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Libertarians in Russia: Moscow Never Sleeps?

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Victor Agroskin is Vice-president of TechInvestLab, has an experience in strategy, IT and management consulting. Participated in investment and consulting projects in various industries for private and government clients, including e-government projects, financial market infrastructure, exchange trading, network capacity distribution.

Andrew Schumann: The libertarians in any country represent a minority; nevertheless very often this minority is an influential expert group whose opinion is considered as meaningful. What spheres are where the Moscow libertarians have influential expert estimations?

Anatoly Levenchuk: In Russia there are several libertarian intellectual groups and one formal (yet unregistered) libertarian party. One of the oldest groups is closely tied to Austrian school of economic thought and is interested in the development of praxeological thinking. Austrian school has a rich and long history, but is rather forgotten now by a leftist mainstream economy, although its existence always surfaces at the time of economic turmoil.

Victor Agroskin: In Russia Austrian economic school is probable known better and wider then in other countries – because of the activities of the said group and first of all because of the publishing house "Sotsium" and its founder Alexander Kouriaev. Here every economist knows (and some are afraid) of its influence on the intellectual life. Nevertheless it should be noted that adherence to or knowledge of Austrian school of economics does not automatically mean adherence to libertarian political philosophy.

Andrew Schumann: Who or what has suggested a number of Muscovites to accept libertarian worldviews? What background is for libertarianism in Moscow? What projects have been implemented by the Moscow libertarians recently?

Anatoly Levenchuk: As I've mentioned, one group of Moscow libertarians was involved in translation and publishing activity since early 90-s. For many years works of Mises, Hayek, Rothbard, etc. were translated and published in paper and on-line. People with different backgrounds (soviet-style economists, mathematicians, programmers, engineers) started to share

common views on economy and politics, and became involved in various public projects, such as reforms in privatization, energy and transport sector restructuring, financial markets and banking.
Annually "Lebedev readings" are held in memory of Gennady Lebedev, once an important member and one of informal leaders of the said group. It is a scientific conference where with each year we have more and more original works – ones that don't just offer reinterpretation of classic thinkers but propose something new and original.

Victor Agroskin: Another group of younger people is trying to win the place in reborn Russian public politics now, coming to streets with libertarian banners and fighting for the registration of Libertarian political party under Russian law. This group is publishing "Atlant" newspaper and organizing Adam Smith readings as a public forum on freedom in economy and politics.
There are several professors of economics in Russian universities (Moscow, St.Petersburg) who are teaching Austrian school of economics to their students. Sometimes they are doing this with support of their universities, but some of them are really defending their right to teach about economic freedom and real market economy.

Andrew Schumann: What features of Gennady Lebedev's libertarian point of view can you note? Usually supporters of von Mizes' economic views are skeptical about mathematical methods in economics. Lebedev was not so obviously skeptic and suggested to use logical methods in economics. Is it a promising approach today?

Anatoly Levenchuk: There are different kinds of mathematic models: a numerical models, used in statistics, and a discrete models, used in logic. Austrian economists do not recommend use of statistics for peoples' behavior. If you kick a stone you can predict its behavior with precise numerical model, if you pressurize a gas – you can use a statistical one. But if you kick or press one sentient individual or even a country of sentient individuals, reaction cannot be predictable. But Austrian economists have no objections to the use of mathematic language for precise logical reasoning about core economic concepts.

Years ago we've discussed with Gennady Lebedev that "Human Action" treatise is very rich in ideas for persuasion but isn't especially good in providing a formal ontology for reasoning about economics. It should be remodeled with the use of contemporary instruments of philosophical logic: counterfactual reasoning, possible worlds, modal logic, etc. Then we'll get a tool for successful distribution of freedom ideas in broader circles, which are now under the influence of mainstream mathematized pseudo-science.

Andrew Schumann: Is it possible to state that your interest in ontology is connected to attempts of synthesis of the Austrian ideas and logic? What achievements have you in ontology sphere?

