#264
Zhirinovsky as a Nationalist "Kitsch Artist"
by Sergei Kibalnik

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This Occasional Paper has been produced with support provided by the Russian, Eurasian, and East European Research and Training Program of the U.S. Department of State (funded by the Soviet and East European Research and Training Act of 1983, or Title VIII). We are most grateful to this sponsor.

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ZHIRINOVSKY AS A NATIONALIST "KITSCH ARTIST"

The Russian Anti-Hero

In their comments on Vladimir Volfovich Zhirinovsky, many Western and Russian scholars fault him for being an ultranationalist. Yet this epithet might be regarded as flattering rather than harsh. It has been noted that Zhirinovsky has frequently switched the political circles he moved in, the political platforms he stood on, and the political views he expressed. Indeed, by now he may have exhausted all the options that the current political and ideological situation offers to a politician. He has been active in Shalom, a Jewish cultural group. He has attended the meetings of, and apparently wanted to join, various democratic organizations. He did join the misleadingly named Liberal Democratic Party of the U.S.S.R., and after the breakup of the Soviet Union he formed his own party, the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR). This party interestingly enough, became the first registered party in the Soviet Union—although it broke some electoral rules, thus arousing the suspicion that it was created "to undermine the influence of genuine liberal organizations."[1]

A reading of Zhirinovsky's interviews and articles confirms that in different periods he has professed quite contradictory views. He began with what seemed to be truly liberal and democratic convictions and ended with the stridently imperialistic and chauvinistic ideas that are still present in his eclectic mixture. It is, moreover, striking that Zhirinovsky himself does not deny this. He acknowledges it and even boasts about it. He has said, for example: "Women frequently deceive by not saying what they think. Consequently, you also have to deceive them, not telling them what you want but what they want to hear. I transferred this concept to politics and achieved great success."[2] Like Khlestakov in Gogol's *The Inspector General*, Zhirinovsky constantly displays what he really is, and consequently nobody believes it. The mayor in Gogol's classic story was surprised that he had taken Khlestakov to be the inspector general. This happened precisely because the former bore no resemblance to the latter, continually showed that he had nothing in common with him, and the mayor expected the inspector general to be cleverly disguised.

Presumably in order to soften this cynical lack of scruples, Sergei Plekhanov (that last name!—history repeating itself as farce), in his apologetic *Zhirinovsky: Who Is He?*, created a theoretical justification for Zhirinovsky's frequent ideological shifts. Seeking to paint Zhirinovsky's disdain for convictions as a pseudo-readiness to make concessions and compromises in order to reach an agreement, Plekhanov makes this argument (alluding, in the course of it, to another work of Gogol's):

1 Boris Kagarlitsky, *Restoration in Russia: Why Capitalism Failed* (London and New York: VERSO, 1995), 63.

2 Interview in *Playboy* (May 1995): 61.

> The images of the imperial subconsciousness are extraordinarily multilayered. They arose out of the necessity of accommodating various national stereotypes in the name of preserving the leading role of the prevailing nation. As paradoxical as it may be, those who profess imperial ideology are always somewhat opportunistic. It's hard to imagine ruling a superstate without having the ability to negotiate or to concede on certain issues. The Russian soul is the incarnate confirmation of this life principle. Specifically among Russians, there is a very common type of person, who is prepared to say gladly whatever those surrounding him expect him to say: with the Tartars, to praise Islam; with the Germans, to slander the Asiatics; with thieves, to curse the informers; with soldiers, to lament the decrease in discipline—and in each of these situations a tear of honesty and tender emotion will be experienced.
>
> The non-Russian has subtly noticed this peculiarity in the classics of Nikolai Gogol. His novel *Dead Souls* presents a whole gallery of Russian types, one of which is the landowner Nozdrev, a character who is ready to praise any opinion and who has the zeal to stand up for it as though it were precisely the source of his personal thoughts on life. Incidentally, there is nothing bad about this characteristic. It is an altogether idle occupation to place moral evaluations on peculiarities of character.[3]

All of this nonsense is thoroughly Zhirinovskian. The open immoralism, the pretension of being the epitome of "Russian national character," and the readiness to adapt in order to get something from someone are constantly displayed by Zhirinovsky himself. In a talk given in September 1995 at the Kennan Institute for Advanced Russian Studies, Vladimir Gusinsky, the head of MOST, the largest bank in Moscow, said that Zhirinovsky had recently spent an hour in his office trying to convince several Jewish foreigners just how much he liked Jews—while in speeches in the provinces, he blames the Jews for all of Russia's misfortunes.

Even his family background changes to suit his location. When Zhirinovsky is in Israel, his father is Jewish; when he's in Russia, his father becomes just "a lawyer." When the newspaper *Moscow Komsomolets* published an article about Zhirinovsky, the headline was, "Vladimir Volfovich is a pure Russian, but sometimes just a little bit Jewish."[4]

Plekhanov extends his comparison between Zhirinovsky and Nozdrev: "In Zhirinovsky there is this Nozdrev-like self-assurance in his standing up for the opinion of any person to whom he is speaking. The fact that he was received by various national groups in the early stages of his political career grew out of precisely this Nozdrev-like aspect of his character."[5] But Plekhanov fails to mention that Gogol portrayed

3 Sergei Plekhanov, *Zhirinovsky: Kto on?* (Moscow: Evraziya-Nord, 1994), 112–113.

4 Aleksei Minkin, "Vladimir Vol'fovich chistyi russkii, no inogda nemnozhechko evrei," as quoted in Eduard Limonov, *Limonov protiv Zhirinovskogo* (Moscow: Konets veka, 1994), 43.

5 Plekhanov, *Zhirinovsky: Kto on?*, 113.

Nozdrev as a liar, an egoist, a swindler, and a scoundrel:

> In a sense Nozdrev was a historical character. There was always some "history" attached to any gathering at which he assisted. Something always happened: Either he would have to be conducted from the room by gendarmes or his own friends would be obliged to push him out. If nothing of the kind happened, then inevitably something else out of the ordinary would occur: Either he would get so tight at the refreshment bar that he could only roar with laughter, or he would tell such whoppers that his own conscience would prick him. And he used to indulge in lies without any necessity: He would suddenly spin a yarn about some horse he had with a pink or light-blue coat, or some nonsense of the sort, so that the people he was talking to would leave him, saying, "That's a fisherman's tale, my lad."[6]

Zhirinovsky's public behavior, his perpetual scandals and fights in the Duma, his incredible promises and stories, convince us that he is indeed a "historical character" in the same sense.

