

A. V. Shershukov²

LESSONS OF THE NOVOCHERKASSK TRAGEDY FOR MODERN RUSSIA

For those engaged in economic, political, and social research, the Likhachov Scientific Conference in 2022 is an opportunity to discuss today's problems in the context of historical events. As it happens, June this year is a month of commemorative historical dates. Many "knots" in politics and economics still exist, they are still not untied and are only getting tighter.

This year's Likhachov Conference takes place a few days after the commemoration of the working-class move-

ment in Russia. 60 years ago, on 1–2 June 1962, unrest at the electric locomotive plant in Novochoerkassk ended with the shooting of a demonstration. But this was the climax, or rather, part of the climax of the political, economic and social drama. The reason for the conflict were blatant miscalculations in production planning, the system of tariffs and price policy in the Soviet Union in the last years of the Khrushchev era. If, on the one hand, workers' wage rates are lowered and, on the other hand, meat prices are raised, these erroneous decisions combine to become the basis of a conflict. And if someone further ignites the smoldering conflict, as did the plant manager saying, "If you don't have money for meat, eat pies with liver," then the protest erupts in the form of a veritable "Russian rebellion" described by Pushkin. And if, instead of negotiations, the government resorts to the "services" of the army, it ends in tragedy which

² Deputy Chairman of the Federation of Independent Trade Unions of Russia, Editor-in-Chief of the Central Trade Union newspaper "Solidarnost." Chairman of the All-Russian Political Party Union of Labor (2012–2020). Author of the books: "Russia: Trade Unions and Workers' Organizations" (1991, 1993), "Congress of Russian Communities and Alexander Lebed" (1996), "Trade Union Ideology" (2012), and "Brief History of Russian Trade Unions" (2020).

will be remembered even 60 years later. 22 killed in the square, about 70 wounded. And more than a hundred people who were prosecuted.

What historical lessons should be learned in connection with Novocherkassk? Economic decisions must always be considered not only from the point of view of production and finance. Social results, consequences for the workers and – more broadly – for the entire population cannot be sidelined. These are not “collateral” considerations but the primary criteria for evaluating allegedly unbiased technocratic decisions. Another lesson is the detrimental consequences of neglecting such a tool as feedback. Presence of effective feedback helps prevent negative effects of certain measures or to level them out altogether. When formalism in management or fear of upsetting the superiors become determining factors in decision-making, the risk of error is the highest. But even at this stage, the worst can still be prevented. The third lesson of Novocherkassk is that the lack of readiness for a meaningful dialogue entails a bloody tragedy. Representatives of the Soviet leadership who came to Novocherkassk in 1962, instead of talking to representatives of the protesters, preferred to call in the troops...

Are the events of 60 years ago only a historical flashback, irrelevant to the present day? Not really.

The drama in Novocherkassk shows that even in a state that positions itself as a “country of workers and peasants,” labor relations can contain the germ of an acute conflict which is resolved, as in this case, not through negotiations or other peaceful means, but with the guns.

Now we need to ask ourselves a tough question. Can we say that today, in the contemporary Russia, the events in Novocherkassk have zero chance to repeat? It seems that the guarantees of not repeating them cannot be provided by strengthening of administrative or police control. In the Soviet Union, which many people perceive today in an exclusively favorable light, there were significant restrictions on freedom of speech, the political police, and the death penalty. But the workers still went out on their protest rally. As a result, in addition to those who were shot directly at the plant, several participants of the Novocherkassk events were subsequently sentenced to death. Seven people were executed by shooting and 103 were sentenced to imprisonment for a term from 2 to 15 years.

Today, in a situation of radical reformatting of economic relations inside Russia and especially with the outside world, there is much talk about the need to build new supply chains, quick reorientation from the West to the East, and introduction of technologies that are key to the production of modern equipment. The government invests a lot in import substitution. In essence, we are talking about a “new industrialization.” But these technological and financial issues are inseparable from social issues. During industrialization in the USSR in the 1930s, when millions of villagers moved to the cities, the state made huge investments in the social services. The resettled needed to be provided with housing, food, and medical care, and also with a certain prospect of an increase in their material income and cultural level. The problem with today’s reformatting of the economy is that the “new industrialization” will be (if at all) carried out in a situation of uncertainty and even some turbulence in the workers’ incomes. Mid-term forecasts from some expert communities, including those related to the state, suggest a possible drop in the workers’ disposable income. At the same time, opening of

new enterprises and creation of new jobs also implies an increase in wage funds. Thus, today’s situation is apparently extraordinary and even the forecasts should be regarded with caution, taking into account the patriotic or cosmopolitan stance of the expert, which, of course, has nothing to do with scientific assessments. Nevertheless, even now there is a need for a substantial preliminary analysis of the proposed economic measures and their social consequences, along with a preliminarily environmental check. The declaration of CPSU General Secretary Yuri Andropov, who once said, “we do not know the society in which we live,” can today be read as follows: “knowledge of the society undergoing an economic change must be translated into concrete measures for social development of this society.”

