Republican Party Calls for Reunification of Democratic Forces

INTERVIEW WITH VLADIMIR LYSENKO

Zlobin: What do you see as the most desirable, but at the same time realistic scenario of Russia’s evolution in the near future?

Lysenko: I see now three possible variants of the development of the situation. The most optimal is that the present government in the present situation will succeed in doing something. Therefore, I believe that the best option for everyone is if this government were to get something done. Based on this, Boris Nemtsov and I are already attempting to work toward consolidating the main part of the democratic forces so as to enter the next parliamentary elections as a combined democratic bloc and not as fifteen parties, as was the case in 1995. In this situation, the main task is to correctly determine the leader of the united democratic bloc. It is not simple, because all of the democrats are so well known and loved by the people that each believes that he is the one most adored by the voters.

That is why we are now preparing to hold some kind of public elections, primaries so to speak. I think that Yavlinsky, Gaidar, Nemtsov, Pamfilova, Khakamada, and so forth should be announced here. For me, it absolutely does not matter which of them wins the primaries. The main thing is that we have a united bloc and a mutual leader and that all democrats will recognize the results of such elections. Although we have very complicated relations with him, if Grigory Yavlinsky wins the elections we will agree that he will be the leader of this bloc, and the rest of the parties will back him.

But the optimal thing is to find someone who, without arguments, can unite the whole democratic movement. Neither Yavlinsky nor Gaidar is capable of doing this. Personally, I am betting on the regional leaders, and I think that once Nemtsov has the highest ratings among the democrats in the regions, then he will be that unifying figure. If he does not collapse in the near future, if he does not
ruin himself by reveling in the awareness that he is so popular and big, he has a very good chance to become the leader of the united democratic bloc. If this bloc receives 15 to 20 percent in the Duma elections, then Nemtsov has a real chance to perform very successfully in the presidential elections.

Our second possible variant is that the government will fail. Then the opposition will inevitably come to power.

**Zlobin:** Which opposition, exactly?

**Lysenko:** It will be Communist, national-patriotic, or something between them. In this respect, Russia has missed its cycle. All of the Eastern Europe countries and the former Soviet republics have already gone through it. In those countries, first the right wing won, then all kinds of left wings, Brazauskas [head of Lithuanian Communist Party] and so on, and now again the right wing. Russia has gone through all those years on a single Right wave. Therefore, a colossal responsibility rests on the party in power in Russia. So much is weighing on it now that I really do not believe that they can do anything! I think that, after all, we are fated to the fact that opposition representatives will come to power in 1999 and 2000. Therefore, it is already necessary to think, What will that opposition be like? How systematic will it be? Will the opposition turn the situation completely back? Or, like Kvasnevsky in Poland, will it play by the rules, which are already accepted in the country?

The third possible variant is an authoritarian regime. The party in power, seeing that it is not capable of preserving power in legal ways, conducts a constitutional coup d’etat, such as happened in 1993, breaks up the opposition, bans any kind of opposition parties, and establishes an authoritarian regime. Along with that, the Duma is dissolved and elections either are not conducted or are conducted according to such election law and under such violations that guarantee (as in Kazakstan, for example) a parliament that is fully controlled by the president of the country. In this event, democratic forces either form a hard opposition to the regime, or they will become a complete appendage of the party in power and cease to exist as a political force.

Without a doubt, the first variant is more preferable, but the second and third are also very realistic, maybe no less than the first. Statistically, I suppose that each of the three may have a 30 percent chance of occurring.

**Zlobin:** How can the political activity of General Lebed influence the balance of power? Everyone is convincing me that he is not really able to reach the top of the political Mount Olympus in Russia.

**Lysenko:** Everyone is also persuading me of this, but I am convinced of the opposite. Judge for yourself—Alexander Lebed resigned without a problem. In the Security Council, he fought against crime. He stopped the war in Chechnya. And suddenly they ousted him! The Chubais team did this, let’s say, having interfered with the general’s establishing of order in Russia. Lebed can sit and do nothing at all, wait until everything begins to collapse, until a battle begins between the Communists and the party in power, and only then come into the political
arena. He is very well known in the regions and very well received. He has an unblemished reputation. He gives me the impression that he is a rather intelligent and sensible person. But it seems to me that he is not a politician by nature. Therefore, in many ways his future will be determined by his team and by the political advisors and experts who will work in his circle.