There is yet another respect in which Zhirinovsky reminds us of Nozdrev. While playing checkers with Chichikov, the main character of *Dead Souls*, Nozdrev tries to cheat. Chichikov notices and refuses to continue, and so Nozdrev calls in his house-serfs and orders them to beat Chichikov. Chichikov is rescued by the appearance of a local court executive, who had come to notify Nozdrev that he was being sued for having flogged the landowner Maksimov. When Zhirinovsky appointed Eduard Limonov as minister of security in the shadow cabinet of his LDPR, *Moscow Komsomolets* headlined the story, "Zhirinovsky has found an iron Edik"[7]—an allusion to Felix Dzerzhinsky, "Iron Felix," the first head of the Communist government's secret police.

Plekhanov makes another noteworthy comparison between Zhirinovsky and Khlestakov, the Gogolian character whom I have already mentioned.

Perhaps the most important factor in Zhirinovsky's success was his ability to bluff fearlessly. Distributing letters of indemnity left and right on his party's stationery, he received, on credit, more time than was offered to any other electoral bloc in the official drawing for television advertising time. It was said at the time that he spent a billion rubles to purchase television time for his electoral propaganda. The thing is, that billion did not exist. All that existed were his commitments to pay the billion.

Plekhanov goes on to describe the scene when Khlestakov arrives in a little regional town and

> ...is stuck in a local hotel as a result of his insolvency. The local bureaucrats, however, mistake him for a government inspector from Petersburg, who was due to arrive incognito in their town. Confusion begins: they are ready to carry the VIP around in their own hands, and Khlestakov plays up to his admirers,

6 Nikolai Gogol, *Dead Souls*, ed. George Gibian, trans. George Reavey (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1985), 72.

7 *Moskovskii komsomolets*, 23 June 1992.

painting himself as a very influential and powerful figure.[8]

Again, Plekhanov does not point out that Gogol also characterized Khlestakov as being "a little scatter-brained and as they say, a bit weak in the top story—one of those people who are regarded as empty-headed in their offices; someone who speaks and acts without any forethought; quite incapable of focusing his attention on any particular idea. His speech is jerky, and words spring from his lips quite unexpectedly."[9]

The stupid local officials who mistake Khlestakov for the inspector and offer him bribes could never reclaim their funds. Learning from their mistakes, perhaps we should take Zhirinovsky to court and make him pay his debt to Russian television. It would make more sense to convict him of fraud, and thereby give the country much-needed funds, than to sue him for vague and unprofitable accusations of fascism (especially since such trials so far have been won by Zhirinovsky).

I cannot resist making one more comparison between Zhirinovsky and one of Gogol's characters. Chichikov, the main character of *Dead Souls*, is a swindler who purchases the documents of ownership of peasants who are already dead but are still registered as living, in order to fraudulently obtain a mortgage from the bank. In the same way, Zhirinovsky, when registering the LDPR, managed to turn its several dozen actual members into 5,000 by, for example, submitting a list of all 2,714 inhabitants, from babies to the elderly, in the village of Gantiadi on the Black Sea in Abkhazia (a disputed region within the republic of Georgia). Referring to this list, a Moscow newspaper quipped that the party was collecting "dead souls."[10]

Some scholars have found still other roots for Zhirinovsky's public image in Russian culture. The American scholar Mark Yoffe compares him with Russian literary critic Vasilii Rozanov, religious writer Archpriest Avvakum, and Ivan the Terrible, among others. He asserts that his public image "contains a large dose of Bakhtinian carnivalesque stylistics" (American Slavists cannot seem to do without Mikhail Bakhtin) "and the Russian holy fools (*yurodivye*)."[11] These "fools," in Russian-Byzantine tradition, were street preachers known for their readiness to state the truth to any authority, even the tsar and his ministers, often in a very crude and insulting manner.

In my view, this sort of analysis is an overestimation of Zhirinovsky (who is hardly aware of these cultural figures) and makes the issue more obscure and complex than it needs to be. Some of these allusions were actually used by Zhirinovsky's

8 Plekhanov, *Zhirinovsky: Kto on?*, 143.

9 Nikolai V. Gogol, *The Government Inspector*, trans. and adapted by D.J. Campbell. (London: Steven Press, 1947), 14.

10 Cited in Vladimir Solovyov and Elena Klepikova, *Zhirinovsky: Russian Fascism and the Making of a Dictator* (Boston: Addison-Wesley, 1995), 9.

11 Mark Yoffe, "Vladimir Zhirinovsky, the Unholy Fool," *Current History* 93 (October 1994): 324.

aides in order to soften the bad impressions that he created by his own behavior. Vengerovsky, one of the leading members of the LDPR, for example, explained to Richard Nixon after he met with Zhirinovsky in March 1994 that the latter deliberately adopted the extravagant image of the holy fool, who is allowed to speak the truth with impunity. In reality, Zhirinovsky speaks not the truth, but anything that might be beneficial for him. He resembles the holy fool about as much as, to use the word play of a Russian popular joke, *kanal pokhozh na kanalizatsiyu* ("a canal resembles a sewage system").

Yoffe also pointed out that "Zhirinovsky has adopted Limonov's principle that any publicity is good publicity, and he persistently brings himself to the media's and the public's attention, steadily beefing up his notoriety."[12] But of course this is not merely "Limonov's principle." It is a principle of mass culture that is used by any superstar. Thus, Zhirinovsky surrounds himself with representatives of pop culture, people such as Limonov, author of novels written in coarse language; the hypnotist and faith healer Anatoly Kashpirovsky, widely believed to possess occult powers; the failed documentary director Aleksei Mitrofanov; the professional showman Marychev; and the Italian porn star Chicholina.

But Zhirinovsky's party is a one-man show, and audacious extras are either expelled from the party or leave it of their own accord. Such has been the case with Limonov and Kashpirovsky, and the same is likely to happen with Marychev. During a quarrel with Marychev on the floor of the Duma, Zhirinovsky recommended that Marychev be examined by a psychiatrist. The next day, Marychev arrived in the Duma dressed as a physician and suggested that he himself examine Zhirinovsky. Later, he donned the costumes of a Serbian soldier and a Chechen guerrilla.