These measures cannot be limited to supporting the poor. Unfortunately, the government’s social policy in recent years, including the pandemic period, has been focused on assistance to the people with low income, most of whom are families with children. Over the past twenty years in Russia, there was a slight decline in the share of such an amazing category of the population as the “working poor,” which included huge swaths of the working population. But at the end of 2021, 50% of workers were paid less than 38 thousand rubles per month, although even those earning such amounts cannot be considered middle class. However, elements of progressive taxation of personal income have begun to be introduced only recently and very limitedly with regard to the most well-to-do strata of the society. And if for many years we were told that because of the progressive taxation, the capital would “escape” abroad, today this argument does not work. There is nowhere to escape, thank god. The issues of social justice (the level and ratio of income, taxation, workers’ and trade unions’ rights) are as important today, at the time of economic transformation, as issues of technological reorganization.

Equally important is the problem of feedback. As of today, the response of the authorities to the possible negative reaction of the population and workers is instrumentally implemented on the basis of the regional control centers. However, for the authorities, these structures are intra-administrative, controlling themselves to a certain extent. The answer to the old casuistic question, “Who cuts the barber’s hair?,” is essentially given in a form that helps with reporting, but is not quite effective in solving the problem itself. It seems that a better method of receiving feedback to the decisions is through building an institutional backbone based on employee representative organizations – the trade unions. Such feedback can be organizationally obtained through the system of social partnership built in Russia on the basis of a system of tripartite consultations, regular negotiations, and tripartite commissions at the federal and regional levels. But in order to do so, the authorities must answer the question if they need a meaningful and positive monitoring of their decisions or only formal approval of their actions? It was the second option that led to the tragedy in Novocherkassk 60 years ago. Its ineffectiveness for both workers and the state is quite obvious today.

Unfortunately, construction of an institutional framework for the social partnership system has encountered some opposition over the last year. State bodies often suggest to liquidate the trade union structure (such as the trade union of lawyers) or consistently, from the regional to the federal level, raise claims against the national trade union

center with the specific goal of seizing union property. Such claims are in fact unfounded, since all the necessary documents were signed by the government and there are effective legislative norms that are being interpreted arbitrarily today. The social policy of the country and the policy of the state in relation to the structures that affect social and labor relations are supposed to be carried out using a single approach. Stories in the vein of Saltykov-Shchedrin (“we will give you a medal for your work and immediately arrest you for this work”) cannot be considered normal in a socially oriented state.

But even the introduction of mechanisms of preliminary expertise and follow-up control is not an absolute guarantee for the preservation of social peace and development. Conflicts are inevitable in complex systems like the modern economic and social system of Russia. According to Captain Gleb Zheglov, protagonist of the movie “The Meeting Place Cannot Be Changed,” “legal order in the country is not about the number of thieves but about the ability of the authorities to neutralize them.” Another thing is that this approach suggests a different level of requirements to the quality of work of the law enforcement bodies, including a definitive break with the practice of the 1990s, when investigators and prosecutors often acted as a tool in property “squabbles” and redistribution of property. Such a break does not seem to have happened yet.

In cases of social or labor conflicts, however, there is always the need of their prompt containment and resolution. Mediation methods do play a major role; by the way, they are being professionally studied and implemented by the Department of Conflict Resolution at Saint Petersburg University of Humanities and Social Sciences. But even so, the role of a continuous meaningful dialogue should not be underestimated; the parties to a social partnership must engage in it during a conflict that has already begun. The responsibility of the parties in this case is to quickly find a way to “unstitch” the conflict without resorting to mutual accusations.

Novocherkassk is not just history. Today sociological surveys speak of low protest potential of the Russian population, including hired workers. But it would be a big mistake to think that the relatively calm situation cannot change. The “safeguard” against social explosions should not be complacency or hope for mutual responsibility of government, business, and workers; but only a constant, meaningful, informal social dialogue based on effective social partnership institutions. And it should not be seen as a “steam release valve” (a rather derogatory image for all sides of the negotiation). It’s about preventing problems and actually resolving them, not imitating the resolution. This is the main lesson of Novocherkassk for the contemporary Russia.