Yabloko Is the Single Democratic Power

INTERVIEW WITH VICTOR SHEINIS

Demokratizatsiya: Victor Leonidovich, what is going to happen with Yabloko? Why do many people, in speaking about Yabloko, characterize it as some kind of marginal political movement, even a rapidly dying movement? Is that really how things stand?

Sheinis: That kind of judgment usually comes from Yabloko’s enemies, who would very much like the situation to be like that. I think that the evaluations you just stated are not based on truth. Right now there is a relatively difficult and slow process going on of converting this more-or-less amorphous movement into a political party with its own organizational structure, full-time personnel, and consistent financing. As everyone knows, this is not easy and it requires time. But the process is under way.

I do not share the view that Yabloko is a dying movement. In some regions, we guard our positions, and in the others, we are even expanding them. And this is natural because Yabloko today is the single strength of democratic power in Russia. I am not an enemy of the party “Democratic Choice of Russia”; I have many personal and political friends there. But unfortunately, I have to say that that party hasn’t done as well as we expected. This is why Yabloko will go forward alone.

Demokratizatsiya: Are you trying to create an all-Russian party that will encompass the whole country, including the rural sectors, the Far East, the north, and so forth?

Sheinis: Our task in the rural portion of Russia is not simple, it is not easy for us to work there. Our only base is the intelligentsia or intelligentsia stratum of other social groups, for example, the salaried or skilled workers. The countryside is our weakness; our supporters there are definitely an insignificant minority. Only in the areas surrounding Moscow and St. Petersburg do we have large groups of active or potential electorate, and we will work with them.

Demokratizatsiya: How does Yabloko view the army, the law-defending body? Will they support Yabkolo, or will they again support Zhirinovsky?

Victor Sheinis is a deputy in the State Duma and a member of the Yabloko party. This interview was conducted in summer 1997 in Moscow by Demokratizatsiya executive editor Nikolai Zlobin.
Sheinis: It seems to me that the time has already passed in which the military would have supported Zhirinovsky on a mass scale. That was in 1993. By 1995, the situation already had changed. And by the way, the influence of Zhirinovsky’s party is significantly drawn from the results of previous elections. In 1993, he received around 23 percent of the vote; in the 1995 parliamentary election, barely more than 11 percent; and in the 1996 presidential election, less than 6 percent. I truly hope that the Liberal-Democratic Party, which is apparently neither liberal, nor democratic, nor even a party, will continue to move in the same direction!

Demokratizatsiya: You call yourself the party of democratic opposition. Are you then entering the opposition bloc?

Sheinis: We are of the democratic opposition in our attitude toward government. But we are not an established part of any one opposition. The distance between Yabloko and Zyuganov and Zhirinovsky is greater than the distance between the government and the president.

Demokratizatsiya: Briefly, what are the main differences between Yabloko and the president?

Sheinis: The differences are on economic policies, the struggle with crime, which we think is not being waged adequately. It is not by accident that our platform is called “Reforms for the Majority.” We believe that the human aspects of reform and their social price have been underestimated. Finally, we support changing the Russian constitution so that there would be balance and equality between different branches of power.

Demokratizatsiya: You are speaking of the Constitution of the Parliamentary Republic?

Sheinis: No, I wouldn’t say that. Our constitution was conceived as founding laws for a “semi-presidential republic,” such as they have in France but not in the United States. But it didn’t turn out like that. We are inclined toward an absolute presidential republic. The primary problem of our constitution, from my point of view, lies in the fact that too much power is given to the president and the government, although there is a struggle to change it. The basic problem is that parliament has little power. A certain equilibrium is necessary by broadening parliament’s rights and its controlling function, but the executive branch, as is apparent, doesn’t have the capacity for these changes.

Demokratizatsiya: What are Yabloko’s main disagreements with Zhirinovsky’s people and with the Communists?

Sheinis: We don’t have a single problem with Zhirinovsky! No contact, no problems. I act with a great deal of contempt toward this political leader, I think that this is one of the symptoms of the disease. In this form, the disease will pass on by itself. Zhirinovsky does not express interests but moods. Interests are constant, moods are of short duration. That is why he will leave the political arena either in the upcoming election or the next one. He has no political future. Zhirinovsky is the Russian version of Le Pen.

Zyuganov is a dangerous figure. There are many problems here and they are
tied to the oppression of the past, the extremely harsh character of political reform, and the true deterioration of the lives of millions of people. Let us say that the layer of the intelligentsia to whom I am referring had more success than anyone, having the opportunity to work professionally in conditions of freedom, released from censorship, party control, and so forth. But for the vast majority of people, life and their vital interests were under attack. Abandoning the patronage of government is very difficult. It should have been mitigated in some way, but that was not done. That is exactly what the Communists plan on. I think that the peak of the Communist Party’s influence has already passed or is passing right at this time. In it there are varying forces: on one hand, they are decidedly moderate, and on the other, extremist and frantic. Ignorant people, seized with a desire for revenge, make up the greater portion of this party. Vengeance will not allow healthy-thinking people in the CPRF to take the only path leading to a bridge to the twenty-first century—the way of social-democratization; the way that the Italian party has gone, for example. It is expected that either the Communists will split or they will continue falling.

Gennady Zyuganov was a most unfortunate choice of a leader. He is lacking any kind of charisma, and his personality is repulsive to normal people. Zyuganov is trying to smooth out these deficiencies by appealing to Russian nationalism. He will probably take some portion of Zhirinovsky’s electorate. However, as a whole, I think that erosion will eat away at the Communist monolith. But this process will be slow and communism will remain a problem for Russia into the twenty-first century. I believe that our greatest political competitor right now is the CPRF.

_Demokratizatsiya:_ What kind of interrelations are there between Yabloko and General Lebed? At one time there were rumors about Yabloko supporting Lebed in the presidential election.

_Sheinis:_ No, there was never any support! There were some negotiations about creating, let’s say, a third power. Once, some representatives of a certain small party came to me, people fairly well known in the narrow political circles. They appealed to me to persuade Gregory Yavlinsky to agree that Lebed will become president and will name Yavlinsky as his prime minister. “But,” they said,”Yavlinsky needs to remove his candidacy now.”

My answer to them was not only my personal position but also the position of Yabloko. I said that I will certainly not betray Yavlinsky, and if he himself agreed to a similar proposal, I would no longer support him. For me, I said, I have a different idea. Yavlinsky will become president and Lebed will be guaranteed a high government position. Essentially, the talk was about the same kind of promise that he had already received from Yeltsin—the office of secretary of the Council of Defense, that is, having influence and control over all the powerholding departments. I didn’t know all of this then, but I thought it was probable. But, as you can see, Lebed did not pursue it.

Alexander Lebed is a person who is undoubtedly talented and who draws up his own plans, which are subject to very slight changes, first to one side, then
another. I can always, with great confidence, foresee what Zyuganov will do. With less confidence but within a certain range, I can see what Yeltsin will do. But I definitely cannot say what General Lebed will do if he becomes president. This uncertainty coupled with his association with the most unsympathetic, nationalist groups is what makes him a dangerous figure. However, it is still possible to say that he is a remarkable person.

_Demokratizatsiya:_ What are Lebed’s chances of continuing to be an important figure in Russian politics?

_Sheinis:_ He definitely will run in the next presidential election and will receive a certain percentage of the vote. But I think that unless something unpredictable happens, his chances of winning the election are small.

_Demokratizatsiya:_ What do you mean by something unpredictable; for example that he will be nominated by the Communists?

_Sheinis:_ Yes, that would be totally unforeseen; or that a complete paralysis would happen among those forces which today surround Yeltsin.