



Histories of hope in the first person

Personal reflections on transition in the EBRD region



About this book and its editor

Andrey Kurkov is himself a child of the transition process: he was born in Leningrad, USSR, published his first novel two weeks before the end of the Soviet Union, and lives in Kiev, the capital city of an independent Ukraine.

He is the author of a number of successful novels including *Death and the Penguin*, *The President's Last Love*, and *A Matter of Life and Death*. His work has been published around the world and translated into 32 languages, including English, French, German, Chinese and Japanese. In addition to 14 novels and numerous screenplays, he has written seven children's books, *The Adventures of Baby Vacuum Cleaner Goshka* among them. He was named on the selection committee for the 2009 Man Booker International Prize, a biennial award for achievement in fiction.

The EBRD commissioned Mr Kurkov to compile and edit this collection of personal reflections on the transition process across the EBRD's region of operations. Through the voices and emotions of 15 prominent writers and essayists, it brings together a diverse range of views on the social and economic changes that have affected their countries since the end of communism in eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union.

On the occasion of the 2008 Annual Meeting of the EBRD in Kiev, the Bank is proud to publish this volume, which gives a sense of the colossal historic changes which have occurred across our region of operations. The views expressed are, of course, those of the authors – and not of the EBRD or its shareholders.

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Foreword

The Chinese have a saying: “God forbid that we should live in times of change!” I have never been to China but – saying or no saying – it seems to me that this huge country is changing at mind-boggling speed. And so has the region where I live.

Changing, dreaming, hoping – these are intrinsic to the human character. People have always dreamed and hoped for better times. And they have always compared the existing reality with their expectations. Sometimes they were glad at what they found, more often they were disappointed. Because moving beyond any new reality is also part and parcel of people’s dreams and expectations. “Moving beyond” means incremental but important social or political improvements may appear paltry or insignificant. Yet each society has its own dynamic, its own developmental logic. With reforms and the choice of a new direction, each society uses its own history, traditions and social foundations, no matter when and how well they were laid, as a kind of platform from which to move onward.

The personal opinions and experiences of the 15 authors whose essays are collected in this volume show the high degree of passion with which they follow events in their own countries. The authors aim to give greater immediacy to the new reality which, sooner or later, must arise in the countries which are now in the midst of social and political transition.

There is no science dedicated to the study of human dreams and expectations. Science recognises only facts. Nonetheless, few people realise that at the base of almost any historical fact lies someone’s dream – a dream which has come true.

Andrey Kurkov

Armenia

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Armenia at the beginning of the 21st century

Let's start with a few historical facts which we Armenians have always found astonishing. Fact one: the Mkhitar Gosh Armenian Code of Laws was compiled in 1184 (incidentally, that is the Code of Laws which the Armenian community in Lvov used as a guide for internal affairs). Fact two: in 1773 in far-away Madras, India, Shaamir Shaamiryan published a book called Western Vanity, the second part of which contained a comprehensive draft Armenian Constitution. Fact three: in 1863, the Ottoman Empire officially approved the "Armenian National Constitution", a document intended to regulate the Armenian community's internal relations.

Why do these facts astonish? What unites them? Concepts such as a Code of Laws and a Constitution are terms describing legal documents. Documents like these are usually produced by states and state authorities. Yet at that time there was no Armenian state! The documents were created simply because prominent Armenian thinkers had a goal: to restore statehood and to help Armenia quickly establish itself.

Let's return to the 20th century. The start of the Karabakh Movement in Armenia in February 1988 was marked by a powerful yearning for democracy and a drive to restore independence. Even before Armenia's independence in 1991 profound socio-political reform had begun. The leaders of the Karabakh Movement (the "Karabakh Committee"), supported by many thousands of demonstrators, managed to introduce key changes into the Election Law. As a result, the Communist Party of Armenia lost its monopoly on nominating parliamentary candidates as early as mid-1989. This enabled the democrats and members of the unaffiliated intelligentsia to take part in elections.

This was the start of the development of a multi-party system. It was legally underpinned in 1990 following the election of the new Supreme Soviet (or Parliament), where democrats were in the majority. That was when systemic change really began. Laws were adopted dealing with freedom of

the press, political parties, non-governmental organisation (NGO) activities, land and housing privatisation, and many other issues. The Armenian Supreme Soviet began to prepare and draft the Armenian Constitution, which was adopted in July 1995.

It looked like independence and sovereignty was no longer a dream and was now a reality. But life was much more complicated. We didn't know yet how to use our independence – we didn't know what it really was. Since 1992 Armenia had experienced serious, long-lasting difficulties. No light or heat, no water or basic foodstuffs – those were our memories of the first years of independence. Emigration from Armenia reached epic proportions. It was truly a testing time for the Armenian people.

Armenia's new leaders didn't yet have much management experience and former party appointees, still clinging on to power here and there, frequently boycotted the reforms. These problems were compounded by external forces – the breakdown of economic and commercial links within the post-Soviet region, virtually resulting in the shut-down of Armenian industry, and the collapse of the monetary system. Just how difficult the situation was becomes clear when we recall the disastrous Spitak earthquake of December 1988 and the blockade imposed on Armenia by Turkey and Azerbaijan because of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

Unfortunately, the people who came to power in Armenia after 1998 made a bad situation even worse. There was lobbying in the interests of oligarchs and flourishing protectionism, with high-ranking officials becoming involved in business. Armenian society became even more polarised.

What on earth can we do in a situation like this? We need to construct a normal, functioning state. But what is a normal, functioning state? Is it a state with many tanks and a vertical, “top-down” command structure? This question is of special importance to the countries of the South Caucasus.

Conflicts in Nagorno Karabakh, Abkhazia and South Ossetia remain and these places are rapidly militarising. Just look at the military budgets of Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia, which have ballooned in the past three years.

The number of army tanks does not determine the quality of a state. And the will of a strong leader with a top-down command structure is not decisive. We need to pay attention to the “horizontal”, to the individual and to the human factor. But if we follow this logic, we arrive at a paradox: the less the state interferes in people’s lives, the freer people are. The result? The state is strengthened and free individuals turn out to be capable of creating things – for their own interest and for the sake of society. This could well be a solution to the Karabakh problem, since politicians have reached a deadlock and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) has not proved a successful forum for finding a solution. Perhaps Armenia’s leaders could try to approach this problem from the point of view of the country’s ordinary citizens rather than from that of the “supreme national interest”? Could we do better by trying to implant a sense of tolerance in our society and instilling respect for the principle of neighbourliness – concepts which are well respected and actively implemented in Europe – instead of counting and recounting the number of tanks, fighter aircraft and heavy weapons in our army?

Azerbaijan

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Azerbaijan's independence – from illusion to reality

It was March 1991. The country was preparing for an extraordinary referendum to decide whether to stay in the Soviet Union or not. The issue was debated everywhere. Those inspired by the patriotic movement and dissatisfied with the Kremlin's policy on the Karabakh conflict wanted freedom. But there were others who didn't believe in a future independence.

"What will we do with our sovereignty?" asked Namik muallim,¹ a grey-haired, limping teacher at a small workers' school in the southern city of Lenkoran.² In fact Namik muallim was an engineer by profession and had spent all his life working as a foreman on local building sites. His income was modest and he had to augment it by teaching chess in the local school. At the time chess was at the peak of its popularity, thanks to the recent victories of Gary Kasparov, a native of Baku.

The young chess players, hot-blooded boys with romantic ideas of independence, were ready to tear the poor teacher to bits. Having forgotten all the niceties of the Eastern respect for your elders, they argued with him for all they were worth. "We need to be free of the Russians. We will manage our resources ourselves – our oil, gas and cotton."

"You won't survive for even a day without Moscow's help. You have no grain, no building materials and no machinery," Namik muallim persisted.

"We will sell the oil and buy the grain," answered Anar, a tall, skinny boy, and immediately afterwards he made a point which demonstrated the superficiality of the newly-minted patriots' thoughts. He said: "If there is no grain and no bread, we will eat more bozbash³ and will have eaten our fill". Namik muallim was not convinced.

There was another, not insignificant factor in all these discussions – the steadily escalating Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Some people hoped that the presence of Soviet troops in the conflict zone would prevent Armenia and Azerbaijan from engaging in full-scale war. Others thought that it was

¹ A term of respect.

² Where, incidentally, a few months later we would see the first forcible replacement of a communist government in the USSR.

³ An Azerbaijan national dish similar to meat soup.

the Soviet troops who were the reason why the confrontation had remained unresolved for so long and felt certain that as soon as they left the zone, Azerbaijan would deal with the Armenian army.

In the end, Azerbaijan voted for the preservation of the USSR. People were apparently still hoping for a just solution of the Karabakh problem, and that it would be resolved from Moscow. Having spent 80 years under the cosy wing of Russia, they probably feared being left face to face with the big wide world. There was even some talk of the referendum having been rigged.

However, the USSR wasn't fated to go on for long and it collapsed by the end of the year. Azerbaijan became independent for the second time in its history. Local economists tried to convince us that we would soon be rich. They argued that Azerbaijan had sufficient mineral wealth to pave all its streets with gold. "We will be the second Kuwait," they said.

But real life proved to be quite different. The collapse of the Soviet empire brought in its wake political chaos, economic problems, war and the breakdown of all commercial links with our former brothers from the USSR. There were bread queues everywhere and inflation devoured people's remaining savings. Over two million people left the country in search of work. It seemed that Namik muallim had been right.

Continued disappointment awaited ordinary people in areas other than the economy, too. Democratic values and even the West, in which ordinary Azeris had placed their hopes, failed to live up to expectations. Those disenchanted with communism and the autocracy of Soviet power naively imagined that the West was governed by the principles of justice and morality. They also thought that the West was economic paradise on earth.

Imagine their astonishment when the United States, the cradle and model of so-called democracy, became the first to inflict a blow on the independent

and barely surviving country. In 1992 the US Congress, under pressure from a powerful and wealthy Armenian lobby, passed the 907th Amendment to the Freedom Support Act. This Act, while it offered millions of dollars of aid to former Soviet republics, granted none at all to Azerbaijan. “How could this be?” wondered the puzzled Azeris. “We are under occupation. Some of our land has been captured. Our country is being flooded by refugees,⁴ and they are punishing us? Is this justice?”

In time, people came to understand that the world was not, after all, governed by the principles of justice but by the laws of survival and the constant struggle for the best piece of the cake. And soon afterwards, both the Congressmen who had voted for the 907th Amendment and representatives of American oil companies flooded into Baku searching for lucrative contracts – all of them were interested in their own profit and their own advantage, and not in the prosperity of the Azeris or the ideals of justice.

It seems that the Azeris gradually began to understand that independence wouldn't be as easy as it had seemed and they could rely only on their own strength. But their own strength wasn't quite enough and for a long time the country remained on the brink of collapse. Indeed, the country might have gone over the edge if it were not for one man who assumed responsibility for the fate of independent Azerbaijan. He succeeded in bringing stability to the country, in attracting investment into the oil sector in the face of continuous pressure and sabotage from Moscow, and in strengthening the country's sovereignty. That man was Heidar Aliiev, an experienced politician and one of the former leaders of the Soviet Union. It was said that he had been only a step away from becoming the General Secretary of the old Soviet communist empire. Aliiev's life history is rich and sometimes contradictory but the historical and decisive role he played in his country's development must not be diminished.

⁴ By the autumn of 1993, the number of refugees and forced resettlers had reached almost a million.



I remember in the summer of 1993, when the civil war had started and the people had put their hopes in the disgraced but highly charismatic politician, a woman in the market shouted, “People, all will be well! Heidar Aliev is back! We will live like pigs in clover!” It was sincerely meant, with no tinge of propaganda. It was exactly what the people were hoping for.

Needless to say, we never got to live “in clover”, but the foundations of a long and steady road to economic success and regeneration were truly laid.

What can we say about the realities of today’s Azerbaijan? We have many poor and unemployed but companies are crying out for trained personnel. People complain about the low standard of living, with the minimum pension at US\$ 40 a month, but it costs between US\$ 6 and US\$ 10 to have your car washed. Azerbaijan has the fastest growing economy in the world (its GDP grew by 35 per cent in 2007) but it is gradually becoming a land of contrasts.

Many parents and people from the older generation have found themselves isolated. Their children are earning much more than they are. You need only know English and be computer-literate and a good job is guaranteed.

Family relationships have been transformed. Traditional family bonds and ancestral hierarchies have broken down, possibly because the young have more chances of achieving success in life than their parents and grandparents who lived under Soviet power.

Many young Azeris have managed to travel the world by now. Borders are open and they can afford it. It has even become a political and economic necessity. Recently the president signed into law a new programme under which more than 5,000 young people will be trained abroad in the coming 10 years. Even so, many are not waiting for government programmes and are seeking their own ways of seeing the West and getting a European education. A third-year student from Baku, Bakhriz Babaev, dreamed his whole life of

studying in Europe. He applied to every imaginable exchange programme and finally managed to get to France. He is now continuing his studies there.

But there is also another Azerbaijan and there are other young people. They gravitate towards Islam, are angered by today's fashions and worry about the loss of moral values. They are disillusioned and angry but most importantly they are marginalised, and they too want to change things. They try to impose a different way of life on others. They distribute discs and publications with religious content. Mosques are fuller than before; there is a growing threat of radicalism and polarisation of society.

Mamed was a successful third-year economics student but is now more interested in religion than in science. He is more attracted by the spiritual than the temporal world. And there are thousands of young people just like Mamed.

What next? The government has its own idea of the country's future. The president has said that he wants to use the money from oil to create a favourable social environment, with no poverty and with equal work and study opportunities for all young people.

But will Bakhriz and Mamed be able to live side by side in the same country 10 years from now? Will they both feel they are being offered equal warmth and comfort by their homeland?

It is now 2008, and over US\$ 200 billion of projected oil revenues have enabled Azerbaijan to apply for the 2016 Olympics. Sixteen years after achieving its independence, Azerbaijan is living in another era, with new realities and with new ambitions and plans.

Belarus

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The struggle for freedom

For people of my generation, who were secondary school and university students in the early 1990s, the period of the collapse of the Soviet Union was a happy and adventurous time. For us, who have easily and naturally stepped into the post-communist era, it was an intriguing time that brought an abundance of information and staggering discoveries.

Unexpectedly, we found out that in addition to the history of the “great and mighty Soviet Union” there was another history as well – the history of our own small country, Belarus, with more claims to fame than just its partisan past. We greedily devoured the new socio-political periodicals that we could not have dreamed of even a few years earlier. We argued passionately about the future of our country and made great plans for our own future and that of our country.

