

AT THE HARRIMAN INSTITUTE

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Maxim Trudolyubov Foresees Change in Russia

“The Russian state is an archaic, almost pre-modern collection of institutions that doesn’t do the things that it is supposed to do,” Maxim Trudolyubov, an editor and columnist for the Russian daily business newspaper *Vedomosti* stated during his talk at the Harriman Institute on February 17, 2011. “It produces enormous wealth for the top government employees but does not do much for the public good. There is a constant fight between the people who are trying to play by the rules and those who are not following them.” After painting this bleak picture, Trudolyubov expressed optimism about Russia’s future. He predicted that the efforts of what he called “the third generation”—those Russians who are now in their thirties and forties—will eventually result in lasting, positive reform to Russia’s failing institutions.

“Russia desperately needs change,” asserted Trudolyubov. “And not the kind of rapid, disruptive regime change that is happening in the Middle East right now, but a long gradual transformation of its fundamental institutions.” He explained that Russia “got halfway to modernity during the Soviet times—it urbanized, industrialized and its system of values changed from traditional to secular.” While Russia now has a highly developed, educated population, Trudolyubov lamented that the country has not seen much progress over the past twenty years, “we have an essentially pre-modern state where no rules apply.”

Twenty years ago Russia experienced “disruptive change”—the Soviet Union fell. “Right now, I don’t think that any sweeping revolutionary change is possible, and of course, it isn’t really welcome,” contended Trudolyubov, arguing that instead, change will come from the efforts of people like the blogger Alexey Navalny, who is an important figure in the anti-corruption movement in Russia. According to a *Time.com* article, published last March, Navalny “has arguably become Russia’s most relevant political renegade.”

Trudolyubov described Navalny as “one man doing the work of a state anti-corruption agency.”

Navalny started out as a traditional politician, but “then he realized that trying to cross the current with traditional politics was impossible with the Kremlin destroying it, so he decided to work his way through the door of the anti-corruption movement.”

Navalny, who is only 34 years old, has a tremendous following. He’s gained momentum through online fundraising. “Raising money online might seem obvious, but in Russia, it is a very new concept.” Trudolyubov emphasized that this “concept” has given Navalny’s blogging efforts credibility, “it produced trust. He isn’t backed by a Western grant. He’s not coming to the Russian people as someone sponsored by the West, particularly by the United States.” Trudolyubov noted that while Navalny’s blogging promotes democracy, the word is never mentioned. “His blog isn’t seen as a way to spread democracy, and that is why it’s actually starting to work. It’s strange, but we are really at the stage where if you just don’t use the word, even if you have the substance, then everything is fine. As long as you don’t call it what they call it in American textbooks.”

Navalny’s blog is called “RosPil,” which means “to saw up.” It is a slang term used to describe the way that the Russian state appropriates funds. “Thirty percent goes to what the money is actually meant for, and the rest goes to government officials.” Trudolyubov explained that this type of corruption is not exactly bribery, but is “essentially the taking advantage of state resources. It is so rampant, it’s amazing. These people have made themselves very rich.”

Trudolyubov, admitting that this was a “simplification,” divided Soviet and post-Soviet history into “a history of three generations.” The first generation was born around 1917, the year of the October Revolution. “These are the people who have never seen pre-revolutionary life.” At this time the Russian population was mostly peasants, “I would say about 85% lived in the countryside. Those who were born in cities were the children of the revolutionaries themselves.” Trudolyubov explained that by the 1960s about

70% of the population was urban. “The first generation lived a very hard life; it had to build a living from scratch. They influenced the second generation very much.”

“The second generation” was born in the early 1950s, “the generation of Vladimir Putin.” According to Trudolyubov, it was heavily influenced by the first generation, “they have very similar mentalities—when they were children the second generation got the message that they had to enjoy what they earned by working hard and leading a life of consumption.” While most families lived in communal apartments during Soviet times, the goal was to have a “separate apartment.” The next step for this generation would be to have a dacha, and “owning a car would be the ultimate achievement.”

“The second generation wanted to actually enjoy consumption, which wasn’t possible for their

fathers.” Trudolyubov attributed the current propensity towards extreme luxury among well-to-do Russians to this desire. “That’s what we see now, the huge palaces that are still being built around Moscow—for instance the huge St. Petersburg-like palace that was built for the chairman of Gazprom and resembles a Disney park. I think that this is where this tendency has come to an absurd end.”

Trudolyubov (along with Navalny) belongs to “the third generation.” He believes that in it, “there are a lot of people who really want change,” and that they will be able to accomplish the modernization that was started, but not finished, during Soviet times.

Reported by Masha Udensiva-Brenner