

What Do Russian Leftists Dream About?: A Collective Portrait - Members of the Russian Socialist Movement (RSD)

Sunday 20 March 2016, by [BABUSHKIN Evgeny](#), [MEDVEDEV Kirill](#), [PLOTNIKOV Vladimir](#), [REZNIK Aleksandr](#), [TIMOFEEVA Oxana](#), [TSVETCOFF Alexei](#), [VILKOV Sergei](#) (Date first published: 4 February 2016).

Who are today's leftists? What's the problem with liberals and patriots? What are the political goals of the left and how to achieve them? Do leftists want to bring back the USSR?/ dekulakize everybody?/ abolish the difference between the smart and the stupid? What does one need to read/ watch to become leftist? The *Furfur magazine* published an extensive interview with contemporary Russian leftists, members of the Russian Socialist Movement (RSD): the journalist Sergei Vilkov, the poet Kirill Medvedev, the publicist Ivan Ovsianikov, the psychoanalyst Vladimir Plotnikov, the historian Alexander Reznik, as well as such figures of Russian leftist culture as the philosopher Oxana Timofeeva and the writer Alexei Tsvetcoff.

Evgeny Babushkin - Let's start with the biggest question: who are the Russian left today?

Alexei Tsvetcoff, writer (Moscow): The left is in favor of the expansion of access, for an increasingly broad range of people, to everything that society generates, be it food, shelter, or education. A leftist is a consistent democrat, who carries the principles of democracy beyond politics and into economics. In my own Soviet childhood I read a lot of science fiction and I liked the description of communism there, albeit without understanding the reality around me in this way. During perestroika, all the adults disillusioned with communism turned to liberal or right-wing values, an easy betrayal of their earlier ideals that left me shocked. So at 14, I decided to be the last communist on earth.

Oxana Timofeeva, philosopher (St. Petersburg): To be on the left means to think universally. Socialism, internationalism, feminism - these are the main principles by which the left is united. Oddly enough, these principles are much more complicated to understand and master than the ideas of the right, namely racism, sexism, and homophobia. It is much easier to believe in archetypal nonsense like the idea that Jews eat children than it is to really read Marx and understand how surplus value works.

Aleksandr Reznik, historian (Perm): The left is made up of those who know that society can change for the better. The left is convinced that social injustice, exploitation, obscurantism, and other such "eternal ills" demand to be destroyed. The invisible hand of the market does not exist, and likewise there is no invisible hand of socialism. What we need is for those who are aware of their historical responsibility to fight.

Ivan Ovsianikov, union worker (St. Petersburg): To be on the left means being an enemy of the status quo. The left is made up of the contemporary inheritors of liberation, an anti-medieval project that began as early as the years of the great French Revolution (that word gives itself away). Leftists oppose reactionary forces, defenders of privilege and tyranny, and enemies of reason, but so too do they oppose supporters of compromise, moderates, and collaborators.

Kirill Medvedev, poet (Moscow): To be on the left means understanding that you are part of dynamic material, and that even that which seems natural and immutable to you (the color of the sea, the structure of a forest, the forms of the clouds) is defined by human activity in its historical and class forms. And in order to get this social material moving in the right direction, we need efforts that transcend the limits of private lives, private careers, private creation, private charity, hopes for technological progress, parliamentary democracy, and other such wonderful capitalist achievements, which can no longer guarantee us anything.

Vladimir Plotnikov, psychoanalyst (St. Petersburg): The left believes that the world should be free of inequality and other forms of one person's oppression by another. In contemporary society, this means first and foremost overcoming the market economy, minimizing the influence of the state, and breaking free from the oppressions of xenophobia and chauvinism.

Sergei Vilkov, journalist (Saratov): To paraphrase Marx, being on the left means understanding the fundamental order of things.

So what's wrong with liberals? They're also in favor of all these good things.

Alexei Tsvetcoff: Liberals cultivate individual freedom, but their freedom derives from the basic ability to buy and sell the labor of others. They nicely call it economic freedom, but this is in fact the freedom to exploit. Liberal ideology is an eternal market that never ends and an eternal bourgeoisie, which serves as the apex of social evolution and an unattainable ideal for the majority of losers who aren't lucky enough to belong to the ruling class and scale society's Olympus. Liberalism is the absolute power of transnational capital over man, dressed up in the freedom to have hair of any color and any kind of jacket.