The early 1990s were a time of hunger and of shortages of everything, a time of empty shelves. You went out shopping as if you were going hunting, hoping for luck. The exchange of money for goods was replaced by bartering.

The amazing thing was that we, the young generation of the 1990s, did not give up or get upset, perhaps because we were young and carefree. Or perhaps because we were so overcome by the fact that the modern history of Belarus was being written before our very eyes and, from that point of view, everyday problems were trivial matters, not worth remembering or noticing.

And yet the most important thing was something quite different: we were no longer taught to lie and conform because with the death of the USSR the need for political hypocrisy had died as well. The door to the world stood wide open before us. We learned to debate and argue, and rediscovered our native Belarusian language. And as it turned out, it was far from a “peasant” language, as we were made to believe by Soviet propaganda, but instead it was melodious and tuneful, as if specially created for verse and declarations

of love. We also learned that Old Belarusian was the language of the first code of laws of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania.

However, as so often in Belarusian history, fate once again played a dirty trick on us. The cavalier Belarusian democrats, chief among them the Belarusian National Front, which at the time had a lot of influence in the Supreme Soviet (the parliament), quickly managed to frighten the people. In their view, the new Belarusian state would be able to develop only if it adhered to the tenets of Belarusian nationalism. For this reason it was vital for the country to switch immediately to the Belarusian language, a language which virtually nobody spoke until then, except perhaps for a small band of the intelligentsia. What was really amazing in the circumstances was that the people who were expected to know their own language were offered no language courses at all!

The heroic transition to Belarusian was accompanied by a long, drawn-out economic crisis, which inevitably affected the people's mood. They suddenly started longing again for a "strong hand", for stability, perhaps without freedom, but with social guarantees and the famous "confidence in the future".

Before long, a man appeared who was willing to promise all those things to the people. In 1994, the Belarusians elected their first president, who immediately issued decrees restoring the Soviet coat of arms, flag and national anthem. Not bad for a start?

But the trouble was that the new presidential republic somehow made life very uncomfortable for private business. A good friend of mine who owned a private news agency had to register his business several times: new rules and regulations kept appearing and he simply couldn't keep up with them. One day, after yet another dreary trek through government offices he understood that the problem was not with registration but with the nature of his business.

It was that information now had to be provided by the government alone, not by heaven knows what private news agencies. The outcome was that my friend closed his agency and started a printing business. He printed business cards, calendars and other things. Gradually, all unofficial sources of information disappeared from Belarus.

Shortly thereafter, to make matters worse, all businesses, even those trading in a small way, became unprofitable. My mother's friend Lidya, who had a stall in a clothes market, now no longer has any work at all. Taxes and constantly changing laws, the need always to be buying new licences and permits, have cured Lidya of her entrepreneurial spirit. To protect her own and her colleagues' rights, she even at one time became active in the Entrepreneurs Association. But it proved pointless. Times became harder and harder for independent trade unions and other non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and public appearances by their representatives more often than not ended by being forcibly broken up by the police.

So Lydia was left without work and has been sitting at home for almost a year. Many of her friends have suffered a similar fate. Even so, they are in no hurry to join government service: they are put off by the contract system. The thing is that the government now signs employment contracts with its workers and these contracts are limited to a year or two. There is more to the contract system than meets the eye: one false move and it's goodbye, with no explanation other than the contract has run out.

If you live in Belarus you could easily develop a split personality. Your television screen will be showing you one thing while in reality you will be seeing and experiencing something quite different, if not the exact opposite. For instance, quite recently the news again praised our "famous" Belarusian stability. Then there was a report on how our indefatigable and caring president had visited yet another state enterprise and graced it with

his guidance and valuable advice. On another occasion they reported on Belarus's prospects for cooperation with China and Iran.

Among my relatives, the evening session in front of the television is a time of furious quarrels. My cousin Ales simmers with anger every time: "After this news all I want to do is take all those journalists and shoot them!" The thing is that Ales reads the news every day on the internet and it is very different from the "internal Belarusian truth".

Ales's wife Natasha, however, likes to keep well away from politics. She says she is not interested in it: "In any case, we can't change anything! I'd rather read a book or listen to music". What Natasha doesn't like to remember is that her father has already managed to lose a prestigious job because of the same "arrogance" which clearly characterises her husband. Nowadays they are all trying to be careful, to let sleeping dogs lie. This is why Natasha tells her husband from time to time: "Another word about politics and I am going back to my mother!"

Ales has problems at work as well. The local "special services" have taken a dislike to him – it seems he travels to Poland, Germany and Ukraine far too often. Once he was even called in to his boss and told off for having supposedly got a sick note and, according to his vigilant "colleagues", having gone to Kiev instead. He was even told the exact time he was supposed to have crossed the Ukrainian border: it was last Thursday at 15.20. Ales no longer doubts where his future lies. He is dreaming of living abroad.

For many potential emigrants, their last hope was the presidential election of 2006. At the time, in the bitter cold March weather, they came out into the Square to demonstrate against the official line. They came out because they were fed up with living in a "Soviet backwater". Both the old and the young came out.

After several days of peaceful but tense confrontation, when most foreign journalists had already left the country, the protesters' tent city was knocked down with the truncheons of the special militia units, so painfully familiar to many. Hundreds of people were sent to prison, many lost their jobs, student participants were expelled from university in huge numbers and many found themselves with no option but to emigrate.

The stand-off between the Belarusian people and their government is now in its 14th year. During the last skirmish, for a variety of reasons, the government again proved stronger and more unified, winning yet another battle against its own people.

Throughout all these years freedom has remained a distant dream for the Belarusians. All who want to live here must keep silent, agree and sit on their hands, suppressing their growing pain and aggression. It is as if the Soviet Union had never died.



Bulgaria

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A song of misgiving

The political changes in Bulgaria came in 1989 when I was 18. Ever since the third grade I had imagined communism in the way explained to me by our teacher, and this image had remained unchanged, possibly because it was like a story. At the same time, reality came to baffle me more and more, and that got on my nerves. Not even my youthful naivety could help.

Opposite our house there was a flagship leather goods store called Pirin. The gloves, jackets and shoes it sold seemed to us almost luxuries – and had price tags to match. Many years later, I understood that its regular clients were members of the city's bureaucratic elite. Even the saleswomen – three stern, middle-aged ladies with their hair done up in the curly remains of a perm – were far from ordinary: all three were married to army colonels.

So, to return to my dear teacher, she taught us that communism would have arrived when anyone could walk into that shop, take whatever he or she needed – a pair of shoes, a suede coat or a bag – and go straight home without having to pay. And everyone would have become so conscientious that they would visit Pirin not more than once a year, instead of abusing this right which had been given to them, that is, instead of abusing communism.

It is now 2008 and the chain of shops which sold socialist luxuries has long since ceased to exist. Because of the complexity of the restitution claim brought against the state by the heirs to the nationalised land on which Pirin had stood, the site is now overgrown with weeds. The shop windows through which you could sometimes see the communist future were first smashed and later boarded up. Nobody knows what is going to be built on this mouth-watering plot of land right in the centre of Bulgaria's ancient capital, Veliko Turnovo. Or perhaps the only ones who know are those who have been lining their pockets with the proceeds of corruption.

In 1989, not only I but almost all of Bulgaria was eighteen years old. Somehow I just can't believe that there were many who foresaw the inexorable financial collapse of the risible economic irrationality of the mirage so blindly trusted by my teacher. The collapse swept away our ideological illusions and our modest personal hopes.

Student walk-outs, protest meetings, street pickets and other similar events helped my peers and me to sublimate the anger typical of the years of our pimply youth. But our country proved unable to reach maturity with dignity: instead it managed, disastrously, to go straight into menopause.

To tell the truth, my generation didn't prove terribly useful to the new society. It split into strange new socio-economic sub-classes. Some of us dream of shopping in Pirin and of guiltily buying their utopias. Others, having made money, guiltily cover up their new lifestyle with the fig leaf of empty rhetoric. Yet others patiently eke out a miserable existence in a time which has proved too profound for them. A wave of depoliticisation has swept through all classes and has made room for the monsters of populism. We are unhappy even when we are rich.

But generally speaking, my generation has now acquired sufficient political levers, and could even use them for social management. Simply to get our hands on them, we had to sign a pact with the devil, with all the things and all the people we demonstrated against, drunk with the naive idea of freedom and fair elections. Today, it is we who are the mafia, the cynics and the stool pigeons. In other words, we were unable to acquire the critical mass needed for true social inspiration, rather than simply for gaining membership of the European Union and NATO. I, too, have now for two years occupied an office overlooking the place where the police liberally sprayed me with tear gas in 1997. Nevertheless, I am certain that I have absolutely no appetite for

power: things would be very different if it were not so. Things would also be very different if I were not consoling myself with the illusion that I am creating a healthier social environment for my daughter outside the walls of our abode – a capital city ghetto for the privileged. Politically speaking, my short-sighted generation has failed.

Our post-socialist history abounds with paradoxes. We have a former tsar who became prime minister, the mafiosi shooting one another in the street turn out to be presidential advisers, and venerable men of letters become the signatories of declarations supporting NATO's bombing of Belgrade. We have become so used to the astonishing that we regard it as ordinary.

The most recent incident of this kind happened to me in my native city. There are no more Pirins in Veliko Turnovo, but the centre of the ancient capital has recently acquired a huge shopping centre – a “mall” – a temple of capitalist consumption. It continually attracts crowds of worshippers, who include the new local national minority, the English, who come here to buy country houses in the picturesque hilly outer suburbs.

On a busy Christmas Eve I wandered from shop to shop looking for a present for my wife, and accidentally found myself in the Pierre Cardin shop, where I overheard a conversation between two young people who were trying on suits, commenting knowledgeably on the fabric, style and cut.

And what else do you think they talked about? The enchantments of office life? Their extreme, adrenaline-rush-inducing sports? Not a bit of it. They exchanged information on how and when they had slaughtered pigs in their village, how much dressed weight they had produced and what home-made sausages they had prepared.

There you have it; the true symbol of post-socialist Bulgaria, the poorest country in the European Union. Isn't it strange how the one consciousness

can accommodate both the refinements of European taste and Balkan provincialism? Unobtrusive elegance and tipsy village ethos? I don't doubt that eternal Bulgarian vitality will give us many more such surprises in the future, forcing pragmatism to throw up its hands.

My country's civil society has become tired of the paradoxes, and as a result it, or rather we, have become clearer about what it is we want. What we want is a proper reform of education and health care. It is 18 years since Todor Zhivkov was removed from power, and since then heated debates have been conducted on every subject under the sun. At least on those two points they turn into a sensible discussion – a discussion between “ordinary” people who don't much trust politicians.

In a word, the official Bulgarian state has become infertile – it can no longer produce a future for its citizens. But on 1 January 2007 we acquired an acceptable political family which, although it does rather look down on us, offers opportunities to the most viable among us.

But won't Europe prove to be yet another Pirin, with us dreaming empty dreams in front of its windows, not noticing that they are full of Chinese goods? Or is it just me being a pessimist?

Croatia

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In Croatian California

Several years before the great changes, the people living in that large country called the Socialist Republic of Yugoslavia began to find it increasingly hard to endure the certainty and predictability which were meant to accompany them from the cradle to the grave. They worked in the same place until retirement, in summer they went to the seaside and stayed in workers' holiday homes, in winter they bought half a pig through their trade union, there was no problem with health care, wages were low but loans were cheap and as a rule were eventually eaten away by inflation.

However, what the people found especially hard to endure was the stagnant political quagmire which guarded them against the rest of the world. Since Yugoslavia was also a federal state, people found it unbelievably easy to despise the way of life pursued in the neighbouring federal entities, although it was virtually indistinguishable from their own. They began to hate one another and blame one another for their pointless, worthless fate. Everyone dreamed of their own republic becoming an independent capitalist state; there was every likelihood that in this new world you could become an ambassador, a minister, a deputy minister or at the very least a civil servant. It would also be tempting to establish some out-of-the-ordinary political party and get elected to parliament. After all, why not? You could then defeat everyone in democratic elections and become president. At any rate, the people were fed up with socialism and even the thought of returning to the old ways made them sick.

It was, for instance, utterly grotesque when a writer published a thriller about a bank robbery, but there was only one thing more worthless than a work of art of this kind, and that was a film made from the book. In real life, you simply could not imagine a bank or a post office being robbed. Robbery was the exclusive privilege of those in power. The pinnacle of "socialist"

robbery was to break into a kiosk and make off with cigarettes, chewing gum and toilet paper. Or else you could rob dachas, but that involved no risk. You simply turned up in the middle of the night, ate and drank your fill, slept the night and in the morning took home with you whatever took your fancy. It didn't even count as real robbery, but was thought of more like a grown-up prank. As for ordinary people, they loved exciting Western films with rivers of blood, sweat and sperm and with the throbbing of real life in the streets – none of your stagnant quagmire. Those streets were home to picturesque crime in all its manifestations: from ordinary robbery, murder, prostitution, drug peddling and smuggling to blackmail, kidnapping and bombing, up to and including minor domestic massacres and clan warfare. “There is real life for you, and not this pretence which bores you to death,” sighed the intelligentsia and the semi-literate alike.

Finally the long-awaited day dawned and the communist empire and its communist colonies started to implode. The people could finally tremble with joy as they stood before the gateway to freedom and before the true unknown, and faced the temptations which in capitalism abounded.

Had it been independent at the time, my own Croatia would have been the richest country in the entire former socialist world, something like California in the United States – how much for the huge, beautiful seaside alone? In addition, every other citizen had a ready-made recipe for success: how to set up your own business fast and become a successful capitalist with nothing else to do but to supervise the business and skim off the fat profits each day.

The fourth estate proclaimed in all the media at its disposal that we would all be made rich simply because, being a developed republic, we would no longer have to deprive ourselves in order to help the backward provinces in the other republics. What was especially thrilling was that the republic

containing the capital of the unloved federation would lose all possibility of confiscating half of our annual income from tourism – yet another industry we could all live off without doing a stroke of work, if all this money were distributed among the citizens.

However, since all the other countries also regarded the sea as their own (and anyway what kind of country doesn't have its own seaboard and navy?), separation from Mother Yugoslavia was accompanied by a series of wars on a larger or smaller scale. After all, Serbia too, after its isolation and the NATO attacks, paid a high price for the war. Bosnia and Herzegovina also paid a high price for self-determination, as did my own Croatia. The four-year war brought suffering both to the Croatian majority, which had achieved victory with America's help, and to the rebelling Serbian minority, which knew no homeland other than Croatia and against which that very Croatia fomented national and religious hatred. At the same time, the same minority was being armed and encouraged to fight by its historical homeland, Serbia. Those two secret allies, Croatia and Serbia, are guilty of many internecine killings and blood baths which were intended to arouse hatred and thus mobilise their own citizens for war. They conspired to carve up Bosnia and Herzegovina, the countries that separated them from each other. Fortunately they were prevented from achieving their aim by the peace enforced by the international community, but the chaos they left behind continued in Bosnia and Herzegovina for a long time.

