

Oleg Kashin

Their money is there, their children are there and their houses are also there

Oleg Kashin is a Russian journalist and prose writer and was born in Kaliningrad in 1980. He was a professional sailor and one of the organisers of the Bolotnaya Square protests in 2011-2012.

He was covering the developments about the proposal to build a highway through Khimki Forest in Moscow region and anti-government protests.

Oleg Kashin was assaulted repeatedly; the most violent attempt on his life was in November 2010. Kashin spent several days in a coma. Dmitri Medvedev, during his presidency, said that “the criminals must be found and punished”. The attack on Oleg Kashin is one of the topics of the 2012 documentary “Putin’s Kiss”. Today, in November 2013, this attack still remains unsolved.

Anyone who has been to Moscow will have seen a collection of Soviet propaganda sculptures from the 1930s arranged all around Revolution Square metro station, as if it were a museum. Among them is a large bronze dog whose nose has been polished to appear almost mirror-like. Students once had a cute tradition of rubbing this dog’s nose for good luck. Eventually this tradition has been adopted by everybody else.

I also walk past this dog and sometimes touch its nose, and it has recently occurred to me that for many years I have regarded it as just a dog, an open-hearted animal, a doggy similar to those my friends had and never as what it was for sculptor Manizer who cast it 75 years ago. But I still remember what it meant - a very recognisable figure from my Soviet childhood. A stern border guard with a stern dog safeguarding the padlocked border - now this image simply is no more.

Now the first image associated with the words “border guard” is a pretty girl in a glass booth at the airport who looks at my passport when I am leaving

for New York, Amsterdam, Copenhagen or Geneva. The border is no longer padlocked, and I am having a hard time remembering my childhood in the Soviet Union, when people looked at trips to other countries (even to those in the Soviet bloc!) almost as we look at travel to Mars today. "Come with me, I will introduce you to the people who saw the people who saw Belgium!" - such was the time, but it is no more.

And I remember my first trip outside Russia - Yeltsin was the President then, and I was a young sailor. I walked around unfamiliar cities, listened to passers-by and whenever I heard Russian, I walked up and said hello, already knowing I would not be sorry. I knew I would hear a fascinating story, meet an adventurer who took the first opportunity to leave ten years ago, or, quite the opposite, a successful fellow countryman who spent his first "serious" money on a vacation in Amsterdam instead of buying a fancy car, "just like the boys do".

Fifteen years have passed since that time. I still visit Europe quite often - no longer as a sailor, but as a journalist or a "public figure", or sometimes simply as a tourist. I walk down the same streets as I did in my youth, I listen to the passers-by again, but now if I hear somebody speaking Russian I try not to show that I am also Russian. Something has changed, and I am not the only one having this unpleasant reflex. I even read many articles about how it is the peculiar social withdrawal of my fellow countrymen and their communication problems, but I have my own theory on this matter.

It's just that I know exactly what kind of person I will meet in an expensive shop in Milan, or in Central Park in New York, or on the shores of Lake Geneva. They are all gone now - the adventurers of the 1990s or daydreaming new businessmen. These are totally different people, new people. Even if I meet a Russian student, it will not be the same student I could have met ten years ago.

The Russian student in Europe is, most likely, the son of an official or a policeman from Moscow - of course, I exaggerate a bit, but the probability is very high. The Russian woman shopping in an expensive European store is the wife or daughter of an official or a policeman from Moscow. The grey-haired gentleman in an expensive suit at the table in a restaurant is, most probably, the official or policeman from Moscow himself.

Yesterday he might have directed the breakup of a rally in my city, or tried

my friend for an anti-Putin slogan, or made an eloquent speech from the judge's bench about Russia's spirituality, or about how foreigners should be prohibited to adopt Russian children because in their countries gay people are allowed to get married. Or he simply signed a clever state contract under which he allocated US\$100 million to a new highway out of which he took US\$90 million for himself. A kickback is the symbol of today's Russian economy.

And afterwards he took off his police uniform or judge's robe or the badly made deputy's suit and went to the airport to fly to Europe, where he has a house and a wife, where his son goes to university and his daughter was the most sensational débutante at the latest Bal des Fleurs in Cannes. I do not want to think how one head can contain both - being a son of a bitch in Moscow and a respectable gentleman in Europe. However, this is not of much interest to me. I mean, I do hope that someday Russia will have a normal democracy and corrupt officials will go to prison, hypocrites will not be elected to Parliament, judges will be honest and the police will protect the people instead of attacking them.

To achieve it is a task for me and those like me. I'm sure we will achieve it. I find it inappropriate to count on somebody else's help in such matters - and not only inappropriate, but, to a certain extent, pointless. Because I, after writing about Russian politics for years, know very well that today Russia, apparently, has the most pro-West regime in its entire history. Not in Soviet times, nor during the Czarist Era, nor in Yeltsin's 1990s did Russia have such a Western-oriented government.

This is not the case, not in any deep geopolitical or economic sense, but in the most primitive, everyday sense. People of that generation, for whom a simple trip abroad was a blessing, now want to live how they lived in Russia - to steal, cheat or even kill, when necessary, but they definitely want to live in the West at the same time. Their money is there, their children are there and their houses are also there. Everything is there. I cannot be tricked by the rhetoric of a new Cold War, I know that talks about differences with Europe mean nothing as long as I see the same people on Russian television in political news as I see in European shops and restaurants.

I am sad to realise that they - these very security officers and officials - are needed in Europe, if only as consumers and taxpayers. But I believe that when Russia gets real democracy and the bribe-takers and murderers are thrown

into prison, someone in Europe will be ashamed by these years, when they allowed them to buy houses, spend money stolen in Russia and send their children to European universities; ashamed of when they smiled at them and shook their hands. Sooner or later it will of course be over, but I hope that the Europeans will at least be ashamed for not adopting the Magnitsky Act, that is if, of course, they do not adopt it.