



Petersburg

Michel Donnegan

1995

dyr boul chtchyl oubechtour

skoum vy so bou

rrléz

— Russian futurist manifestoes, 1913

“There is more national character in these five verses than in all the poetry of Pushkin.”

— Krutcheny

They close the door. They are “among friends”; it is a broad definition that covers both old relationships and the hosts of the moment. They will drink. They help each other and search for solutions to everyone’s problems; money is never an issue here. They joke, we exchange views, and again they drink and eat. They can end things with vows of friendship. They remain lucid for a long time. They can laugh at themselves and at the world. They tell each other what they have been doing. It is usually generous and warm. The feeling of loneliness doesn’t exist, and everyone is ready to exclude whoever does not respect this “community,” “among friends.”

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“If they could kill each other, they would do it willingly.” More and more numerous cars accelerate in pursuit of a passer-by crossing a wide street. Swinging doors swing back violently against the next person. As soon as the subway train reaches the platform, passengers who were waiting rush inside: people have to elbow their way out. They take their children in their arms as they approach the bottleneck at the escalator, where everyone brutally forces their way through with their shoulders and fists. They are crammed together in the buses, when they circulate. Bags hit people’s knees. Elsewhere, a man insinuates himself into a waiting line and tries to trick everyone, with an expression that is a mixture of uneasiness and false indifference. On the Nevsky Prospect, one passes a disturbing number of faces bruised by blows. In many places one finds a number of holsters for sale. A former-officer, who is “a little drunk,” asks our advice: “I’m looking for someone to slaughter.”

One hears very few insults, yells or even comments. It is an insidious violence, where everyone hates everyone else, where other people are responsible for misfortunes and difficulties, where their very existence makes everything worse. It is a hatred that tries to take advantage of every opportunity to simply and maliciously do harm. Without any compensation: “That’s life.” And though Russians have always abused each other in the street, today some discover a fear they were unaware of until now: a growing one caused by the permanent war of all against all.

There, people don’t burden themselves with any politeness or conviviality, which, as they do in the West, remove uneasiness and frustration and conceal aggressiveness and contempt. Fear is not afraid of its effects: hatred is omnipresent and expresses itself indiscriminately against everyone, mute and straightforward, opportunistic and unsubtle — a constant veiled vengeance.

Without endless debate, straight out, Russians do not like work. Production is low and of poor quality; planning is only formally respected and authority is ridiculed. What counts, apart from wages, is what you can pick up there. Threats, terror, recruitment and com-

petition haven't changed anything. They are still recalcitrant. These "Asian Barbarians" have neither a head nor the taste for it. Discipline is an obligation, order a constraint. They don't expect any enrichment, unless it is one that results from a collective exchange.¹ The more they are able to exert themselves in their daily lives for themselves and their friends, the more they will be indifferent and indolent at work.

Money was not their main preoccupation: the stores filled up and they could buy. It was just a sinister means that was usually separate from relationships that ensured survival. They used the money to feed and clothe themselves; other expenses were residual ones, as opposed to the West, where an extreme complexity of credit, taxes, social insurance, rent, insurance, bills, etc., subjugates everyone to the pace of life that is imposed by it. The social organization did not bind Russians through the *diktat* of money: they were largely unfamiliar with it.

Indifference to work and money: here are two terrible evils that modern states have always recognized as their most formidable enemies. For them, the West's contamination by the "spirit" of the East would be the worst possible case. The most plausible one is fear of a migratory contagion of the poor populations, reaching the West and its wealth "on foot" without an initiation into the effort and type of submission that is required by the hope of attaining that wealth. Since (according to the propagandists) the world has been divided, until now, between totalitarianism that the populations of the East were subjected to under the heel of the police, and western happiness, where people flourish in a standardized slavery — and this division is finished — from now on, Russians must be forced to love freedom.

The people of Petersburg have been seized with a feverishness that is quite new: in addition to waiting in lineups, they will have to run and compare commodities, take an interest in them and

¹ A few years ago, using the recent western technique, a factory manager

spend time on them following the “liberation of prices.” The invasion of many new products, signs of long-awaited abundance, is leading Russians into a pace of life that they have never experienced until now. The promise of commodities calls for their participation. The arrangements and schemes that show their lack of civic-mindedness must disappear. It’s only by grabbing these Russians by the throat that they will change and submit willingly, because this is the only way they will be able to survive “the end of communism and the coming of democracy.” They must get down to work, acknowledge its advantages, give in to its demands and further reduce their lives to a sum of activities that they are forced to do and that have become vital.