After the war, the wonderful Croatian belief that we really were California, that we really were the most desirable corner of this fine world disappeared – and with it the reason for our arrogance. While soldiers and civilians died at the front, the nouveau riche privatised everything of any value for next-to-nothing. The Croat and Serb nouveau riche even traded with one another to

great mutual benefit, even though they were on opposing sides during the war. And at last crime, so long awaited, began to flourish. American thrillers now seemed like fairy tales. Every day the papers and television brought news of murders, shoot-outs, robberies, swindles, prostitution and drugs. People pined for social protection only when someone reminisced about the time when we had lived in the grey, motionless quagmire. The post-war depression was almost impossible to survive.

Thirteen years after the war it seems nothing short of a miracle that we are again living well in Croatia. It seems like a lucky and accidental lottery win, but each one of us has been left with a scar on our hearts. However, criminality has again had its wings clipped. The air is clean. On the other hand, very few have become capitalists with nothing to do other than supervise the business and skim off the fat profits each day. To be honest, we spend quite a lot, not because we have too much, but because we have too little. We have acquired a celebrated and all-powerful facility – the overdraft. There is no life without an overdraft. We are hoping that when we join the European Union the authorised overdraft on our credit cards will become at least twice or, God willing, three times as large as before.

To this end, we are changing our laws and bringing our standards into line with the European Union because, dear citizens, once you have become part of the European Union's authorised overdraft, you will feel that you have finally been given what is due to you. And since you have done everything in your power to reach this status, you will be overcome by the feeling that you have every right to get a thrill out of this hard-won, fat overdraft, and are lucky to be able to enjoy it.

Georgia

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Rustaveli Avenue

The new Georgia was born on 9 April 1989 – even before the Soviet Union received its death sentence in Belovezha Forest. That was the day when in Tbilisi's Rustaveli Avenue, special army units dispersed a peaceful pro-independence demonstration staged by the hungry masses. The attack on the demonstrators resulted in 20 deaths (most of them young women). Many more were wounded or seriously affected by the toxic gas used in the attack.

It was one of the last clashes between the Soviet Army and its own people. Very soon the national leaders of the newly independent Georgia began to claim reassuringly that the country would rapidly reach the living standards of Switzerland. “We will sell our unique Borzhomi mineral water and our unique Georgian wines to the world, and if that is not enough and we need more money, we have spring water, and we can sell that too,” they said.

The communist officials disappeared quietly. But they didn't vanish into the past – they simply removed their communist masks and before long the whole country could see them in church, as they diligently learned to light the candles before the icons and to cross themselves devoutly.

The people started to build the new Georgia with new hopes and, at the first democratic elections in May 1991, elected a new president, Zviad Gamsakhurdia. He won 87 per cent of the votes cast by the 80 per cent who turned out.

But Georgia's independence brought with it a multitude of problems, the most acute being a shortage of electricity. Using every conceivable (and even inconceivable) means, people sought a way out of the situation. Some were clever enough to connect their apartments or houses to two or three different power lines. The authorities regularly drew up schedules for supplying different areas at different times, but these immediately broke down. Depending on the quantity and quality of power supply, the country became divided into more desirable and less desirable areas, and cities into more desirable and less desirable districts. Needless to say, the city that did best

was Tbilisi, the capital of independent Georgia, but even there from time to time residents would close this or that major thoroughfare to traffic to ensure that any power generated would reach their suburb.

In some remote villages, children were taught during daylight and went home after school without ever even seeing the dusty glow of what were known as “Lenin lamps”, those weak, old-fashioned lights hanging from the classroom ceiling.

At that time, people who were dubbed “the electrical men” became hugely popular. These were the petty bureaucrats, or power engineers, involved in power distribution. Inevitably, the media soon elevated them to the status of pop stars – newspaper and periodical correspondents, television and radio journalists interviewed them frequently, asking endless questions, the most vital of all being: exactly when will Georgia have a reliable power supply?

Their faces were known all over Georgia. People greeted them in the street, stopped them, asked them questions – everything short of asking for their autographs.

In 2004, 13 years after independence, Georgia finally got its continuous power supply. Street lamps shone in the cities and the brightest, most “electrified” city was of course Tbilisi. The “electrical men” sank into oblivion – no one remembers their names or faces any more.

Several years ago a new problem, a water shortage, unexpectedly emerged in Tbilisi and it looked as if history would repeat itself. “Water men” appeared on television, though this time the city’s water supply was restored fairly quickly and the media had no time to hype them up.

Georgian journalists, just like journalists in most post-Soviet countries, have now returned to their customary routine – hyping up high-ranking and less notable politicians. Thanks mainly to television, Georgian politicians have entered every home and every family. There is virtually no one in Georgia who isn’t aware of what this or that politician has for breakfast or who they had a



crush on in the first grade. Even exhibitions of their childhood photographs are held as if this was an altogether ordinary and traditional event.

Today as never before, Georgian politics has become the country's culture, its art and its economy. It has swamped the whole of the informational and human sphere, it has taken unto itself the monopoly rights on giving people hope for the future.

Politics has permeated the air breathed by every Georgian. Georgia is the most politicised country in the whole of the post-Soviet region or, more precisely, the country burning most ardently with hyper-political passions. Since Georgia has been independent, it is safe to say that it is not Georgia's presidents who have lived the lives and problems of the nation, but the nation which has lived the lives of each of the three presidents. The people have learned of the tastes and thoughts of their presidents from television, and then either zealously defended "their" president or equally zealously attacked him as not "their own".

Zviad Gamsakhurdia had been in office only a few months when his opponents met to demand his resignation on Rustaveli Avenue, on the exact spot where the hunger demonstration had been broken up on 9 April 1989, and where the first president occasionally organised rallies of his supporters. The crowd gradually grew. Awaiting bad news, the whole country watched developments in the capital with bated breath. The first shot fired on Rustaveli Avenue tore the nation in two. Blood was spilled. Earlier still, an armed conflict exploded in South Ossetia and there, too, people died – Georgians and Ossetians.

The fire that ignited on Rustaveli Avenue engulfed the whole of Georgia, and in particular the west of the country.

"Did you think that democracy would be a walk in the park?" Djaba Ioseliani, the founder of the illegal armed units and Gamsakhurdia's fiercest enemy, asked on television. After Gamsakhurdia was exiled, it was Djaba Ioseliani who suggested inviting Eduard Shevardnadze to Georgia.

On his return to his homeland in 1992, Shevardnadze was immediately elected head of state. The post of president had by then been abolished, but as early as November 1995, when a new constitution had been adopted, Shevardnadze was elected Georgia's second president, with a 74 per cent vote. At first, he rewarded Ioseliani, but it wasn't long until he put him in prison for several years – the same prison where he had been held under Gamsakhurdia. After his release, Ioseliani wrote and published a book about his time in Georgian prisons. He died soon after.

Just a few months after Shevardnadze's return to his homeland, Georgia was accepted as a member of the UN. His supporters claimed that the UN had accepted not Georgia but Shevardnadze.

Just a few days later, Georgian National Guard tanks entered Abkhazia, sparking another bloody conflict. Georgian politics could not remain unaffected by the war, and collapsed. To this day, different words are used to describe it in Georgia: the Russo-Georgian war, the Russo-American conflict, and even the Georgian-Georgian conflict.

At the end of September 1993, the armed conflict in Abkhazia ended, and refugees from South Ossetia were joined by some 300,000 Abkhazian refugees. Thousands of Georgians, Abkhazians and Ossetians and many others lost their lives. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the internal armed conflicts brought total economic ruin and extreme hardship to the Georgians. The country had neither bread nor electricity, and could hope only for humanitarian aid from democratic countries.

The overthrow of Gamsakhurdia's ephemeral power wrecked many people's hopes of stability, but Shevardnadze lost no time in pointing the way to a fairy-tale-like, beautiful and democratic future.

He ruled independent Georgia as if he were still the First Secretary of its Communist Party. He had got so used to accounting for his actions to Moscow in Soviet times that when he became president of an independent

country he continued to search for someone he could report to, and at the end of his political career he started obsessively reporting to Washington, just as earlier he had reported to Moscow. Although he managed to resolve some issues, his “successor” inherited a bankrupt country, chronically explosive conflicts, a difficult economic situation, terrible corruption, a majority that was socially unprotected and had been shamelessly robbed, disappointed hopes and false promises.

Rustaveli Avenue erupted again. There were larger and smaller demonstrations, but nothing like the numbers termed the “ocean waves” (“ocean waves” being 50,000, 100,000 or 200,000 people) that were needed to overthrow the old powers that be and spark new life. Popular dissatisfaction grew slowly but steadily.

The next “ocean wave” did not hit Rustaveli Avenue until November 2003, and it culminated on 23 November, St George’s Day, in Shevardnadze’s voluntary departure. This was the action which came to be known as the Rose Revolution, and was headed by one of the leaders of the then opposition – Mikheil Saakashvili.

As long as Shevardnadze was gone, the people were willing to give carte blanche to any leader, and Mikheil Saakashvili became their next choice. On 23 November, wearing a bullet-proof vest under his coat and carrying a red rose, Saakashvili, accompanied by his associates, burst into Parliament House and drank warm tea from a cup left on the podium from which Shevardnadze had been speaking a moment before. Shevardnadze was led away from Parliament House and out of harm’s way by his bodyguards. By drinking the lukewarm tea, the new leader seemed to assume from the old leader all of Georgia’s problems and the nation’s new hopes.

Six weeks later, the people elected Saakashvili their new president with 97 per cent of the vote, a margin unprecedented in independent Georgia. The new politicians, headed by their third and youngest president, set to work with zeal.

Leaving behind the stagnation of the Shevardnadze period, the country began to move forward and started to display clear signs of genuine nationhood.

But the politicians kept trying to divert the people's attention to global politics, neglecting many domestic issues. The "new" politicians loved the spectacular fireworks and fountains, and busied themselves with new roads and grandiose building projects.

Neither the "old" nor the "new" politicians kept their pre-election promises: "We will resolve the conflicts and bring the refugees home", "We will do away with unemployment"... All of them placed far too much hope in such slogans as "America will help us", "The West will help us" and "We will soon be joining NATO".

After a period of time, a people's exaggerated hopes and boundless trust in government inevitably end in disappointment. Those who blindly put their faith in politicians often take a long time to notice the difference between real and cosmetic politics, between a true policy overhaul and a simple facelift.

Ultimately, the actions of the new politicians repelled the community and yet again robbed the people of their hope for rapid improvement. The authorities frequently placed themselves above the law. Corruption, the gulf between the words of those in authority and their actions, the leadership's occasionally irksome but sometimes dangerous populism, its egocentricity and messianic slant, its eternal pose of rectitude, its failure to admit mistakes and unwillingness to take advice, all of this could not help but influence the people's attitude to Mikheil Saakashvili and his team.

The situation was also aggravated by the radicalism of an amorphous civil society, the people's desire for a charismatic leader, their wish for rapid success in conditions of barely nascent democracy, and by the fact that the majority ignored not only the realities of modern politics but also, and more importantly, the Russian factor.

Beginning on 9 April 1989, Russia took centre stage in the Georgian political theatre. It was the ever-present monster of Rustaveli Avenue, its evil genius, its *eminence grise*. In the political show staged by Russian political producers, like in a cheap television comedy, all that happened seemed an absurd, coarse caricature. As if battling with demons, Russia first took on Georgian wine, then Georgian citrus fruit and Borzhomi mineral water, and finally those Georgians whom fate had thrown onto Russian territory.

Georgia is the only Caucasian country on which Russia has imposed a visa requirement. None of the governments of independent Georgia has managed to build a normal relationship with Russia, once its major market, though Western leaders have advised time and time again to “please take the Russian factor into account”. Georgian and Russian leaders took turns at making relations worse. In 2006, Russia deported Georgian citizens from its various regions based on their citizenship.

Before the collapse of the Soviet Union, Georgia had a population of over 5 million; it is less than 4 million today. Over a million people have left our country, some say a million and a half. Most of the emigrants have now acquired new citizenship, and while others return from time to time, the country’s instability makes it hard to hope for their permanent return.

People from other countries often say that we, the Georgians, are an artistic people. It may be because we love the theatre. The number of theatres in Georgia has doubled, and perhaps even trebled, in the last 15 years. I know for sure that Georgia has the most theatres per capita in the whole of the Caucasus. Even during the “dark age” (when there was no electricity), in the winter, the stage was lit by electricity from generators and the theatres were always full. Incidentally, the famous Rustaveli Theatre is on Rustaveli Avenue, a short walk from the Parliament building.

Our celebrations are also theatrical, and so is our politics. The Tamada, or toastmaster, at a celebration meal is like a president. Politicians themselves frequently say “Let’s put on a good show”, “What sort of a show is that?”,

“We will teach them stage management”, or “It is all going according to our scenario”. Needless to say, they mean their own political theatre.

The Georgian for “bread and circuses” is “bread, wine and circuses”. The “simple” Georgian of this tale is a hospitable, sociable person.

And another thing – Georgians love television. Per capita ownership of TV sets in poverty-stricken Georgia is among the top 10 countries in the world (“bread, wine and television”). All these years, Georgia’s television sets have been full of political news and red-hot developments, politicians, personalities pretending to be politicians, and talented and talentless showbusiness people, all this while its refrigerators were half empty, and sometimes just plain empty. That was how the “simple” Georgians lived, with their crammed television sets and their empty refrigerators.

Although the new government had some successes, it was four years to the day from the start of the Rose Revolution that the “ocean waves” of unrest again stormed up Rustaveli Avenue (different sources put the number of demonstrators at between 100,000 and 150,000). But this time it didn’t end with a new leader coming to power. The “happy ending” of the Rose Revolution was not to be repeated. Saakashvili said that the state was the state, and on 7 November, on the very day and in the very place where for 60 years Soviet Georgia celebrated the October Revolution with parades and demonstrations, the authorities demonstrated their own power: they dispersed a peaceful protest with water cannons, rubber truncheons, gas and bullets – rubber ones, but bullets nevertheless. There were also noise generators, whose blood-curdling howls resounded through the dreams of the escaping demonstrators for several weeks afterwards. The authorities had “cleared” (as was said in officialese) Rustaveli Avenue and, later on, the Rike (the Kura Embankment). Fortunately no lives were lost but up to 700 casualties sought medical help. The then prime minister immediately tried to reassure the people, saying: “Don’t be afraid, the tear gas wasn’t made in Russia, we imported it from the West”. But hardly anyone paid him any attention.

