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“In Russia, we are experiencing shame, voicelessness, and the collapse of all the values”

Saturday 22 October 2022, by [BUDRAITSKIS Ilya](#), [VILENSKY Dmitry](#) (Date first published: 16 October 2022).

A dialogue with artist Dmitry Vilensky of the “Chto Delat”/“What is to Be Done” platform about the war in Ukraine, the transformation of the Russian regime, and what Russian cultural workers can (and should) do today

The Chto Delat/“What is to Be Done” cultural platform was created by artists and philosophers almost twenty years ago and has become one of the most striking examples of politically engaged leftist art in Russia. In recent years, Chto Delat members have also made enormous contributions to education and helped foster a new generation of activist artistic initiatives. This milieu, which played a prominent role in the movement against Russian aggression, is now the target of a crackdown by Putin’s security forces in St. Petersburg. In early September, after being searched and interrogated, leading members of Chto Delat, Dmitry Vilensky and Olga Yegorova (Tsaplya), were forced to flee the country. In this dialogue with political philosopher Ilya Budraitskis, Dmitry Vilensky reflects on the war in Ukraine, the rapid transformation of the regime since the war began, and gives his opinion about what Russian artists and activists can (and should) do today.

IB: A month ago, police raided your and Olga Egorova’s (Tsaplya’s) place, and you had to leave Russia, threatened with criminal prosecution. As far as I understand, most of the members of the Chto Delat group are also already outside the country. In the large-scale case currently being investigated by St. Petersburg police, you are apparently assigned the leading role in an underground anti-war network that needs to be suppressed. In other words, the very existence of *Chto Delat* is virtually outlawed (since in Russia today the law has been reduced to the pure will of the “sovereign”). Was this outcome inevitable? After all, back in spring, despite the alarmist moods of part of the Russian activist and artistic scene, you believed that it was necessary to keep creating “spaces where discussion, uncensored speech, and the reproduction of new forms of life are possible and will be in demand later.” What has happened since then, and how has your position changed?

DV: Certain objective factors came into play here. State control has penetrated the subtle spheres we are dealing with. Indeed, before September 1, we planned to continue our educational program and to make Rosa’s House of Culture into a nomad organization in collaboration with the remaining independent venues. Now that there is the danger of a major criminal case against our whole community, I do not know how we can continue this work. Moreover, following the search and seizure of our computers, Tsaplya and I have acquired a kind of toxic reputation. Our comrades are afraid to contact us, even though we have already moved abroad and are using German SIM cards for all social networks and messengers. But all the same, there is still a fear that we, not those who still use Russian SIM cards and providers, will be bugged...

We can already say that the hope of being able to work in a semi-public confidential sphere, as it was

in the days of the dissidents, has already collapsed, and perhaps only the most closed and secure communities can survive. But recent experience shows that digital security and encrypted communication are even more of a problem than conspiracy in the Soviet “analog” period.

As for my leading role, it is hard to say: we have never engaged in direct-action projects or activist art and have always been quite distant from social work. On the other hand, we have managed to create and maintain a significant infrastructure of independent artistic and educational projects, and now, after the escalation of the war, maybe this has become more visible. Many have long said that artists are next in line, but we still hoped that maybe we have not yet reached this stage and that [the security forces] have more important things to do. There was a stack of Ukrainian passports on the table in the investigator’s office...

IB: For almost two decades, Chto Delat’s activities have been closely tied with the evolution of the Russian regime — from controlled democracy with its limited public life, through the more explicit authoritarianism of the second half of the 2010s with its semi-dissident atmosphere, to the overt dictatorship of the present. Your strategy changed accordingly: from almost explicitly political forms (street actions, participation in leftist cultural and political coalitions), the Chto Delat group shifted toward education (the School of Engaged Art, Rosa House of Culture). These changes, it seems, were not just a reaction to circumstances but a search for form in which these circumstances could be the object of artistic reflection and analysis. All of your artistic works also had a profoundly historical character, which could even be used to compile a kind of textbook for studying the principal stages of Putin’s rule. However, only now, since the outbreak of war, can we finally grasp the primary vector of contemporary post-Soviet history: the road to catastrophe. To what extent does an understanding of this catastrophe lead to a revision of the entire previous artistic experience of *Chto delat*? After all, you (and I, too) have never been fatalists and have never believed that all our efforts were in vain and that the country’s fate was predetermined decades ago?

DV: Thank you for your appraisal of our work — a “historical character” is precisely what we were aiming for, and in hindsight, it seems that we have achieved it. Looking back at our old films, publications, and installations now, you can see how they reflected their time and showed traits that we only intuitively felt.

Catastrophe is one of our most important concepts. From the outset, our positions were close to the Benjaminian understanding of history as a series of disasters. But up until now, our perception was somewhat speculative. It seems that after talking so often and so much about the catastrophic state of the world, we were not quite ready to find ourselves in the epicenter of some infernal vortex. For all the horror of the war, Ukrainians seem to have an optimism and a heroic hope for victory. There is attention, help from all over the world, and an aspiration to build a civic nation. At the same time, in Russia, we are experiencing shame, voicelessness, and the collapse of all the values that we tried to discuss and that we sought to implement.

