There Is No Reason for Us to Be Corrupted Because We Are the Richest Political Party

INTERVIEW WITH VLADIMIR RYZHKOV

Demokratizatsiya: How can you depict the Our Home Is Russia fraction in the State Duma?
Ryzhkov: Our Home Is Russia is the second largest fraction in the State Duma. It includes sixty-five deputies, forty-five of them elected on the Our Home Is Russia party list and twenty by majority in districts. When the Duma distributed leadership positions, our fraction obtained the position of first deputy head of State Duma, which is now occupied by Alexander Shokhin, as well as the chairmanship of four committees: Defense (Gen. Lev Rokhlin), Privatization (Pavel Bunic), Local Self-Government (Andrei Polyakov), and Nationalities Affairs (Vladimir Zorin). Besides this, our fraction holds positions of deputy chairmen in all other Duma committees and has its representatives in all of the twenty-seven Duma committees.

Demokratizatsiya: How could you describe the current political position of the fraction?
Ryzhkov: The Our Home Is Russia party and its fraction in the Duma are the closest to what we understand in the world as a mass movement. For example, the Christian Democratic Union of Germany, the Tories in Great Britain, or the Union for the Defense of the Republic in France. So we are the right-wing conservatives who combine in our program two major ideas—the idea of a strong Russian state [gosudarstvenost] and the idea of democracy and a market economy. That is the difference between us and the [Yegor] Gaidar-type liberals who represent pure Western values, on the one hand, and the national-patriots who do not recognize the values of the market and democracy, on the other. United in our program are moderate patriotism, market economy, and democratic structure of power.

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**Demokratizatsiya:** What kind of relations does the Our Home Is Russia have with the current Russian government?

**Ryzhkov:** We are absolutely not in opposition to the government. On most, or I can even say on all, of the main questions, we support its direction. We sometimes have differences and nuances in tactics, but in the major strategy of reforms such as tax policy, social policy, budget, and so forth, we always vote for the government’s proposal. On the major issues, we are on the government’s side.

**Demokratizatsiya:** In foreign policy as well?

**Ryzhkov:** In foreign policy we support the policy direction of Yevgeny Primakov, which consists in our opinion with the defense of Russian national interests in the world arena without stumbling into unproductive confrontation with the West as well as with the East. We share his aim to construct a more intensive relation with the East, particularly with China. We support the integrationist policy of the CIS, as well as his efforts to resolve the antagonistic issues with our neighbors, first of all territorial questions, only in a peaceful way. We believe that before we can solve the territorial questions, it is necessary to recognize the integrity and independence of the former Soviet republics. Then, we have to try to find the path to closer integration between them. We support the agreements with Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova.

If we are to speak about NATO, our movement categorically opposes the process of enlarging this bloc. But at the same time, we believe that the Founding Act signed in Paris between NATO and Russia is a constructive enough document and responds generally to Russian national interests. Of course, keep in mind that this is just a minimum that our country could get as compensation for the capricious expansion of NATO to the east.

**Demokratizatsiya:** How will the Russian government and Our Home Is Russia react to the further enlargement of NATO to the east, including to the countries of the former USSR?

**Ryzhkov:** The Russian government as well as Our Home Is Russia absolutely will never accept the further extension of NATO! We will try to prevent it with all of the legal methods.

**Demokratizatsiya:** For example, what can Russia do to prevent this kind of NATO evolution?

**Ryzhkov:** For example, Russia can reject the ratification of START II, it can reexamine its Defense Doctrine, build ideology of military reform based on ideology of restraining and adequate response to NATO, and so forth.

Russia can sharply deepen its relations with India and China. Russia can put forward the question of the creation of a new military bloc. We can undertake a full set of diplomatic and military efforts to provide for our security under these conditions of increasing NATO pressure. Of course, we would not like this kind of evolution. We hope that common sense will prevail in the West. We hope that they will understand our concerns. And we hope they will fully reject any plans for any future expansion of NATO.
Demokratizatsiya: An opinion exists in some Russian political circles that Russia now has to try to split NATO through a strategy of negotiating with the different members separately—such as with Germany, Turkey, and so forth. Russia can allegedly go into political and territorial concessions and this way make NATO weaker from the inside. What do you think about this kind of a strategy?

