

Challenges of Russian Left

Ilya Ponomarev's speech

Date: April 16, 2004.

Place: Stockholm.

First of all, I wanted to thank you all for the invitation to come and speak here. Why we came to this seminar? Why we think that relationships between European left and their Russian counterparts are so important?

I think there are two major reasons. First reason is that Russia is in fact the place of great social experiments with the longest history in the world. We had different periods in the recent century in our life. We now have history of military, social and economical exercises of all types. During this time we switched between absolute monarchy, constitutional monarchy, bourgeois democracy, totalitarianism, military communism, socialism, new liberalism, etc. We'd witnessed brilliant victories and bitter defeats. We saw collapse of world largest empire and most rapid transition of national wealth from private hands into public domain and then back, to people we know now as "oligarchs". As the result, understanding of many good words, like "communism", "liberalism", "socialism" is completely compromised. More – the word "politics" is compromised. So the main result of all the experiments is tremendous social apathy. And European left are complaining about lack of trust of people to traditional political institutions, I say: "Guys, come to Russia! You'll see that your parties are just adored by your citizens!"

There are no trusted parties, and no trusted authorities in Russia. Everything that we're doing now in our political system, we're doing from the scratch, because everything that was done so far was done from the top, against people's will, at least – without their understanding or support. It was built up officially by the people that came to power in 1991 and declared by them to be "the democracy".

What happened in 1991 only looked like revolution. But in fact there was no revolution, because "revolution" supposed to result in changing the ruling class. In Russia no ruling class was changed, because the same people remained on the same place. Mr. Yeltsin was the member of Politburo of Communist Party of the Soviet Union. All the people he brought to the power were all former regional secretaries. So now Russian politics is basically is a struggle between different regional secretaries of Communist Party of Soviet Union and some comsomol leaders, now oligarchs. Normal people were not in power before 1991, and they are not in power nowadays.

The second reason why I think Russia is so important and why we should build good and tight relations between us – it's because of geopolitical situation. United Europe is the only force that can oppose the process of globalization as it is imposed by the United States. We can argue whether formation of EU is good or bad for European people, but it's an undeniable fact. But new emerging superpower cannot do it on its own. Russia is the key player for the success of Europe, because 80% of European natural resources are coming from Russia. The production of oil and gas in the North Sea is declining, while Middle East is under firm grip of US, so the majority of the supply is coming from my country. United States, which in contrary to EU has a clear strategy in its foreign policies, strategy aimed on maintaining its world leadership, is using all the levers to gain control and to change the flow of the national resources towards US, and not Europe or China. We have the story of the big pipeline from Eastern Siberia to China, the project that was initiated by Mr. Khodorkovsky, one of our famous oil tycoons. He never got a chance to implement it – he was jailed by Putin, who supported the plan of building an alternate pipeline to Nakhodka to the Pacific Ocean to start exports to the US. Given the fact that Americans abstained from supporting Khodorkovsky, I believe it is not a coincidence. I always believed that if there is a competition, there is a space for maneuvers. If there is no competition there is no success. I think that for Europe it is the right time to support competition in Russian both in political and economical spheres – otherwise there is a good chance that somebody else will control vitally important natural resources and dictate its will to Europeans.

These are two major reasons why we are here and why we want to make constant and real ties between us. So far they were limited by episodic and personal relations of some individuals, not organizations or institutions. To make a better understanding of current political process in Russia, I would like to briefly give you an idea what is going on in our political system, inside the Communist Party, and generally in the left movement. I will speak about the major political actors and organizations as they are.

Being completely artificial and created on the basis of personal sympathies rather than political stands, the whole system of numerous Russian political parties and movements is very much confused nowadays. Naturally it should be possible to classify them into right and left wings. But in fact inside all tendencies there are leftists and rightists. First tendency - liberal - can be divided into two groups. Leader in the first group is the Union of Right Forces, which is more or less right liberal party. Leader in the second is Yabloko, which is definitely left liberal party. Basically what the latter usually says is no different from what Communist Party is usually saying. Just they're afraid of words "communism", "socialism" and etc. But in general their ideas are absolutely the same and can be heard from any communist from Europe.