Yoffe is right when he says that Zhirinovsky "most of all ... is not about substance but about style." The question is: what style? Although propounding traditional aesthetic views, Zhirinovsky in reality displays a constant inclination toward trashy diversion. He represents the phenomenon of kitsch in politics, an illustration of just how far contemporary Russian popular culture has penetrated into politics. This is not *Soviet* popular culture, it is Russian popular culture in the process of transition from Soviet to Westernized mass culture.

The same holds true for the evolution of Russian political culture. Limonov sees the change Zhirinovsky brought to Russian politics as "having introduced the language of the street into politics." "After the wooden speech of the (Communist) Party, he spoke with the common man in his own language, and the fellow in the street liked that. Zhirinovsky never takes credit for his street argot, but that's his strength... His caricatured speech... sounds normal to the common man and

12 Ibid., 326.

easily penetrates his consciousness."[13] It may be admitted that after the "wooden speech of the Party," Zhirinovsky's talk sounded fresh to the common people at first. Nevertheless, ordinary people do not speak the way he does. Limonov, who has been living in France and developing a sort of kitsch language in his own prose, apparently has only a vague idea of what sounds normal and what sounds abnormal to the common people of Russia.

When the weekly *Argumenty i fakti* surveyed a sample of the Russian population asking which Russian politician they would prefer to drink with, very few named Zhirinovsky. (One of the respondents expressed the fear that Zhirinovsky would talk him to death.) His speaking style, lacking any order or logic, calls to mind the main character in Saltykov-Shchedrin's satirical novel *The Golovlyov Family*, who was described as "empty talk, empty mind, and empty heart" [*pustoslovie, pustomyslie, i pustoutrobie*].[14]

Verbal kitsch

The books on Zhirinovsky published over the last few years have focused on his earlier literary productions.[15] Perhaps his most revealing work, however, is a more recent one, *Poslednii vagon na sever* [The Last Coach to the North], a collection of articles written between 1992 and 1994.[16] In it, we can see evidence of both the fluidity of his views and the constancy of his "kitschy" style.

To begin with, the former internationalist, an "aborted product of nationalism" [*vykidysh natsionalizma*], as Limonov called him, has transformed himself into an ostensibly genuine nationalist. Here is his description of a future restoration of the Russian Empire:

> We need a Russia with borders as they existed at the beginning of this century or at least with the 1977 borders. And we will achieve this without any shooting. We will leave all the territories, we'll put an end to this Ukrainian tempest in a teapot, and we'll leave Central Asia. We'll leave them to their field officers and mullahs. After a while, they will come back to us. Actually, they won't exactly come, they will crawl, all out of sorts, hungry, and sick. Some of them will walk with crutches, others will be laid out on stretchers. They will beg us to at least give them some hot water to wash themselves with. We will accept some nations (our brother Slavs, without question), but there will be no Republic of Ukraine. There will be two dozen provinces directly subordinate to the center.
>
> And, I repeat, the most important thing is not to become involved in any conflicts. Let Turkey, Iran, and Pakistan get involved in conflicts. This will result in the

13 Limonov, *Limonov protiv Zhirinovskogo*, 126.

14 M.E. Saltykov-Shchedrin, *Gospoda Golovlyovy*, in his *Sobranie sochinenii* (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaya literatura, 1972), 13:253.

15 Solovyov and Klepikova, *Zhirinovsky*; Graham Frazer and George Lancelle, *Absolute Zhirinovsky: A Transparent View of the Distinguished Russian Statesman* (New York: Penguin, 1994); Vladimir Kartsev, *!Zhirinovsky!* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995).

16 V. Zhirinovsky, *Poslednii vagon na sever* (Moscow: Yusvetoton, 1995).

loss of their statehood. The southern morass of instability will absorb them. And then we'll come. Our soldiers will wash their boots in the warm waters of the Indian Ocean, and the local inhabitants will greet them with flowers. They will come as saviors, as rescuers from starvation and extermination. But upon our arrival in the south we will not build cosmodromes on the steppes, plow virgin lands, or begin irrigation projects. Everything will remain as it was, as the local residents want it to be. Herds, barbecues, fresh air, and pilgrimages to Mecca—by foot, not in Boeing 747s. (pp. 22–23)

This picture of local inhabitants along the coast of the Indian Ocean greeting Russian soldiers with flowers brings to mind another well-known incident in Russian literature: the promise by Ostap Bender, in Ilf and Petrov's *The Golden Calf*, to obtain a million rubles from a Soviet millionaire on a little plate with a golden rim. But for some Russians, this kind of return of prodigal sons to their magnanimous Father may be irresistibly attractive.

Zhirinovsky presents his own philosophy of national socialism, differing from Hitler's but appealing to a similar mind-set:

> Nationalism is a combination of the most important principles of socialism and nationalist ideas. National socialism has nothing in common with Hitlerism. Hitler discredited the ideas of national socialism. There are many elements of Comintern world revolution in his doctrines. There is not a big difference between pretensions to world domination and pretensions to world revolution. The national socialist does not require world domination, he does not measure the skull of his neighbor, he does not need massacres. The philosophy of national socialism is the philosophy of the ordinary man, the philistine, if you will. He wants to live quietly in his apartment, to have a loving wife and healthy children, to be busy on weekends in his little garden in the suburbs, and to go on vacation once a year. He does not want to interfere with anyone else, but he also doesn't want anyone to interfere with him. He is not at all a hero and does not want to gouge the frozen soil with a piece of scrap iron or to lay down under tanks in the name of some principle. He is repelled by the poverty-stricken and perceives the rich with irritation. He wants to be sure that his daughter will not be raped on the street at night and that his son's head will not be cracked open with a bottle. He is not at all a fanatic. Unlike Hitler, he doesn't need any sort of occultism. He wants to respect his leaders and to feel that they deserve their posts. He is not a drunkard, but on holidays he might drink a little and even shed a few tears, recalling his father, who was killed in the war. (pp. 25–26)

This appeal to the "philistine" by no means proves that Zhirinovsky's philosophy is akin to Nazism, but it does suggest that he is a kitsch artist who rivals even Hitler.