Sergei Vilkov: The problem for even the most sincere liberal is that he considers compliance with formal democratic procedures and the emancipation of the market to be sufficient conditions for universal freedom and prosperity. But there cannot be equality between a business owner who is able to financially lobby for his interests at the state level, and his ordinary worker whose political power is limited to the ability to cast a vote once every few years.

Ivan Ovsianikov: The liberal ideal is not democracy, but the power of an "enlightened elite." On the one hand liberals insist that they want individual freedom, small government, that sort of thing, but on the other they stand for the freedom of rich individuals to profit at the expense of the less successful. Ultimately these notorious rights and freedoms are a fiction for 99 percent of the population. It goes without saying that such economic inequality isn't reflective of a lot of people in the liberal camp, who just want honest elections and an end to repression. Those people I would call democrats, not liberals.

And patriots — what don't you like about them?

Ivan Ovsianikov: I'm Russian: I love churches and birch trees. I don't suffer from Russophobia, nor do I plan to emigrate. But to call oneself a patriot, with people like the Surgeon and Milonov so strongly associated with "patriotism"? No thanks, for now I'd rather stay a rootless cosmopolitan. Patriotism here has attracted some really stuffy reactionaries. They invent these fetishes — the

Russian world, traditional values — and you either bow down to them or, if you don't, you're part of the "Fifth Column."

Kirill Medvedev: Patriotism isn't bad in the sense that it means loving your neighborhood, city, district, or soccer team; it's bad when it becomes a state religion that lets you rob and destroy both your own people and others.

Alexei Tsvetcoff: Patriots profess collectivity, but this collectivity is distorted by a repressive hierarchy; a belief in eternal inequality; the necrophilic cult of ancestors and the lands where they lie; and by a fixation on a "norm" that is given from "above." Politically, patriots always end up defending the local bourgeoisie against the transnational one, which is really no better. Generally speaking, history is doomed by this defense.

Vladimir Plotnikov: Liberals and patriots have much in common. Both favor a market economy under the leadership of a handful of oligarchs. As for so-called values and civilizational differences, these things are deeply secondary and alluvial.

So what do leftists want?

Kirill Medvedev: The ultimate goal is free and universal access to basic goods, education, information, culture, and medicine.

Oxana Timofeeva: I want to live in a just, free society, which is not only comfortable, but also lively and interesting. I want no one to die of hunger or cold, and for everyone to have food, water, and shelter. But that's still not enough: in a just society, along with these basic things, one should be able to develop themselves freely and creatively. Right now this is permitted only to a few; the majority must constantly think about how to earn money, and how to pay off debts and credits. Love and art are off limits to them. Poverty eats away at a man's soul. There should not be rich and poor people either within a single state, nor should there be rich and poor states.

Ivan Ovsianikov: We want communism. We want a society that mobilizes all of its economic capacity to the rendering obsolete of social inequality, xenophobia, and statehood. Mankind's turn to communism is an anthropological revolution, probably on the order of that of the Neolithic era. I don't think I'll live to see this, though I may catch capitalism's fall. If you're talking about more mundane goals, I'd like to see Russia become a parliamentary republic with a strong workers' movement and a left democratic party in power. I'd like to see strategic resources nationalized along with the growth of an industrial economy, ensuring a key role for trade unions and other workers' associations. I'd like to see national wealth distributed according to the interests of the majority, and above all to those of the most disadvantaged groups. I'd like to see direct democratic institutions developed at the local level, and local self-government becoming a real force. Of course health care and education should be free, and there should be a real separation of church and state. I also dream about Russians no longer discriminating against women, or panicking about LGBT people. For this, though, it's not enough to have good intentions: we need to increase the material and educational standing of the masses.

Aleksandr Reznik: Our goal is communism. And in the interim, it would be great to see the expropriation and socialization of the means of production, as well as the taking of state power with an eye toward its ultimate extinction.