September 21 was a turning point of [the regime’s] militaristic death throes: with the mass exodus of draft dodgers, the direct terror of mobilization, and the first serious grassroots protests in Dagestan and Yakutia. Things became even more unpredictable and catastrophic. Talking about predestination is always slippery and speculative. Unfortunately, finding no rational reason for this insane war, we keep hearing more and more voices saying that it was all predetermined by the entire history of Russia, and we often hear that some mythical “Russian culture” is to blame. Indeed, everyone is hypnotized by the insanity of events, by a kind of extravagant, suicidal collective drive, which cannot be described either by Marxism or by the logic of the neoliberal world order. This is why they feverishly describe the events in the genres of fantasy, conspiracy theories, and essentialist speculation. It seems to me that some archaic tragic scripts have been set in motion. And we actually worked a lot with the genre of modern tragedy. Let’s put it this way: “Western and global

contemporary art” is about striving to improve life. If there was a problem, you identified and critically analyzed it, made contact with the community, and created some kind of process together (necessarily with a positive attitude). Singing folk songs, collective embroidery, planting a vegetable garden — and boom! — The world became a better, more tolerable, more livable place. The Russian conception of art always contains an element of tragedy. It proceeds from the fact that the world has always been and always will be unbearable. This feeling of life’s finitude and inevitable suffering (and its purifying nature) may mark us from birth. This attitude is partly to blame for the darkness that has befallen our country. With all the horror of the consequences of such a view, we cannot say that it is entirely inadequate, as this position has its roots in history and philosophy. But it dictates a particular type of behavior — from resignation (humane or totally pessimistic, when the positive course of history is called into question) to the most horrible forms of necropolitics.

IB: Yes, at this precise moment, the idea of tragedy in art seems critical to me. According to Adorno, genuine art reveals and undermines the untruthfulness of the present, which always tries to present itself as the true and only possible one. In Putin’s Russia, until very recently, culture played a normalizing role, reconciling us with reality (and, moreover, leading us to turn a blind eye to its most repugnant aspects). After the outbreak of war, this reality of the Russian regime, its absolute cynicism and inhumanity, finally came to the surface. It is emblematic that recruitment centers are now being organized by the authorities in such citadels of cultural consumption as the Museum of Moscow. It is highly possible that private contemporary art museums like Garage or GES-2 will soon send their visitors to war immediately after they have viewed their exhibitions. Benjamin said that every monument of civilization is also a monument of barbarism: we are witnessing the one transforming into the other right before our eyes. Obviously, art — especially art so profoundly connected to Russian society as yours — will have to do something about these vestiges of Putinism’s cultural policy. What might this look like? And is it even worth thinking about today?

DV: A long time ago, when I would ride my bicycle past the vast, historical building of the St. Petersburg Academy of Arts, my imagination would spring into motion, and I would visualize myself and a crowd of artists and activists storming the building, breaking into the office of the rector, a certain Senya Mikhailovsky, and kicking him out of the rector’s office. And this incredibly huge Academy building would become a squat, just like the Palace of Trade Unions during Maidan. But I fear these sweet and exciting dreams are far removed from any possible future. Instead, in the future, Senya will embrace Marat Gelman and swear that he has always hated Putinism [note: *Marat Gelman, now a Russian art collector and a spokesperson for emigre liberals, led the Kremlin’s spin campaigns in early 2000s*]. It is worth remembering that the founders of the documenta exhibition, who promoted the revival of the avant-garde tradition in Germany, used to be Nazis. I am referring, for example, to Werner Haftmann, a prominent German Nazi art historian and later three-time documenta curator, member of the SA and NSDAP, and an active participant in the suppression of the Partisan movement in Italy.

But, really, the impact of catastrophe can also be purifying in many ways. New issues arise, but they are no longer only fashionable trends imported from elsewhere (such as “decolonization”), rather they stem from our own experience of events. The problem is that in Russia there has always been only a little of the good, and the most positive changes have not changed this overall balance of power. The descent into barbarism is already too deep and terrible. The great misfortune is that the experience of these events is mainly negative. We and the world strongly desire a just and complete victory for Ukraine. Still, I’m afraid that it is unlikely to create a new progressive agenda based on cultural internationalism, the rejection of the oligarchic model of democracy, the expansion of workers’ rights, and resistance to new forms of clerical control (for example, in Poland, the main ally of Ukraine). All of this is hard to imagine now since we do not see or hear these voices in this terrible war, which, in this respect, is very different from what we have known before.

In the context of this war, it is now a huge problem, and even a complete obscenity, to say something like, "It's more complicated than that." The situation demands simple answers. Paraphrasing Godard's formula, we see that "there's no room for nuance in class struggle." Some believe that complexity of analysis and positioning will return after the war is over; others think that we are doomed to be stuck with this simplified picture of the world, where arguing positions is no longer possible, for a long time. Only victory at all costs over absolute evil. It is unclear what will happen, when, and how, especially today, on October 10, when the war has inevitably entered a new destructive and tragic phase. And I am terrified that even more terrible events will already have taken place by the time this text is published. And I very much wish and hope that the people of Ukraine will persevere and be able to create some new reality that is not as terrible as it has been for the last 8 years since this war began.

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