The most common form of kitsch in his oeuvres is the use of erotic and communal metaphors.

> Everyone who wants to leave his apartment should be allowed to leave. The only ones we will not let go are those who have a lot of knowledge or those who have caused damage without paying compensation. Emigration is an iron law, there shouldn't be any leapfrogging with international passports. We do not rape anyone. We only seduce.
>
> In a big house where everyone has a separate apartment, the role of the man who is responsible for the whole house is diminished. The role of world institutions like the United Nations and UNESCO ought to

> decrease. The United Nations is the same old Communist International, today transforming itself into the world's policeman. Why do we need policemen and world courts? We should cooperate with our neighbors, establish regional institutions with them, and let someone else worry about Somalia. (p. 24)

Among Zhirinovsky's kitsch devices we also find harsh allusions as well as picturesque metaphors: "Politics is a bang on the forehead, a stroke on the knee, spitting and hot kisses, winking, whispering, and howling. If a politician is one-dimensional and can only pound on the table with his fist, then he should go to work as a bouncer or, let's say, return to his beloved air-force unit" (p. 125). This is undoubtedly an allusion to Aleksandr Rutskoi, a former military pilot who served in the Russian Air Force during the Afghan war, was a vice-president in the Yeltsin regime, and was a major participant in the abortive 1993 coup.

Zhirinovsky pokes fun at Rutskoi more directly in an article entitled "The Caucasian Factor in the October Revolution." Exaggerating the support that Chechens gave to Ruslan Khasbulatov, the former chairman of the Supreme Soviet, he writes: "Khasbulatov relied not only on his powerful apparat but also on the assistance of thousands of his fellow tribesmen—hot-tempered and pugnacious guys. They would shield him with their own breasts. And who would bring Rutskoi to Moscow? His brother, a militiaman, and three buddies from his regiment ... Or Nikita Mikhalkov with a chorus of gypsies" (p. 133). Nikita Mikhalkov is a popular film-maker and director of the award-winning movie *Burnt by the Sun*. He was a close friend of Rutskoi and had played the main part in a popular musical, *A Cruel Romance*, which featured a gypsy vocal group.

The nationalism now professed by Zhirinovsky is a renewed, more "fashionable" nationalism designed to attract as many people as possible: "Many years ago, I came to understand that the old, ignorant nationalism repels people. Russian nationalism should be modern, intellectual, aggressive, and fashionable. Russian nationalism should never develop into extremism, because extreme nationalism leads to death. Nationalism is a fire, but one should be able to manage a fire so that it doesn't become a conflagration" (p. 69). The origin of this kind of nationalism, according to Zhirinovsky, lies with Ilya Glazunov (1930–), a Russian artist who specializes in historic and patriotic themes. Glazunov's "chauvinism," argues Zhirinovsky, "was tied to being clean-shaven, wearing fancy foreign suits, and smoking Marlboros. He irritated the 'patriot-nativists' with his open-mindedness and Western stylishness" (p. 69).

Zhirinovsky portrays the author Alexander Solzhenitsyn, who offended him by calling him a "caricature of patriotism," as a representative of the old, unfashionable nationalism:

> Look, a man with a "patriotic" beard, in a Leo Tolstoy-style shirt. He speaks about the "moans and shouts of the Russian people." And what a biography! Isn't he a good candidate for president? Who knows, he might take some votes away from Zhirinovsky. And if he is not a candidate for president, then he is a spiritual teacher of the people, a guru. He will stir up trouble and restore the patriotism that was the good old darling of the West and of

> members of the former Central Committee of the Communist Party—beloved horses, birch trees, manure, bast shoes, and an eternal repentance of all in all! And no aggressiveness! God forbid that we tell the foreign world that we demand our own, fair piece of the common pie. This is "*zhirinovshchina*, a caricature." Whole generations have grown up for whom Solzhenitsyn is something antiquarian. These generations, which went through the filth of *perestroika*, understand my aggression. They also want to get what they deserve. They don't want bast shoes and manure, they want French suits and Spanish wines. For them, patriotism is not expressed in a style of clothes, but in traveling through life in first-class cabins. (p. 129)

This attitude toward Solzhenitsyn did not prevent Zhirinovsky from borrowing some of Solzhenitsyn's ideas, including that of dividing the country into *gubernias* (the prerevolutionary provinces) only, instead of into *gubernias* and republics.

In the article "Young Wolves," named after a well-known movie with which Zhirinovsky completely identifies himself, he says of the "new wolves" (i.e., the "new Russians"): "My personality is exactly like theirs. At the dawn of *perestroika*, I started my own career in politics as they did in business. I worked my way up from small groups that gathered in dubious apartments to victory in Russia's parliamentary elections." He goes on to assert that he is going "to help these guys. I will not strangle them with taxes. I will allow them to have guns to repel the attacks of bandits. I will force the state to protect them, but most importantly, I'll give them serious business—not spirits, vodka, and chocolate bars, but the mining of big deposits and the building of big factories" (p. 40).

Conducting a hypothetical argument with his erstwhile ally Limonov, Zhirinovsky uses the familiar form for "you" (*ty*), and addresses him in a very trusting, comradelike tone—something between that of Russian revolutionaries and that of working people: "Look, Eduard, where are all the candidates for Russian president in the 1991 campaign except for Yeltsin and Zhirinovsky? On the big political stage, there aren't any others. Who can recall their political programs? No one." And he presents himself as having an appeal for homeless people: "Yesterday in a public market a homeless man came up to me and, having explained that he had just been freed from a labor camp, he said: 'I watched you on TV before I was put in the slammer. You were right in what you said about the *gubernias*. There shouldn't be any *gubernias*.' Would a homeless man recognize Bakatin, would he recall any point from his former political program? Never" (p. 30).

