

The coronavirus is stirring the impulse to communism

By Aleksandr Buzgalin, translated by Renfrey Clarke



“There would never be happiness, but for the help of misfortune”

Russian popular saying

The coronavirus pandemic has laid bare the most acute problems of our collective life, its main contradictions.

One aspect of this is constantly being exacerbated by the mass media: we have come to fear one another. We dream of cutting off international contacts. We want to refrain from personal communication. In everything, we see the hand of the Chinese (Americans, Italians, Russians – insert as required). One more step, and racism will start appearing. We have begun talking about the birth of a “new world”, in which people are not just scared to shake hands with one another, but are *afraid of one another* in general...

There is, however, another side to the coin. People are “suddenly” discovering that there are many things in the world that cannot be bought for any amount of money, and that the most

difficult problems cannot be solved by relying on the “invisible hand of the market”. That we cannot solve them alone. That our world is one, and that all of us have to work together to save it, since however important quarantine and isolation may be, we can only defeat this calamity by *acting together, all of us, the world as a whole*. Quarantine is not so much a means for us to save ourselves, as it is an imperative for saving everyone.

From general utterances, we have to progress to facts, and to try to work out their implications. We have to seek to understand the essence of the problem, and to come up with a strategy for solving it.

Self-isolation as the road to...solidarity

Fact number one: we have begun to be scared even of our friends. Circulating on the internet is a grim joke: “Friends, in these difficult times we have to keep as distant from one another as possible.”

But there is also a different trend. Rational market egoists who only recently were preaching the slogan “everyone for themselves” are beginning to understand we are all in the same boat. Something is changing right before our eyes. Even if it is not quite the rule, the urge among young people to help their elders and participate in the work of volunteer organizations – something that only recently was an amusing exception – has become a mass phenomenon. At six o’clock in the evenings, Italians on their balconies applaud medical staff, and sing songs to one another. Students at Moscow State University ask their teachers who are older than 65 not to hold back from requesting help. In the youth subculture, mutual help is becoming a trend not just in the ghettos of the left, but also in mass social networks. As the main watchword informing people’s lives, individualism is no longer as sacred as it was a month ago.

The mega-malls are empty, and we are suddenly finding in practice that it is possible to live without shopping. That existing for the sake of buying a new car is not cool, but more likely stupid. That it is possible to read books and watch movies as a whole family. The mirages of the consumer society are beginning to tremble, to melt away and disperse in the new social atmosphere...

No, we have not yet arrived at the victory of communism, but for the first time since the demise of the “actually existing socialism” of the late Soviet era, millions of people have started to think seriously about other things apart from money, prestige brands and embracing the latest trends. They are starting to think about the possibility of spending their days in a world not of competition but of solidarity.

Even liberal politicians are no longer afraid to utter this word – *solidarity*.

Why? Because this is what life demands. *The struggle of each against all and the invisible hand of the market cannot solve the problem of the pandemic.* The struggle against it requires, in the main, non-market measures. The main forces of resistance to this *shared* calamity are state regulation and public initiatives, mutual help, self-restraint, and the subordination of people's egos to the solving of problems we have in common. The popular interest, denied by liberals for centuries, is becoming a reality obvious to all.

But!

But modern national states, and still more the world market controlled until recently by global players, are incapable of solving problems that require the coordinated action of people who trust the authorities – that require action in the interests of the majority, not pandering to the interests of financial capital and of the oil (media, etc.) corporations. Around the world, a clear picture has emerged: *the weaker the public sector, and the more oriented the state is to the interests of oligarchs and bureaucrats than to those of society, the greater the numbers of people whom the virus is cutting down.*

The alternative is quite obvious – planned, direct (non-market), solidarity actions by the state and civil society to support vitally important systems. In the first instance this affects health care, social security, infrastructure, energy supply and the associated productive capacity. Here we can and should proceed boldly to the socialization (under public control and with transparent functioning, subject to management in the interests of society) of both private and public corporations, and to violating the dictates of market institutions. We need to follow the path of drawing up clear, transparent, new rules that are consistently applied and that aim at the realization of general popular interests. Here the principle of the inviolability of private property, and the interests involved in maximizing profits, must be relegated to secondary status.

Which states will be able to do this, and in what measure, will depend both on the citizens and on how clearly, consistently and actively we demand that the authorities take these steps. It is time to recall the seemingly utopian slogan of romantic leftists: *“For people, not profits!”* This is what the pandemic places at the forefront.

The virus is “democratic” – consequently, social justice is to everyone's advantage

Fact number two: the virus, after its own fashion, is democratic. Everyone gets sick – government ministers, show-business stars, billionaires and beggars. The virus is a leveler, but it does not level everyone, and not in all respects. The pandemic has placed a question mark over the ability of money to resolve all matters, but it has not provided an answer. As in the past, a different system of relations holds sway over the world: some people live in luxury and are able to be treated in ideal conditions, while others – billions of them – lack money even for simple medicines. These latter people are not only citizens of poor countries on the global “periphery”. They include the tens of millions of people in Russia who live on 10-15,000 rubles per month, and migrants in our megalopolis cities...

The paradox of the global pandemic, however, lies in the fact that when beggars are sick, this poses a mortal threat to *everyone*, and members of the establishment are not exempted. Either we solve the problem together, and for everyone, or all of us will finish up in ever-increasing danger. For all of us to join together in solving the problem, those who have hundreds and thousands of times more than others must, at a minimum, share a substantial part of their wealth. This is an imperative, and not only a moral one; it is indispensable for overcoming the pandemic. The funds needed for overcoming the pandemic will have to be provided by the millionaires and billionaires, and not by limiting their investments, but by restricting their personal consumption. The restrictions involved here will be essential, since in this way, no-one will suffer. Not even the plutocrats themselves; for the duration of the pandemic, they can put off buying new yachts, or redecorating their palaces.