Second tendency is, how its representatives are calling themselves, centrists. Russian people are calling them differently – "parties of power". These are structures that are created by Kremlin, and they are constantly changing their names to match the mood of most recent President's Administration chief. Now we have two major organizations that can be identified as "parties of power", and again, one is trying to position itself as right, and another – as left. First is called the United Russia, and it now has the majority in Parliament, in the State Duma, and is known as the official party of President Putin. The second is the rising star and called Rodina ("Motherland"). Putin's political technologists are trying to repeat a model of German parties, country, where acting President was an intelligence officer from KGB. Putin repeated many times in public, that he wants Russia to have strong right conservative party like CDU (United Russia), and a social democratic party like SPD (Rodina). According to him, Communist Party could be transformed to what PDS is, but if there will be no success in putting it under Kremlin's control, it better be destroyed. This is his idea.

These postmodern ideas in normal situation would be impossible to implement anywhere, but in Russia, where all parties except CPRF are created from the top, and lack real people support, everything is possible. One exclusion does not make the picture – and more, makes easier to put communists in unfavorable light, as "people that do not fit" in modern life.

What helps true left activists, is the fact that Kremlin PR specialists can tell no difference between left and right. Initially they have tried to build a controlled opposition using an ambitious Christian socialist economist Glaziev as the leader of the party. They failed, talented economist could not become a real politician, and they had to switch to a very strong nationalist and populist Dmitriy Rogozin to create what they call "social democratic" force – just because he likes to talk about "social justice for Russians". He brought with himself people that are even more nationalists, "Russia for Russians" is their favorite slogan.

Not a surprise that both left and right wings of "party of power" are the same. They are being controlled from the same cabinet in Kremlin by the same guys. The methods of its financing and management are the same – obligatory assistance from large industrial groups and regional authorities. They are pumping huge financial and organizational resources there. While Hitler-style national-socialism – that's more or less accurate term that explains what they are. The only difference is that anti-Semitism is substituted by anti-Chechen rhetoric. And it is very dangerous, because while their masters can't make the difference between the social democracy and national-socialism, it could develop to the stage when it is too late.

Coming to the part of Russian political field which is labeled as "left", but where we can also see both right and left organizations, we have to admit, that the brightest side of the picture is a major defeat of the Communist party in the recent elections. The party was talking about the need to renovate, to change, to modernize, whatever, for a long time already. The party leader, comrade Zyuganov, is

famous for talking about how to attract young people to organization, of new ideas for bringing Internet to party management, etc. But in fact not much changed so far, because majority of party functionaries felt that we have a strong social basis, which cannot be lost to anyone. And vice a versa, if party will do some rapid turns, significantly change its image, whatever, this social base can disappear. They were constantly saying that our voters are conservative and can be frightened by changes, and it could make more problems for the party, than real benefits. But the elections showed that we actually do not have much to loose. Now changes are not a matter of expansion of our support base, but a matter of survival as an influential political force.

So process of changes has started recently. The major issue of transformation is in the defining the new face of the party. The Communist Party was previously blamed for being very eclectic in program, it even was called in Russia “The Red and White Union” – CPRF now is in fact the union of a very different people: those, who are internationalists, who are communists and even people who could identify themselves with the White Army in 1917. You can laugh at that, but unfortunately it is sometimes true. The modern communist heirs of the White Army, which was defeated 80 years ago by the bolsheviks during the Civil War, justify their current political views by the fact that their ancestors were not only monarchists. They included a lot of republicans, liberals, democrats, even social democrats, and others – as they say, “Russian patriots”. More, now CPRF unites both businessmen who are for the private property, and people who want to eliminate private property at the same time. In the party there are Leninists, Trotskyites, Stalinists, Maoists, orthodox communists, everybody. Being disorganized by the collapse of the Soviet Union, the party had lost its political face. Good thing is that it had started to reappear recently – although very slowly.