Zhirinovsky's literary style also includes frequent resorts to a sort of "affected democratism." The reach of his imagination includes fantastic pictures of his future, and of him consoling President Yeltsin after he loses his position—obviously to Zhirinovsky himself. This picture is painted in the tradition of Russian working-class drinking culture:

> But when B. N. Yeltsin is no longer president and when all his followers abandon him, having held him accountable for all of the collapses, just as Gorbachev was left by his "demfriends," I will be the one to show up at Yeltsin's house with a kilogram of Antonov apples in a

> sack and a bottle of vodka, and we will drink without fail, and I'll be sure to ask him why he did not come to take part in the TV debates between the presidential candidates on 10 July 1991, when I wanted so much to administer a beating to him. Shakhrai won't come, and Nechaev won't call. But I will come because I respect the people who elected this president in 1991 and who did not elect me. I'll go because I hope that when I feel bad someone will also come to see me with a sack of apples and vodka. (p. 34)

Zhirinovsky's favorite literary device is hyperbole; his inclination to exaggerate everything brings to mind the Renaissance vitality of Rabelais' *Pantagruel* and *Gargantua*. This love of big numbers provokes some anxiety. For example, Zhirinovsky recently suggested that the staff of the KGB be increased to a million men, which led a reporter for *Literaturnaya gazeta* to comment, "It is not impossible that by the parliamentary elections he will come up with the slogan: 'One Chekist for every Russian!'" ("Chekist" is the common Russian name for a member of the secret police.) He added, "Well, given the current absence of limits on criminal behavior [*ugolovnyi bespredel*], there might be more than a few supporters of such an appeal."[17]

Another characteristic of Zhirinovsky's writing is the noticeable influence of Lenin's style on it. He wrote, for example: "Just for the sake of the unification of Germany, I would have stripped Chancellor Kohl down to his undershorts. Kohl would get very trim and would switch to a diet of rice gruel" (pp. 70–71). This reference to "rice gruel" would surely remind Russians of Lenin's satirical description of Leo Tolstoy's having become a vegetarian. In his article, "Leo Tolstoy As a Mirror of the Russian Revolution," which Zhirinovsky, like every other Russian, had to learn by heart in school, Lenin quotes the great writer as proclaiming, "I don't eat meat any longer, I feed myself with rice balls."

In kitsch, the division between propaganda and entertainment can become extremely vague: "Propaganda can sometimes masquerade as cultural entertainment, and, conversely, entertainment can be directed toward subtle manipulative goals."[18] The convergence between propaganda and entertainment can be seen in this passage from the prologue to Zhirinovsky's latest book, in which he excoriates many of the main figures on the political scene:

> A cold November night... the Yaroslav train station is almost deserted. In the dark, a heavy gray snow is falling.
>
> With the hoarse whistle of the diesel locomotive, the Moscow-Anadyr train is on its way.... There are no friends and family on the platform; no one wanted to see these passengers off. Who are they anyhow, these night travelers? Let's imagine ourselves in the last car. Who's that fellow curled up on the foldout board that serves as a bed, right at the door? The window doesn't let

17 *Literaturnaya gazeta*, 6 September 1995.

18 Matei Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977), 235–36.

in enough light to recognize him. Ah, look! It's the blotched reformer Mikhail Sergeevich (Gorbachev), who was able to "get started" and then "become profound" so well that Mother Russia is lying prone to this day. This Nobel Prize-winning tractor driver, the political Charles Manson, managed to rape a great nation. Do the bloody boys of Sumgait, Tbilisi, and Vilnius appear in his dreams? Where's his pompous spouse now, that Suslov-in-a-skirt? Is he sorry that he couldn't keep the billions which flowed in from German reunification and which were put into circulation by the Gorbachev Foundation? Didn't he want, like Judas, to hang himself on the nearest tree after his betrayal of the very party that had nurtured him, a snake, on her own breast? Mikhail Sergeevich is silent awhile, with steely eyes he observes the passing village stations....

Who's the fatso who takes up the whole compartment with his stomach? At the sound of that familiar little oink we recognize the delirious economist Yegorushka Gaidar. What's this terrible, pudgy boy mumbling about in the darkness? Did he ever for an instant believe in his mumblings? If he did, then was it while he was working for the journal *Kommunist* or was it in October 1933, when he was summoning drowsy Muscovites to crush the "red-brown serpent"?

"Here sits the Naughty One, gobbling and rejoicing"—poor grandpa Arkadii, was it on your own future grandson that you modeled the portrait of the fat traitor, selling the motherland "for a jar of jam and a box of cookies" [*za banku varen'ya i korobku pechen'ya*]?

How much did the Naughty One steal from the people? From some he took two thousand, from others he took five. People saved up, hoping that they'd have some kind of security. But no! In comes Yegor the Bourgeois and grabs everything.... In the next compartment, folks are stuffed in like sardines. They're personages with aliases rather than names: "Shakhrai," "Chubais," "Burbulis." The first, moving his cockroach whiskers, led the Transcaucasus to the bloody abyss; the second, the carrot-topped swindler, merely sold Petropavlovsk Fortress, and then for a long time made fools of the Russian people with his colored papers, the vouchers with which he tried to sell the country to red-headed foreign swindlers. The third, formerly a professor of scientific communism, was, as it turns out, always a dissident, and just as soon as they let him, he started nagging away about the use of democracy for one's health....

It's terrible to move about this coach—the farther you go, the more monsters you run into. The Satanist Yakunin in a black camouflage robe, the Siamese twins Nemtsov and Yavlinsky, the witches Bonner and Gerber, the flustered toads Starovoitova and Novodvorskaia, the moneybag Gavriil Popov, the pseudo-generals, bearded preachers, Parisian novelist-homosexuals (an allusion to Eduard Limonov), comedian-prostitutes, and journalists who roll the letter *r*. A wax museum! Apparitions of Hieronymus Bosch! Who's that sitting in the last compartment? You can't make him out because it's dark and because you no longer have the strength to look. Shoo, you devil!... And what's outside the window? Fields, forests, rivers, cities, villages—Russia!... How, Mother Russia, did you allow these tyrants to rule, starve, destroy, and rape you? Fyodor Mikhailovich (Dostoevsky)! Perhaps you had devils in your time, but they were little devil babies compared to the ones in this coach, the Last Coach to the North. (pp. 7–9)

This passage is not the only literary effort of Zhirinovsky. He also included in the same book a fictional tale of his own, with an investigator, two veterans of the Afghan war, a great deal of sex, and a certain amount of mayhem (three corpses in sixty pages). It is also quite kitschy, but not as colorful or anywhere near as funny as the prologue. It is unlikely that this story was written by Zhirinovsky himself, for it is quite devoid of the "torrent" [*poliv*] that constitutes a distinctive feature of his style.[19]