In one month the price of everyday products increased by a factor of two and a half, urban transport by a factor of two and trains by a factor of two or three. Wages hardly budged. Pensions are a thousand rubles a month — 3 kilos of sausage, a vague agglomeration of dubious-looking meat. Rents are going up. At the slightest rumor of a price increase, shopkeepers empty the shelves, anticipating the profits that speculation will bring them. Cash shops are proliferating and most people suffer nightmarishly in front of the windows.

Leave? From now on, the borders of the ex-USSR will be open. But western states, which have always protested against the shutting in of populations in the “totalitarian” countries, are increasing difficulties at their ports of entry in the form of interdictions.

Recently, the Austrian State bought border installations from Hungary that it had at the time of the Iron Curtain: although it is said that Hungarians can now leave, their entry into Austria is controlled from the same watchtowers. Germany is still tolerating a little final easy access, for a little while. A Russian who bears an invitation must pay into an insurance policy that is meant to pre-

asked his workers to elect the one among them with the best performance, so he could be awarded a bonus. They all elected each other..

informing and careerist ambitions — seems to have gotten lost. The most recent jokes that are still circulating ridicule Gorbachev. There is nothing about Yeltsin and the imposition of the new laws, and no insolence, apart from an unhappy cynicism that jeers at the disturbing levels of radioactivity and the poor quality of food, and which repeats the most sinister anecdotes that young children tell each other in the West. A musical style inspired by hardcore and technopop, and which mixes in parts of military marches, has attracted a significant following among the youth, who call it “*depressnaya musika*.”

The domesticated slaves of the West indifferently put up with the biggest lies and the most perceptive truths in a state of hypnotic contemplation. But it is a whole different matter for the Russian “barbarians,” unused as they are to consent to being subjected to a general impoverishment of their lives in the name of the western model.

For the Russians, the attainment of wealth claims that it is no longer hampered by the bureaucratic and communist system. But they, who had to bear horrors and terrors to attain “western happiness,” have not experienced the slow process of dispossession and exhaustion experienced by the western populations. In a very brief period of time they must join a system that has taken several decades to put the finishing touches to itself, to channel people’s ideas and anger, to impose itself as eternity and as the only measure of freedom. It is a finished product which they have to swallow brutally and in large doses, without the promise of drunkenness and with a permanent hangover. It is not the slow digestion of an insipid product: it is a violent ingestion which concentrates the poison and its vile taste.

Like the immensity of Russia, the inertia of its population is formidable. In the past, many invaders have already come to catastrophic defeats there after a few brilliant victories.

vent any expense to the German State. Other western countries are closing their borders de facto by requiring, with sinister hypocrisy, a mass of documents and attestations that are hard to assemble. As a last resort, the consul can block it, without explanation and irrevocably. Money will select people: every Wednesday there are significant increases in train and air fares with destinations in the West. As a final toll, the Baltic countries are slowly setting up a system of visas, which, in cooperation with the western states, will contribute more, acting as a final filtering effect.

Neither seventy years of communism nor the brutal offensive by the idea of money invented the crushing of Russia’s peoples. It was a Czar who created the city of Petersburg ex nihilo: thousands of forced *mujik* volunteers exhausted themselves in the construction of this caprice. Men had to be little and despised there: broad streets, a geometrical convergence toward the center, an architectural monumentalism that was the result of a mix of western styles, without a trace of the hesitations, plans and disorderliness of its inhabitants.²

Accounts of previous epochs describe street scenes in which line-ups outside supply depots trudge through the mud. Scenes of arrests, evictions of *mujiks*, forced labor camps, shortages, emaciated faces and vodka. The knout has been replaced by the club, which the cops still hold constantly and threateningly.

