevsky who established this reverse dependency and nothing has changed since then. The group Lumen, which is extremely popular among teenagers, sings «I love my country so much, but I hate the state.» «Times a hundred», as lovers of this song would say. And you can't express it better than that.

What is most interesting is that people working in the public sector are also anti-state in their hearts. If you talk to any policeman or civil servant off the record, you will find levels of resentment, disillusionment and Jacobinism that the classical anarchists could only have dreamed of. The ruling elite, the masters of life, also think about the prosperity of the state, but it's not a high priority for them, as they hide behind patriotic rhetoric for the sake of carrying out the daily ritual of the absurd. When the time is right, they will scarp to their Antibes or Marbella. Apparently the prime minister's daughters live in Germany or Switzerland – wherever they are, they're certainly not in Russia. He is not, after all, the enemy of his own children.

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