The kitsch in this tale is of a trivial sort. Love is usually described in a very sexist manner: "Once, late at night, Potekhin pounced on Lena on the little bed in the outpatient office. He was torn apart with lust." "He pulled off the ring road into a grove of trees, jumped out of the car, and pounced on his own lawful wife right there under the birches. She whimpered about her new dress and about a proper bed, but he was in no condition to think about such things." "A length of ash fell on her breast, right on her nipple."[20]

In the tale, the former Afghan soldier and the local racketeer give speeches on the need "to issue strict orders" and to exact "merciless revenge." However, the protagonist, the other veteran, disagrees. Militiamen have regular orgies in apartments temporarily vacated by their owners. This turns out to be fatal for some, because a cunning and gloomy character who has gone on vacation has left behind in his refrigerator a vodka bottle filled with poison.

The most likely author of the story is a "graphomaniac" in Zhirinovsky's circle or a former Komsomol and military scribbler whose product is no longer in demand and who traded the story to a member of the Duma in exchange for certain services. In any case, a person with normal, rather than perverse, taste would do everything possible to prevent something like this from being published under his name.

19 The same is true of another recently published book, *Spit on the West*, written under Zhirinovsky's name and containing many historical examples of mutual misunderstanding between Russia and the West. Apart from the title and some brief passages, much of the book seems to have been ghostwritten. This reference to the West is probably one of his contributions: "Well, they are not able to judge us fairly, given their analytical approach, because they unwittingly judge us by their own standards. To hell with them! The less we act, the fewer errors we'll make! We don't need each other very much. We need the raw materials for ourselves, and as for the rest (the so-called 'culture,' etc.), we would rather not deal with them. To hell with them—and that's it." Quoted in *Mezhdunarodnaya gazeta*, 34 (1995): 15.

20 Zhirinovsky, *Poslednii vagon na sever*, (197, 217, 191). Unfortunately, the full kitschiness of the style does not come through in English ("literary kitsch is almost always untranslatable"—G. Dorfles, ed., *Kitsch: An Anthology of Bad Taste* [London, 1969], 35.) Here is the Russian original: "Как-то глубоким вечером Потехин зажал Лену на кушетке в процедурной. С голодухи потянуло." "Он свернул с кольцевой дороги в лесок, бросил машину и зажал законуг супругу прямо под березками. Она шептала про новое платье, про кровать, он безумствовал." "Длинный пепел упал ей на грудь, прямо на сосок."

In recent memory, leading politicians, namely, Leonid Brezhnev, had works such as *The Little Land* and *Revival* written for them; now they buy *The Last Coach to the North* instead.

Kitsch in pictures

Perhaps politics is always kitsch to some extent, but bad or totalitarian politics is kitsch to a particularly great extent.[21] In this respect, Zhirinovsky is a kitsch artist two times over. There is no question that his politics are quite dangerous. At the same time, although he pretends to be a future dictator, he looks, as a foreign reporter has said, "like a comic opera dictator, more Charlie Chaplin than Adolf Hitler."[22] In this connection, it is interesting to examine the photographs, and the captions attached to them, that appear in the appendix of Plekhanov's book. The photos were probably approved by Zhirinovsky, and the captions, like the text, are unabashed apologias. There are 46 of them (in the expanded edition). The first 8 show Zhirinovsky's family and his youth; the next 24, Zhirinovsky himself in different parts of Russia; and the last 14, his foreign contacts and his comrades-in-arms.

At least one commentator has suggested that the word "kitsch" comes from the Russian verb *kichit'sya*, which means "to be haughty and puffed up."[23] This proposition seems quite appropriate to the caption of the first picture: "I have thought for a long time about the mechanism of state power. What are its components?"; "I have an understanding of the most intricate issues"; and "I've known the world well enough to have the scope one should possess in order to lead a political party."[24] This first photograph contains a detail worthy of particular attention: the LDPR's enormous coat of arms, an eagle surrounded by rays of the sun and flying over a map of a Russia that includes Alaska, Poland, and Finland.[25] Hanging above Zhirinovsky's armchair in his office, it looks more like an American corporate emblem— that of, say, the Harley Davidson motorcycle company—than the state emblem of the Russian Empire. While pretending to be very Russian and very nationalist, and declaring his attachment to high moral, cultural, and patriotic values, Zhirinovsky is really displaying a type of consumer political culture.

The absurd grandiloquence of certain captions such as "Before a meeting" and "Thinking about Russia's destiny" sounds like something one might find in a book on Brezhnev published in the early 1980s. The principal law of kitsch, the "law of aesthetic inadequacy," is at work in this tasteless junk. Calinescu has argued that "we

21 Dorfles, *Kitsch*, 113.

22 Quoted in Solovyov and Klepikova, *Zhirinovsky*, 97.

23 Gilbert Highet, cited in Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity*, 235.

24 All photos discussed are located at the end of this paper immediately following the text.

25 This coat of arms is also reproduced in Solovyov and Klepikova, *Zhirinovsky*, 97.

may well speak of kitsch effects in connection with combinations or arrangements of objects that, taken individually, have absolutely nothing kitschy about them,"[26] and indeed we can note the strong kitsch effect of the photographs and captions taken as a whole, even if in some of them Zhirinovsky does not look particularly "puffed up."

In the next photo, Zhirinovsky is shown seated on a camel. The caption is: "I had already begun to elaborate upon my own geopolitical concept. I don't want to give it my name, so I won't say, 'Zhirinovsky's formula,' instead I'll call it 'the last dash to the south,' gaining access to the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea, this is truly the way to save the Russian nation."[27]

Zhirinovsky's kitsch style mixes self-aggrandizement with extreme banality. He apparently believes that banalities become profundities when he utters them. The caption for photo number three is: "Finally, the goal of every policy is the happiness of a concrete man... To make people happy and not to awaken their hatred." The phrase "to make people happy" is reminiscent of the well-known poster in which a group of Pioneers is shown addressing Stalin with the words "Thank you, Comrade Stalin, for our happy childhood." Photo number four is a fine bit of kitsch art, though with an ominous message. In it, Zhirinovsky is holding a rifle, and the caption is: "I think that politics is a wholesome, noble, and dangerous business."