Anatoly Levenchuk: It is not specifically about economic ideas, it is about praxeology (theory of action) ideas, which also comprise the foundations of Austrian economic. I want to see human action ontology (although I don't believe in an existence of one-fits-all ontology) that I can use to reason about possible human activities. I am interested in studies at a borderline between planned and non-planned activities. E.g. you definitely can plan work of 5 employees in a small engineering boutique, but you rather can't plan activities of a whole construction industry even in a small town. How can we describe and attempt to optimize activities of a federation of dozens enterprises (extended enterprise) in a big infrastructure project with their own supply chain management, CAD/PLM systems? I need a compact language to reason about such projects – greater then a single firm but smaller then a whole market.

We are participating in the development of industrial standard ISO 15926 – life cycle data integration ontology. It is rather unique for its ontological foundations in 4D extensionalism and possible world approach. We've developed .15926 (pronounced "dot15926") software framework to work with data structured with the help of this ontology. There is a small (about 80 people) Russian-speaking community interested in such applications of ontology to human activities in engineering.

Victor Agroskin: ISO 15926 so far is not used for ontology modeling with formal semantics, and there are no software tools with logical provers or reasoners under the hood. It works more like a common dictionary now but this is sufficient for our purposes of activity description mappings.
We are testing ontology-based mapping of enterprise and extended enterprise activity descriptions – project management, process management, case management, supply chain logistics, factory floor logistics, etc. These descriptions are distributed across different project management tools, issue trackers and process engines in CAD/PLM, ERP, EAM and other kinds of engineering, production, maintenance and financial enterprise information systems.
Some day we hope to use .15926 software for conceptual modeling of a general praxeology framework to obtain a model good for theoretical studies and for education. But currently we have no resources for such an endeavor.

Andrew Schumann: What is your interest in systems engineering and engineering management connected to? What appreciable results you have in this area?

Anatoly Levenchuk: Engineering is a good starting point for the study of complex human systems. And it is possibly the only area where definitive scientific results are within our reach, compared to social and government domains.
Engineering activity consists of substance and information transformations to fulfill product requirements. Systems engineering is an interdisciplinary activity to build system as a whole and view the whole system's life cycle while dealing with it. Specialty engineering (mechanical, electrical, software, etc.) is only concerned with a part of a whole system. Therefore systems engineers need a good systems-centered ontology to describe a system and its life cycle. It is very challenging task – to build an oil refinery or an aircraft and eliminate all collision imminent to collaborative efforts. Systems engineering tell us how to do it.
Engineering management (or operation management) deals with flows through multiple workstations in a single enterprise or in multiple enterprises' supply chain. These are flows of materials and parts, of work tasks, of information, or money. This is about planning enterprise resources, scheduling and executing project, managing, queues, buffers, etc. Engineering management also deals with configuration management – defining objects of various flows and managing changes to these objects.
But all these disciplines are just different views on a human activity. We have developed PraxOS (Praxeologic Organisational System) framework that is in essence a library of systems engineering and engineering management method components. We use PraxOS in our consulting work with industry holdings. Also we are introducing students from a couple of Moscow universities to PraxOS concepts.

Victor Agroskin: And also we pay special attention to the problem of social engineering. Specifically we always teach people that systems engineering or engineering management recipes are not good when you are working with public systems and systems of state rule. These methods are developed for private entrepreneurial domain and for artificial systems, and should remain where they belong.

Humans are not a substance for engineering and their wishes and preferences are not the same as engineering requirements.

Andrew Schumann: When can we expect the high-grade electronic government which will completely replace the real governments? Will the era of libertarian communism appear then?

Anatoly Levenchuk: A decade ago we've participated in e-government projects in Russia. We've worked from a presumption that electronic government is not more then computers in aid to real government and real people. You can rename computers in your home (including chips in telephones and cars) as an "e-home" but this will not mean that real sweet home suddenly disappears and you enter a virtual reality. The same is true for e-government.
We believe that e-government should not be used to empower bureaucrats to the same extent e-enterprise is empowering workers. Absolute power corrupt absolutely. The government was not delegated the right to use computers for better control of the citizens.
Libertarian communism is oxymoron. I understand your sarcasm. Be careful with "progress" when you deal with governments and powers.