

# Victor Erofeev

## Russia looks Europe in the eye

Europe is doubtless less well-acquainted with Russia than Russia is with Europe. That was patently always the case and the tradition continues. For Europe, Russians were exotic savages. The Soviet Union also differed from Europe in its savagery, it was an exotic power, and one with global ambitions and a missionary ideology, but then the exoticism for Europeans was tinged with fear. Indeed the fear reached an all-time high, since Europe felt threatened by Russia even in the days of the tsars, who were keen to bring order, as they saw it, to Europe.

For us, Europe was the least exotic continent in the world, seen rather as the measure of all things, an unattainable standard and a tirelessly striven-for ideal. Right up to the heyday of fascism, we in Russia suffered from Europe-fever, with an inherent, sometimes maniacal passion. Now, in the 21st century, that portrait of our inner, spiritual relations with Europe has faded and become opaque. As ever, we love the comforts of the European way of life, but the boldness of philosophical, political and artistic decision-making in Europe has palpably waned. I once asked a certain Polish minister of foreign affairs, now no longer alive, who, in his opinion, was Europe's brightest politician. He thought for some time and eventually recalled somebody from Luxembourg. His answer really seemed to confirm a European decline long-awaited by our countrymen. But now Europe is paying Russia back in kind as with regret it watches the decline of our democracy.

"Russian and European souls - can they walk together?" was the title they thought up for my presentation in Strasbourg. A title describing souls walking along together sounded abhorrent to my ears but for a European it was little short of romantic as it was also recognising that Europe had a soul.

It is clear that we have a childishly simplistic attitude towards the Council of Europe. When the Council of Europe is on our side, Russia loves it but when it is against Russia, it can go to hell! In Europe itself there are two opposing views about our membership. One was expressed by Charles de Gaulle, who drew the border of Europe at the Urals. The other is well-known to our Polish friends who consider that the border of Europe runs along the Wisla and even the eastern, poorest and hardest-drinking part of Warsaw does not fall into Europe. On the whole though, I believe that Europeans consider Russia part of Europe: like an enormous room in the European home that has not been aired for a long time, with unwashed floors, full of spiders and cockroaches, but we are not beyond hope – if we are cleaned up, if they buy us a big vacuum-cleaner, we can clean up our act and become a dapper member of Europe.

The most obvious example is culture. From the middle of the 19th century we had intermingling cultures which, as banal as it sounds, complemented and enriched each other, generously and without friction. It would be superfluous here even to mention names like Tolstoy and Chekhov. But Russia's actual presence in Europe was a rather dubious matter. After all, it would be difficult to call the Canadian soul European, yet where did it come from, if not from Europe? And if we look at the Russian soul, it is opposed to its western counterpart in many respects. The Russian soul lives as ever in magical fairy-tales, separating the home-grown heroes from the strangers, expecting miracles and not believing in hard work. Twice in the last century, in 1917 and 1991, having abandoned humane values (as if they were completely irrelevant), the Russian soul floated in society, Titanic-like in cold, catastrophic waters. Its political immaturity left it vulnerable to varied manipulation. If a foreigner asks what Russians think about that Europe, it is clear that they understand nothing of Russia. You might as well ask how the weather is in Russia at the moment. We are terribly fragmented us, each living in our own spiritual climate.

Each of us has retained certain values. Where from? From family, books, from the television, from our experience of survival. But we each have our own experience, our family traditions. We are like people holding a bag of multi-coloured marbles – each marble a value we have retained. One marble is democracy, another a sense of empire, a third is nationalism, a fourth – soviet thought, a fifth – Orthodoxy, a sixth – state patriotism, a seventh – liberalism, and so on. Everyone has a different number of those coloured marbles. Someone has 68% democracy in their bag, another has 75% nationalism. We hold on to our bag of values and find it difficult to settle things among ourselves. Every time we start negotiations all over again – that is the essence of Russian debate today. The Russian soul is torn apart by contradictions. It has a tough time, and no one helps.

Nevertheless, there are some things that are permanent fixtures of the Russian soul. First and foremost, there is imagination. The Russian soul is full of imagination. It is a good basis for creativity, of whatever form. It is a good basis for fears, hopes and conspiracy theories. The Russian imagination draws pictures of happiness. The Russian soul wants to be happy. It is slightly naïve and somewhat similar to a child's soul. But when something stands in the way of its happiness, it can throw a major tantrum.