Vladimir Plotnikov: I want to live in a country free from dictators, poverty, jingoistic hysteria, and thieves. The realization of such a "minimum program" still doesn't mean that real socialism has been built, but only a leftist movement can achieve this.

Sergei Vilkov: The goal is to contribute to the cause of giving man power over his own future. I do not think I'll live to see this, but I'd like to depart this world knowing that this hope is alive again.

And how does one start?

Kirill Medvedev: With the nationalization of large industries like oil; worker control of all companies; and the combination of grassroots forms of democracy (unions and assemblies) with parliament. Install deputies with specific mandates from voters and that can be recalled – deputies who, like state bureaucrats, earn the same as the average worker. Bar any radical right-wing movements that sow ethnic and religious hatred. A real separation of church and state. Support trade unions, cooperatives, and companies based on collective ownership and decision-making. Compulsory free education and free medicine.

Ivan Ovsianikov: In the first place you need a radical grassroots revolution against the old elites, old parties and oligarchic clans, and from Yelstin's authoritarian 1993 constitution. Roughly speaking we need February 1917 instead of Maidan, which is sullied by nationalism, and leaves the social order unchanged. This revolution needs to form a strong left pole – a party in the broadest sense of the word – which enters into a power struggle with nationalists and liberals, keeping them from driving people back into a stall in order to commence the next round of “unpopular reforms.”

Aleksandr Reznik: The left should promote self-organization and the workers' struggle wherever it's most useful, and even when the results in terms of protecting privileges are modest, if it helps awaken people's political consciousness. It's essential to support mass citizen protest against the regime and aim to win, to disrupt the ideological hegemony of liberals and “patriots.”

Sergei Vilkov: We will nationalize major industries and resources. We'll restrict the activities of political forces that seek to return these assets back into private hands. In workplaces we will create electoral councils of labor collectives, which will become the main mechanism for controlling production processes. They will decide on the candidacies of all factory and workplace directors. We will organize the greatest possible state investment into infrastructure and industry, education, academia, and systems for electronic participation in our democratic processes. We will promote the creation of large independent media on a cooperative basis under the auspices of public organizations. Building upon the work of local industrial councils, we will hold elections and organize similar bodies up to the national state level. We will transfer power to them. A board of experts and specialists, elected by a national congress, will co-ordinate the work of the local councils. We will bring back an unlimited multi-party democratic system.

Vladimir Plotnikov: We have to dismantle the regime that's come into being under Putin. That means lustrating all parties to the system, eliminating ultra-right forces as well as the stranglehold of organized criminal groups. It means nationalizing the production of the entire hydrocarbon industrial complex, and placing it under the control of trade union and civic organizations. That income will be used to expand social welfare, replace the current presidential system with a democratic republican model, and to introduce a universal minimum income. This is what will allow us to build what would be a relatively free and humane society in Russia.

Alexei Tsvetcoff: In a New Declaration of Human Rights, which would be created and implemented by the left, there would be a right not to sell oneself, by which I mean a universally guaranteed minimum income set at the poverty line, albeit introduced in stages so as not to simply provoke mass sponging. There needs to be a right to free housing, and a right not to go hungry. The minimum amount of food that a person needs should become completely free. There should be a right to live one's life—not only medical care, but also medicine should be completely free. Finally, there should be a right to free, quality education. We need as quickly as possible—something that could make use

of online resources—to achieve universal higher education for all citizens. This is just a transitional program. Further along, we need to move to an ecologically sustainable mode of production, and a society that isn't governed through commercial competition. In such a society there would be a huge explosion of creativity, a record drop in crime, and an amazing growth in technological innovation. After that, capitalism, with its primitive labor incentives and speculative rules of exchange, will remain forever in the past.

How do you feel now about the USSR?

Kirill Medvedev: I don't feel good about state terror, about the destruction of revolutionaries, poets, workers and peasants in camps, about the resettlement of whole nations, about the endless sanctimonious bans and restrictions on culture, and about a lot of other things. But I'm not prepared to go on record about all that in some spirit of repentance before those who would have preferred Hitler, Vlasov, Thatcher, Pinochet, or Yeltsin.