Bolshevik propaganda used to rely on the support of communal traditions to conquer state power. As Czarism’s heir, the communist regime applied the same principles: subservience, contempt, barbarity and greed. Having the mentality of a docile functionary was and has always been the norm of social behavior. More grotesquely than elsewhere, lying, informing, blackmail, careerism and servility ensured the ruling classes’ preservation and expansion. Membership in the Party, which was indispensable to social climbing; informing, which was not always inspired by fear, revealed a civic-minded atti-

² It is the courtyards and alleyways which cross the building blocks that bring back the city’s confused and disorderly character.

tude from which one could expect many advantages. Submission to ideology and the hierarchy had to prove its zeal. "One had to force one's way through the bureaucracy, enmities, paperwork and stupidity."³ There an individual's worth has always been measured by his baseness.

As opposed to the western ruling classes, who understood the need to weaken and domesticate abilities and talents without suppressing them, the ruling classes of Russia and the ex-USSR always saw in them a deadly threat that had to be eradicated.⁴

The western powers have achieved this incomparable feat: in all moments of their lives, citizens use the same language as the State. This governing apparatus has diluted itself in people's heads and its coercive nature has been expurgated: it is defended as a personal choice, with the same servility and baseness as the ones that exist in the functioning of communist society. There, lies are consumed, produced and spat out again as definitive truths, whereas even in Russia official truths are ridiculed. There, just as the language of the authorities is seen straight out as propaganda, spinelessness and duplicity, which are required in social life, are seen as monstrous excrescences. People are not unaware of self-renunciation; it can be described as an obligatory degradation, but one that has not lost its ability to judge itself. In the West, one has to reach the point of great intimacy or anger to spare oneself the dissembling, hypocrisy and peculiarities that justify and reproduce misery in relations among men.

Soviet power was the productive and regulating center that forced every citizen to submit to a bureaucratic normality made up

³ Mayakovsky.

⁴ The recurrent anti-Semitism in Russia has its origins in the same viewpoint. Independently of religious antagonism or the association Jews/Bolsheviks or Jews/revolutionary movements that supposedly favored the Bolshevik seizure of power, the constant rejection, whatever ideology of state power is in force, defines an aspect of this despotic will: in Jews, they have always seen the threat of a phantasmagorical myth of "Jewish talent."

of rebellion. The camps for "prisoners of opinion," to use the official expression, were closed and psychiatric hospitals are used solely for their intended purpose. In prisons for young people between the ages of twelve and eighteen, the color red is violently forbidden, and this ban has become a pretext for the hierarchies and for a reign of terror among the prisoners: such and such a prisoner who has agreed to a visit with a visitor dressed in red, or who has received a package containing a red object or red food is subjected to all kinds of punishment, ranging from humiliation to death.

On one hand nostalgia, which wants to revive the past, and on the other a caricatural and fetishistic rejection of it, seem to monopolize people's expression of their refusal.

"There is no future; the future is today" is a remark that is often heard. Others, who experienced the KGB cellars, the blows, the camps and the psychiatric hospitals, anticipate forty years of hardships: "The time it will take for a new generation to forget their parents were slaves." Like it does at the end of a long period of imprisonment, when the enemy was clearly defined, fatalism maintains confusion in the face of the situation's complexity and the increase in people's misfortunes. "There is no light in Russia today," an ex-member of SMOT said to us. "Let's hope there will never be another communist regime. And though we are eating even worse now, at least we can read the books we want to."

Many Russians say they don't understand at all what is going on anymore. The world wants to make them ashamed of having put up with so much and for so long: they defend themselves against it and submit to it. Caught in the frantic pace of an offensive against their way of relating to each other in society, and in the lies of an international propaganda which pretends to feel sorry for them while it starves them, they are being ordered to lose even the lucidity that allowed them to point out the rotteness of a world where they had to struggle to get by.

Humor — the "*anekdotes*" which are often about the unforeseen drawbacks of alcohol, and which made it through police terrorism,

tisement displayed on Moscow walls shows Billy Graham in a stadium, offering to answer the metaphysical question: “Why?”...

These missionaries sponsored by big American corporations have come to preach social peace, and present money as the salvation of the soul.