The caption for photo number five is: "... less heroism... If everyone sacrifices his life, who will be left to live in our country?" Boris Kagarlitsky has commented that this "sounds almost like Brecht's dictum: 'Unhappy is the land that has need of heroes.'"[28] Actually, the similarity is only superficial, for the form is quite different. Brecht referred to "the land" in the third person, whereas Zhirinovsky's caption speaks of "our country." The element of kitsch is particularly evident from the photograph itself, which depicts Zhirinovsky with his hat off near a military tomb, with a guard in the background holding a machine gun. During the Soviet period, such pictures were typically accompanied by captions with just the opposite message.

In photograph number six, we see Zhirinovsky standing by a map of the world with a foolish expression on his face that makes his lips look trumpetlike. The caption is of the sort that Limonov called "Zhirinovsky's international dreams," in which Russian soldiers stand on the shores of the Indian Ocean and are met with flowers by the local inhabitants. Limonov says that Zhirinovsky "poeticizes, borrowing everything either from Napoleon or from Ostap Bender"[29] (or, I would add, from Alexander the Great), and he offers an alternative

26 Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity*, 232, 236.

27 *The Last Dash to the South* is the title of an earlier book of Zhirinovsky's: *Poslednii brusok na yug* (Moscow: RAIT, 1993).

28 Kagarlitsky, *Restoration in Russia*, 67.

29 Limonov, *Limonov protiv Zhirinovskogo*, 159.

caption: "The Russian soldiers are marching on the ocean shores; Zhirinovsky, like Phantomas, emerges onto the surface of the water in a submarine."[30] Phantomas is a character in a series of French black comedies about a masked criminal who appears everywhere at a critical moment, causes trouble, and then vanishes with the trademark line, "Ha-ha-ha, I am Phantomas."

The "Kitsch Man"

What particularly makes Zhirinovsky a phenomenon of kitsch is above all the element of falseness. A false aesthetic consciousness or, to paraphrase Theodor Adorno, a parody of aesthetic consciousness,[31] appears everywhere in Zhirinovsky's work. As the examples above indicate, the very political content of Zhirinovsky's texts and pictures becomes kitsch when it masquerades as high culture.[32] In his writings, everything is transformed into superficial emotions and hedonistic witticisms, all of it in poor taste.

Nevertheless, to call Zhirinovsky a "genius of kitsch"[33] is certainly an overestimation. As a kitsch artist, Zhirinovsky is weak, neither independent nor original. The ideas he expresses are merely vulgarized versions of those invented by Solzhenitsyn, Vladimir Maksimov, and other genuine Russian patriots. Even his style turns out to have a lot in common with that of the rock star and LDPR member Sergei Zharikov. He has also stolen a great deal from Limonov, which is one reason that Limonov titled one of his articles about Zhirinovsky, "To Catch a Thief." Nor, as Limonov has put it, does he really have a great talent for self-advertisement.[34]

It must be said, rather, that Zhirinovsky was simply fortunate to have entered the public arena at a moment when the common people were temporarily blind, a moment when the lifelong bureaucrats, the Skalozubs (named for the stupid colonel of Griboedov's comedy, *Woe from Wit*), had begun to be replaced by the newcomers, the Khlestakovs,[35] and some of the old nomenklatura were trying to use the new arrivals for their own ends. If Zhirinovsky is a genius of anything, he is a genius of theft, of the pilfering of everything from everyone. The unconcealed impudence of his theft astounds the observer; Limonov says "the plagiarism is way too visible," and that Zhirinovsky is "made from different pieces, like a patchwork quilt."[36] The genuine "kitsch artist" should be eclectic, and Zhirinovsky certainly is that.

30 Limonov, *Limonov protiv Zhirinovskogo*, 183.

31 Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetische Theorie* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhkamp, 1970), 355.

32 Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity*, 231.

33 Solovyov and Klepikova, *Zhirinovsky*, 164.

34 Limonov, *Limonov protiv Zhirinovskogo*, 16, 36, 122.

35 See Grigorii Pomerants, "Smena tipazhei na avanstsene istorii i etnicheskie sdvigi," *Obshchestvennye nauki i sovremennost'*, 1990, no. 1.

36 Limonov, *Limonov protiv Zhirinovskogo*, 37, 161.

In addition, Zhirinovsky is a spiteful and mediocre person, a Russian redneck, "the sort of person who cuts into line," "the director of a food depot."[37] And that makes him a perfect "kitsch man" as well. A genuine "kitsch artist" should be a true "kitsch man." "The kitsch man wants to fill his spare time with maximum excitement... in exchange for minimum effort. For him the ideal is effortless enjoyment."[38] That's exactly what Zhirinovsky wants. He himself admits that he never "had a strong inclination for science and the humanities," where diligence and hard work are needed.[39]

Zhirinovsky makes heavy use of the big lie, but he does it in such a way that people don't believe him. In the West, they get frightened, but in Russia they laugh. Both reactions are good for publicity, because in the West, people talk most about politicians who are dangerous, and in Russia, they talk most about politicians who are amusing.

In any case, Zhirinovsky's popularity is on the decline. There is not sufficient space here to discuss the social and political reasons for this decline, but let me illustrate it with a couple of the most recent jokes about Zhirinovsky. These jokes demonstrate that his political reputation has been compromised. Simple people are sensitive enough to understand when people consider them cattle. The commercial inclinations of Zhirinovsky, whom Limonov has compared to a gypsy selling a bad horse, are displayed in the following jokes:

> Yeltsin says to Zhirinovsky, "You know, I was offered $5,000 for my resignation. What would you advise me to do?"
>
> "Ask for more," Zhirinovsky replies.
>
> . . .
>
> "Why aren't you getting married?"
>
> "Well, you know, my boyfriend, Zhirinovsky, is a politician. He can only promise, he doesn't follow through."[40]

Conclusion

How long are the incredible adventures of Ostap Volfovich going to last? Not much longer, I believe. As far back as 1991, one observer ventured to suggest the possibility that "Zhirinovsky will disappear as unexpectedly as he has appeared"—though he added, pessimistically, that "this kind of position is never empty."[41] This paper was written in order not only to encourage Zhirinovsky to leave politics but also to keep this position empty—to help people who support such figures become aware of their unfortunate mistakes

37 Limonov, *Limonov protiv Zhirinovskogo*, 184, 180.

38 Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity*, 259.