Ryzhkov: I think that this is a too exotic scheme, which will not work. The NATO members long ago learned to coordinate those interests and act with each other and it does not look as if they will fall for this disunity in their bloc.

Demokratizatsiya: Let’s come back to internal problems. As is well known, Our Home Is Russia party covers all of the country and has a network of local organizations. You participate in elections at all levels, including the presidential level. What will be your strategy in the next few years on the electoral front?

Ryzhkov: It is completely obvious that the next election will be organized based on the same conditions as the previous one. I mean, there will be balloting, on the one side, for the candidate from the party of power, the democrats, the liberals and the Right; and on the other side, for the candidate from the united Left parties, which are currently in opposition. The question is, will Our Home Is Russia support a single candidate from the parties of power, and will this candidate be from our movement? On both questions, I can answer absolutely positively. Unconditionally, Our Home Is Russia will support a single candidate from the democratic and reform-minded parties. There is a very big possibility that this will be our candidate, because Our Home Is Russia today is the biggest and the most powerful union in the entire right wing.

Demokratizatsiya: Will it be Viktor Chernomyrdin?

Ryzhkov: Why not? We think it is conceivable that Viktor Chernomyrdin can be the most acceptable candidate for all of the democratic forces.

Demokratizatsiya: Will it be his personal decision? Or will it be the decision of the Our Home Is Russia leadership?

Ryzhkov: It will be neither his decision nor the decision of our leadership. It should be the decision of the current ruling elite. It should be the decision of the president himself. It should be the decision of the leaders of the financial and banking structures, and the leaders of industrial circles as well as leading political figures in the right wing.

Demokratizatsiya: I did not understand clearly, How can the president affect this kind of decision?

Ryzhkov: The president in Russia can affect all of the decisions.

Demokratizatsiya: Yes, I understand this, but I thought that Our Home Is Russia is independent or at least pretending to be independent from President Yeltsin.

Ryzhkov: We are independent from the president, but we always take into account his position, hearing his opinion, and will do so in the future.
Demokratizatsiya: Well, let’s suppose that Viktor Chernomyrdin will be a candidate and will start his campaign—which is almost to begin. What will be the difference between his current politics and his program as the candidate for the presidency?

Ryzhkov: I think that in the major things, Viktor Chernomyrdin will embody the continuity in policy, internal as well as foreign policy. He is a man who always embodied and is embodying stability and continuity. With his name people connect the end of the collapse of our economic system and its stability.

Demokratizatsiya: Does this mean that there will be no differences?

Ryzhkov: There will be. First of all, Chernomyrdin will be an incomparably bigger supporter of dialogues and compromise than the acting president. The acting president—the president of the era of transition—is a fighter who carried out several difficult struggles and tests. The spirit of struggle is still present in his policy.

Viktor Chernomyrdin is an absolutely different kind of person. His goal always was agreement, anti-crisis dialogue with the opposition. He will not be afraid to concede some power and responsibility to the opposition. I think that he will be ready to seriously analyze the question of a coalition government. But anyway, we are very sure that Chernomyrdin will never retreat from the principles of a market economy and democracy. He can carry out some dialogue and compromise but not against the values of the new Russian democracy. Chernomyrdin will guarantee the exclusion from Russian life of civic, social, and class confrontation. But there is no question that he will continue the course of reforms. This is how I could describe his political line and it seems to me that it will be positively accepted by current Russian society.

Demokratizatsiya: There is a lot of talk that, allegedly, Moscow mayor Yuri Luzhkov is ready to begin his presidential campaign. Will you support him?

Ryzhkov: No way. But first of all, I will say that it is impossible that Luzhkov will go against the single candidate from the democratic forces and the party of power. It will never happen! Yuri Luzhkov will appear as a candidate if he is selected as the single candidate from the reform-minded forces.

Demokratizatsiya: Does he have any chance to become this candidate?

Ryzhkov: It seems to us that now he has much less chance than a year and a half ago. First of all, in our opinion, he made a series of serious mistakes, especially in foreign policy. In particular, he adopted a wavering position on Ukraine and Sevastopol. He made mistakes in a series of other issues, particularly in Azeri-Armenian relations. In the capital, Luzhkov organized some actions, which may be very popular among part of the Moscow population but poorly understandable from the democratic point of view. For example, the ethnic cleansing in Moscow, which is a well-known scandal in the world. Finally, all Russians understand that Moscow has privileged economic conditions, and these conditions have nothing to do with Luzhkov’s merits. This economic system was shaped a long time ago. All of this, plus the fact that Luzhkov is a Muscovite, and this is, like everybody
knows, not the most popular category for regular Russian voters, make his appearance as a candidate for the presidency very much unthinkable.

