

# Nobody Wants to Live in the Mean New Russia

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Many people who were either born in Russia or have lived here for many years are feeling that it is now time to leave. And often their reasons have nothing to do with politics: They couldn't care less whether this is President Vladimir Putin's first or fiftieth term in office or who controls Crimea.

They want to leave Russia because the social microclimate — the people whom they meet every day at work, at home and on the street — is changing for the worse. They see that people are becoming angrier, meaner and even dangerous.

However, that aggression did not appear out of nowhere. The authorities violated numerous social taboos over the past year, and the list continues to grow. Thus, what began as political and propaganda manipulations intended to help the ruling regime maintain its grip on power could one day grow out of control.

That might work as a short-term tactic, but not as a long-term strategy. Apparently

the authorities have not considered what type of population they will end up ruling once this degenerative process reaches its logical conclusion.

As an example of this trend, an ethnic conflict recently occurred in the high-rise apartment building where I live on the outskirts of Moscow. A Chechen family moved into one of the apartments in our building this winter.

Everything was fine — until a gang of skinheads began harassing one of their young women. The troublemakers were not from our neighborhood, because nobody remembered seeing any signs of neo-Nazi activity there since the apartments were built in the 1970s — although the occasional skinhead had been spotted in the area.

As a rule, Chechens do not leave any act of aggression unanswered — especially when it is directed against their women. And they do not go running to the police: they call other Chechens to their aid.

It turned out that a young skinhead woman led the gang in question. As a result, a young female neighbor and friend of ours — who, of course, has no connection to neo-Nazi skinheads — found herself surrounded by a dozen burly and bearded Chechens who began questioning her as she approached our building on her way home one evening.

The young woman phoned her mother, a woman who had grown up in tough Soviet times and was not afraid to run outside, confront the men and bravely rescue her daughter.

The entire scene played out under the streetlights as several dozen neighbors in the three nearby apartment buildings looked on, glued to their windows. Not one of them came out to help or called the police. Luckily, nobody was hurt, but there is no guarantee things would have ended so well if it had been skinheads stopping a young Chechen woman instead.

After calming down, my neighbor decided to find the apartment where the Chechens live and explain that, first, we all want to be rid of the Nazi scum disgracing our neighborhood, and second, none of us has anything to do with the skinheads, so let's work together and stop harassing each other under the streetlights, scaring young people and their parents half to death.

She made the rounds of the entire 14 floors of our building to find that Chechen family. Although she and other neighbors had seen members of that family in the elevator or holding the downstairs door open for mothers with strollers, not a single neighbor confessed to knowing anything about a Chechen family living there.

She returned home more upset than she had been after rescuing her daughter. Why? Because she was convinced that fear had prompted many to keep their doors closed to her, and that fear had stopped even those who did open their doors from speaking freely.

It turns out that two borders have changed this year — the line between Russia and Ukraine, and the line between those who aren't allowed to violate the law in Russia and those who are.

For example, if senior government officials believe that, even as Russia ostensibly wages a war against fascism in Ukraine, they can convene a forum of European neo-Nazis in St. Petersburg — a city that suffered enormous casualties during the war against Nazi

Germany — what can you expect from a 15-year-old skinhead girl and her pubescent admirers toting beer cans and brass knuckles?

The country's leaders essentially tell them: "Go ahead, harass whomever you want." And they are just punks living on the fringes of society. These punks could never have dreamed that leaders would one day hail them as the salt of the earth and the pillars of Russia's renewed empire.

They are like some menacing paste that the force of official propaganda has squeezed out of a tube and sent oozing into our streets, yards and buildings. And even the trouble they have already caused is enough to show that they will not be squeezed back into the tube, and that clearing them away will be no easy task.

They are all just tools that Russia's leaders use to achieve their ends. They have the example before their eyes of Ukraine, where a little more than one year ago ultra right-wing protesters were throwing gasoline canisters into the fire with which they burned down the regime of former Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich.

The Russian authorities held the forum in St. Petersburg not so much to receive some mythical minority stake in the parliaments of Europe — in which ultra right-wing groups are gradually gaining a foothold — as they did to show the potential nationalist opposition in Russia, and to perhaps even form a global ultra-right movement that supports Putin.

Even in this year, that marks the 70th anniversary of the Allied victory over fascism, the Russian authorities couldn't care less about such semantic inconsistencies.

I care. The main achievement of that distant war is that millions of people gave their lives to draw the line beyond which we cannot pass without ceasing to be human beings. And yet, Kremlin spin doctors fail to see that their obsession with World War II and their torrent of anti-fascist propaganda is gradually degenerating into a modern-day version of Nazi slogans.

After everything I have said here, it is difficult to write these words, but I do consider myself a Russian nationalist. However, my nationalism is deeply rooted in the concept of "national interest." And I am convinced that it is in Russia's true national interest for as many people as possible to act humanely toward one another.

Then it will not matter how many Chechens or how many Russians live in our building, and no one will be afraid to open the door to their neighbor. Then the country will open itself up to the great big world and to the future, and not close itself off and hide in the past.

And any punk or criminal, of any race or social standing — right up to the most senior executives or government officials — will be held accountable for their actions, and when arresting them, the police will never fail to read them their rights.

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