In August '92, public transport in Petersburg was blocked for ten days: it was a bosses' strike organized by the Communist Party. The Baltyskaya, one of the biggest firms in the city, is the stronghold of an ultranationalist competitor of Yeltsin's. The last big strikes of '91 in Vorkhuta, the Donbass and the Donetsk were settled after management agreed to a tenth of the wage increase that was demanded, accompanied with insistent threats; in the west there have been massive layoffs. Apparently the strike was led by the NTS, the old corporatist and ultra-nationalist organization which stems from Russian emigre circles. Several movements in the factories and neighborhoods are the product of a hidden struggle between various political groups that will continue to exist, with nostalgia and a return to the past as their common viewpoint — the royalist-czarists, the nationalists, Pamyat, the Communist Party — whose program consists of profiting exclusively from the decline in living conditions by outdoing each other in disorganization.¹³

In 1986 there were about 7 million prisoners in the USSR. Individual struggles and the threat they were able to bring to bear on the administration resulted in a slight “softening” of the prison regime — more mail and visits. In early '92, a congress of the “Memorial” organization¹⁴ estimated that 50,000 prisoners had carried out acts

¹³ An article in the November '92 issue of *Monde diplomatique* claims that anti-IMF committees are being set up in various regions of Russia and that *kolkhoz* workers who have been evicted from their homes by new private landlords are reviving the “scorched earth” tradition. We haven't heard of it...

¹⁴ An association that has set itself the task of collecting all information about the prison system — drawing up lists of the number of people deported and imprisoned during the communist epoch and publicizing current movements in the prisons.

of careerism and contempt. It not only dictated the need for it but defined its limits, which were supposed to force everyone to stay in their assigned place: it was out of the question for some people's zeal to be allowed to offend the hierarchy.

The decline of soviet organization is that of this regulating center. The desertion of the apparatchiks and the considerable worsening of living conditions are leaving the behavior gained in the functioning of communist society leaderless and unmanaged. These upheavals are not suppressing them, they are aggravating them. Contempt and indifference, barbarism and greed, pettiness and spinelessness are taken up and developed by a whole new category of speculators and grabbers. The hoarding of foodstuffs and products, price increases, and speculation on everything — they are obeying a new master: money.

Speculators, the “*farsos*” or “bandits” whose work is underwritten and maintained by the former powers-that-be, are a type of independent vanguard that is reproducing the same techniques of despotism: threats and hope, competition and war. They are imposing money on people as the basic precondition of survival. This population that is dramatically suffering the *diktats* of this new master must now learn to understand the meaning and idea of money.

Money is not the external exercise of despotic power: it wants to devour the innermost recesses of the mind and does not tolerate anything that is foreign to it. It must penetrate minds and colonize tastes, feelings and aspirations much more deeply than any bureaucratic and ideological power can. It promises not a fragment of power but universal power, and in fact must wipe out the old ideologies, which left enclaves where people could “still breathe.” Police terror is being substituted by the war of all against all. “The Russians are learning what loneliness is”: it is a new situation and a new feeling. The exchange of services, mutual aid and the agreed-upon repurchasing of state production ensured a stable imbalance in the ex-USSR and the preservation of collective ties. The idea of money must destroy these vestiges, which are obstructing its de-

velopment. “You have to count on your friends less and count your money more.”

The state has “disengaged itself”⁵: private businesses are proliferating and stalls are taking up the sidewalks, long unmoving lines that offer a pair of shoes here, a pack of cigarettes and a bottle of cognac there, etc., and leave a line for passersby. This market is becoming the principal market.⁶

And everyone must pay: to the state (which adds a tax to fictitious bookkeeping), the municipality and the local mafias.

To apply the tax or regulate competition, which have not been made official by any law that legalizes rackets the way they are in the West, they have to use force and direct threats. As a result, private militias are recruited in body-building and karate clubs, when they are not cops who have left the force but kept their uniforms. These “sportsmen,” these new *dmjenniki*, must terrorize people and regulate the overall orderliness of the market.⁷

At the service of a project that goes far beyond them and will suppress them, whose on-the-spot managers are, as they have always been, apparatchiks who have been redeployed — the *blatnoi* dogs, big traffickers and all the little men of business, speculation and terror are just a passing and necessary tool. Like the “golden boys” who worked so hard in the West during the ’80s to establish and strengthen financial power over the whole planet, they are ephemeral; here a monetary gust, there a legislative squall will sweep them aside and send them back to the garbage cans they were taken from by interests far superior to their little businesses. All the same, the main thing is that they are creating the atmosphere and

⁵ In early January ’93, a decree issued by the new government proposes to reestablish the old system for the price of bread, milk, and of course, vodka...