39 Zhirinovsky, *Poslednii brosok na yug*, 48.

40 *Anekdoty i tosty* (Voronezh, 1995).

41 Leonid Radzikhovsky, "Pessimisticheskaya komediya", *Ogonyok*, 37 (1991): 16-17.

and to abandon their dangerous illusions.

I am quite convinced that Zhirinovsky himself will facilitate this process. He will do something that will overwhelm everyone, that will be recognized as crazy even by Russia's lax political standards. He'll be flogged by someone, he'll be sued for having sex with underage boys, or he'll break his neck during one of his frequent drinking sprees. Or, more likely, someone will publish documents showing that Zhirinovsky was a lifelong KGB agent.[42] Whatever the exact circumstances will be, his reputation will burst like a bubble.[43] He will be expelled from Russian politics as he was expelled from Turkey for Communist propaganda, and from democratic circles because of suspicion that he was an agent of the KGB.

Indeed, one of the ominous predictions about Zhirinovsky has already come true in a sense. Drawing the parallel between the way Zhirinovsky fights for the presidency and the way an arrogant person cuts ahead of people in a cafeteria line, Limonov warned Zhirinovsky: "You know, Vladimir Volfovich, generally Russian life is quiet and suppressed, but all of a sudden even the most inoffensive old lady will get fed up and she will beat you over the head with her handbag, and then the men will join in ... and you, having been beaten, will be sent to the very end of the line; you won't get a thing, you'll count yourself lucky just to survive."[44] Admittedly, Duma deputy Tishkovskaya isn't an "old lady," but she did hit him during a parliamentary session.[45]

Then again, perhaps he will simply leave the Russian political arena on his own (along with Yeltsin). As for us, we will marvel at the fact that we took him seriously for so long. We still have a chance to come to our senses now, before it happens, so that we won't have to exclaim, as Gogol's mayor did: "How could I, how could I? I've been such a fool. Look, look, all the world, all Christianity, everybody! Look what a fool I've been. To take that nincompoop for a man of importance. What first put all this nonsense about the inspector general into my head? Nothing! Did that idiot look like one? But all of a sudden everyone began buzzing, 'The inspector! The inspector's here!'"

42 A statement that Zhirinovsky obtained from the KGB declaring that he was not an employee of the security agency is definitely full of a disarming kitschy charm, but can hardly assure anyone.

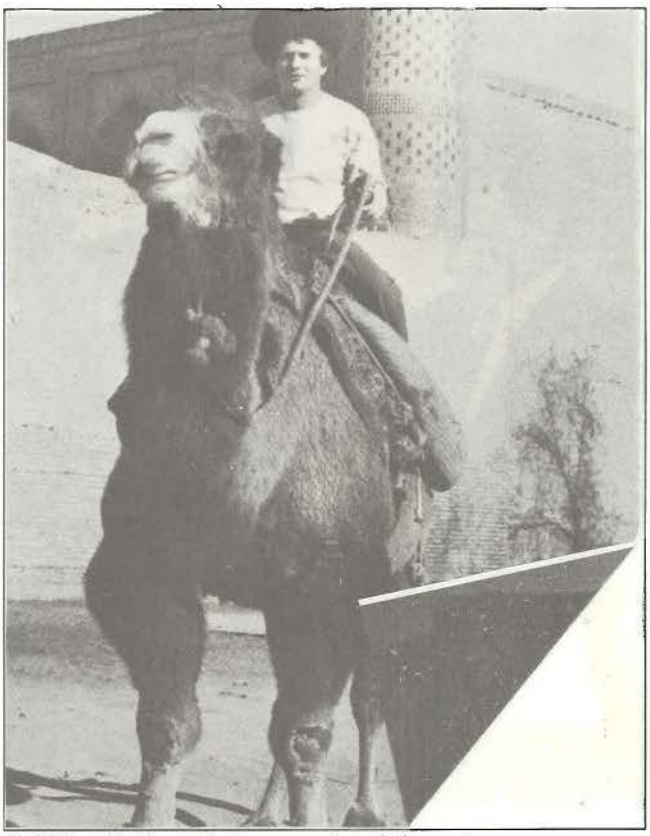
43 To cite yet another character in Russian literature, we may note the fate of Governor Ugrium-Burcheev: "There was a resounding crack and the former hangman vanished instantly, melted into thin air." Mikhail Saltykov-Shchedrin, "A History of a Town," in *The Chronicle of Foolov*, ed. and transl. Susan Brownsberger (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Ardis, 1982), 173.

44 Limonov, *Limonov protiv Zhirinovskogo*, 182.

45 "Zharkie diskussii v Gosudarstvennoi Dume", *Novoe Russkoe Slovo*, 11 September 1995.

1. "I have thought a long time about the mechanism of state power. What are its components? I have an understanding of the most intricate issues. I've known the world well enough to have the scope one should possess in order to lead a political party."

Note: All photographs are from S. Plekhanov, *Zhirinovsky: Kto On?* (Evraziya-Nord, 1994)



2. "I had already begun to elaborate upon my own geopolitical concept. I don't want to give it my name, so I won't say, 'Zhirinovsky's Formula,' instead I'll call it the 'last dash to the south,' gaining access to the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea, this is truly the way to save the Russian nation."

3. "Finally, the goal of every policy is the happiness of a concrete man... To make people happy and not to awaken their hatred."

4. "I think that politics is a wholesome, noble, and dangerous business."

5. "...less heroism... If everyone sacrifices his life who will be left to live in our country?"

6. "I see Russian soldiers preparing for this last dash to the south. I see Russian commanders at the headquarters of Russian divisions and armies, tracing itineraries and destinations for the movement of troop formations. I see aircraft at airbases in the southern districts of Russia. I see submarines surfacing off the shores of the Indian Ocean and launches approaching the shores along which Russian soldiers are already marching, along which armored personnel carriers and huge masses of tanks are moving. Finally, Russia completes its final military campaign."