

REVIEW ESSAY

Public debate in Russia: matters of disorder, edited by Nikolai Vakhtin and Boris Firsov, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2016, 288 pp., £75 (hardback), ISBN 978 1 4744 1168 4

When I accepted the request to review this book, I was intrigued by the title, but had not the slightest inkling of what awaited me. In the event, I found the scope and contents not only intriguing, but also – Russia being Russia – singularly perturbing. The volume contains 13 chapters written by a medley of linguists, sociologists, anthropologists, historians and literary scholars attached to universities in Russia, France, Israel and the UK. The chapters range over wide domains of Russian linguistic history and experience: the specification of totalitarian language, letters to the editor at the beginning of Soviet times, the rhetoric of socialist meetings, legal language in the nineteenth century, so-called public aphasia, the past and future of Russian public language, and satirical discourse.

At one moment we are reading about the famous correspondence between Ivan the Terrible and Prince Kurbsky; then we are learning about Catherine the Great's attempts to produce a law code on the basis of consensus and appropriate forms of discussion; before long, we are with Lenin at the second congress of the League of Russian Revolutionary Social-Democracy Abroad in London in 1903; elsewhere we are treated to an unravelling of therapeutic discourse on contemporary Russian television; and then, we find ourselves observing the general meeting of an allotment association in St Petersburg – grassroots democracy indeed. The entire vast sweep of subject matter confronts what the editors, Vakhtin and Firsov, call 'a chronic, and neglected, socio-cultural malady', a grim legacy of the period of so-called 'mature socialism' introduced under Brezhnev in 1981. It is worth citing in full their description of this malady:

Twenty years have passed since the last revolutionary transformation of Russia, but no effective mechanisms for the public discussion of vital problems have yet been developed in that country ... the register that would serve for the situation of speaking in public in front of an audience that is unknown and not necessarily friendly, which would convey one's point of view to one's opponents and successfully bring the two positions together, *is almost totally lacking in modern Russia*. (Vakhtin and Firsov, p.1, added emphasis)

The various authors proceed to address this convoluted issue from a multiplicity of contemporary and historical perspectives. Their insights, based on extensive research, provide an authoritative glimpse into one of the most pressing issues facing Russian society today. One contributor asserts that the lack of experience of participation in tolerant public debate leads to a 'multitude of breakdowns in communication which can be expressed by the metaphor of public aphasia' (Gladarev, p.186). The Russian language itself is said not only to lack resources for participative discourse, but also to be hampered by its very complexity. The editors again: 'Russian society is still trapped by the dichotomy of "officialese" and informal discussion, neither of which is satisfactory as the basis for constructive public debate' (Vakhtin and Firsov, p.7). In similar vein, Tissier (p.85) adds that these 'two predominant registers of language in Russian social reality' exist in opposition to each other. This book is in large measure devoted to explaining the nature of this opposition and accounting for its historical roots. But the quest to reconcile the two remains, as we shall see, very much work in progress.

We learn that the Soviet language, the prime ideological vehicle of the Communist Party, which was designed to eliminate opposition to its own agenda, was anathema to participative public debate (which is hardly surprising). In a chapter on Russian and newspeak, Krongoauz (pp.40–1) notes that 'in this language the meaning is typically not so much manipulative as

incomprehensible or obscured.' It has caused 'a degradation of the Russian language', not, of course, an unfamiliar charge. With more precision, Kelly (p.105) points out that there were several different Soviet public languages, but this observation does in itself not weaken Krongauz's comment about the damage inflicted on the Russian language; in fact, the very plurality of forms may enhance it.

In Soviet times, according to Vakhtin (p.28), 'people were taught at school and university to defend the only correct position.' It follows that those who do not hold this position are not worth arguing with; in fact, they all too readily open themselves up to denunciation (Kalugin, p.54). In Stalin's time, this could be a prelude to a firing squad or a long stint in the gulag. Kalugin (p.52) also points out that the lack of a public register was in fact a marked characteristic of imperial Russia, noting that there has been an 'intensification of imperial rhetoric around the situation in the Ukraine' following the annexation of the Crimea in 2014 and the imposition of Western sanctions.