The Russian soul is polarised, doesn't like compromises. It is a mix of contrasts. It can love and hate at the same time, be obedient and rebellious, take power and yet prepare for revolution. A soul like this is difficult to manage. You can only feel sorry for our government.

Finally, the Russian soul looks for the meaning of life. It cannot live life without searching for its meaning. This is driven not by religiosity, it's in its nature - an eternally searching for life's meaning. The Russian soul looks for the meaning of life, finds it, is enthralled, becomes disenchanted, and then starts looking all over again. That is what our grandfathers did. Our fathers, we ourselves and our children are also searching for the meaning of life.

All these qualities make the Russian soul a great subject for literature. It is an interesting thing to describe. Every Russian family is a subject for a novel. We are all heroes of the novel that is called Russia.

Our common weakness is our political immaturity. Traditionally, it was the Russian intelligentsia that thought on behalf of the Russian people. People still cling to archaic concepts of public life.

When I fly from Moscow to Paris, London or Strasbourg, I tell my friends "I'm flying to Europe", and they all understand. When I fly from Moscow to Peking or Tokyo, I tell my friends that I am flying to Asia. And they understand that too. It is understood where I am flying to, but not where I am flying from. Moscow is neither Europe nor Asia, but stands alone. On the one hand that is a good thing. Moscow is the sum of its own parts. But on the other hand, it is estranged from both East and West. Moscow is not only a world apart, but also judges others by the laws of its own world. In Russia Europe is loved or criticised not from within but from outside. Poland has no choice. It is Europe. If it is dissatisfied with Europe, it is actually dissatisfied with itself. Our Russian attitude towards Europe is far more complex, marked by duality. The majority of the educated Russian population have always been ready to love Europe more than Europe is capable of loving them, we have loved Europe to the point of hero-worship. But on the other hand, Europe remained terra incognita for a great many simple Russian souls. And in a final twist, Russian conservative power saw a threat to its own existence in the liberal principles of Europe and was prepared to go on the offensive.

Of course, the European soul is more responsible for its own actions than we are. But we are unable to take full responsibility for them – in Russia, that possibility has long been very remote. The main difference between present-day Europe and Russia is not that same-sex marriages are recognised there and not in Russia. It is that, there, the State is obliged to serve the individual, whereas in Russia it is the individual that is obliged to serve and go on serving. And yet, even if the individual serves faithfully, even grovels, one day he/she will be thrown onto the scrap heap all the same – that applies to today's sycophants too.

Russia's ruling elite believes deep-down that the State must serve it, but it is equally sure that the people must serve the State and even give up their lives, by serving in the army.

At this level, we have grounds for serious confrontation. Europe believes that Russia is restricting the freedom of its citizens and waging war on the opposition and sexual minorities. Europe gives Russia lessons on how to live. It considers that its principles are superior to Russia's. This is terribly annoying for government-controlled Russia, which does not believe that Europe is better. On the contrary, it thinks that Europe accumulates mistakes, that Europe is in decline, that the consumer society is not the best model for human society and the failure of multiculturalism in Europe is the consequence of its own impotence.

Paradoxically, though, when Russia criticises Europe, it suggests no alternative, as it did in the days of the Soviet Union. Russia itself is moving towards a consumer society, and it is rocked by inter-ethnic conflict nearly every day, particularly in the Caucasus. It is looking for a new form of national ideology and is now trying to find one in Orthodoxy. A union between the Russian State and the Orthodox Church is very dangerous, fraught with extreme forms of nationalism, taking Russia to the brink of an Iranian-style disaster. But as things stand today, such a union is only one of the options for Russia's future.

Another possibility for the future is the resurrection of the Soviet Union. In my country, where half of the population see Stalin as a positive historic hero, a resurrection of this kind is possible. It pleases our patriots, it gives them strength and it reinforces their concept of life. As a rule, these are people with no higher education. It is important for them to have an enemy in their sights. In any case, a renaissance of the Soviet Union will not be possible without the participation of Ukraine – that country's decision on whether to join Europe or draw closer to Russia will be pivotal. The same can also be said of Georgia.

The revival of the concept of the Soviet Union is already complicating dialogue between Europe and Russia, but how far we will go back to the USSR is difficult to say, because the ideological basis for it is all but completely absent.

God is dead – this slogan of Nietzsche's has been taken as authoritative knowledge in Europe. But passionate immigrants full of religious dogma do not live on inertia, quite the opposite. As it grapples with human aggression, repressing its appearance, Europe is putting on its safety helmet. Safety belts, safe sex, safety razors – these are the new symbols of Europe. When all is said and done, the fate of European man must be decided by anthropology and not bureaucracy.