But I have to say that Our Home Is Russia does not have any problems with our relations with Moscow or with Luzhkov personally. We worked closely in the last elections. Moscow, as you know, had one of the highest percentages of support for our party among the subjects of the federation, and we would very much like to continue our good relations.

Demokratizatsiya: What is Our Home Is Russia’s attitude toward General Alexander Lebed, Grigory Yavlinsky, Vladimir Zhirinovsky, and their political activity?

Ryzhkov: There are two leading political camps in Russia. The democratic camp, where Our Home Is Russia is the biggest organization, and the leftist camp, which is led by Gennady Zyuganov. But there is a third camp—different kinds of marginals. These political forces have their voters, but these voters are very unstable, move from one marginal political figure to another, and generally represent only a protest vote.

There are, as you correctly said, three main marginal figures in Russian politics. These are Alexander Lebed, Grigory Yavlinsky, and Vladimir Zhirinovsky. They are very different but one thing unites them—they have no stable voters, no stable system of views, they rotate around the hot topic of the day, transitory topics. For example, General Lebed’s success in the last presidential election and Zhirinovsky’s lack of success can be explained by the fact that two-thirds of Zhirinovsky’s supporters at that time voted for Lebed. But there is no guarantee that the next time, they will not do the opposite. If we talk about Yavlinsky, the most typical situation is in St. Petersburg. This is a city with a huge number of scientific intelligentsia who lost their financial and social status as a result of the reforms. These people now have a very contradictory attitude toward life. On the one hand, they are very educated and they are supporters of democracy and reforms. But on the other hand, because they lost a lot, they did not accept the current leading group, acting government, and president. This is why they are voting for Yavlinsky, who gives the illusion that it is possible to be a democrat and at the same time to be in the hard opposition to the current government. This is why in St. Petersburg Yabloko won several of the last elections. All except one of the State Duma deputies from St. Petersburg hail from Yabloko.

There is the same situation with Zhirinovsky in the Far East. There, people don’t accept communism—at least so far—but did not accept the current authorities either. The Liberal Democratic Party of Russia is regularly getting 20 to 25 percent of the votes there on any given election.

This is why our attitude toward Lebed, Zhirinovsky, and Yavlinsky is an atti-
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tude toward marginals. Their success completely depends on the lack of success of the leading group of ruling elite and the Communists. If the ruling elite or Communists prove their ability, all of these three marginal groups will fall. If the main elites collapse, there is a big possibility that somebody from among the marginals will take over on a wave of popular anger.

Demokratizatsiya: What, in your opinion, is the biggest danger for Russia today?

Ryzhkov: There is nothing worse than if the current power and the opposition take radical positions toward each other. Let’s say, the State Duma does not accept any laws that will help to heal the economy and the social situation in the country, and as a response the ruling elite will take extreme actions, including the destruction of Parliament, limiting its powers, or banning opposition parties. This will lead to the collapse of authority and the opposition as well, because both of them are very much compromised in the eyes of the electorate. In this situation, any kind of extremist group can take over in Russia.

That is why the ideology of our movement, its strategy, is built on the ideal of anti-crisis dialogue. That is our key principle, around which our daily work is built. The anti-crisis dialogue means that both the authorities and the opposition should search for a coordination of positions and decisionmaking procedures, joint compromises and joint responsibilities. This way, the authorities should give something to the opposition, and if the opposition wants, the authorities should share some power with the opposition and invite their representatives to the government. However, at the same time, the opposition should also attempt to support the acting elite and support the hard and unpopular decisions without which there cannot be any economic or social healing.

Demokratizatsiya: Today, there is a lot of speculation about the stability of the Russian government, including the possibility of surprise changes and the possibility of a strong but secret struggle among several members of government. Is this so?