In short, the absence of a public language and the persistence of the Soviet-influenced register, as characterised by 'logorrhoea and vacuity' (Firsov, p.158), has hampered not only Russia's path to parliamentary democracy, but also its embrace of a market economy. In the crisp formulation of the British economist Hanson (2011), Russia continues to observe 'free market pieties with Soviet practicalities.' At every turn then we are presented with 'the difficulty of disentangling the Russian mind from its near or not so near relative, the Soviet mind' (Hingley, 1977, p.203).

Among the Russian contributors there is a general conviction about their fellow countrymen's inability to listen and to sustain social dialogue with unfamiliar people. It is worth quoting Gladarev (p.196) on this point:

To be successful in interaction in the public sphere – in Other People's space – a person must have specific skills for presenting his own arguments and criticising other people's. Observations of meetings among the public of St Petersburg have revealed a complete lack of experience of interaction at the public level or collective discussion.

Russians by and large 'do not know how to speak or how to discuss common affairs with Other People whom they do not know.' One such group of people, and they do not come up for discussion in this book, happens to be the rest of the world.

The Soviet period offers a masterclass in the failure to know how to act and speak at a major gathering of 'other people'. The occasion was a meeting of the United Nations in October 1960 on third-world decolonisation. Nikita Khrushchev, that 'genial, clubbable, sweating, folksy autocrat' (Hingley, 1977, p.42) disrupted the proceedings by banging his shoe on the table and jabbing his fingers at his audience in an anti-Western tirade. It was dangerous clowning. For these antics, Khrushchev is said to have been an embarrassment in the Soviet Union itself. Compare this Soviet leader, incidentally, with a later one, namely President Gorbachev, of whom Margaret Thatcher, the British prime minister, famously said she could do business. That same Gorbachev, with the seemingly easy facility for intercultural communication with Western political leaders, was both dangerously unSoviet, and so unRussian.

It is probably the case that readers without a good general knowledge of Russian history, quite apart from those without an interest in discourse and language-and-society issues, may find this book abstruse and hard-going. Those not falling into this category may find, as I did, that the various contributions forced a recasting of what they previously knew or assumed about the evolution of Russian society and the role of the Russian language in it both now and in the past. Generations of Russians, and quite possibly no small number of foreigners too, have accepted Turgenev's famous dictum about the Russian language being given to a great people. Few would disagree with Reginald de Bray, the distinguished Slavic scholar, who wrote that 'Russian literature is remarkable for the breadth and universality of its ideas, and it is this, above all, that has won for it and for the Russian language the recognition of the whole civilised world' (De Bray, 1980, p.37). The paean is taken up by F. P. Filin, the Soviet philologist, who declared:

Of all the numerous features of the Russian language one should first and foremost highlight ... its capacity to express all knowledge accumulated by mankind in every field of endeavour and its semantic universality; from which it flows that its literary language is able to describe human life in its entirety. (cited in Holden *et al.*, 1998, p.169)

But the sad fact is that this great Russian language – this great, yet ‘degraded’ Russian language – has not been able to adjust to the new realities of post-Soviet life and cope with the linguistic demands created by them. Up to now, so many of our authors concur, Russian is not up to the task of facilitating – for want of a better expression – civilised debate. A case in point is the world of business and management. The ‘newspeak of the market economy’ – a topic that receives no attention this volume – is awkwardly poised between Sovietisms and the culturally alien language of management concepts and terms from the West. This state of affairs is, of course, a further aspect of the unhealed dichotomy in contemporary Russian language.