Ivan Ovsianikov: You need to really hate Marxism to assert that a socialist society was built in the USSR. If I was talking with a Stalinist I would stress that under Stalin the Soviet Union turned into a bureaucratic empire, in which a privileged class of party and state officials ruled, claiming to do so in the name of workers and peasants. The Great Terror, of which thousands of Communists became victims, cannot be justified in any way. But if I were arguing with a liberal, I would point to the unquestionable social, economic, and cultural achievements of the October Revolution, which were never completely destroyed during the years of Stalinism and subsequent decades.

Sergei Vilkov: It was a tragic, failed attempt to break through into a new world, but which quickly became a caricature of the old one. The first bourgeois revolutions bore exactly the same fruit. At least the USSR didn't just make it possible for Russia to become the center of world history but also became seen by a huge swathe of humanity as a landmark in the struggle for justice. It was a complex experience of terrifying mistakes and sensational victories, which was paid for in blood, but to which future generations can still look for inspiration.

Alexei Tsvetcoff: It was a unique system, which gave people maximum economic equality, but a minimum of personal freedom. But what's more important is that it provided a historical example where a classless society became the general developmental goal of an entire civilization. It's useful to distinguish between the different Soviet eras. Two of my favorite Soviet decades were the 1920s (constructivism, Rodchenko, the Left Front of the Arts (LEF), Tretyakov, the Comintern, Vygotsky) and the 1960s (Ilyenkov, Lotman, the Strugatsky brothers, the New Program of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, the alternative "Kommunarsky" teaching method, Gennady Shpalikov). The Soviet Union collapsed because it didn't fit into the post-industrial turn that had happened in the West. It never found its own version of "Post-Fordism." And so it lost a kind of civilizational competition, having overplayed its hand in the arms race.

It seems as though you all still want to implement a kind of redistribution of wealth, similar to the early Soviet collectivization model of "dekulakization"—demonizing and targeting the wealthier groups in society.

Alexei Tsvetcoff: Where have we seen situations where leftists have made their systems work using wage labor? In Chile, Allende nationalized the corporations and guaranteed all the country's children with free milk. Typically, it's the people who actually have something to lose who are afraid of redistributing wealth along the lines of "dekulakization." In our country there just aren't that many of them. So we're talking about opposition from those people who have benefited from Russia's experiment with capitalism, and those who are in cahoots with them. For everyone else, it's a matter of not associating with those people who are going to have their wealth redistributed, while

everyone should be standing with the people who are going to be doing the redistributing. In my opinion, it's a beautiful thing—to take the masters palaces away from them, and give them to the people. No?

Kirill Medvedev: If you're dealing with some sort of compulsive fear, then the best thing to do is talk about it with a therapist. I happen to think that we need a guaranteed universal minimum income, a wage that doesn't vary too widely for all workers (with a gradual decrease from the current unlimited number of hours worked to a maximum of two hours a day), as well as a slightly higher ceiling for those who are willing to work more than the norm.

Ivan Ovsianikov: When I hear people talking about how communists want to “take everything away and divide it up”, my usual response is to point out that capitalists want to take everything away from the poor and share it among the rich. And they don't just want this—they do it every day. There are 62 people who have the same amount of wealth as the poorest three and a half billion of the world's population—that's half of humanity! So, yes, we are going to take a lot from those guys, not so we can divide it into three billion pieces, but in order not to divide it up. Socialism means public ownership of the means of production and the fruits of social labor. The economy needs to work for society as a whole, to serve its development—not to make a bunch of parasites rich.

Sergei Vilkov: There's no need to expropriate small-scale business, because it caters to certain consumer niches left by the planned economy. Large-scale, nationalized enterprises would naturally force it out anyway, in the same way that it's getting squeezed out by corporations today.

But you don't differentiate between people who have talent and those who don't . . .

Ivan Ovsianikov: They are no different in that they both need food, housing, health care, and schools. Maybe we'll have less untalented people if we actually provide them with equal opportunities.