A state of emergency was declared. A number of TV and radio companies were closed down. Later, some political scientists dubbed these events “a lesser ‘37” or “the new 9 April”, while others maintained the law had to be upheld, there was no other solution and that Georgian statehood had been saved.

For the umpteenth time, the people were divided. The Avenue of Presidential Undoing forced even Mikheil Saakashvili to resign, only on this occasion the president himself named the new election day – 5 January 2008. He named the day, and he won again, but without the previous overwhelming majority. He polled 53 per cent of the votes.

On the day of his inauguration, which took place on 20 January in front of Parliament House (again on Rustaveli Avenue), his many opponents gathered at the Tbilisi Race Track. Saakashvili repeated his campaign slogan – “A Georgia without poverty” – and the opposition, both in the capital and in other cities repeated: “The elections were rigged” and “We don’t accept Saakashvili as president”. This time, the presidential elections did not unite Georgia, and only confirmed its division.

Of all the countries in the Caucasus and in the whole of the post-Soviet region, Georgia continues to hold the top spot in terms of number of the problems it has and their complexity. They include unresolved conflicts and a weak economy. So far, the government hasn’t created the peaceful, constructively governed space which is the prerequisite for progress and stability. Our society has yet to learn how to temper its boundless optimism with reality. Without the emergence of a new political culture, without a harmonious relationship between the authorities and society, the people’s hopes will always be deceived and the main player in our country’s political history will be Rustaveli Avenue, and not Georgian politicians.

Kazakhstan

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“Multi-Kulti” with endless patience

“Multi-Kulti” is the German word for the ethnic cocktail which, with the growth of globalisation, has become both an asset and a threat to the modern world. A multicultural environment is typical of mega-cities such as Berlin, London and New York. People from all over the world gravitate towards the wealthy, stable countries and make their new home there.

Strange though it may seem, this group includes Kazakhstan, whose centuries-old multi-ethnicity goes back, thanks to the Cossacks and the Germans settling in its steppes, to the times of tsarist Russia. It is also the result of Stalin’s repressions, the Gulags, repatriation from the Caucasus, inmates of labour camps, the evacuated intelligentsia, Khrushchev’s virgin lands scheme, as well the Soviet system of job assignments for university graduates.

As a result, Kazakhstan has become not so much Babel but rather a veteran of the global multicultural front, having gathered over 100 different nations on its 2 million square kilometres of territory.

The return of the Germans, Jews and Russians to their historical homelands that followed perestroika somewhat diluted the multi-ethnicity, but it continues to be Kazakhstan’s “unique selling point”. In the past 10 to 15 years multiculturalism and mutual tolerance have become Kazakhstan’s most valuable assets, rather than oil or wage rises. And to tell the truth, it just so happens that we don’t have any unique architecture, famous brands or personalities, but we do have an exclusive and amazing variety of faces, surnames and names. This is probably what constitutes Kazakhstan’s chief wealth.

If you were to ask 100 passers-by in the streets of, say, Almaty, what they regarded as our principal asset, fewer than 10 of them would name this renowned multiculturalism, simply because it is familiar to the Kazakhs and they don’t see it as anything out of the ordinary. But what would they list as our achievements?

Stability. The government is being given credit for this moth-eaten piece of official propaganda. It may indeed be the case, although for some reason I prefer to think that it because of the general tolerance of the Kazakhs who are used to living side by side with people looking quite unlike them and have always felt that it was best to “live and let live”. Against the background of wars in the Caucasus and Tajikistan and conflicts in Transnistria, the Baltics and other countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States, Kazakhstan really seemed to be an island of stability. But also for this very reason and unlike other countries, Kazakhstan did not see stability as a common goal or a sort of national dream.

Oil. When independence came down on our heads like a heavy blunt instrument in a dark alley, oil became a hot topic in Kazakhstan. Naturally the West needed the “unique” non-Arab oil reserves to exert pressure on OPEC. We were told we could become “a second Kuwait”, but it gradually came to nothing. The authorities pounced on it, befuddling people’s minds with dreams of a land of millionaires. Of late, for instance, we have been aspiring to membership of the group of 50 countries regarded by the World Economic Forum in Davos as the most developed and the most competitive in all areas, from economy to culture. We will get in because we are nearly there, but what we will gain from it is not clear. We will feel proud for a while but we will still offer bribes, be dismayed by the falling standards of education and health care, see beggars and the homeless in the streets and be horrified by absurd inflation levels. The famous group of 50 has now become part of the traditional discussions around the kitchen table, along the lines of “Things are bad right now, but we will soon have joined the 50 most developed”.

Nevertheless, it can’t be denied that things are in fact changing for the better in Kazakhstan. Above all, there are more opportunities – for instance, many can now afford to study or holiday abroad. Hypermarkets, foreign cars

and everything imaginable from the entertainment industry have lately become the accustomed adornments of Kazakh life. All this has been happening against the background of official spin. For instance, when it became clear that Kazakhstan was unlikely to become “the second Kuwait” – we don’t have as much oil, and are not keen to share the profits – we were presented with yet another fairy tale. This one had a complicated name – “The Industrial Innovation Strategy”. What it really meant was “no point resting our hopes on oil, we need to build factories and develop the latest technologies”. What about the fact that next door we have China with its lightning-speed introduction of all the latest technologies and extra-cheap labour, and Russia on the other side?

If you were to ask 100 passers-by in, say, New York, what they know about Kazakhstan, 20 of them would say “Nothing” and shrug their shoulders. Another 30 would say “Do you mean Afghanistan?” Ten at most would say “Oil”. But there is no doubt whatsoever that 30 or 40 would shout “Borat!”

Sacha Baron Cohen is a British comedian who created the character of Borat Sagdiyev, a fictional Kazakh journalist, and who until recently was the worst enemy of the Kazakh authorities. He blackened our “great” country in every way he could. There was even talk of suing him. That would have been fun! Thank God they thought better of it and did a complete U-turn, using the character for their own ends. The Kazakhstan Embassy in the United States cleverly published an article called “Who needs Borat? Here’s the President of Kazakhstan” in a leading American newspaper. Absolutely right – sadly, our president is virtually unknown in the United States but he is ever so well-known at home! His portraits adorn the front pages of newspapers, he is always the first item on television news. Recently parliament gave him a generous present, quite in defiance of the Constitution (which grants equal rights to all citizens): he may stand for re-election as many times as he likes. So now everything is in his hands and everything depends on his modesty.

So now the whole country is waiting – will it prove enough? Many have been wondering whether we will prove to have enough of the famous Kazakh tolerance. Will we be able to keep our multiculturalism or will we become “Kazakhstan for the Kazakhs”, repeating our neighbours’ mistakes? Such questions make it less important who will be the next president.

Most Kazakhs are peace-loving and still believe that happiness is when you have lots of money and no one wants to take it away from you, when you can ask 500 guests to a wedding and flaunt your wealth before them, never mind that you had to sell your apartment to be able to afford it, and that most of the guests will be staying overnight. Touching but vaguely disquieting ostentation, and hospitality blown out of all proportion – typical Kazakhstan things. But you must have enough patience and enough refreshments for all.

Kyrgyzstan

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From revolution to revolution

In 1990, democratic slogans resounded throughout Kyrgyzstan. Nationalism became more extreme, bringing anti-Russian, anti-Uzbek and anti-communist sentiments to the fore. Anti-Russian sentiments resulted in a mass exodus of the Russian-speaking population; anti-Uzbek sentiments evolved into fierce clashes between the two fraternal nations; and the anti-communist feelings, for some reason, resulted in nothing at all.

That October, an excited history student rushed into my room in the student quarters and told me that our lecturer, Tynchtybek Choroiev, wanted me to come urgently to the square in front of the Concert Hall. I went and found him sitting there in the middle of the busy city square, having gone on a hunger strike, next to a placard with the words “Down with the bosses of the Central Committee”. It turned out that members of the Democratic Movement of Kyrgyzstan had decided to declare a mass hunger strike and were sitting in different places in the centre of Bishkek. Choroiev had called me to ask me to stand next to him and explain to passers-by why he had decided to take such a step.

At first I misunderstood what he wanted and with the words “Read the placard and disperse as fast as you can” I started breaking up the gathering crowd. Having in this way very nearly defeated this anti-communist propaganda effort I then got things right and started to denigrate the Kyrgyzstan Communist Party and its Central Committee for all I was worth. “It’s the communists that have brought us to this dead end!”, “Human rights have been trampled!”, “National rights have been violated!” I shouted without stopping. We students started going to the central square every day, returning home just before the curfew which had been introduced because of the Kyrgyz-Uzbek clashes. It may be that others knew but we, the students, had no idea at the time that these demonstrations, together with the political hunger strikes, would in fact lead to the overthrow of the Communist Party in Kyrgyzstan.

In the meantime, a meeting of the Zhogorku Kenesha (or Supreme Soviet) decided to establish presidential rule in the country. By the time the question of who should become president came up, a huge number of people, including virtually all the students, had become involved in what was now a political movement. The number of hunger strikers increased dramatically. Ultimately, none of the Communist Party Central Committee secretaries became president; perhaps this was due to internal divisions among the communists or perhaps because of increasing pressure from the protesters.

Askar Akaev, urgently called in from Moscow, thought that he too would try for the presidential chair. Of all the candidates' speeches his words sounded the most progressive. I can remember them almost by heart: "Kyrgyzstan must boldly enter the international arena, without looking to Moscow. Kyrgyzstan is an Asian country and its place is in Asia. This is why we must establish close relations with the largest Asian economies, with the Hong Kong and South Korean "tigers". I think that by following this approach I will be able to pull Kyrgyzstan out of its economic crisis within three years." Visions of Singapore and Hong Kong floated before our eyes. And just before midnight the voting results showed that Akaev had won and he became president. We who were standing in front of the parliament building went home in raptures, convinced that if we followed Akaev, in three years we would have caught up with Singapore.

Fate in its cruel irony decreed that it was those three years that would remain in our memory as a time of total economic collapse, unprecedented unemployment, hyperinflation, poverty and growing crime.

Askar Akaev was a physicist and attempted to justify the plight of the country and of society with the laws of physics. "From chaos to order!" he said. The people calmed down for a while and settled down patiently to await the end of the chaos.

The president who had promised to abide by the rules of democratic processes managed, by a series of subterfuges, to stay in power for 15 years. Images of Singapore and Hong Kong gradually faded from our Kyrgyz eyes. The wittiest joked that Akaev was busy searching for another suitable law of physics with which to calm the people down. By then, after the “colour” revolutions in Ukraine and Georgia, many started saying that Kyrgyzstan was next in line. That must have been when Akaev too started worrying about his future.

In fact, on 24 March 2005 he was forced to leave the country. His supporters, though still in power, had lost control of the levers of power. Within hours a wave of unrest swept the capital and the country found itself on the verge of civil conflict.

I remember how late one night I was telephoned by a friend who worked in parliament. “Drive round,” he said, “it’s going to be interesting!” I drove round. Virtually at the same time, Kurmanbek Bakiev, leader of the people’s movement and former prime minister, and Felix Kulov, who had only just been released from prison, arrived at the building. Kulov looked as if he hadn’t even had time to change. After brief negotiations the still unacquitted Felix Kulov, former Minister of the Interior and former Minister of National Security, became Kyrgyzstan’s head of security. People thronged the dark foyer of the parliament building, their troubled eyes asking “What will happen now?”

And then, with a shout of “Make way!” Usen Sydykov, one of Bakiev’s advisers, took his arm and moved forward. The famous film director, Bolot Shamshiev, rising to the occasion, took the future president’s other arm. I too, guessing where they were headed, led the way, shouting “Make way!” even louder. And so, accompanied by the crowd we made our way along the



dark corridors of the Supreme Soviet building. In my mind, as if in a film, I saw images of the 19th century Kyrgyz men whose endless palace coups had led to the collapse of the Khanate of Kokand. During that period, having killed at least 10 heirs to the Kokand throne and deposed several more, the Kyrgyz people became completely mesmerised by their ability to cause a change of power and, so it seemed, could not stop themselves. In that instant, I too believed that if you calculated correctly, it was not too difficult to replace a ruler, and I thought to myself, maybe this is just such a coup? “No, no,” I answered myself, “this is a revolution, a Kyrgyz revolution!”

But in fact the Kyrgyz people argue to this day whether it was a coup or a revolution. The faces and personalities changed, but did the system? Some maintain that nothing has changed, while others assert that progress has been made. At any rate, the long reign of one man has ended and the people are trying to form new, more democratic political traditions. It may be that the marked revival of youth movements is in fact proof of a new Kyrgyz attitude to the government and of the government's greater trust in its people.

Moldova

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Moldova in transition: from survival to rebirth

I agree with those who say that living through a period of change is more of a punishment than a blessing. For my family at any rate, Moldova's independence, declared in 1991, became a true challenge. I think that most other people were also unprepared for the drastic changes – and certainly not for changes for the worse – which began as soon as independence was declared.

Both my husband and I were over 40 when our life and the lives of the 4.5 million people living in Moldova entered a new era – the era of survival. Moldovan industry slowed to half speed. Salaries were paid in kind: I brought home some bed linen, my upstairs neighbour Wellington boots, and my downstairs neighbour nails. You had to acquire new skills fast, learn how to trade and barter to get rid of such things and use the money to buy essentials for the family. These skills proved useful later on when many of Moldova's enterprises and organisations declared large-scale redundancies. Chisinau, the capital of Moldova, became a vast open-air market. Unemployed engineers, scientists, doctors and teachers stood in the street side by side in the cold, sunshine or rain, trying to sell anything that could be exchanged for money. Papers and poster pillars were full of advertisements offering to exchange everything under the sun: "Will exchange almost new two-man tent for a new wedding dress" or "Will exchange folding bed in good condition for gardening tools". The word "barter" began to sound like an SOS. Taking a leaf out of our former colleagues' book, my husband and I started going to Turkey to buy things. At first we bought only what we needed for ourselves and enough to sell to cover our travel costs. Later, we started to specialise in leather goods. By the 10th anniversary of Moldova's independence, the business had become the main source of income for our family. By then, we had two stands in Chisinau's largest market and had hired assistants to sell

leather jackets. The key words in our family became “wholesale”, “currency” and “market”. They had replaced such words as “poetry”, “performance” and “concert hall”.