Let me at this point not so much digress from the main themes of the book as extend them to the topic of Russian management systems. In recent years, the Russian government has itself ‘committed billions of dollars with the goal of developing a knowledge-based economy to enhance participation in the global arena, whilst simultaneously diversifying away from energy and natural resources’ (McCarthy *et al.*, 2014). But still Russia does not seem able to stimulate innovation. Consider the otherwise laudable initiative in 2009 to create Russia’s own Silicon Valley in 4,000 hectares of land in Skolkovo, west of Moscow. Launched with a thousand start-ups, the venture ‘has endured an excruciating incubation ... it is hard to think of a single Russian brand that has broken through internationally’ (Rice-Oxley, 2015). Its underperformance was attributed to corruption, unsolved taxation issues, and foreign reluctance to invest.

But there is surely more to it than that. Ever since the publication of ground-breaking research by Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) into innovation processes in Japanese companies, it has been generally accepted that the key stages of the creation of new products are linked to successful communication among designers, engineers, scientists and others, all merging their respective experience-rich professional registers, regardless of status, and using language that is non-judgmental and able to move easily between formal and informal modes of expression.¹ It has already been observed that Russian companies persist with ‘entrenched bossdom’ (Holden and Vaiman, 2013), that the premise of Russian-style knowledge management is that knowledge is a resource to be hoarded, even kept secret (Michailova and Husted, 2003), and that there is deeply ingrained hostility to sharing it (Holden and Michailova, 2014). Assuming that these observations are not wildly mistaken, it follows that they impose a handicap on knowledge sharing, the *sine qua non* of creativity in organisations, commercial or otherwise. The argument in *Public Debate in Russia: Matters of Disorder* leads to an inevitable conclusion: that a factor in the underperformance of the firms in Skolkovo, Russia’s Silicon Valley, may be attributable to a failure to create or develop formal–informal cooperative registers which nurture and protect ideas.

Is there a solution to Russia’s chronic malady? Kalugin (p.53) boldly suggests that there has to be ‘a reformatting of that communicative space where the very principle of dialogue is delimited.’ For his part, Kharkhordin urges civic bodies to adopt a new version of the Muromtsev–Maklakov standing orders, which were introduced for the State Duma at the beginning of the twentieth century. This has the advantage of being a Russian solution to the problem of running public debate in an orderly manner. In contrast, Vakhtin would like to see texts on public debate from English-speaking countries introduced at various levels of education, though he is far from idealising their habits of public discourse. Come what may, it seems that entire generations must be taught the importance of listening and to restrain a specific Russian tendency which caused Ronald Hingley (1977, p.212), the British expert on Russian literature, to marvel; namely, the tendency of Russians to ‘commit themselves to dogmatic assertions about the unknowable.’

Hingley’s remark reminds me of something I noted years ago in A. N. Wilson’s well-regarded biography of Tolstoy. In 1860, on a trip to Western Europe, the great novelist:

... met Julius Froebel, nephew of Friedrich Froebel, the founder of the Kindergarten system. Froebel's account of being lectured by his Russian visitor sounds like any exchange between any Western liberal and any Russian *between that date and this*. Particularly admirable is Tolstoy's ability to criticise the German system of education, and to make a virtue out of the fact that the Russians did not have any system. (Wilson, 1989, p.155, added emphasis)

And that in turn reminds me of something else: I have forgotten how many times I have been told by Russians over the years that some notion I had of Russia was not just wrong, but *absolutely* wrong!


The blurb on the book's back cover describes it as essential reading for students and researchers in Russian studies, sociolinguistics, politics and sociology. If I were in the marketing department of Edinburgh University Press, I would be targeting a highly important non-academic outlet for which this book is just as essential: think-tanks on international relations and the research departments supporting the Russian desk of foreign ministries worldwide. The world – or the West at least – needs all the help it can get in its attempts to achieve stress-free coexistence with Russia.

Note

1. Such company-specific processes have been inelegantly described as 'linguaging' (McKenzie and van Winkelen, 2004, p.112).

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Nigel Holden
Leeds University Business School
 nigelholden123@aol.co.uk

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