We Have Dictatorship in the Form of Democracy

INTERVIEW WITH ALEXANDER N. YAKOVLEV

Demokratizatsiya: What kind of scenarios do you see in the current Russian political evolution? Which is the most preferable one in your opinion?

Yakovlev: I see three major scenarios. Let’s start with the most preferable one because I would really like to see this one come to fruition. This would be a continuation of liberal reforms, on the side of which it seems the president has finally taken a stand. It looks as if the president has made his choice in the liberal direction but after a long period of wavering. I am sure that Yeltsin felt long and strong pressure to turn to the way of authoritarianism but finally in the economy he accepted a liberal scenario. I hope now that if our government will save its unity, it will be able to go through land reforms, real legal reforms, military and tax reforms. In this case, business will improve. However, let’s say honestly, this way is the harshest for the common folk. This way will show its benefits only much later. But even here I have some serious reservations. For instance, let’s take the famous document “The Seven Major Tasks of the Russian Government.” This document makes me smirk, to put it mildly. It seems that our government does not have even an elementary sense of humor. Take for example the two last points. The sixth says that the government and the state should live honestly. Which state in the world and when has lived honestly? This is nonsense. Nobody demands this. And seventh, tell everything honestly to the people. Which government ever did this—American, French, German? It’s pure demagoguery. This has never existed and never will exist.

And look now on the “major promise” of the Russian government—to pay pensions and salaries on time. Excuse me, but what the heck is this? It’s the government’s elementary duty, it’s elementary business. If you can’t even do this,
then resign. The Russian government not only claims it as a major task, but promises to do it in steps. This is such nonsense.

I can tell you more. Pay attention. In these “Seven Major Tasks,” there are no major tasks. For example, to give land to peasants that they could work on, own the land, and feed the country. Or to make the middle class the basis of any democracy. There is no such thing in these “Seven Major Tasks.” At the same time, the new tax code has stronger regulation toward small and medium businesses. In substance, this code provoked the collapse of small businesses. This is why the strategy of the opposition now, of the Bolsheviks, is very simple—to just sit and wait for everything in Russia to start to collapse because government did not give the land to the people. This means that the government has no base, because there is no middle class. Americans, for example, understood this right after World War II, and started to think how to stimulate small businesses and to regulate big business, which had been a millstone around the economic neck of the United States.

Demokratizatsiya: What about the second and the third scenarios—the least desirable ones?

Yakovlev: The second one is a merging of new and old nomenklaturas. There are already all of the indications that a new nomenklatura has appeared but its nature is the same as that of the old nomenklatura. But the new one is really new in at least one way—the old nomenklatura served a dictator or group of dictators. But it was pure dictatorship. Now we have dictatorship in the form of democracy. People are humbled and without rights. And this is good for any kind of Bolsheviks. They understood very well that there is no way to change current power in Russia through any kind of revolution. You can of course agitate some rabble, as was done in 1917, but it will not be more than that. They simply will get drunk and cease to rebel. This is why all of the new Bolsheviks, regardless of which party they came from—democrats or Communists—are first of all trying to sneak into the new system of nomenklatura.

The third possible scenario is the most simple. It is some kind of temporary autocracy. Let’s say that the president understands that nothing can be done, and that Russia needs an iron hand, rejects some liberties and takes some tough actions. General Lebed appeared not accidentally, and he got 15 percent of the votes. It’s still the same democracy but in combination with the iron hand and authoritarianism. I am not sure myself now if an authoritarian regime could be led by an enlightened leader—even though I myself do not believe in “enlightened dictators”—it’s necessarily bad. More important is to understand, Will Russia go through this step? Is this inevitable?

Demokratizatsiya: What are the possibilities for each of these three scenarios, say, in percentages?

Yakovlev: If you asked me this yesterday, I would have given the preference to the liberal scenario, with 60 percent versus 20 percent each for the other two. Now however, when the struggle against banks and former ministers started
again, I will tell you: Hell knows. I obviously would not be so optimistic now. Judge for yourself. Now, the government has felt big pressure from society. I don’t know if it’s true or not, but there is a widespread opinion that everybody in government is getting rich on the budget’s money. And if this is so, they must return it to society. Take for example the recent story with Potanin. I have no possibilities to judge whether the charges against him are true or not. I am not an investigator nor a police officer. But I can tell you for sure that the result of the struggle between different financial groups is extremely important politically.