Besides that, very many things will depend on how the party will relate to Lebed. And here there are two conceptions. Russia’s Choice represents one conception, and the radical-democratic organizations represent the other. They say that the general is a terrible enemy of democracy and that you should fight against him with all your might. It seems to me that we are thus pushing Lebed into Zhirinovsky’s niche, making him into a führer who will then actually step over bones, who will ride into Moscow on tanks and start a bloodbath here such as we have never seen.

Garry Kasparov has now set about implementing the second variant. He wants to make a liberal out of Lebed. It seems to me that this is a hopeless case. But Kasparov is ready to put all of his energy into seeing that a meeting takes place between the president and General Lebed whereby they could reach a secret agreement between themselves in which Yeltsin names Lebed as his successor. Lebed’s popularity in the regions is higher than anyone else’s, often even higher than Nemtsov’s. General Lebed’s popularity was confirmed when he was elected governor of Krasnoyarsk in spring 1998. But if this occurs, Lebed will take certain obligations upon himself, in particular, that he will fully observe the rules of the game, that he will not persecute the team that is now in power, even, possibly, that he will have to take some part of the team with him into the next party of power.

Overall, it is possible to work with Lebed. I have told him that the Republican Party is ready to cooperate with him in the regional elections. Zhirinovsky is now winning very strongly in many regions. That is why, if we have good organization somewhere, but not a well-known leader, we could appear together with Lebed, and these would become regions that support him. We could bring some good people to power. He is thinking it over. Unfortunately, he has already displayed a large megalomania. So far, he feels somewhat self-sufficient. Lebed has parted company with everyone—with Glazyev, Baburin, Rogozin in the Congress of Russian Communities. So far, he has not refused me—he smiles, but does not want to do anything. But I am not at all counting him out and am convinced that Alexander Lebed is one of the most serious candidates for the office of president.

Zlobin: Let’s turn to the Republican Party. What is its position today, where does it see itself in the political spectrum of the country? Is it a serious political force?

Lysenko: A question about the seriousness of political positions always has a subjective character. That is why I remind you that in the 1995 Duma elections the Republican Party had its own list of candidates (Pamfilova, Gurov, Lysenko). Among all of the democratic parties, we took fourth place. First, as is known, was Yavlinsky with a little more than 5 percent. Next was Gaidar with 3.9 percent;
third was Boris Fedorov with 2 percent. We had a little less than 2 percent. Although we did not get into the Duma as a party, I believe that among fifteen democratic parties we have a substantial position. This is, in particular, related to the fact that the Republican Party was not created to cater to a leader.

I remind you that in 1989 the most progressive part of the Communists came to the conclusion that it was necessary to reform the CPSU. Otherwise, they said, the party itself would die and drag the country down with it. Before the Twenty-eighth Congress, the Democratic Platform in the CPSU was created—probably the largest opposition in Russian history. According to surveys of the CPSU Central Committee, about 40 percent of 18 million Communists supported the platform. But they supported it ideologically, not organizationally. Before the congress itself, as is known, Gorbachev banned the platform, which helped us very much. At the congress, neither Gorbachev nor Alexander Yakovlev nor Eduard Shevardnadze supported us, and they did not agree on the division of the CPSU as we proposed (to give the conservative part to Yegor Ligachev and for them to head the progressive part). Yeltsin, Popov, and Sobchak, who were extremely popular then, also did not support us and did not risk creating a democratic party. Thus, we found ourselves completely without leadership. After quitting the CPSU under these conditions, we created the Republican Party in November 1992. In the beginning, there were 20,000 members, but then that number fell and stabilized at 5,500. Now our membership fluctuates between 5,000 and 7,000. Each year we conduct reregistration and issue membership cards. We do this in contrast to many other parties that have not done it in five years, but have simply been increasing and increasing their numbers on paper. There are three of us in the Duma. Besides myself, there is Ella Pamfilova and Stepan Sulakshin. Sulakshin recently left the democratic wing and now has taken a sharply critical stance toward the party in power. But it can not be said that he has joined the Communists.

Zlobin: Do you consider yourself the opposition?

Lysenko: After leaving the CPSU, we tried to unite with the Social Democratic Party of Oleg Rumyantsev. When Rumyantsev was not elected chairman, that party fell apart. The Democratic Party of Russia disappeared when its leader, Nikolai Travkin, left politics. At first we became a liberal party, but in the last three years we consider ourselves a centrist party and a party of pragmatic direction.