As recently as the winter, a serious discussion about whether the interests of society could take priority over those of capital seemed impossible, though even then it might have seemed that the looming economic crisis should have forced people to start thinking about such topics. But at that time, as the Russian saying has it, a roast chicken did not peck them.

Now it has pecked them.

I cannot say that the owners of capital forgot immediately about their profits and became filled with ideas of handing their incomes over to the fight against the infection, though a few symbolic steps have been taken.

The truth is, the profits have not been forgotten.

Now too, the owners of capital are readier to agree to half of humanity being infected than to agree to place a ban on offshore financial havens, or to redirect the bulk of their personal spending to fulfilling public needs. The mass of the population, however, are coming to

understand that it is necessary to force these people, at a minimum, to start sharing a little. The state too is beginning to understand this. It has been used to serving the oligarchs, but it now feels a tingling in its spinal cord that says it is time for it to recall its responsibility for the lives of its citizens. On *this* question, we cannot forgive the state for its inertia and indecisiveness. Meanwhile, a few individuals from the clan of millionaires and billionaires are starting to recognize that it is better to share a part of their incomes and even property, than to live in a world of epidemics and quarantines.

Whether relatively decisive actions will follow this incipient change in social consciousness depends once again on us. A number of states, even the Russian Federation, have begun taking the first timid steps, but for the moment they are preferring to consume their reserves, made up of funds created by the labor of their citizens...

Meanwhile, the problem in any case cannot be solved by national states acting on their own.

Closed borders as a prologue to...internationalism

Fact number three: the pandemic is a problem of all humanity. It affects (directly!) every one of us. The virus has shown that it is in the interests of *every* citizen of *every* country that the problem is solved throughout *all* the world. Neither in the vastness of China, nor in tiny Moldavia, nor in our native Russia can we hide from the virus. The paradox is that while closed borders, quarantines and isolation are necessary, they are necessary as a means for slowing the *global* spread of the virus. The quarantine in China has proven to be vitally important not only for the Chinese, but also for the citizens of the whole world, including for us Russians. By closing off their country, the Chinese have helped us prepare ourselves to solve the problem. The same applies to Italy, and to us as well. Even if through some miracle we stop the virus in Russia, but do not save humanity from it (and from all subsequent viruses!), we shall not make *ourselves* safe, since the next virus (or some other global problem) may not stop at the barriers in the international airports.

The virus has shown the vital importance of the principles of friendship between peoples and of internationalism. The medicines needed to treat the pandemic include international solidarity. This involves more than help to the countries and regions where the situation is most difficult. It also includes help to the countries and regions where the degree of poverty is such that they cannot solve their problems on their own. We would now need to help them even if we were thinking solely of our own interests.

Perhaps the main thing in this context is that all the achievements in the struggle against the virus, all the new discoveries, all the different ways of creating a vaccine and still more, the

vaccine and the technology for producing it must belong to humanity, free of charge and without limitations. There must be *no restrictions of private intellectual property* applying to a vaccine against the virus, no matter who creates it or where.

Is such a decision possible within the space of the neoliberal “rules of the game”, that are now flavored with nationalism and right-wing populism? Even yesterday I would have answered, “No”. But the situation is changing before our eyes and changing rapidly. Here is an example, an amusing one. In Russia people love anecdotes, which as a barometer of public opinion reflect the moods of the majority better than any surveys. Over the past two weeks socially pointed anecdotes about the coronavirus have become extremely popular. I shall relate just one of them, which came to us from Europe: “You pay millions of euros a month to show-business stars and footballers,” a scientist complains, “and 2000 euros to biologists. Now you want a vaccine. All right then, go to the ‘stars’, and see if they can come up with a vaccine for you.”

In this joke, as in many others, there is an element of tragic absurdity: the world of late capitalism, after sustaining itself through the production of simulacra (stars, derivatives, brands, trends, hype), has turned out to be incapable either of preventing or of solving the problem of the virus (and it may be that it set the virus loose on the world, dooming hundreds of thousands, if not millions, to sickness and the threat of death). This world has to be changed. On the very eve of the pandemic, the beginning of the second world economic crisis in the past twenty years was pointing indirectly to this. Now the pandemic points to it directly.

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To wind up: the impulses of solidarity, justice and internationalism are early signs of the emergence of the new society that for a second century now, in tortured fashion and through contradictions, blood and sweat, has been in the process of being born. A hundred and fifty years ago Marx and Engels termed it the “realm of freedom”, communism. That is its rightful name, and it has the appropriate content: solidarity, justice and internationalism.

And also freedom. The freedom to come to know the laws of historical development, and to change the world in accordance with them. It is time to change the world; tomorrow may be too late. If today we do not move resolutely to the left, then descending on us tomorrow will be the brown plague of fascism, more terrible than any coronavirus pandemic.

The alternatives are again on the agenda – “either communism, or barbarism”.

P.S. This article has its origins in thoughts that occurred to me over two or three days recently in the course of dialogue with my comrades of the Alternatives movement Lyudmila Bulavka, Andrey Kolganov, Natalya Yakovleva and others. I turned these thoughts into the present text literally in the space of an evening. And literally the same evening, after I had written this text, I encountered two internet articles on almost exactly the same topic – by the well-known Slovenian intellectual Slavoj Žižek and the young Ukrainian activist Yurii Latysh. Then on 28 March Sergey Kurginyan, appearing on Russian Public Television on the program “Right to Know”, spoke of the need for a rebirth of the Soviet man and woman as the only way to solve the problems now being piled upon us.

That was a good sign.

The spectre of communism is again haunting the world!

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<http://links.org.au/coronavirus-stirring-impulse-communism>