Independence proved a challenge for children and young people alike. Lots of parents left their small children in the care of relatives or friends, and sometimes they simply left them to fend for themselves. Our neighbour, a middle-aged woman, did exactly that. She went to find work in Italy and left her two daughters, aged three and five, for the husband to look after. The last time I asked the girls about their mother, last seen a couple of years earlier, the younger girl said she couldn't remember what mummy looked like and recognised only her voice because every so often she would phone from abroad. My own sons, who graduated from university in the first years of independence (one as a doctor and the other as a teacher), but were unable to find decently paid jobs at home, decided not to wait for their country to become a corner of paradise. Instead, they followed in the footsteps of many of their friends, left Moldova and settled abroad. We now see them only on special occasions when they come to visit from Israel. Or rather, whenever they come to visit, that is a special occasion.

Independence proved even more of a challenge for the older generation, my own parents included. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Moldova's pensioners had to survive on pensions which were barely enough to pay their rent and utility bills. They always paid very promptly, although to pay their rent they had to save on food and this, needless to say, affected their health.

Moldova's governments changed very frequently and each one brought with it its own promises of bread and circuses. Tired of the chaos of the government's “new order”, which continued for around 10 years, Moldovans decided to bring back the “good old days”, and in the parliamentary elections of 2001 the communists won the majority of seats. Sadly, this did not make

street lighting brighter or houses warmer. You got hot water on the eve of national holidays, just as before, and nominal heating just as you got used to wearing felt boots and several jumpers indoors. I especially hated November and March, when it was cold outside but the central heating was either not yet on or already off. The electric heater got shunted from room to room but couldn't heat the house. In those months it was hard to breathe indoors, there was so much carbon dioxide from having to turn on all the rings on the gas hob as well the oven to get a little heat into the house (or at least into the kitchen, where the whole family gathered to get warm). In spite of this, in the parliamentary elections of 2005 the communists won again, though this time with a more modest majority.

As I look back at the last 16 years, I can safely say that during its time of independence Moldova has become a country of paradoxes. On the one hand it is the poorest country in Europe (this is the label Moldova earned during the transition period), but on the other hand it has a huge number of upmarket detached houses, expensive cars and luxury products. Each year, Moldova celebrates a Language Day, but in all its years of independence it has been unable to decide which language that ought to be – Moldovan or Romanian – and so in official documents the language celebrated on this day is referred to as the “national language”. During the Soviet era Moldova supplied fruit and vegetables to many of the Soviet republics, but having gained independence (and having remained predominantly an agricultural country) it started to import the very same fruit and vegetables from Turkey, Poland and elsewhere. The retirement age has been raised but average life expectancy has fallen, so pensioners no longer live to enjoy their pensions. Moldova longs for tourists but many buildings in its historical centre have fallen into disrepair and have been bulldozed, while museums have remained closed for over 10 years.

No narrative of Moldova's recent past can ignore Transnistria, which broke away from Moldova on the eve of independence, forming its own separate state, recognised by no one. The separation led to a bloody war and since then Transnistria has been a constant topic of conversation, both in Moldova and abroad. The conflict has been put on ice but continues to attract the attention of politicians, smugglers and journalists. Our family's dealings with the area have mainly involved travelling to Ukraine to visit relatives, while some of our friends wanted to buy cheap brandy or go to a football match at the Sheriff Stadium.

Since its independence, Moldova has carried out many semi-reforms, pseudo-reforms and anti-reforms. They include introducing new administrative divisions by combining districts into regions, and then shortly afterwards separating them into districts again. Another example was the mass privatisation of state enterprises in exchange for "national wealth bonds". Such short-sighted experiments did Moldova no good. Many opportunities for improving the country's lot were missed and most importantly, time and human potential were lost. But I sincerely hope that Moldova still has the chance to overcome the difficulties of the survival era and enter an age of rebirth.

Russia

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Post-Soviet Heaven-Hell

Some people believe that ideas rule the world. That it is ideas which shape ideologies, world views, values, behavioural models, words, meanings, discourses, the paradigms of perception of existence – and our concepts of God, Hell, Heaven, the Last Judgement and Salvation. And that it is all these things taken together, and the energy and will of many, many people, nations and generations, that shape the economy, politics and culture. Someone joked that in the winter of 1942 the Battle of Stalingrad was fought not between two armies, but between two interpretations of Hegel – the Soviet Marxist-Communist and the German Nietzsche-National-Socialist.

Not that this is everybody's view. Many more consider that ideas are an invention of the intellectuals or an optional “add-on” to the tangible world. But in the context of Russian culture, ideas have always been handled with great seriousness and at a certain point with extreme caution, the way you might handle concentrated hydrochloric acid. The Russian view that ideas are absolutely fundamental will be immutable forever. This may well be the reason why the land that gave birth to Tolstoy, Dostoevsky and Lenin has several times in the 20th century become the world's testing ground for other people's hallucinations. According to one theory, the “real” 20th century lasted not from 1901 until 2000, but from 1917 until 1991 – from the October Revolution, when Russia determined to test the socialist “prescription” on itself, to the death of the Soviet Union and the collapse of the bipolar world, when Russia decided to try out extreme liberal fundamentalism and the “unfettered capitalism” of Adam Smith's works. Greetings from the 18th century.

I started thinking about ideas ruling the world shortly before the collapse of the Soviet Union.

At the time, I was obsessed by just one question: who had been right, not simply in the historical and political sense, but in the metaphysical sense too – the Reds or the Whites? The Tsar or Lenin? The supporters of the Soviet

state or those who had been against it? And where and when was Heaven, and where was Hell – before, during or after the Soviet era? To be sure, the Reds were murderers and bloodsuckers, but if the pre-revolutionary Russian Empire had been so wonderful, why could it not stand the test of time?

In the early 1990s, many Soviet people thought that their life in the Soviet Union was true Hell, and that all you had to do was to get rid of the monopoly held by communist ideology and communist power and everything would become just like in Europe and America: happiness, joy, a veritable Garden of Eden.

In mediaeval Christian literature there was a popular, literary “travel” genre – descriptions by monks and lay people of their pilgrimages to the Holy Land, Jerusalem and the Holy Sepulchre. Towards the end of the 1980s this genre was resurrected by Soviet papers and TV: they carried a lot of amazing stories about how Soviet people in the West for the first time would visit a supermarket and faint at the sight of counters overflowing with 150 kinds of cheese and 200 kinds of cold smoked sausage – almost like mediaeval pilgrims in the throes of religious ecstasy. Today, even recalling this proselytising seems ridiculous – now we are intelligent and know that all those sausages differ from one another only in their range of flavourings, emulsifiers, preservatives and genetically modified soy substitutes. But at that time it seemed to us that there was a paradise on earth, that it must really exist.

When on the eve of the 1980 Moscow Olympics I tasted Coca-Cola for the first time in my life, drinking it from a red can with a ring on top which looked like a grenade pin, I had the sensation that I had supped from the Holy Grail.

But there were others in Soviet society, mainly those who love what they hear and not what they see, who found it hard to believe in the existence of Heaven on earth. They knew that the Soviet Union was no Heaven (though there were some who believed it was), but thought that true Hell would come if it collapsed.

When in 1990 the notorious Article VI of the Soviet Constitution was repealed (the one about the leading, guiding role of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union) and everyone said that any minute we would have, if not Heaven, then at least “normal life”, I grieved. It was clear that the days of the Soviet Union and of all its genuine achievements were numbered. It was not that I felt very sorry for it psychologically speaking, since I had nothing to compare it with. It was simply that I wasn’t able to enjoy all my “best years” under Soviet rule. But even then it was clear that without the state a primordial chaos would ensue, a war of everyone against everyone, and de-modernisation. And it was far from certain that the strongest and best would win – more likely the opposite would happen. And in the circumstances, you could only rely on yourself and in the divine Random Number Generator.

My parents were never communists – objectively speaking, the fact that they were not party members prevented them from having distinguished careers (they were both rocket engineers at defence industry plants). What is more, neither branch of my family tree contained any party members; the time came when I took pride in this. Professionals and tsarist civil servants, dispossessed farmers and disbanded Cossacks, victims of the Stalinist terror and of the Ukrainian famine of 1933, my forefathers simply didn’t leave me the option of loving communism and Soviet power. But my parents weren’t liberal, dissident members of the intelligentsia either. They didn’t secretly thumb their noses at the authorities, didn’t worship Okudzhava and Galich, and weren’t interested in the details of the trial of Daniel and Sinyavsky. From early childhood I heard quite different names around me: Tarkovsky, Fyodorov (the cosmist philosopher who invented the theory of “the resurrection of the fathers”), Florensky, Tsiolkovsky, Oles Berdnik, Rerikh, Chizhevsky, Vysotsky, Shukshin, Valentin Rasputin, Losev, Andrei Rublev, “Russian philosophy”, “reversible perspective”, “noosphere” and the legendary mediaeval town of “grad Kitezh”.

For this reason, my understanding of life, my model of existence differed from my parents'. I thought that in Soviet and pre-Soviet existence there were elements of both Heaven and Hell, but that something fundamentally different was being created before our very eyes – one big, post-Soviet Heaven-Hell where meanings were mixed up and ground to dust.

Boys born in my year were no longer being sent to Afghanistan and weren't yet being sent to Chechnya, so we never had to come face-to-face with death, or sacrifice anything for the sake of our country or "the common good" under truly extreme conditions. On the other hand, life itself soon came to resemble one big extreme condition.

Its first victim was the boyfriend of a girl I knew at Moscow University. A successful early proponent of "unfettered Soviet capitalism", he was blown up in his car even before the collapse of the Soviet Union – in 1990, with a radio-controlled bomb. He had been involved in buying up various "dead souls" (if I am not mistaken it had to do with reselling non-ferrous metals; the time when you became an Abramovich, a Khodorkovsky or a Berezovsky by stealing gas was yet to come). Alas, competition in that particular "market" made survival impossible. The girl herself found religion and spent much time agonising over whether his soul would go to Heaven or to Hell – much to the ironic bemusement of her girlfriends. There were more than enough arguments in favour of either option, especially the former. Afterwards, she took a sabbatical from the geology department where she had been studying and went on an expedition to northern Kazakhstan to look for a rare and extremely valuable mineral. This pale, green-streaked stone was especially popular among the early "New Russians" – almost as popular as raspberry-red jackets. It was cut into thin tiles and used as cladding for offices – in those days absolutely all the rage! She used the money she earned to buy a new apartment in the south-west of Moscow and got married. Her first lawful husband was shot with a Kalashnikov late at night outside the apartment house, apparently mistaken for someone else.

This was then followed by a succession of mysterious deaths and shootings – the victims weren't my friends, but they were people I knew, with whom I had studied or whose paths I had crossed. That was how the “fighters” of the new era fought for their ideas of a capitalist Heaven-Hell. It is now clear that this was actually a civil war. Its “greenback warriors” died for dollars and for the triumph of the “new capitalist order” with the same fanaticism that Red Army regulars had so many years ago for the triumph of the communist paradise.

The last shot of this 1990s cannonade rang out in the new era. A fellow student of mine (who had miraculously survived the initial period of capital accumulation and its ensuing redistribution) was living far from Moscow, in Kiev, and was hit by a sniper's bullet. The virtuoso marksman had hit him in the heart at 300 metres just as he was being taken under escort from the courtroom to a deserted yard.

It would be unfair to regard the Soviet state solely as the embodiment of communist madness or socialist theory. It should instead be regarded as a modernisation project, a project intended to transform reality – and an alternative to the western European one. It achieved success in some places (for instance, in outer space and in the depths of the ocean) but failed in others (mainly on land), otherwise it would have lasted to this day. Stalin was a tyrant and a murderer. He found a Soviet Union with the plough and left it with the atom bomb. Yeltsin found a Russia with the atom bomb, but left it, for all intents and purposes, without the bomb and without a plough.

There is a well-known joke about Shakespeare. An aspiring young writer comes to the genius of drama and says: “I too write plays and dream of becoming as great as you,” to which Shakespeare artlessly replies that he himself had wanted to become God, but all he had managed was to become Shakespeare. “So what sort of rubbish do you think you will become, young man, if all you dream of is to become me?”



Something similar happens to countries as well. As long as their development is driven by grand visions and world-class plans afire with utopian ideals of Heaven on Earth, there is a point. But once they start to proclaim the values of comfort, pleasure, prosperity and “normality”, citizens lose the incentive to serve the state. And soon thereafter the sense of well-being begins to fade.

When a country prepares for war, the engine of development works at full tilt: the defence industry mobilises basic science and high technology; higher education standards are dragged upwards. Even some things trickle down to the ordinary folk.

However much we loathed the Soviet state we must admit that, up to a certain point, it oriented itself around the notion of development. Virtually all post-Soviet states orient themselves around the notion of consumption. More often than not Putin’s Russia merely simulates development. It is symptomatic that under Putin the two professions in greatest demand by the government have been intelligence officers and PR gurus. Members of the intelligence services knew how to generate short-lived “shock and awe” from their former lives, while PR professionals knew how to simulate reality. Neither was concerned with actual reality.

The main trend in post-Soviet Heaven-Hell is towards a general de-modernisation and abandonment of the notion of development. The Moscow plant where my parents worked and which produced the most advanced intercontinental missiles in the world fell victim to “conversion” and began producing bagel and doughnut machines. Something went haywire with the bagel machines and soon some of the empty areas were rented out for an Italian shoe warehouse.

Another Heaven-Hell “mortality indicator” is the new entertainment culture and new consumerist lifestyle and meaning of life. We have been taught new ways of enjoying leisure and entertainment but no one has taught us new

ways of working. The West may have been a beautiful video image but was not understood as the locus of a Protestant ethic which makes one work, work and work again, and which, in the final analysis, made possible the foundations of an efficient economy.

It may well be that we really are living in the final stages of the Last Age. This is why time has become so inexorably compressed, why our existence is moving ever faster towards its final moments, towards the end, the abyss, towards non-being, and why we have been given some means of chasing after runaway time: the internet, e-mail, mobiles, jet planes and an abundance of things.

Communist-Gnostic spirituality and immateriality multiplied by the literature-centred nature of Russian culture have had a colossal impact.

The Soviet authorities cultivated the status of the writer in his primordial, archaic form. The writer was seen as the lord of poetry, the master of discourse, the creator of unique worlds – in Soviet “newspeak” he was known as the engineer of human souls.

Then came 19 August 1991, and life changed in a heartbeat. The writers whose influence had dominated became marginal ideologues and sub-intellectuals. Before our very eyes their words turned from pearls to limescale, from gold to dross and from diamonds to graphite dust.

Needless to say it is not the job of literary figures to think up national development plans. It is the job of economists and political scientists. But writers (especially, we thought then, in Russia) are obliged to shape the vector and direction of society. To Heaven? To Hell?