We do not have a strong position in Moscow, although I was deputy minister of nationality affairs in Gaidar’s government. But we have a rather good position in the regions, because in its day the Democratic Platform had its own organizations in all of the administrative divisions of the federation. We now have Republican Party divisions in seventy-three regions. There are already leaders here and there. Let’s say that members of our party head the oblast Duma in Belgorod. Our mayors are working in Tambov, Yushkarola, and Nakhodka. And isn’t Tambov the most Red region! Not long ago at a Russian government meeting on community housing reform, which in a rare case was led by Boris Yeltsin himself, Yeltsin said that the Tambov experiment pleased him more than Nemtsov’s
experiment in Nizhny Novgorod and Luzhkov’s in Moscow. There are very many Republicans in the regional power structures at the oblast and municipal levels.

What is the Republican Party in Russia today? Republican is one of the most widespread names of parties all over the world after the Social Democrats and the Communists. However, this name is used by various parties. In the United States, the Republicans are a rather respectable party, but in many countries it is a right-radical, neo-fascist organization, often ultra-nationalistic and chauvinistic. The Ukrainian Republican Party is an example of this. In Georgia, Republicans were supporters of Zviad Gamsakhurdia. The National Republican party of my namesake, Nikolai Lysenko, is more radical than Zhirinovsky’s party!

We are in favor of democratic power in the form of a republic, but for strong power. It should be a presidential republic, but with a normal parliament and judicial system. Checks and balances of the executive power should definitely exist. We firmly believe that a republic should defend its national interests. In this respect, we are far from copying a Western country like we did at the beginning of the 1990s. Our ideology now has a more Eurasian character. Russia for us is a country that follows a general path, but with its own specific nature. Therefore, neither Europe, even Eastern Europe, nor China suits us as a model for development. We have to go our own way, although with regret.

Republicans are in favor of Russia’s being a federation. We believe that at the end of the twentieth century, it is simply suicidal for such a huge country as Russia to return to a unitarian form. It will end as a huge state further collapsing into pieces that are now already sufficiently independent.

But at the same time, we believe that Russian wholeness needs to be preserved, that is why I do not support the withdrawal of Chechnya from the country. However, I was an opponent of the war that Yeltsin unleashed there. We are for the preservation of Russia, but by democratic, political methods. We support the idea of voluntary integration of countries of the former USSR, including a union with Belarus. Although I have a negative attitude toward Belarusian President Lukashenko and I do not like his policies, at the same time I believe that if Russia and Belarus successfully integrate in political forms, it would become not only a very powerful economic but also moral and psychological factor for the many citizens of the former USSR. The USSR had many faults, but those countries that now simply try to divide the former USSR into zones of influence did not compensate us for what we lost from the collapse of the USSR.

Therefore, when our radical democrats say, “What’s the hurry [to integrate]? Let’s wait a bit. Russia will become very rich, and in ten years they will come
running to us,” I object and do not think that they will come. Frankly speaking, the United States, Germany, European countries, and even the Asian continent are penetrating so strongly into Ukraine and in a number of other former Soviet republics that soon they will simply buy up everything, and then it will be too late to do something. Therefore, from the geopolitical point of view we should by all means integrate with Belarus, despite Lukashenko himself. Russia is much bigger and will continually grind down everything that we don’t accept in Belarus. And the regime there will be the same as that which exists today in Russia.

Zlobin: As a member of the Duma Committee on Federalism, how would you describe the state of federal relations today? Are you satisfied with them?

Lysenko: No, I think that we are only on the way from a unitarian federal government. I would not venture to say that we have a federation. The 1993 constitution laid the normal foundations for development of a federal government. But there are several big problems.

The first problem: Until now we have been preserving both a national-territorial division and a territorial one. We have not managed to find a balance in this area. The system has survived since Stalin’s time, when nations on the outskirts were promoted and given privileges. Now this is related to large tax benefits, along with many other inequalities and advantages for rich federal subjects such as Tatarstan, Bashkortostan, and Yakutiya, which causes intense dissatisfaction in the Russian regions and oblasts and is leading to very serious national friction. Personally, I see no end to this situation. Russia is fated to live exactly like this! The gubernatoria proposed by Zhirinovsky [a return to only the territorial principle that existed in the Russian empire] I consider to be unrealistic.

Our second problem is that there are too many federal subjects. As is well known, there are eighty-nine! Almost two times greater than in the United States, not to mention Canada, where there are only ten provinces. This is almost an unmanageable, huge community that, in addition, has too much variety. Unfortunately, here I also do not see any prospect for change. There are no hopes that the local elites will agree about unification and decide which elite will become the first and which will become the second. In the interest of the country, it would undoubtedly be better to establish ten to fifteen areas or states, and then the country itself would be much stronger.