Ryzhkov: First, any personal changes last year did not lead to changes to the course of reforms. Who will be in which position, who will be minister, will not change the strategy of our course. Second, the first three members of our government are big political figures in their own right. Each one is a leader himself. But the course of reforms, which is now led by Anatoly Chubais and Boris Nemtsov, was formulated in the government’s “Mid-Term Program of 1997 to 2000” of summer 1996. Everything that is going on now in social, housing, and tax spheres was formulated previously by Viktor Chernomyrdin. Chubais, who at that time was Yeltsin’s chief of staff, participated in this work. But Nemtsov, absolutely not.

Of course, there is mutual jealousy between them, mutual competition, but there is no antagonism. I can tell you for sure that several years ago when Chubais was first deputy prime minister of Chernomyrdin and the other first deputy was Oleg Soskovets, who was more of a Soviet-type mentality, Chernomyrdin was always
on Chubais’s side on questions of principle. They had very close professional and personal relations. I can say the same in today’s situation. Chernomyrdin and Chubais have the same point of view in all the questions of principle.

What concerns Nemtsov is a more complicated situation. He is the new man in Moscow, and he is a bit of an elephant in a china shop. He is not always taking adequate steps. And reality showed him that his initial cavalier plans were stopped by life’s momentum. Now, he has more balanced and professionally proven decisions than he had the first days of his Moscow stay. I think that there are some difficulties, but on the main issues all of these three leaders work in the same direction.

Demokratizatsiya: Does this mean that in the Russian government there is no struggle for survival?

Ryzhkov: No. Even more, I can say that in psychological and personal aspects, both Chubais and Nemtsov are accepting Chernomyrdin as a more experienced and mature leader than themselves. Those attitudes are adequate. Neither of these deputy prime ministers has any ambitions to be the leader of government. By the way, when Chernomyrdin was on vacation in July 1997, not a single government document left without his signature. All of the correspondence was shipped to Sochi, where he was. This means that, though Chubais was the acting prime minister, Chernomyrdin was the real one.

Demokratizatsiya: There is a widespread opinion that Our Home Is Russia is the most corrupt political party in Russia. The monopoly of Gazprom, dealing in industrial and financial spheres, privatization, everything is connected with this party. Is this a fair view, and if it’s not, how can you disprove it?

Ryzhkov: If I would say it’s unjust, that would not be enough. I will try to prove that this is not so. The poorest parties also happen to be the most corrupt, since they have to sell influence for money.

Demokratizatsiya: Like whom, for example?

Ryzhkov: For example, Zhirinovsky’s LDPR. As you know, during the last two to three years, he obtained several very prestigious buildings in downtown Moscow and much financial backing. He obtained these in exchange for concrete political steps in the Duma and in exchange for backing some important legislation for the government. Everybody knows this fact well. Grigory Yavlinsky was extremely actively lobbying for the law “On Agreement of the Division of Production.” We have information that Shell and Exxon were backing him. Even more, Yavlinsky lobbied for particular deposits where we know some foreign companies have an interest. We can say the same about other parties in Russia.

Our Home Is Russia cannot be corrupted by definition, because we are the richest party today. We have very serious financial sources from industrial and banking sectors. There is no reason for us to be corrupt, we are a very wealthy political party. We have a legal income that we report and pay a tax on. Paradoxically, we support our government’s policy unprofitably because we support
it unconditionally. The government doesn’t need to negotiate with us about our support for legislation, since we will vote for it anyway. The government needs to negotiate with Zhirinovsky, but not with us.

**Demokratizatsiya:** Well, let’s formulate this question differently. You are not a corrupted party, but you are lobbying for some particular interests, specifically Gazprom.

**Ryzhkov:** There is a cliché that hails back to the very beginning of our existence, that we are the political party that represents Gazprom. Of course, this is a very big simplification. For instance, there were forty governors in our congress in 1997. What do they have with Gazprom? Nothing. There are close to ten leading Russian bankers who joined our congress. They also have nothing to do with Gazprom. Look further, the general director of Gorkovsky Avtozavod, Pugin; the general director of Magnitogorsk, Starikov; Alikberov from Lukoil, the biggest Russian oil company, were in our congress as well. I can easily enlarge this list. If we are lobbying some particular interests, it is the interests of big national banks and industrial capital.