⁶ So, for example, shoe stores have nothing but summer sandals left in winter. There would not be anything unusual about this situation, except that today, these shoes are being resold in front of the stores.

⁷ Civil volunteers recruited in ’57-’58 to struggle against hooliganism, in cooperation with the police.

faces of old Stalinists were supposed to frighten people once and for all, and impress them with the irreversible nature of the changes that are in progress. Democracy’s spectacular officialization had to provoke a reaction in the street with a popular feel to it, one that would defend the present order and show both people’s hopes and their refusal to return to the past. But Russians are stubborn, accustomed as they are to mistrusting state lies: this Yeltsinian show was too much like Tejero’s playacting. Those who met at the barricades — which in Petersburg wouldn’t even have held up against the passing of a truck — took advantage of the occasion to meet and drink and dance together in the streets. Even those who wished the putsch was real — and there were many of them — don’t seem to have taken it seriously. What did they have to fear or hope for? In Petersburg, the commanding officer was the same high-ranking officer who officially protested the Tbilisi massacre in ’89, and had been transferred after it. Many Russians say the putsch succeeded, and that it was Yeltsin who organized it.

Big maneuvers, manipulations, exactions, poisonings, expropriations and isolation in the name of democratic and commercial freedom are so many techniques of enslavement that are far too coercive and mundane, and which run the risk of provoking uncontrolled acts of resistance and refusal after all. Although Russians only envy the West for the wealth that is on display there, they want it right away and easily. What they are lacking is the spiritual dimension that justifies hardships and describes fatalism and submissiveness as virtues. Apartment blocks, public transportation and streets are neglected, but churches are right in the middle of renovations. All kinds of western sects are turning up. American religious lobbies are financing propaganda and a share of the reconstruction of religious buildings. Russians are invited to big rallies, where preachers promise them happiness in the midst of suffering (or the opposite). On the Nevsky, groups of priests in plainclothes distribute luxuriously printed digests of the Bible. The only adver-

For the time being, nothing in Russia will allow a real development of the market economy to take place. The distribution networks are rudimentary and archaic, the circulation of commodities is hampered materially and bureaucratically, and the Russian population has not been completely colonized by work and money. Thus, the country's collapse must reach a level high enough to stimulate the guilty conscience of the West and raise the whole moral, industrial and military armada of humanitarian aid, which synthesizes the high degree of mixed stupor and alienation of the western mentality. A promotional show that displays the aid brought by peoples who are full of happiness to ignorant peoples that are drowning in misery, it will create the primary distribution and communication networks — as in Romania in '89, when the infrastructures of the humanitarian organizations facilitated the implantation of western corporations. This harmful benevolence must evangelize on behalf of the democratic and commercial spirit. It organizes the ideological and material penetration of the commodity.

The contacts that humanitarian aid already has there are the remnants of the state apparatus. The “organs,” the apparatchiks and the mafia are the only ones that hold the key to distribution. With a few slips due to the recent nature of the operation, they take over shipments sent from the West and redistribute them at higher prices. Sometimes a few charitable associations still suffer the setbacks of their naive extremism: thus, at the beginning of '92, a German Protestant organization set out to collect some money and used articles, which were meant for a hospice in Moscow's Kiev district. The people in charge demanded that the shipment be handed over to the administrators themselves. The cops sequestered the hospice's managers, replaced them and seized the collected goods.

In this long process of decline, which is already liquidating thousands of people and will liquidate more, the new Russian leaders had to show the westerners proof of their good will. In August '91, the putsch was supposed to prove that the ex-USSR was entering a new phase as a fiefdom of the West. A few tanks and the stern

the social climate, defining the new social relations being imposed by the idea of money.

A vast conspiracy is being set up in Russia. Its foreman is the IMF and its branches. Russia, which has been a member since June '92, received a first loan of a billion dollars⁸. The managerial apparatuses are mere order-takers. After the long spectacle of East-West conflict, Russia's integration, and by extension that of the ex-USSR, is experiencing its globally programmed impoverishment and collapse first.