We now see rebuilding of the face of the Communist party as a classical left party. Why so? The recent elections showed that major gain in voters we’d given in urban areas. Traditionally our party relied on rural areas where people are very conservative and supported communists last 80 years. Some party leaders believed that they would vote for communists for years to come, whatever we will be, whatever we will say, and whatever ideas we will express. But recent elections appeared to be a completely different story. All rural areas and most of pensioners, another CPRF stronghold, voted for Putin’s “United Russia”, because the President had started to express “patriotic” ideas – strong government, strong Russia, restoration of the empire, etc. So people expected Putin to restore the Soviet Union, to do things that are usually associated with the communists. He is young and energetic – so why vote for somebody else? But instead of our traditional electorate, we’d given voters from large industrial areas – workers, educated professionals and intellectuals. We’d given most votes for CPRF in December elections in Novosibirsk, the intellectual capital of Russia. We’d given also a big inflow of young people who are coming to the organization.

Before the elections we had formed a special task force who was studying the experience of PDS – transformation of the former Communist party of Eastern Germany. Something we’d tried to adopt. Not many, unfortunately – but we have one hell of a large organization to start moving! What we have taken from PDS seems to work primarily in large cities. But our major idea right now, and that is something what I’m focusing at, is to try to make this process of changes universal for the whole organization. It is imminent, because the social situation in the country is changing anyway.

But to succeed in changing the left we need to work with very different forces inside CPRF and with other left organizations. Different people are trying now to lead the opposition in different directions. Some are calling for revolution here and now; some are trying to convince us that we should tactically support Putin to fight against oligarchy. What we have done so far? We have gathered together all young left organizations in Russia (when I’m saying youth organizations, I refer not only to people who are young physically, but to people who are dynamic, progressive, who want not just to go back to Soviet times, but who want to change the system, who are anti-capitalists, internationalists, who are democratic and etc.). We drafted a paper, just one sheet of paper, where we put the platform of unification of our forces. We managed to start doing direct people actions on the streets of Russian cities – not parliamentary activities CPRF is famous for, but real work on the streets.

We think that now in Russia we have an advantage that nobody has. My personal background is in area of information technologies, and I remember saying of one of famous IT gurus, Mr. Dvorak. In the beginning of 90^{es} he came to Russia and said: "I'm jealous of you guys because you do not have the outdated mainframes to throw out and infrastructure that should be painfully modernized. You can start from the most up-to-date PC technologies from the beginning". The same story can be applied to Russian politics. We do not have a political system to throw out to make it match the challenges of the new ages. We can start from the very beginning. We can start from the beginning and build the new forces. New forces that will lead the country from industrial era to the new information society. It is more than possible, because Russia has a very good basis to transition from: we have a thick layer of intellectuals, good level of education and etc. And what we are focusing now in CPRF is in provoking cultural changes in and outside the organization, in making resonance actions for the whole society. That might be small in number of participants, because of general allergy to politics among Russian people, after all the "democratic" chaos of last decade. Now it is really hard to bring tens of thousand people on the street without a very strong reason. Our best result so far was youth march "Anti-capitalism" which all together gathered about 70'000 people across the country. In Moscow, the most politically active city, our maximum was 10'000 people at rock concert at 1st of May 2003.

What we can achieve with these actions? Primarily – we are trying to mobilize more social active parts of the society, to restore a fashion for being involved into politics (because it was unfashionable last decade), and to provoke Kremlin to make inadequate political responses for our actions. In latter we are relatively successful. During the presidential campaign, for example, we make one such action in St. Petersburg, where Mr. Putin was born. We made the action – "political flash-mob" – with the masks of president, shouting "Putin, go home!" By the way, many people of Leningrad, that saw us, were saying they did not need him as well. May be because of that we immediately were jailed. Everybody. But in the action itself there was nothing illegal – just policemen under orders from the very top assumed, that if it is something about Putin it must be not legal. Because they violated the law, the resonance was huge. And now virtually everybody in the country knows about this action. It was free and a very good advertisement for our movement.