We also love Gazprom, it is one of our biggest sponsors but certainly not the only one. But at the same time, we supported Boris Nemtsov in his drive to reorganize Gazprom. We supported the government in its efforts to bring order to the financial structure of Gazprom. One thing with which we disagree in principle and categorically is the idea to divide Gazprom into several separate competing companies. Our accounting demonstrates that it would be very unprofitable for Russia. Maybe in the internal market the competition will increase, but Russia’s ability to compete in international markets will sharply decrease. We can lose our position. We are speaking, I remind you, of about 25 percent of the income of the federal budget. It would be too high a price to pay for increasing a market atmosphere inside the country. Neither Norway nor Algeria are doing this. Why is Russia expected to do it? Why do we have to put ourselves in the previous bitter conditions in our competition with gas companies from other countries? If Norway and Algeria will demonopolize their gas industry, maybe Russia will be more flexible on this question as well.

**Demokratizatsiya:** So, can we say that your party is the party of industrial protectionism?

**Ryzhkov:** Well, yes, unconditionally. But only up to reasonable limits. For instance, take the auto industry. We were against the new custom tax for foreign cars that were introduced by former Deputy Prime Minister Viktor Kadannikov. The point is that he supported the special interests of his native plant Volsky Avtozavod [VAZ]. And what has this led to? The prices in the market jumped up but the quality of VAZ cars decreased because they were artificially shielded from competition. But at the same time, we found a correct policy to stimulate foreign companies to build their products on Russian territory.

Our protectionism is not a Soviet kind of protectionism. Even more, our party is working very actively to achieve Russia’s accession into the World Trade Orga-
nization as soon as possible. We are ready to adopt the major conditions for this, but will keep some measures to defend our economy anyway. For example, our assembly factories can assemble very good computers, but our federal bureaucracy is still buying foreign-assembled computers, including even the Duma. For instance, there is in my office a very strange-looking Compaq, assembled by an unofficial dealer. It looks like somebody made some very good money on this. It looks like a real Compaq but does not work like one. Obviously, with a similar quality and price, it is necessary to buy a Russian-made product. Why do we have Italian furniture in the Duma? Russia can make not worse—the money should remain in the country.

Demokratizatsiya: Since you began to talk about the Duma, let me ask you, What is the Committee on Nationalities Affairs, of which you are a member, doing now?

Ryzhkov: The goal of our committee is to regulate federal relations. There are well-known, difficult problems in our country. We are now trying to solve the problem of Primorye, the problem connected with Governor Nazdratenko. We just finished work on the draft of the law about the structure of power of the subjects of the Federation. According to this law, the president of Russia can dismiss an elected governor if he systematically violates the Constitution and federal law. At present, there is no such law in the Russian legal system. This is why the conflict between Yeltsin and Nazdratenko has no solution. The federal government and the president have no tools to influence an elected governor. Our law passed the Duma but, of course, the Federation Council rejected it. Now we will begin to work in the inter-chamber Concord Commission.

The second problem is the direct agreement between Moscow and the regions—the subjects of the federation. Already almost thirty of such agreements have been signed. Each of them established an exclusive system of relationship between the center and the subject of the federation. But there are a lot of mistakes in these treaties; some regions received unreasonable tax benefits, unreasonable rights to use natural resources, and so forth. Now, we are trying to pass a federal law that will organize this practice and will describe what is possible and what is not in the relations between the center and the federal regions. We prepared this law and we are now waiting for the president to sign it.

Demokratizatsiya: This looks like the substitution of the Constitution, which determines the relationship between the center and the subjects of the federation.

Ryzhkov: Well, everything is abiding by the Constitution. However, the Constitution has some blank spots and we are trying to fill them in.

There are several more problems that our committee is trying to settle. Particularly, in draft form we have a law about accepting a new subject of federation into the Russian Federation and about creating inside Russia a new subject of federation. I tell you honestly, this implies Belarus. Although Belarus said that it did not see itself in the framework of the Russian Federation, we want to prepare the legal base—Who knows what can happen? The Constitution also implies having
this law. If we are to talk about changing the structure of the federation, there is a very small chance for this because it can happen only through changing the Constitution. But we need to have a law that will regulate this mechanism.

**Demokratizatsiya:** Does that mean that the current federal structure satisfies everybody?

**Ryzhkov:** Our Home Is Russia and our government think that there is neither the need nor the means to make any changes in the current structure. It would be an unnecessary and extremely expensive undertaking. It would be much more productive to modernize the structure that we have now.