Because the ruble will have parity from now on, the National Bank of Russia, obeying the orders of the World Bank, is setting its value: in December '92, in the streets and the banks, the price of a dollar was 500 rubles. The western countries — which set up the BERDS and are moaning with lust over Russia, that declared in the context of the reorganization of the Russian economy that they want to shift 70% of all produced wealth monopolized by the army to civilian needs — are causing a quickening decline of the country with the aid of these monetary manipulations. Their contribution to the “reconstruction of Russia” is in fact extravagant. Because payment in rubies has obviously become impossible, only barter, which had already installed itself from the '70s on, allowed western states to contemplate setting up markets. At lower prices than those of the international markets, copper, manganese and other natural resources are its money. Thus, the IMF and its western organizations are appropriating the country's wealth at the same time that they wax indignant about the decline in sanitary conditions, which for example, forces Russians to buy their syringes in the stalls before going to the hospital; that they are surprised by the cutoffs of hot water, electricity and heating for periods of several months; that they describe the accumulated and multiple ordeals that the Russian people are being subjected to as the heritage of a past which

⁸ Through May '92, it had received aid in the form of goods and supplies worth an estimated \$26 billion.

they have made such good use of, and which, with their hands over their hearts, they now declare they want to save.

With the collapse of the ruble and its repercussions on the country's "adjustment" (according to the IMPs expression), a constant rise in the prices of current products adds to this decline daily. It has been a long time since the slightest threat of an increase made the state fear social unrest: since prices rise daily, the citizens are imperiously encouraged to spend their savings quickly, to hold on as long as possible.

The old "opium war" with alcohol and vodka, which was orchestrated in Russia by all the ruling classes to exhaust the population and drown people's anger,⁹ has been revived, reorganized and resupplied by the western states. Thus, a kind of alcohol that is impossible to find in the West has appeared in the stalls, the streets and the stores: its label, following Russian tradition, shows all the medals that testify to the quality of the product. This imported alcohol, known as "*spirte*" is 96 proof. But on the label of "Royal," the most common brand, the eagerness of the poisoners signs the confession to the conspiracy by innocently indicating the many and surprising sources of the product — California, France, Holland and Italy — and whose manufacturer is apparently a multinational corporation unknown in the West.¹⁰ Less expensive than vodka, and tasteless, it is cut with a quarter-liter of water. Its effects are anesthetizing and can lead to serious nervous disorders: paralysis and blindness at high doses, that is, more often than not.¹¹

⁹ During the Andropov period, when the current mood was one of "struggle against parasitism and absenteeism," and the cops went on raids right into people's showers, he put a low-priced vodka on sale, known as "Andropovodka" (cf. note 5).

¹⁰ The "*spirte*" whose origin is exclusively French is called "Krystal"; "Camoe," the locally produced one, bears the inscription in English, "Cleaner for surfaces."

¹¹ Small 25 centiliter bottles of eau de cologne can be bought at the stalls: some people drink one in a gulp while they wait for the bus...

For twenty years now the western ruling class has deepened a type of domination that had never been experienced before on such a scale: the days of triumphalism and odes to prosperity are over. For a long time, western states thought they could maintain a semblance of social peace with the promise of wealth. A ruse of History; the western poor wanted even more of this wealth, to the point of sensing the possibility of realizing it completely at the end of the 70s. The managers therefore resumed doing what their predecessors did: impoverishing people to separate them and threatening people to ensure their support. From economic crises to stock market crashes, from closer and closer wars to reductions in the standard of living, the reigning lie has instituted itself as an enormous campaign of intimidation, creating many conflicts and just as many new threats, which do not call the basic principle of poverty into question: preserving gains means reducing them; isolation worsens the breakdown in relationships among men; impoverishment rules out any universal project. Therefore this maneuver must impose absolute support for itself, which itself revives the lie. The wealth of the state lies in this support.¹²

Russia's current impoverishment, which is no more than an inevitable tactical moment, originates in the same maneuver. But there, the population does not give its support to the extent that we are familiar with in the West. The IMF must act quickly: internal political struggles can destabilize, slow or check the completion of the operation. Dependency on the West must be irreversible. Meanwhile, the blow must be struck now, so it can be generously tended to later. The widespread collapse in living standards must spectacularly prompt people to feel compassion and pity.

¹² During this period a new change in the situation appeared; people began to fight the lie everywhere, but in an illusory way: nationalism against unification-standardization, the critique of science against the degradation of biological life, the emotional plague and instinctive refusal against the despotism of well-reasoned submissiveness, dissatisfaction against praise for a world that gets by despite the difficulties.