Long before Spengler, Dostoyevsky sought out the old stones of Europe and did not like its new-fangled aspects. Perhaps that full-bodied Rubenesque essence of Europe is what every generation seeks.

The wolves that may eat Europe up are its emaciated and denatured values, values that are becoming increasingly devoid of their primary content and essentially exist on a formal level. This decline into disorder is taking its toll, and Europe is living a haphazard existence as a result. Contemporary European writers are telling the whole world about this; they see the haphazard as a great adventure game. A game that is replacing meaning. If we analyse the life of a European, the most important thing is missing from it - there is no meaning of life. Or rather, this is not something that people like to talk about. Conversations about the meaning of life or any other metaphysical issues prompt irritation and sarcastic smiles. Europe associates metaphysics with the teachings of the Church, which it sees as a vestige of history. The European is born in the comfort of material things, valued in terms of the effort necessary to obtain them. Education views the classical values of Europe in the same way as Latin, which formed modern languages but itself became a dead language for dead people. The consumer society has turned the European into a fashion victim. Work is turning into a race for second-rate kudos. You only have to look around the flat of an ordinary European family to understand what I am saying. It is no coincidence that the concept of 'Evro-remont' – European-style renovation – has popped up in Russia: a big white space full of the most suburban-bourgeois cosiness and homeliness desperately trying not to look suburban-bourgeois. All that effort for a show of style. Europeans are constantly occupied; they have even turned their leisure time into an occupation that leaves them no time alone with themselves. Here too, we see the disembodied wolves of Europe: people have lost the notion of self-discovery. Self-discovery of an existential kind has turned into practical tips about beauty, health and pastimes. Life has become boring but boredom goes unnoticed within this existence because life is a wall-to-wall struggle for what is generally considered to be a decent standard of living.

The ideology of Europe has been reduced to a set of common notions. Democracy has had a makeover into political correctness. Liberalism has morphed into tolerance. The hierarchical pattern of culture has been discredited as a form of disrespect towards the electorate. Culture has become horizontal. Meanwhile, authority has preserved its pyramid structure but it is unseemly to talk about this. Europeans have felt the discomfort of this big white space and turned back to archaic nationalism. For safety's sake, any risks entailed by life have to be eliminated. The anti-smoking campaign is just the first step. If football brings out fans' aggression, why not emasculate football? European man is frightened of the aggression he emits. He does not want to acknowledge that it is in the nature of man, in the same way as the sexual object subsists in a woman. Europe is forfeiting what makes its human beings picturesque.

Men who fret about being sexist are turning into cuddly little creatures. Humans cannot change their nature at a single stroke without looking ridiculous. Have a sex change, and you will understand what I am talking about. Europe is becoming a never-ending stampede towards something resembling an old people's home but with better food. True enough, you can leave that home for a trip to Africa or Cuba, to enjoy something more exotic. To cap it all, you could even pop over to Russia and breathe a sigh of relief on your way back from that unpredictable place. The world has become simple, like a business lunch menu. Europe has bolted into the bushes to hide from the bandits it might meet on the highway. With neither God nor atheism and no clearly expressed forms of political life on the right or left of the spectrum, it is increasingly becoming a laughing stock for those very immigrants it invited in out of feelings of guilt and political largesse.

Europe, like a woman, thinks that it is attractive. Everything will be fine until she loses that illusion.

But we will still get married! What is more, we will get married both for calculated gain and for love. Our souls, Russian and European, will live together as one heterosexual family. There will be slanging matches but no physical violence. Of course, it would be better for Russia to move in with Europe than for Europe to move in with Russia (as was partly the case with the Soviet Union)... well, it sounds like a joke now.

And in the meantime, you Europeans should not be surprised if Russia's statesmen do not love you: your ideals coincide with the white ribbons of the Russian opposition, but it is the victor who decides who is locked up in prison and not the vanquished. Whether it means to be or not, Europe is shaping up as half-friend, half-foe for an indeterminate period but this temptation of the devil will pass. We will get married!

The trouble is, so many of our political dimwits take the view that all Europe does is stir up Russo-phobia on the orders of the USA and quiver with hatred towards us... Oh yes, by the way I have a request: abolish visas! Get rid of this needless nuisance! All our gangsters are already in Europe anyway, and all the prostitutes too! And normal people are being messed around...

I don't know, do you think they will listen to me?