In America there is also an incredible struggle, but they will never subject it to public opinion. Neither international nor internal American opinion. Because bankers understand, they have learned it from experience, that this fight will turn against all of them in the end. And any kind of problems they will try to solve between themselves. Sometimes they are searching for compromise for years and years, and finally they find it. However, in Russia, everything is in the Russian way—precipitously. Nobody wants to wait. The biggest concession is postponing something for tomorrow morning—not later than 6 AM. This is the Russian way, we have no patience.

Look for yourself. If we will start to investigate where the money came from and how it happened to be in these or those hands, you will start to open these machinations that were and are, then justice will prevail. But if you ask me if I want it, it’s not so easy to answer. On the one hand, I want justice. But on the other, if I would start to think that instead of worrying about industry, instead of solving the sharpest questions of our lives, we start a new Russian fight, we will start the new Russian discussion on the topic Who stole more money? I am not sure if I want to know. Who cares who stole more? I like to see money invested in industry, in production. I like to see business going on. When former minister of justice Kovalev was videotaped in the mafia’s banja with naked girls, Boris Nemtsov reacted very correctly when he said, “Why the hell should the Russian government bother with this?” I completely agree. Are there no other matters in Russia more important than taking this story of Sergei Stankevich seriously? Unbelievable. They found the major thief of the Russian Federation! What nonsense. Besides, I am not even sure if Stankevich ever took these meager 10,000 dollars.

Demokratizatsiya: What do you think of Boris Nemtsov’s activity and his prospects? Is he an independent and long-term player, or is he a man who is being used by different forces and interests?

Yakovlev: At least, let’s say, trying to use. As soon as Nemtsov gets rid of his childish style, it will be better for him and for everybody. He has a lot of serious experience. That his own creature succeeded him as governor of Nizhny Novgorod can tell you a lot about his power. But his ridiculous campaign to force officials sitting in foreign cars to now drive in Nizhny Novgorod’s Volgas is just unbelievable. I am using a Volga myself. But if Moscow brings a new first deputy prime minister from Chukotka, will he force everybody to sit on reindeer? And if he is from Yakutia—on dogsleds? This is not a question that the deputy prime minister should care about. But I am ready to forgive him everything if he is
strong enough and courageous to carry out housing reforms. But will he be strong enough and courageous? I am not sure.

Too many things, if not everything, in Russia, we do very dilatantly. I will give you a simple example. Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov just announced that he is increasing pensions for older Muscovites. But several days later, he announced that he had decided to increase the subway fare. Any smart politician should think of combining these things, and to say, “I am increasing the metro fare, but because I want to defend the older folks, I want to increase the pensions.” People will then take it more positively and will say, “Look, Luzhkov gave us money to compensate these metro rates.” Instead of negative, he could have gotten a positive reaction.

Demokratizatsiya: Do you believe in the stability of the current government?
I have known you for a while and can I see that you are much more optimistic now than before. Maybe I am wrong?

Yakovlev: I hope that the current government will work for awhile. Of course, let’s wait and see what happens in the country in the next several months. Will they pay the salary to the military, as they promised many times? How about to other federal employees?

I think that this government is workable enough. And the course that they took is correct and crucial. I say, even if there are any elements of authoritarianism in the government itself, not in an individual person in government, there is nothing to be afraid of. Many forces wanted to make this government weaker or to split it up. For example, in August 1997, the newspaper Moskovsky Komsomolets published an article titled “Chubais Versus Yeltsin.” Stupid and obviously a purchased article. They want to put in Yeltsin’s mind the idea that Chubais is a traitor. He is intriguing and generally unreliable and not devoted to the president. But I think that Boris Nikolaevich is sneaky and wise enough, and he will never bite the hook. On the other side, Chubais is not as foolish as to do something against the president, who will be, whether you like it or not, the president until the next election.

Demokratizatsiya: There are a lot of rumors in Moscow that some forces have begun to convince Yeltsin to present his candidacy for the next presidential elections—by claiming that the limit of two terms does not count because he was first elected when Russia was part of the USSR and not an independent state. Askar Akaev used this tactic successfully in Kyrgyzstan.

Yakovlev: I don’t think so; they cannot do it. Boris Nikolaevich will never go for this. Last time, when Yeltsin convinced all the country that he would not stand for election, I was telling everybody that he would. And I was right. Now, it doesn’t matter what people are saying, he will not run again for reelection. I hope Yeltsin will be able to make the situation in Russia partly better, and he will leave, as we say in Russia, not completely on the saddle but at least not under it. If you ask me who will appear for the next election, nobody can tell today for sure. Anything can happen in the next three years with those who have already announced
their intentions. Everything can be changed if some forces really start to investigate who, how, from whom, when, and how much received money and power. And this, I think, is irreversible and will go deeper and deeper. It can change the destiny of many people at the top. We will live, we will see.