But they, the zealots of Holy Russia, chose Heaven-Hell. There is an apocryphal political tale about messengers from the “Forces of National Resurrection” appearing before Solzhenitsyn in Vermont in advance of the first Russian presidential election and saying to him: “Aleksandr Isayevich, the time has come to put Russia right! Only you, with your prestige and

popularity, can be Russia's president and provide an alternative to the uncontrollable Yeltsin. Save your Motherland from destruction!"

But the "Hermit of Vermont" had recently received a huge amount of historical material on the White Guards and was thoroughly entertained figuring out what was what. Why should he care about Russian politics or Yeltsin, when before him was a gold mine of information on the pre-revolutionary, émigré Russia which we had lost?

He came to Russia several years later, in the spring of 1994, after 19 August 1991 and the shelling of the Russian White House in October 1993. His arrival was tragic because of the inherent element of post-modernist comedy. On the one hand, he was the returning Prophet, the Teacher of Life, the Living Legend, a near-Messiah. On the other hand, people started to brush him aside. Here was a man who had been living in a parallel world and who took it upon himself to preach homilies to all and sundry. This was most accurately portrayed by a then popular parody of Solzhenitsyn, speaking with an American accent and making the simplest of grammatical errors in Russian.

Our new life brought with it something quite inconceivable for Russian culture. Russia stopped being the land of the word, and books became nothing more than objects.

But idealisation of the Soviet era and attempts to rehabilitate Stalin and Brezhnev are not the solution. We need to think about the future, not about the past. The question is: can we escape from the post-Soviet Heaven-Hell? And which way should we run?

The thing is that Heaven-Hell was invented and is being zealously guarded by men who are far from stupid. It has changed its form several times before our eyes: Yeltsin's Heaven-Hell "Dark Ages" were replaced by Putin's Heaven-Hell "Age of Order". Although many of those who don't trust television and love not what they hear but what they see and what touches their hearts (and other places) feel that this is not the "Age of Order" but the "Age of Glamour".

It is Glamour without pain and without anguish, with no suffering or death, no wrinkles nor an ounce overweight. It is Glamour in which all aspirations are cropped Photoshop pictures from a glossy magazine. A Glamour where there is no longing for angel choirs and where immortal souls perish forever.

But it seems there is a way out of Heaven-Hell! Just as in Dostoevsky, where God battles with the Devil and the battlefield is the human heart, we now have Ontology battling with Glamour, and the battlefield is again the human heart, soul and mind. There is already a league of conspirators who dream of escaping from this empire of the dead. And if they can't escape, then they will blow it up and scatter it to the wind. And in place of the glamour-virtual-Photoshop illusions they will plant a new Garden of Eden and cultivate "life-as-it-really-is" – with pain, suffering, death and resurrection.

For the moment, these people are in hiding; they keep to themselves and recognise one another only by secret signs. But when the appointed hour strikes and the day arrives, they will rise up in a struggle for a new reality.

Only then will we see, beyond the lifting fog of Heaven-Hell, the first beginnings of the New Heaven and the New Earth.

Serbia

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A mad time in an inexplicable country

At the end of 1990 when I was approaching 40, I was the editor of a daily newspaper and I was earning 2,000 deutschmarks a month. The publishers also paid me a decent rate for my poems and translations – an average amount per standard page of 40,000 characters. I also got paid for taking part in literary evenings. Moonlighting in this way, I managed to build and furnish a house with a garden 15 kilometres out of town. A few years later, when suburban transport became a rarity and petrol had to be bought by the teaspoon, this daily commute became a real adventure.

With a passport from the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, you could travel to over 100 countries without a visa. My daughter flew to see her aunt in Australia at 13. I couldn't even imagine how precious the several hundred metres of fishing line she brought me would become, since very soon afterwards not even that could be bought here.

In December 1990, the first multiparty elections took place in Serbia. The former communists headed by Slobodan Milošević achieved an easy victory. Six months later, the whole of Yugoslavia had descended into war. It was dangerous to go out in the evening because groups of armed drunks roamed the streets. They called themselves volunteers. By the end of 1991 Yugoslavia had ceased to exist. During those months a police car or a military jeep frequently drove up to my house, bringing my conscription papers. That meant that I would have to go and fight in Croatia. My wife would open the door and tell them that I was at work or away. They never went in to check. Once they came to the newspaper but my colleagues said I wasn't there. I frequently slept at friends' houses. One of them, a cardiologist, solved my problem. I spent several days on his ward in hospital, and after that he gave me a certificate saying I needed treatment. I took the certificate to the military authorities and asked for permission to go abroad. As soon as it was granted, I boarded a train for Kiev. Kind people arranged for me to stay in some sort of a hostel. For the first time in several months I slept

peacefully, without worrying that someone would arrest me and send me to fight a senseless war. In May 1992, when I returned, the Serbian army no longer needed my military capabilities. It was just retreating from Bosnia and Herzegovina, having earlier left Croatia.

My foreign friends frequently asked what was happening in my country. Why had the Serbians given their wholesale support to Milošević, a dyed-in-the-wool communist, at a time when other eastern European nations were toppling communist governments? Why had the Serbians started four wars against peoples with whom they had shared a country for 70 years? Why were the Serbians en masse expecting support and assistance from Russia, but wanting to live like western Europeans? Why have most Serbians left Kosovo, although everyone says that Kosovo is the cradle of the Serbian nation? Why and how was that possible?

I always answered that it made more sense to drink beer and watch the clouds than to try to explain the inexplicable. There were more inexplicable things than there were things that could be explained reasonably. I spent four years on gardening leave. What is gardening leave? It is when you are not allowed to the office where you are registered to work but are still paid 60 per cent of your salary, which was sometimes 20 deutschmarks (approximately €10) and sometimes as much as 50 (€25). If I could do it today, I would immediately agree to stay on gardening leave until retirement. The average wage in Serbia today is approximately €300.

The empty shops were also inexplicable. History did not take note of the date when this started. Coffee was the first thing to disappear, followed by soap, washing powders, toothpaste, cigarettes, matches, sugar and salt. All these things could be bought only in the street or in the market. Humanitarian aid packages could also be bought there. The European Union sent aid to refugees and to other socially underprivileged groups. Instead of distributing the aid to the needy, the leaders of refugee organisations and

heads of social institutions sold most of it, and kept the rest for themselves. In this way, we were able to buy European tinned food, flour and personal hygiene items, as well as fake whisky. The markets also sold war booty – things looted during the wars in Croatia and in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Everything was stolen and sold: tractors, cars, television sets, crockery, various tools, clothes, icons, even books. The government turned a blind eye. Tens of thousands of people survived by selling goods of unknown origin in the street. The suppliers of those goods made fortunes and with the government's blessing became respectable citizens.

Life during hyperinflation was inexplicable too. In 1993, all prices at first increased every day, and then several times a day. If you had bought five deutschmarks in the morning, by the evening you were a rich man. If in the morning you had enough money for a crate of beer, by midday the same money would buy you five bottles, and in the evening none. This is how within a few months we ended up with banknotes with 30 noughts on them. Whoever had 5,000 deutschmarks, and invested them at the right time, soon made 50,000, and soon after 500,000. After the first million, nobody asked you where your money came from.

When everything is allowed, people lose their sense of time. The value system breaks down. You can buy a university degree with a lorry load of cigarettes or a tanker of oil. A man called Arkan, the son of a Yugoslav colonel, who was a criminal before the war and during the war became the all-powerful boss of a gang of so-called "volunteers", before whom the police and the generals trembled, became a member of parliament and the owner of a premiership-winning football club. Arkan was murdered by his army and business friends. President Milošević himself attended the funeral. Arkan's widow, a popular singer (and the lover of many prominent men) still lives in an illegally built villa in an exclusive area of Belgrade. The self-styled "commander of the volunteers", Vojislav Šešelj, won more votes

in the election than the greatest Serbian writer then alive, Borislav Pekich. The writer died soon after, while the commander was appointed university professor, and later even became deputy prime minister. Today he is on trial in The Hague as a war criminal.

Major state enterprises disappeared overnight. They were acquired for next to nothing by directors, members of the political police, restaurant musicians, sportsmen or drug dealers... The process is simple: an enterprise becomes illiquid, it has no raw materials and so produces nothing, the machinery is removed, the workers are not paid for months and the enterprise is put up for auction. The government turns a blind eye and pretends that the entire process has been completely lawful.

Serbia survived in spite of international sanctions. There was a ban on the import and export of virtually all goods but there weren't actually any goods that weren't imported or exported. This too was a simple process: a company registered in Cyprus transports some goods from Hungary to Greece. The invoice is paid through the Bahamas. Border control checks all the documentation and discovers that everything is in order. The goods arrive as transit goods in Serbia, and that is where they stay. The end price takes care of all participants of this chain, including those unfortunates who, come rain or shine, stand by the roadside selling petrol. The head of the customs office gives every customs officer the right to confiscate a bottle of whisky and a carton of cigarettes from the smugglers once a week. The wife of the head of state and the leader of the governing party sets up her own party. The professor who supervised her PhD becomes the ambassador to Moscow. Ministers tremble before her, writers and academics try to curry favour. There will always be more than enough people willing to write whatever is required for a few glasses of wine and a dinner.

In 1998, I was editor-in-chief of the daily *Naša Borba* in Belgrade. One evening in October, our office was visited by the Deputy Minister of

Information, accompanied by a dozen policemen. He handed me a notice banning our newspaper on the grounds that it was spreading fear, panic and defeatism. All our journalists lost their jobs. Several days later, a group of strangers appeared in the office. They loaded the computers and all other equipment onto their truck and left. We reported the theft to the police. The police told us to give them the names of the thieves and witnesses. At that time, nobody wanted to be a witness. Some weeks later, a car import company owned by the son of the head of state moved into our offices. The President's daughter became the owner of a television station.

After all this, the bombing started. NATO aircraft, flying at 10,000 metres, precision-bombed bridges, barracks, police stations and the government television station. Serbian anti-aircraft rockets have a range of 3 kilometres. The Ministry of Defence announced every day that several enemy aircraft had been shot down. A certain story was repeated in every village and town: a black American pilot was captured nearby last night. In his pockets he had US\$ 5,000 and the address he was supposed to go to. It was always the address of someone living near where the plane came down, a Croatian or a Hungarian, never a Serb. The propaganda-mongers who started these stories never explained why the pilot had to be black, why he had to have US\$ 5,000 and how his commanders knew where he would be shot down, so that they could give him the right American spy's address. After 78 days of bombs, it was announced that around 80 enemy aircraft had been shot down. In fact, one had been shot down. The officer responsible later opened a baker's shop. Life goes on.

How can one live through all this? On the afternoon of 5 May 1999 the air raid alert in Novi Sad, the main city of the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina in the north of Serbia, lasted several hours. The barracks on the edge of the town and its oil refinery were attacked. The earth trembled under the bombs and anti-aircraft guns. My colleagues and I were sitting in the office of the

Independent Journalists Union and in the street across the road from us over 100 people stood calmly in a queue – the kiosk had just had a delivery of cigarettes. One of my colleagues rushed in to say that beer had been delivered to a shop nearby, and even the non-drinkers rushed out. Later on, a taxi driver took us to see the bomb site free of charge. The bombs had missed the barracks and hit a residential house. There were no dead.

Beer and cigarettes could always be got hold of somehow. In my village my neighbours and I sat in the courtyard virtually every night and cooked something special. No distinction was made between teachers, doctors, farmers and the workers from the closed-down factory. Someone brought some meat, someone else potatoes, tomatoes, beans or raki. We lived as if every day were the last. Army cars would rush down the darkened streets. At night, after the all-clear, firing would continue for at least another hour. The fire came from rifles, automatic weapons and anti-tank guns fired by hundreds of soldiers stationed in the surrounding fields, giving vent to their joy. During the bombardments, the parliament voted for the unification of Serbia with Russia and Belarus. No response was received from Moscow or Minsk.

Eighteen months later, on 5 October 2000, the Milošević regime was overthrown. Strangers kissed and hugged in the streets, shouting “He’s gone!” This was the start of democracy. Members of the opposition who for 10 years had promised freedom and the righting of all wrongs rushed to receive the reward for their patience. Some rushed to get jobs in ministries, others in local authorities, yet others in business. No one remembered their main battle cry: “Thieves to prison, madmen to madhouses”. Those who had grown rich under Milošević expressed their loyalty to the new power, partly in words but mainly in cash. When the first democratically elected prime minister put serious pressure on the political and financial underground, he was assassinated by Milošević’s special police. Most of the former members of the security services are still doing well. They live in fashionable villas in

exclusive areas of Belgrade. They live in luxury, though it is unclear what they do. When the papers write about the mafia, no names are ever given. Only euphemisms are allowed – “shady businessmen” or “the rough guys from the street”. No one knows how they made their first million. They travel in armoured cars, accompanied by bodyguards. They have no problem travelling abroad. The tabloids write their colourful biographies in countless instalments – how they grew up in poverty, what sincere patriots they are, what sincere orthodox believers, how remote they are from politics. They are angels with human faces and bullet-proof vests under their shirts. Their dirty work is done by 20-year-olds, the ones with no moral scruples, average incomes and high school diplomas. Neither the general public nor the police know the names of the perpetrators of nearly 500 unsolved murders committed in the last 10 years. Life goes on.

Seven years after the arrival of democracy, a minister suddenly remembered that we ought to have a law that required buyers of state enterprises to verify the sources of their assets. Most enterprises had long since been sold. Private entrepreneurs had bought national, regional and local television stations and newspapers. Everything had been done strictly in accordance with the law. Anyone may publish and write whatever they like, provided they obey those who pay them. If you can buy a public prosecutor, a judge or a professor, imagine how much cheaper a journalist would be.

Milošević is buried in the courtyard of a house outside Moscow, owned by his wife, a person not responsible for her actions. Their son lives nearby. Their daughter lives in Montenegro. Two ministers of police from the Milošević era have committed suicide. Some of his close associates sit in prison and await sentencing. Others sit in parliament, in government institutions or private companies. Life goes on.

In socialist Yugoslavia, a party card opened all doors. Today we have many parties, but even now party cards can work wonders. The party can help you

open a kiosk, a bookshop or a supermarket, buy a plot of land and build a house with 50 apartments where a square metre costs €2,000. Parties use their people to award literary prizes to their own, provide them with space in art galleries and scholarships. Those without a party sponsor need not bother to write books, produce wonderful film scripts or paint. Throughout the collapse of the state, the wars and the transition period, artists paid a terrible price – some by going to live abroad, others by writing odes to Milošević, and others by fawning on anyone with a little power or money.