Oxana Timofeeva: Talent doesn't just happen. Every talent needs to be given the opportunity to develop. Under capitalism this gets hindered by economic constraint—the necessity to sell one's labor in order to pay for housing, food, study, and everything else.

Sergei Vilkov: Socialists do not see people as equal in their abilities. It's about giving them equal opportunities for self-realization. That shouldn't depend on privilege, material or otherwise.

Aleksei Tsvetkov: I've met dozens of talented folks living in poverty, and hundreds of mediocre people who've done incredibly well for themselves. Inequality takes root in an organized and institutionalized process of theft, one where production is essentially social, while its results get privately appropriated. This is what is irremediably absurd about capitalism. And it works within a totally legal framework, along with the right to inherit the results of that appropriation.

And what about all the stupid and lazy people like me? They'll just get a free ride . . .

Aleksei Tsvetkov: With the ways in which teaching would develop, and with universal access to a quality education, there would be fewer and fewer lazy and stupid people with each generation. It would mean a society of passionate innovators, where not making a contribution wouldn't just be uncool, it would be immoral, and carry with it a very low social status.

We already see the technological basis for this in Europe and the United States. Modern technology has increased labor productivity so much that there isn't the previous need for mandatory work from so many people. That is precisely how a basic income for everyone has become possible, and why it is being discussed in Europe today. Should this kind of practice be successful, in the next few years

we are going to see a new, more humane type of capitalism, and a new type of citizen. Survival is no longer going to be the incentive to work for wages. It will mean that there will be more complex motivations for people to participate in production and exchange.

Oxana Timofeeva: We need to forget the idea that it's essential for everybody to work, find a career, be successful, and perpetually improve one's quality of life. Nobody owes anything to anybody. If a person doesn't want to work, let her or him not work. It's critical that the society in which we live gives us that option. Ideally, any kind of labor should happen freely, and on a voluntary basis. Both the economic and simultaneous moral compulsion that move people to work today constitute a form of slavery, and it's only those on the left who are asking how we might overcome that. It all comes down to the fact that, in capitalism, labor is the primary commodity. We sell our labor, and we can't imagine a life outside of this endless rut of selling oneself, the basic template for which is prostitution.

Under communism, labor wouldn't be exchanged for money. It would be based on love and mutual desire. The lazy could relax because there would be no need to worry about money, or food, or having a roof over one's head. There would be enough bread for everyone. What and how much one consumes wouldn't depend so strictly on what and how much you produce. We need to think beyond what wage labor teaches us, where life itself becomes a means of producing and profiting. There is no such thing as stupid people. There are people who don't do so well at school. But this is something that we will also fix. Things are going to be better with us than they are now.

Vladimir Plotnikov: All people are stupid and lazy. Even Freud talked about this. Nobody wants to work, no one wants to study—they just want to lie around and enjoy themselves. Nevertheless, life is such that one way or another we get drawn into doing certain things, and some we do well, while others we do poorly. We just need a way to organize people's socialization, so that the potential they have can be realized.

Aleksandr Reznik: Leftists need to be smart and not lazy. There aren't many of them to begin with, while the task in front of them is of historic proportions.

What should people read or watch to better understand what you're talking about?

Ivan Ovsianikov: *John Steinbeck, The Grapes of Wrath; Lars Von Trier, Dancer in the Dark; Leon Trotsky, The History of the Russian Revolution*

Aleksandr Reznik: *China Miéville, Iron Council; Terry Eagleton, Why Marx Was Right; Leon Trotsky, Literature and Revolution*

Alexei Tsvetcoff: *Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, The German Ideology; Vladimir Lenin, The State and Revolution; Raoul Vaneigem, The Revolution of Everyday Life*

Sergei Vilkov: *Friedrich Engels, The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State; Vladimir Lenin, The State and Revolution; Victor Serge, Midnight in the Century*

Kirill Medvedev: *Vladimir Lenin, The State and Revolution; Leon Trotsky, The Revolution Betrayed; Victor Serge, From Lenin to Stalin*

Vladimir Plotnikov: *Émile Zola, Germinal; Günter Grass, Local Anesthetic; Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, The Communist Manifesto.*

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P.S.

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