The third problem is the problem of budgetary federalism. Money plays the utmost role in the development of our government. In Germany, for example, a system of financial equality for the states is set in law, and each citizen receives a certain social minimum guaranteed by the government. In Russia, in the last seven years the income disparity between areas of the federation has greatly increased. Therefore, the situation has become tense not only between separate social groups but between the regions. Their financial inequality is growing. It is necessary to drastically change the situation, to achieve a certain social minimum that is provided everywhere. We need to help the depressed regions, where there are physically simply no means. But this needs to be done through help to the economically strong regions in implementing reforms, so that they may help the
economies of the weaker regions. So far we have been doing this very poorly in Russia.

One of the reasons for the lack of success lies in the fact that we all do not live according to the law. Money is divided not according to the law, not according to the budget, but according to who is closer to Yeltsin and Chernomyrdin. The system of contractual relations, which began developing after the conclusion of a treaty with Tatarstan in 1994, has begun in fact to turn into a system of rights parallel to the constitution. Many republics prefer such bilateral relations with Moscow, rather than a system of relations secured by legislation.

The fourth problem lies in the fact that Boris Yeltsin, as a result of an absolutely insane compromise, agreed in 1996 to gubernatorial elections in the regions. As a result, now we are losing executive vertical, which is extremely necessary in the conditions of the transition period from a socialist to a market economy, from a unitarian state to a federal one. Here is an example: Governor Nazdratenko is impossible to fire, although everyone understands that he took the Primorye situation to the very edge. It shows that the federal authority is in fact not so strong, and local governors, having been elected, have started to feel much more powerful. In the Duma, we have prepared a Law on Federal Intervention, which proposes that parliament may give the president the right to relieve a governor of his duties in the event of a serious violation of the constitution, of the laws of the country, or of presidential decrees. But the president’s decision has to pass through the court, which will give the final resolution. If the court considers the presidential decision to be groundless, the governor is returned to his duty.

In other words, for now the interests differ so much between the center, regions, and republics on the one hand, and the borders and oblasts on the other hand, and between those regions that signed a mutual treaty with the center (today they are more than thirty) and those who did not sign, that I—having worked seven years already as a federal legislator—can state that so far we have been unable to pass a single law. The greatest difficulty has proved to be finding a balance of interests and drawing it up into legislation. So far all relations have been expressed on a level of intrigue, direct, openly expressed connections, personal interests, and so on.

Zlobin: If you ask the same question about the political system—what don’t you like about it?

Lysenko: In Russian history, the individual has always had a characteristically important role in running the government. And when not long ago, we remember, the Congress of the People’s Deputies ruled the country—this was simply absurd! That is why what happened in October 1993 can be objectively understood. It was necessary to break the absolute power of the soviets and to adopt a normal constitution. But the way in which it was done aroused a protest in me, and that is why I did not support Yeltsin then. I think that October 1993 will come back to haunt us and it will not be a proud moment in history.

But when the parliament was dissolved and Yeltsin received complete power, he bent the situation in reverse—he greatly strengthened presidential power and
just as greatly weakened the judicial and parliamentary power. Now we have a
president who can do almost anything—start a war in Chechnya, adopt any bud-
get, or even live without a budget, conclude any treaty, and so on. We can discuss
how concretely Yeltsin uses this power, but if the next president possesses total-
itarian tendencies, then in such a system of power he can completely do away
with democracy in the country. Parliament would be incapable of mounting resis-
tance against him, and the institution of impeachment would be practically impos-
sible to implement in Russia.

It is necessary to balance powers. It seems that even Yeltsin partially agrees
now that this is necessary and that a certain parliamentary control and strong judi-
cial power are needed. The Constitutional Court adopts many resolutions accord-
ing to presidential decree and does not have an independent position. Therefore,
we are losing almost all political lawsuits.

I think that the electoral system has been created absolutely optimally—half
of the deputies are elected from party lists and half from majoritarian or single-
member districts. However, within the party in power they have now begun to
talk about the possible return to only majoritarian elections. They are being led
exclusively by opportunistic reasons—in elections by party lists now the opposi-
tion has taken almost all, and in the next elections it might still take more. There-
fore, in order not to let the opposition come to power, it is necessary to liquidate
party lists and return to non-party majority elections. And there, frankly speak-
ing, it is possible to form a fully controllable parliament with the help of the
administration, falsification of election results, and big money. But in doing this
we in fact give up a multiparty system, and the next generation of reformers will
have to begin everything from the beginning.