There is a wonderful Serbian joke about this very thing. A man is standing in the street and reading a paper. A friend comes up and says, “What does it say in the paper?” “X has died,” says the reader. “Who was he?” asks the friend. “He was our writer,” answers the reader. The friend asks, “So who is going to be our writer now?”

At the start of November 2007 the papers reported that the writer Dobrica Ćosić, called “the father of the nation” by the “patriotic forces”, was present at the opening of the largest Belgrade megastore. At one time he had been a commissar with the partisans and later a member of the Central Committee of the Communist Party. Even later he was made a figurehead president by Milošević... This year, the Belgrade Book Fair was visited by 200,000 people in seven days – exactly the same number that goes to the largest Belgrade beach on the Sava river every summer day.

Historians who in socialist Yugoslavia wrote about the brotherhood and unity of the Yugoslav peoples can't publish a book today without discovering new differences between the Serbs and the Croats, and new conflicts in the recent and more remote past. Recently, historians discovered that Macedonians and Montenegrins are fictitious nationalities, that there is no such language as Croatian, and that the Croats are the descendants of Serbs who had converted to Catholicism.

Twenty years ago I lived in a country where after you had graduated from university you could get a decent job. Farmers could take their families to the seaside for a fortnight after they had brought the harvest in. Factory workers could get a loan to build a house, and pay it back punctually out of their monthly wages. Today, people who haven't spent a single day at a university can wave their diplomas at you. Serbia has nearly 200 villages where not a single person remains. Farmers can still just about feed their families, but no more than that. Some businessmen own 20,000 hectares of land or more but factory workers and teachers, if all they have is their wages, cannot earn enough in their lifetime to buy an apartment or build a house. All they can do is feed themselves and their families. Where previously we had stores and craftsmen's workshops, we now have the glass edifices of foreign banks.

Twenty years ago I lived in a predictable country, where everyone did their job: university professors, lorry drivers and political functionaries. Life was transparent and comprehensible, it could be planned. My friend Janko, an electrician, worked on the railways and was well paid. Then he decided to leave his job, explaining to me that all the management positions had been given to non-professionals who ordered people to allow faulty carriages and locomotives onto the track. He explained that there were no spare parts in the workshops, that no one was responsible for anything, that all the tools had long since been stolen from the workshops and that none of the managers were bothered by it. Today, Serbian trains travel at an average of 30 kilometres per hour. Janko has gone private. He repairs electrical appliances, farms several hectares of land and uses his tractor and combine harvester to provide services to farmers. His daughter has graduated in pharmacology and has emigrated. The transition period has helped Janko to live on the proceeds of his own work and to live better than if he were working for a state enterprise. He works 12 hours a day and gets no annual holidays.

He doesn't trust a single politician. He doesn't go to church. He can't end the day without several bottles of beer.

Most of his contemporaries, now in their fifties, haven't done nearly as well. They have no permanent work, or else they are working in the grey economy with no social protection. They manage to earn enough for beer. They don't see themselves as obliged to earn enough to bring up and educate their children. They don't trust the politicians, they don't believe in God and they swear all the time.

The trains in Serbia have not been on time for the past 20 years. We no longer have a system of socialist self-management and we don't yet have capitalism. And we're still, all of us, on a train which is not hours but years behind its schedule.

Cheers!

Tajikistan

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The cold winter of 2008

I was just 14 when the Soviet Union collapsed and the civil war started in Tajikistan. In the beginning we didn't know that the war would cost over 150,000 lives and that it would set the country back dozens of years in its development. I remember those years well, and how hard they were both for our country and for my family.

At the end of 1991 independent Tajikistan's first general presidential election was won by Rakhmon Nabiev, the former Communist Party boss and a member of the "Leninabad" (northern) clan. His victory meant that the situation which had existed under Soviet power would remain unchanged.

For several months after the election, a delicate balance of power reigned in the country. Rakhmon Nabiev strove to observe the democratic principles that were so fashionable at the time and, at the same time, to run a socialist economy simply by inertia. The collapse of the Soviet Union made this virtually impossible. Very soon, mass demonstrations against the communists started in the capital's Shakhidon Square. The demonstrators were mainly refugees from the Karategin Valley (Garm) and from the Badakhshan Autonomous Province (Pamir). Their opponents, known officially as the Public Committee for the Protection of the Social Order, had organised an alternative, pro-government demonstration in Ozodi Square (the former Lenin Square), where refugees from Kulyab congregated.

The people called supporters of the opposition "Vovchiks" and supporters of the pro-government national front "Yurchiks". Everyone became involved – adults, young people and even children. In our apartment block the tenants were divided into Vovchik and Yurchik supporters. Neighbours stopped speaking to one another and families were on friendly terms only with those who shared their viewpoint. I remember my younger sister playing in the courtyard with her friends (she was six at the time) and witnessing a quarrel

between much older boys. The quarrel had an ethnic background, and was between Vovchik and Yurchik supporters, and she had no choice but to side with one or the other, as did the other children. She didn't know exactly which it was that our family supported, so she rushed home and asked her mother in an anxious little voice whether we were for the Vovchiks or for the Yurchiks, leaving my mother no option but to confess that we didn't support either side.

I remember my mother's sleepless nights as she waited anxiously for my father to come home. He is a surgeon, and in those difficult times he often had to stay at work until late at night, treating the wounded from both camps. Sometimes he would be collected by armed men in fatigues who would drive him to the hospital for emergency surgery, and all we could do was pray for him to come back alive, since his life depended on the outcome of the operation.

In those difficult times my parents absolutely forbade me to go out for walks because the militants were everywhere. They raped girls, could beat up a passer-by because they didn't like the look of him, squatted in empty apartments and made market traders and shopkeepers give them food for nothing.

Some people living in the capital, mainly those who came from the north, decided to pick up and move back north – to Soghd Province, where it was relatively quiet. Dushanbe experienced a huge influx of villagers and townspeople from the east and south of the country, where the fighting was worst. Some rented apartments, others bought them cheaply from their Russian-speaking owners who were leaving Tajikistan. Over half a million Tajiks became involuntary refugees.

When in November 1993 Dushanbe was taken by the supporters of the then-current president, the situation at the front stabilised. In fact, the war was for the most part over by the summer of 1993. However, almost a million Tajiks, mainly supporters of the opposition, found themselves abroad



in neighbouring Afghanistan. In 1997 the opposing forces signed a peace agreement. Emomali Rakhmonov, an advocate of a secular administration, became president, but the opposition too won posts in the government, and the former opposition fighters joined the army. The refugees began slowly to return from Afghanistan.

By then I was a third-year student but I had to look for work, since I wanted to help my parents and offer them at least some financial support. Their earnings weren't enough for us to live on; it was the same for most Tajik families.

My elder brother had to leave medical school and go to Russia to find work. He became an economic migrant, like almost a million other Tajiks.

Today, the country's economic situation is, of course, better than in the early 1990s. Even so, the authorities say that we won't be able to reach the economic level of 1991, the high point of the Tajik economy, until 2015.

They say that every season has its own beauty, but this is not true for me. I have recently stopped liking winter. I associate it with cold, darkness and candles. It is a time when people have to survive in conditions of extreme hardship because the country is so short of electricity. This year the winter, and especially the end of January and February, was perhaps the hardest ever. In Dushanbe we had electricity for only a few hours a day and in the regions and villages there was no electricity at all. The situation was aggravated by the fact that it was a winter of unprecedented freezing temperatures in Tajikistan.

My parents are now anxiously awaiting the birth of a new grandson. We can only pray that they don't cut off the power as he comes into the world, and that he is a healthy baby.

Turkmenistan

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Independence Turkmen style

The authorities had their first true taste of Turkmen independence only after they had secured themselves against the inevitable resurgence of the Soviet Union. At the time, in 1996, the communists had a real chance of regaining power in the forthcoming elections to the Russian State Duma. It was the fear of communist rule in Russia that caused Turkmenistan to solidify what was termed a “status of permanent positive neutrality”. This status confirmed Turkmenistan’s non-participation in all blocs and alliances, and became one of President Niyazov’s favourite fetishes. The neutral stance was assumed at the very end of 1995 and became “the point of no return”; it separated us from our Soviet past and it was from then on that true Turkmen independence began to take on meaning. How precious this “neutrality” was to Niyazov himself can be judged by the fact that he erected the grandest, tallest and kitschiest monument of his era to it: the three-legged Neutrality Arch which graces our capital. Not far away is the gilded 15-metre high statue of the first president himself, which rotates on its axis so that it always faces the sun.

But what about the people? It is most likely that awareness of their country’s independence emerged not with the appearance of the first trappings of statehood – the declarations, the constitution, the president – and perhaps not even with the introduction of a national currency. Rather, it emerged only when the authorities introduced a visa requirement for all CIS countries. It was then that the people, completely cut off from the rest of the world, came to appreciate and understand that this was it, this was independence. The total isolation was felt not only because it was impossible simply to buy a ticket and fly to Almaty or Tashkent, Moscow or Kiev. It was also because, at the same time, all foreign television broadcasts were stopped and it was forbidden to subscribe to foreign newspapers

and periodicals. If we were to have independence, it would include “independence” from every kind of foreign influence. The people got used to the lack of newspapers and periodicals, but houses suddenly sprouted a forest of satellite aerials. Even far into the desert where there was no electricity, people switched on their generators to hear the news, watch the serials and breathe in some of the delights of foreign informational freedom. Perhaps nowhere else in the former Soviet Union had the alienation of the people from the authorities become so great.

The authorities even invented an official programme called “10 Years of Prosperity”. A little later, when prosperity didn’t seem to have worked out, the same period was dubbed “10 Years of Stability”. And when the authorities became totally convinced of the people’s submission and outward loyalty, the slogan became “The 21st Century – The Golden Age of the Turkmen People”. Niyazov himself, having adopted the title of “Turkmenbashi” (Leader of the Turkmen), generously proclaimed that the country would have “free gas, water, electricity and salt”. But all this concern for the people really meant was that the authorities had no intention of creating a suitable environment for the competitive growth of a middle class, and would instead keep people dependent on government handouts and under government control.

A true tragedy for Turkmenistan’s intellectual elite was the abolition of the Academy of Sciences, by which Niyazov sought to destroy a nest and source of non-conformist and free-thinking intellectuals. Tertiary and secondary education fell victim to a similar sterilisation process, and the main subject of study became Niyazov’s book “Rukhnama”. A mixture of myths and legends about the origin of the Turkmen people (with Niyazov’s own interpretations of national customs and rituals – and his personal biography), the book was foisted on universities and schools and on society as a whole.

Rukhnama was studied in all factories and offices. To pass an exam or a test of any kind, including a driving test, you had to be able to answer questions on its contents. The book had a 10-metre high monument of its own and Niyazov went so far as to commit blasphemy by promising in public that whoever read Rukhnama three times would go to Paradise and that he had personally asked Allah to grant him this wish.

It is hard to imagine the moral state of a society which for years had it drummed into its collective head that its leader had been chosen by God, that his book was a work of genius and that he himself was infallible. Regrettably, foreign journalists reduced Niyazov-Turkmenbashi to a comical figure weighed down by numerous huge bejewelled rings, a man who had flooded the entire country with bronze, marble and plaster-of-Paris copies of himself. This was a bad mistake. There is no doubt that he was an outstanding state-builder; in less than 10 years he managed to turn a country which could still remember the liberties of the days of perestroika and had the highest educational standards in the whole of the Soviet Union into the modern equivalent of a mediaeval satrapy.¹

All that time, the people stoically bore the burdens and deprivations of their “independent” and “neutral” life. In spite of the rivers of foreign currency which flowed into the country in payment for natural gas, Niyazov managed to restrict his people’s breathing space again and again. It was on his initiative that the number of school years was reduced to nine and university courses to 2-3. Many pensioners were deprived of their pensions and the numbers of teachers, health care workers and all others whom Niyazov regarded as a drain on the budget were mercilessly reduced. On the other hand, acting as the true master of his country, he continued to adorn his capital with huge edifices, facing it all with marble, ruthlessly demolished

¹ In Ancient Persia, a province or territory ruled by a governor (*satrap*).

whole privately owned residential districts and threw people out onto the streets, while building an entire city as a monument to himself. It was a city intended to service his government machinery, a city whose inhabitants hid at home after 9pm like redundant parts of a machine, a city with no one in the streets apart from police guards, standing in clear view of one another.

But everything eventually comes to an end. A feeling familiar to all those who in Soviet times were old enough to understand (and who had lived through the “revolving door” changes of rulers) swept over Turkmenistan when Niyazov passed away. They had lived during the lifetime of the “messenger of Allah” and they were convinced that the “eternally great Turkmenbashi” would live, if not forever, then for a long time. A further irony of fate was that, shortly before his demise, Niyazov had added the word “Eternal” to his title, so that the final version was “Eternally Great Saparmurat Turkmenbashi”. He also completed construction of his mausoleum, the family shrine where he had been collecting the ashes of his closest relatives. With that, he finally came to rest. Forever.

The orphaned Turkmen people didn't have to suffer for long. Especially for them, Niyazov's entourage fashioned a new “reforming president of genius”, which is how Niyazov's successor, Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov, is now known.

When Niyazov died, the Turkmen people thought, and continue to believe to this day, that any minute now fresh winds might blow and perhaps something might change in their lives. Because the fact is that the arrival of independence and the whole period of independence has failed to bring them the most important thing – freedom.

Ukraine

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A land for people, a land for animals

In the spring of 1991 I had just turned 30, and soon after my birthday, my first book, *Don't Take Me to Kengaraks*, was published by Soviet Writer, the Kiev publishing house. The book's three stories were an attempt to come to grips with Soviet history. I wanted to separate history out into positive and negative events, into truth and fiction, but above all I wanted to raise the issue of the secrecy and inaccessibility of history as it really was. Three months after the appearance of my first book, the USSR ceased to exist, the publishing house was re-named Ukrainian Writer, and Soviet history stopped being of interest even to the inquisitive.

And indeed, the recent history of independent Ukraine has proved much more interesting and surprising than any historian could have imagined. It is a history which was written and is being written before our very eyes – with our participation and even under our control.

Ukraine's independence came from Moscow with the severing of the strings which Kremlin puppeteers had used to control the first secretaries of the fraternal republics' communist parties. The strings frayed and broke because of the deep-seated economic crisis which had undermined and refuted the Marxist-Leninist idea. There was no revolution. No revolution was needed. In 1991, no one wanted to take up arms in the name of independence.

The declaration of independence didn't make goods appear in Ukraine's empty shops, but it did produce a feeling of joy and enthusiasm. At the same time I noticed a huge number of pedigree dogs running wild in the streets of Kiev. Before, the only thing you could see on the streets were nondescript mongrels, whereas now we had emaciated, purebred bulldogs and German shepherds. A little later I understood just what was foreshadowed by sightings of pedigree dogs which had lost their warm homes.

