



Low Trust in a Time of Plague

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The plague of 2020, as future historians may not call it, is a time for taking stock of our relationships, social, personal, and professional. When contact becomes more risky than usual, and instructions from on high appear restrictive or contradictory, a great many people will ponder their own existence, sometimes for the first time. The contagion has only briefly touched my small, adopted home town of Belgorod. It is in southern central Russia, about 30 miles from the border with Ukraine, and 60 miles from the city of Kharkhiv, that country's second city, and home to my mother-in-law. Belgorod Region is rural, think Norfolk, but the area of Belgium, and the city itself is like Edinburgh in terms of population, and Leicester in terms of cultural sites. By Russian standards, Moscow is nearby, only 450 miles away, because any place reachable within twelve hours by train or car is considered 'the neighbourhood'.

Normally, nothing happens here. But now ... nothing is happening here. As I write, we have had one case of the virus, the lowest rate of infection of any Region in the country, but we are now on lock-down, by orders from Moscow. Things have changed, though. The mood has darkened, especially among the elderly. In 1974, a propaganda piece coined a new term for the next step in human evolution, *Homo Sovieticus*. As with all things aspirational at the time, it soon came to represent its mirror image, that of a complaining, cynical, uncooperative, but conformist person, that will begrudgingly end up doing as they are told. The latter was Alexander Zinoviev's distillation of *Homo Sovieticus*. For this person, now in their sixties or older, the willingness to self-isolate is tinged with their twin articles of faith, that you can neither believe the authorities, nor defy them. They have been buying dry food for about 10 days, but avoiding pasta. The entrance to our flats is a gathering place for the old people from my stairwell. Most days, when the weather is fine, you will have to pass through the obligatory small talk to get in or out. It is usually good natured. Five days ago, the informal leader of the old people in the block asked me for a not insignificant loan until pensions are paid. He comes to me when someone needs an advance for medicine, and always keeps his word. I had it to spare, so I obliged him. When I walk the dog in the morning, I am only ever in the company of other dog walkers and elderly fitness fanatics. Recently, they have been choosing to walk among the trees and away from the paths. They used to be in pairs, now they do their brisk walking alone. My conversations with them used to be frequent, now I cannot find them.

And what of my generation, *Homo Post-Sovieticus*? This is the generation that came of age in the 90s and 2000s. My contemporaries are the most pragmatic of Russians, profit-driven and materialistic, as befits the circumstances of their youth. Their concern appears to be rather narrow. All of them asked the same question I did, when we were informed of the closure of the University where I work, 'Will I still get paid?' Putin's recent address was aimed squarely at them, his natural supporters. A suspension of bankruptcy, mortgage holidays, and State aid for small businesses, all were designed to lift their morale. The President also announced a fresh attempt to repatriate off-shore funds, one in the eye for the oligarchs and the wealthy, that

include the political elites. The middle classes that make up the bulk of Putin's support are keen that nothing damages their hard-won wealth. In the UK, I always had the impression that the middle classes felt that they were entitled to their wealth and lifestyle, I have never had that impression here. Stability is equated with lifestyle, the more, the better. What drives my contemporaries, is a sense that they are losing out, or that it is all so unfair. This still obsesses them, even during a plague. A recent comment passed by one of my colleagues ran along the lines of, the private clinics are hoarding the medical supplies, and Moscow has all the best doctors. Both statements are probably true. Another colleague believed that her workload would increase, because the authorities would use COVID-19 as a way to make more people redundant. Maybe.

That brings me to our students, *Homo Internetus*. The youngest among us are the most global in their outlook. They are experts on propaganda, as they engage in it every day, both as producers and consumers. In a post-truth environment, they disseminate miracle cures, memes, and wisdom and encouragement in equal measure. They trust only themselves with a religious fervour, and for them, a lack of self-confidence is the main barrier to self-fulfilment, while the machinations of the elite block them further out of self-interest. While they are much kinder than their parents, they are utterly bewildered by *Homo Sovieticus*, the President's generation. Most of them are so disengaged from the rest of society, they are convinced that it is a myth. I had a recent discussion with a class just before we closed, where they postulated that society was a tool of oppression dreamt up by the illuminati to keep us from knowing the truth. Sophisticated English – yes. Sophisticated world-view – hmm.

An Austrian colleague made up his mind recently on whether he liked Russia. He said that he never felt that he could get close to Russians, because he didn't trust them. When pressed, he said that Russia was a 'low-trust society', and therefore, how could you have deep relationships with people predisposed to dishonesty. I could not argue with his logic, but my Russian wife is testament to how much I disagree. Individually, Russians are as honest or dishonest as anyone else, but the trust in authority has never been resolute here, as evidenced by the civil disorder and State violence which are a strong feature in the history of these lands. Now, in these times of plague, the lack of faith in authority has combined with the inertia of individualism, and the self-interest of consumerism, to create a murky, philosophical soup, which cannot nourish us.

Spring is in the air, sun and cool breezes. It is time to prepare for barbecues and walks by the lake. Exam nerves, Easter food, weekend shopping in busy markets, visiting friends, restaurants and theatres, are all memories for now. Like everyone else – we will wait and see.

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