



## Russia's Carnival: The Smells, Sights, and Sounds of Transition

*By Christoph Neidhart*

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### **Russia's Carnival: The Smells, Sights, and Sounds of Transition** By Christoph Neidhart

This colorfully drawn and acutely observed book explores Russia by engaging all our senses. Today's Russia smells different from the Soviet Union. The country looks and sounds different, its touch is different and its food tastes different. Thus, Christoph Neidhart argues, Russia is truly a changed country from the Soviet Union it was, little more than a decade ago. Russian society is rapidly urbanizing and modernizing, as can be perceived by all senses, including the awareness of space and the conception of time. After almost a century, space can be privately owned and freely traded; time too has become commodified. New role models and new ways to express social status are emerging. Russia has become a 'monetized' economy as the old Soviet practice of provision by networking has grown obsolete. Russia thus readies itself gradually to grow into a Western-style, middle-class society with a free market and democratic polity. The author assesses these rapid changes using the evocative metaphor of the carnival to understand the chaotic inversion of the Communist structure of society. He explores the transition's traps and shortcomings?such as the privatization of politics and the looting of the state's assets?and compares this process to the modernization Western society underwent a century earlier.

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### Editorial Review

#### Review

Set against a grey and rigid Soviet past, this book provides a rich picture of people rapidly adapting to a market economy and to intensified exposure to Western culture. (*The Russian Review*)

A colorful tapestry of observations. (*Slavic Review*)

This lively and entertaining book represents a highly original contribution to the growing literature on post-Soviet Russia. The author takes us on a richly sensual tour of the country in which he lived and worked as a journalist for almost ten years. Not surprisingly perhaps, he maintains that today's Russia is a fundamentally different place from the Socialist state which it replaced barely more than a decade ago. The book's distinctiveness comes not so much from this assertion, however, as from the evidence that Neidhart advances in order to support his thesis. This is a remarkable book, not least for the way in which Neidhart manages to write with both the freshness and immediacy of a journalist and the conceptual sophistication of a cultural anthropologist. As a result his book will appeal to readers in a broad range of disciplines, including sociology, economics, history, and politics. (*Slavonica*)

Christopher Neidhart has written an innovative and provocative book detailing the unprecedented changes experienced by the people of Russia. Using the carnival metaphor of the Russian writer and philosopher, Mikhail Bakhtin, Neidhart chronicles the everyday transformations and adaptations of a people and society as they attempt to cope with the many uncertainties of life in post-soviet Russia. Unlike many first-hand accounts of Russia, which are often based on insufficient background information and little in-country experience, Neidhart's work is the result of many years of living in Russia. But it is much more than that; it is the intellectual culmination of a serious attempt to understand and experience for himself the nearly incomprehensible changes in the daily lives of average citizens. Russia's Carnival is a well-researched work that combines theoretical sophistication with penetrating insight. Neidhart has done a considerable amount of research on semiotics as well as urban and cultural studies in order to contextualize Russia's experience. His ability to make Russia's unique experience with transition accessible and comprehensible to a broad audience serves as a reminder that academic works can be first-rate without being opaque and inaccessible (Robert Owen Krikorian *Journal Of Cold War Studies*, Summer 2005 Issue 7:3)

*Russia's Carnival* is a very informative resource for any who wants to know what really goes on in Eastern Europe. Even those who have their own first hand "sensory experiences" are reminded of how drastically Russia has changed since the collapse of the USSR. And no one has reported on them as systematically and with such keenness before as Neidhart. (Jukka Gronow *Senses & Society*)

Christoph Neidhart has written a fascinating account of the most important historical phenomenon of the late twentieth century: the transition from communism, the process of transformation by which the Soviet Union became, and is still becoming, the new Russia. Neidhart goes far beyond politics to offer a concrete anthropology of the sights, sounds, and smells of transition, which he brilliantly describes as a kind of carnival, the communist world turned upside down. The transformation was not just about freedom as an abstract condition, as Neidhart shows, but about fashion, food, and furniture. At the same time, the Russians discovered whole new ways of thinking about time, space, and money. Russia's Carnival will be essential reading for anyone interested in Russia, the Soviet Union, and the end of communism, a book comparable in insight to the important works of David Remnick, Ryszard Kapuscinski, and Svetlana Boym. Neidhart

invites his readers to 'stroll' with him through the streets of Russia in transition, and shows himself to be not only a supremely subtle guide, but also the consummate post-Soviet flaneur in his sensitivity to the signs and meanings of contemporary Russian society and culture. (Larry Wolff)

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#### About the Author

Christoph Neidhart is a senior columnist for Die Weltwoche, Switzerland's leading newsmagazine. As its correspondent, he lived in Russia for almost ten years. He wrote *Russia's Carnival* as a visiting scholar at Harvard University's Davis Center, and is also the author of the book *Nach dem Kollaps* [After the Collapse], describing the transition of the former Soviet republics into emerging states.

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