This is a good example, how bureaucracy government machine overreacting on our movements, that otherwise could be just mosquito bites. They are substituting our deficit of resources and isolation from leading media by their own stupidity. But this is a black humor. Their wrongdoings are a clear sign that Russia is moving very rapidly from undeveloped democracy to a habitual totalitarian centralized society. We feel that new Russian left is the only force which can stop it. We are trying to be the example for our senior colleagues and comrades, the leadership of the Communist Party. Already our messages are getting through and the whole party started very slowly to turn to what we believe is a normal civilized direction. If we'll manage to overcome the threat which is coming from Rogozin's "Rodina", if we will outmaneuver Kremlin in building this fake organization, we will manage to create a basis for our movement. But so far this task looks like mission impossible – our resources can not be even compared, and I can see no sources of real help, except, may be, Western left.

And we need resources at least to overcome our diversity. In attempt to conduct dialogue between majority of Russian left-wing intellectuals we are running a series of Forums "Future of the Left". I invite all of you to come in the middle of May in Moscow, where we'll have our 3rd event. You can look into our faces, and talk to key people in Russian left. Together we stand, divided we fall! Thank you for your attention.

Question: Can you talk little bit more regarding Communist Party activities in rural areas? Why not capitalize on your stronghold to get more votes to come into power?

Answer: As I said already, traditionally the Communist Party was very strong at the countryside. We have a lot of programs and concepts for rural areas. During the recent elections we have our presidential candidate, who is the leader of the Agrarian Union, Mr. Kharitonov. Because of that there were certain rural areas, where he even managed to beat Mr. Putin. As the result, being not very well know across the

country, he got 1% more votes, than party did just 3 months ago. But in general it is very hard to create a structure for the party in the countryside, because of a very poor communications there. More, people in rural areas are greatly affected by managers of former kolхозes and sovхозes – agriculture companies. Basically, whoever they would say to vote for, there employers would have to support. During these elections Mr. Kharitonov was believed by the Kremlin to be not so threatening as Glazyev. Putin wanted to get more people to come to polling stations, and he was not worried about the final results. So people were under less pressure than usual. But I'm quite sure if they would be ordered not to vote for Mr. Kharitonov, they would not vote for us. So it is not a question of the party strategy. It is more a question of how to control the voting process.

Question: There are a lot of speculations of involvement of Russian mafia into politics. Is Communist Party affected by that?

Answer: You see, what are the interests of mafia into politics? Firstly, to elect their key members to make them immune from the prosecution; secondly – to lobby their commercial interests in the parliament. Quite clear that first issue is something that is completely impossible with the CPRF. Regarding second issue – in Russian, and not only Russian political life there are a lot of briberies on the personal level, certain deputies get bribes in their “proper” voting in the Parliament. But in Russia main source of deputies corruption is Kremlin and the government, and not business or mafia. CPRF deputies are much more disciplined, and it's not so easy to buy their votes – they anyway obey decisions of solidarity voting by the faction. That's why I don't feel corruption is a big problem for us. More interaction with criminal circles exist on regional level, usually between ultranationalist forces, sometimes with United Russia, the official president movement. But we don't feel any pressure for us.

Question: Tell us about relationship between CPRF and antiglobalists movement.

Answer: In the Youth Left Front, the organization I was talking about, antiglobalists are active members. ATTAK cannot participate in any political organizations, because it's not a political movement, but in Russia ATTAK is basically the same thing as a political movement called “Social Resistance”. And Social Resistance is the member of our Front. So many members of ATTAK are the members in Youth Left Front.

We have sent our delegation to The European Social Forum in Paris, about 40 people from Russia. Our members were participating in events in San Paolo, Mumbai and Florence. We are planning to send more people to London this year. We with Boris Kagarlitsky just two weeks ago participated in London in March in one of organizing meetings for ESF. We are trying to put into Forum's agenda a question of the cooperation between European and Russian left. I hope it would remain there, and we'll be able to continue this discussion.