What I was witnessing was a change of elites, which meant that many former party bosses who had not managed to change fast enough and find

themselves a niche in post-Soviet Ukraine could no longer afford to keep and feed their “elite” dogs. Some enterprising alcoholics caught the pedigree dogs and took them to Kurenevka, the bird market, where they sold them cheaply to members of the newly-emerging, semi-criminal “elite”.

The early 1990s were tough and dynamic. Soviet laws no longer worked, Ukrainian laws had not yet been made, and no one enforced the very newest ones. The shrewd, the business-like and the light-fingered quickly discovered ways of making money. The simplest one required you to have certain connections in the banks. The inflation rate was staggering. If you had friends working in any of the banks you could get a loan, use the local pseudo-currency to buy dollars and, having waited a few weeks, sell some of the dollars, repay the loan and immediately take out a new one. The loans were not index-linked and were not affected by inflation.

In the meantime, the sharpest people understood that there was nothing as good as parliamentary immunity and they headed for parliament. To this day the Ukrainian parliament includes some of the “heroes” of the early and mid-1990s, people who enhanced their prosperity with a variety of banking operations. They took out large loans using their own homes as collateral. People would rebuild or slightly alter their house and simply not repay the loan. When it emerged that the house differed from the blueprints and documentation on file with the bank as security, and that the owner enjoyed parliamentary immunity, the loan would be conveniently forgotten. The bank forgot about the money and the MP forgot that he had ever taken out a loan. A banker once told me that he had realised that his client would not repay the loan, but was afraid to refuse him because the client might then interfere with the bank’s operations through his parliamentary and government connections.

In 1993 an army officer friend of mine, Volodya P., retired from the army and decided to go into business. He imported paint from Latvia and sold it in Kiev. At the time, small and medium-sized businesses had an uncanny resemblance to Russian roulette. Every business had to have the “protection” of one or another group of racketeers, who in turn acted as tax authorities, bailiffs and judges. For 10 per cent of the earnings they dealt with all breaches of contract, but insisted on being paid “honestly”, that is, the owner of the business in question could not understate his income. Those times could easily be called a period of “triple-entry book keeping”. Many of my businessmen friends kept three sets of books – one for the racketeers, the second one, mostly showing a loss, for the tax inspector, and a third one for themselves. The third set had to be guarded most assiduously. If it had fallen into the hands of the racketeers and they found out that they had been cheated, it could have meant curtains for the businessman. And in fact my friend the former army officer Volodya P. was killed by racketeers who had decided he was cheating them. This happened in 1994.

Today, when there are no more pedigree dogs running through the streets of Kiev, the situation has changed completely and it no longer resembles the end of the last century. The pedigree dogs now live with members of the new elite. It is best not to ask their owners what they did in the early 1990s. On the streets of Kiev the dogs have been replaced by the homeless. Strange though it may seem, this was always the precise difference between socialism and capitalism. Under socialism, being unemployed was prohibited by law and 40 years ago the future Nobel Prize winner, Joseph Brodsky, was tried in Leningrad for this offence. Another law prohibited vagrancy, that is, you were not allowed to be homeless. In far-away New York and the nearer-by Paris the homeless and the unemployed are an integral part of today's society.

For every winner (be it in sports or economics, or in fact everywhere), there is a loser. It may well be that in today's Ukraine there are more social losers than in other countries. Their ranks include not only the homeless and the unemployed, but more often pensioners and the disadvantaged.

Nevertheless, as a country larger than France or Germany, Ukraine must seem attractive to western Europe as a production site and as a market of 47 million consumers. While the locals make fun of politicians or root for them as if they were a favourite football team, the Ukrainian economy is growing steadily and becoming more and more attractive to foreign investors. Polish investors have been developing the timber industry in the Carpathians and western Ukraine, while the Austrians have been investing in heavy industry in Donbas and Lugansk Province, and Turkish and Russian investors have been fighting over the mobile phone market. I would never have believed that some groceries could cost as much in Kiev as they do in Berlin, and sometimes even more, or that I would pay more for petrol than an American motorist and almost as much as a German one. To tell the truth, it no longer surprises me. Ukrainians are quick to adapt to new circumstances and they don't complain too much. If they think the state is cheating them, they will find a way to take revenge and cheat right back. Many businessmen still keep two sets of books. The rackets are a thing of the past, or rather have been replaced by many corrupt government officials in charge of issuing licences, permits and the other paperwork you need to run a business. This is why businessmen often think that bribes should be subtracted from income – making bribes in essence a tax-deductible expense. As a result, they don't pay all the tax they owe, showing the tax inspector the first set of books with the lower figures and hiding the second set under the sofa so they don't forget how well they are actually doing. The fact is, there are now plenty of

opportunities to run small and medium-sized businesses honestly, so that businessmen always have a choice: sleep easy and earn less, or sleep badly, pay bribes, underpay your tax and earn more. Otherwise they can rush into big business, become active members of one of the economic parties (we don't yet have truly political parties), get onto that party's list and be elected to parliament – and do everything they can to gain access to power and to the public purse. But then there will be no time left for sleep, neither easy sleep nor the fitful, nightmarish kind.

Another thing – the prices of parrots in Kiev's bird market have gone up again. The tiny budgerigars and the Australian long-tailed parakeets. Ukrainians are very fond of animals. Farmers love their pigs and cows, and city dwellers love every kind of domestic animal: cats, dogs, fish and parrots. Recently, two Ussurian tigers were discovered in an army unit in Kiev. They were living in a special cage made out of reinforced iron bars. This resulted in a nationwide scandal; tigers are a protected species, every last one of them has been counted and all of a sudden we find two that haven't been accounted for, and they are with the military! Also, what were they fed, and who was paying for it? Without 10 kilos of fresh meat per day they could easily have gnawed through their iron cage! Or could they have been fed meat intended for the soldiers?

Ukraine is a puzzling country, even for those of us who live here and seem to feel they understand it all. The people here are tolerant and cordial, wise and hard-working, in spite of the fact that those trying to get into power are very different, one might say atypical, Ukrainians. Nevertheless in recent years even those in power have improved a little; they have started to fear the people a bit more and that is a good thing. Even in the times of the tsarist Russian Empire, all that was good was done out of fear and not out of a feeling of public duty and responsibility for the country's future.

Ah yes, the future. In spite of constant discussions in the media about whether or not Ukraine can become a member of a unified Europe and NATO, the people take no part in those discussions. Over half of all Ukrainians consider themselves Europeans anyway and a large number of retirees fear NATO just as it was feared in Soviet times. As for the politicians, rooted in Ukrainian agricultural tradition they think that all political decisions are like vegetables – given time, they will ripen by themselves.

And in fact ordinary Ukrainians have long since learned to wait. It was only during the last decade that the younger generation realised that the harder you work, the shorter your wait is for your own glorious future. Therein lies Ukraine's road to success. A land once famous for its hard-working, independent farmers can most certainly regain its glory if only its politicians and civil servants would really support small and medium-sized businesses and implement a sensible taxation policy.

This morning my children reminded me again that I had promised to buy them a parrot. No doubt it is high time. I don't think I can feed a Ussurian tiger, nor would we have anywhere to keep it, but a budgie wouldn't be a problem. After all, a budgie brightens your life and your TV news time. It can be taught to say phrases like "I want to join NATO. Let's get into Europe". And this will make everything lovely – in your home and in our country.

Uzbekistan

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From combine harvesters to irons

There was a coup taking place in Moscow. It was a warm summer evening and I was on my way home. The small courtyard of our five-storey apartment block stood slightly apart from the other houses and there were usually no strangers in it. My parents sat on a bench by the entrance to the deserted courtyard. I caught myself thinking that it was a long time since I last saw them sitting together outside so peacefully and contentedly – I couldn't even remember how long ago. They were breathing the evening air and thinking their own thoughts, and it was clear their thoughts echoed one another and were pleasing. I went up to say hello and my father, after replying, said to no one in particular: "So that's it then. It's all come back. Now we will live as we did before." Without having to be told, I understood that he was speaking about the coup.

The collapse of the Soviet Union brought with it a strange time. The vague hopes born of Gorbachev's perestroika were replaced by general confusion – not in their wildest dreams did anyone think that the USSR would collapse so rapidly and irreversibly. Everyone was still expecting something else to happen. My Uzbek friends from well-educated families expected that, at last, a deserving politician would come to power, while Uzbeks from the provinces hoped they would soon be rid of Moscow's diktat (which they saw as the source of all their troubles). Both were confident that Uzbekistan would now become a rich and flourishing state. The country's Russian-speaking population, myself included, expected pogroms and a blood bath. Rumours of an impending slaughter of "infidels" were spread, it now seems to me, by the "infidels" themselves or, as is claimed today, by the secret services. In any event, no mass events of this kind took place in Tashkent. It all became quite laughable and after each rumour of an impending riot not even the trolleybuses travelled alone – they went in pairs.



But things like this only sound funny when you're looking at them from the outside. All these rumours arose from the usual shortage of information. There was talk of the violent ethnic clashes in the city of Osh but the talk was obscure and frequently implausible. Nevertheless, I did see buses packed full of sullen cadets leaving the police school, located in the centre of the capital, for an unknown destination. There was talk of a major disaster in the Osh Province, in which several buses with passengers had burned but this didn't in any way affect the mood of the people because they were just rumours, although, in fact, they were not rumours but something different altogether.

At that point, my little boy caught hepatitis (it was a common illness among kindergarten-age children at the time) and every day after work I went to visit him in hospital where he was staying with his mother. It was the same hospital that Alexander Solzhenitsyn had described in his book *Cancer Ward*. So, to return to my story, at the time when we heard about the disaster with the buses, ambulances arrived at the burns unit after sunset for two evenings running, bringing dozens of stretchers with burned bodies. They came after sunset so that there would be fewer witnesses to the scale of the tragedy. No relatives waited for them since they had simply not been told where the victims were being taken; the business-like efficiency and terseness that accompanied the unloading process was perhaps the most oppressive thing, more oppressive even than the terror stories told in the queues.

But all that came later... In the late 1980s, Tashkent truly lived in expectation of change. To some this seemed terrifying while to others it seemed promising. Needless to say, the young were the vanguard of the freethinkers. At the time, I talked to a fellow student who was in the Uzbek-speaking group. We had a good relationship and were able to talk without bringing nationality issues into it. My fellow student maintained heatedly

that the time had come to establish our own, purely Islamic state, free of communist ideology. When I commented that not everyone wanted to establish such a state, especially the authorities, he was in no way embarrassed:

“We will achieve our goals, whatever it takes. At first by persuasion, and if that doesn’t work, then by force.”

“But this will produce riots. Moscow won’t accept this kind of new Uzbekistan. They will simply send in the troops.”

“So what? Heavy hoes in hand, we will defend our independence!”

“Yes, but the troops won’t be armed with hoes, they’ll have automatic weapons and you will hardly be able to do much against those.”

“You will see, the people will understand us and will rise up with us. The troops will not shoot at the people.”

Little did I know how right I was. A little later, in 1992, Tashkent’s students did rise up. They rose up against the atrocious living conditions, against the steady rise in food prices, against the senseless changes which were being depicted as so necessary to establish independence but which in fact were the result of the authorities’ wretched, dead-end policies. The people didn’t support the young because they knew nothing of what was happening in the student quarter and when they did find out, it was too late. The authorities asserted their power and remorselessly shot the defenceless demonstrators. That was the start of the new era in Uzbekistan.

At the time I was working as a correspondent at a large-circulation, in-house newspaper published by the Tashselmash Association. Our company manufactured cotton harvesting equipment – more specifically cotton

combine harvesters. Yes, the very same “blue ships sailing through the white cotton fields” that you could see on the shiny posters serving as the iconic PR images of our country. The time was 1989-1990 and the euphoria created by perestroika was dying away. The first ration cards, what we called “coupons”, appeared in the country (unlike the inhabitants of many Russian towns, these had been virtually unknown to us until then). Massive shortages that could only have been the stuff of nightmares became the order of the day. We were saved by what was left of the Soviet distribution system for essential foodstuffs. Families were guaranteed a certain quantity of cotton seed oil, several pairs of galoshes, rice, flour, cloth, etc. People started to find ways of coping. Ration levels were too low for Uzbek families with a lot of children so Russian families who didn't use much cotton seed oil and didn't care for rubber boots exchanged them with their Uzbek neighbours, friends and acquaintances for things they really needed. No one could understand where the products which had for years sat unwanted on supermarket shelves had gone to. People bought up everything. At around that time, Russian factory certificates appeared and were widely circulated. They guaranteed the holder the right to exchange them for the factory's products after a certain period of time (one, three or five years). The system worked because inflation was high and it didn't look like it was going to be curbed soon. A car manufacturer, let us say Moskvich, would issue a form of security which could be redeemed at a fixed price for one of the latest models of a car from the manufacturer's range. The holders of these securities were guaranteed that, whatever the inflation rate, they could exchange their certificates for the cars without having to pay anything extra. It was a good thing that at the time my parents didn't have enough money for a Moskvich. They bought washing machine and sewing machine certificates, as well as a new colour television certificate.

Needless to say, they weren't able to exchange their certificates after a year, or five or even 10 years, and my mother still has them lying around among her things.

At our own factory, production came to a virtual standstill. Representatives of our American competitors, John Deere, started to show a real interest in the Uzbek market. By then, Tashselmash had lost all its foreign customers. As a result, the plant with its vast capacity stood idle, like most other Uzbek enterprises. It underwent a strange and drastic "conversion". The management decided to focus on consumer goods and ordered it to produce irons. I have held those irons in my hands. They were beautifully designed and made of first-rate steel but you had to heat them on a gas hob! Do you remember your grandmother's old iron which she heated on hot coals? That was what Tashselmash was going to produce now.

There was a coup taking place in Moscow. It was a warm summer evening and I was on my way home. My father, speaking to no one in particular, said: "So that's it then. It's all come back. Now we will live as we did before." Without having to be told, I understood that he was speaking about the coup.

My parents didn't know that on the same day my friends and I had been discussing the idea of producing a paper using the facilities available at Tashselmash. I put a lot of effort into persuading them to abandon the plan, simply because I knew that the KGB had the imprints of all the printing presses in Uzbekistan and would round us up just a few hours after our paper or our "rag" made its appearance. We left it for the future. Time moved on and in the future that came, Uzbekistan did not become the great country it had the right to be. And that was not our fault.

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Design

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Translation

All stories translated from Russian by Krystyna Livingstone.

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One Exchange Square, London EC2A 2JN

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