

Putin Represents an Imperial Course for Russia

INTERVIEW WITH GRIGORY A. YAVLINSKY

A leading democratic figure in Russia, Grigory A. Yavlinsky is the cofounder and chairman of Yabloko, a liberal party. Yavlinsky is an economist who became widely known in 1990 when he co-authored the radical “500 Days” economic program with Stanislav Shatalin that was eventually rejected by Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev. He was also the co-author of a proposal for large-scale Western assistance to the USSR in exchange for specific reforms, known as the “Grand Bargain,” with Graham Allison of Harvard University. Yavlinsky went on to become an architect of relatively successful economic reforms in the province of Nizhny-Novgorod, working closely with governor Boris Nemtsov, who currently leads the other main liberal party, the Union of Right Forces (SPS). Yavlinsky has been a presidential candidate twice and a longtime critic of the privatization project carried out under Boris Yeltsin and its consequences. This interview was conducted on May 19, 2003, at the Yabloko office of the State Duma in Moscow by *Demokratizatsiya* founder Fredo Arias-King.

Demokratizatsiya: Now that Yeltsin is gone, do you think the unity of the democratic forces is more doable, say cooperation between the Union of Right Forces, Yabloko, and other liberal forces?

Yavlinsky: What do you mean by “democratic forces”?

Demokratizatsiya: Usually they associate the democratic forces with those parties that are not the Communists, not the party of power, not xenophobes or . . . but you are right, maybe it’s a matter of semantics.

Yavlinsky: I don’t think that’s a good way to describe who are the democratic forces.

Demokratizatsiya: Alright then, between Yabloko and SPS. Say, if they have a leadership change and they remove Anatoly Chubais and Alfred Kokh, would there be more room for cooperation between Yabloko, and then Irina Khakamada, and others in SPS?

Yavlinsky: Maybe. But there is no hope that Chubais and Kokh will leave.

They are the key people after all. They are more important there than Khakamada and other people. These people are the real SPS, and this nomination of Mr. Kokh [to manage the SPS legislative campaign] is making things much more clear than they were before.

Demokratizatsiya: In the view of Yabloko, what is the main item on the agenda for the country? What is the main wish list?

Yavlinsky: The liberation of the state from the domination of oligarchic, semi-criminal groups. Which means an independent judicial system, independent law-making, existence of independent media, more or less fair elections, that's what it means. That is the most important task for Yabloko.

Demokratizatsiya: Putin is viewed in the West as improving the economic performance, mainly the tax system—which I understand was a Yabloko idea, the flat tax, the fair tax—but taking back political and press freedoms in the process. Do you think this view in the West is correct?

Yavlinsky: What is really going on in the Russian economy I would call de-industrialization. I can say that the high economic growth in 2000 and 2001 was the consequence of the devaluation of the ruble and very high oil prices. What about the structural reforms? What about the changes in the political environment? If we compare them to the mid-1990s, the situation is no better. Maybe in some aspects such as corruption, bureaucratization, and the domination of super-powerful oligarchic groups, the situation is probably worse than it was before.

Demokratizatsiya: You once used the anecdote of the “pink tank” to describe NATO and its expansion. I remember a speech you gave at Harvard in the mid-1990s, where you mention that NATO is a nice pink tank—it has flowers, it plays music, it has girls on top, but it's still a tank. In light of NATO's latest expansion that will cover seven new countries, mostly former Soviet and Warsaw Pact members, has your view of NATO changed in any way?

Yavlinsky: NATO is not a threat. It's still a pink tank, but [one] that can hardly move, because the people who are in the tank have no idea where to move and how to cooperate. If the people in the tank don't know how to cooperate, then this tank is not very effective. That's what has happened to NATO in the past few years. From that point of view, the more countries in NATO, the more mess. Seriously speaking, I am interested in strengthening the common security structures of the Western world, of which Russia sooner or later will become a part. But whether it be NATO, or whether it is right to go along with its mechanical expansion, in that I have a very big doubt. So to repeat, I think it is very important to have serious, workable structures that will help create a new security environment for the new challenges and threats, and I think Euro-Atlantic relations are extremely important. I insist in strengthening Euro-Atlantic political relations, but it must be done in the new adequate forms. I would not be happy creating in Europe new special forces that would be separate from NATO. I don't think that this is a very good idea.

Demokratizatsiya: You have often spoken about the oligarchs and their power, as have other members of Yabloko such as Sergei Mitrokhin and Yuri Shchekochikhin. You have mentioned that the power of the oligarchs has increased since Yeltsin left office. What do you think this means for the Putin presidency? How do you think it will end? How will the Putin presidency be remembered?

Yavlinsky: When do you expect him to leave office?

Demokratizatsiya: I don't know.

Yavlinsky: I don't know either. You are talking about something that is not clear.

Demokratizatsiya: Hopefully he won't stay forever! Eventually he will have to depart. So let me rephrase the question. If the power of the oligarchs has increased, how do you propose to deal with that, if and when you become president? How would you be able to limit the power of the oligarchs who have so much money?

Yavlinsky: It's not a question of money, but of political will. The only way would be for the president to gather these oligarchs around the table, ten or twenty people, and say, "What happened before is okay. But from tomorrow on, it will be new rules of the game. And I am inviting you to these new rules. Those of you who are ready to play under the new rules, you are welcome. You have all my support, you have all the possibilities to move forward all together. Those who don't want to, you have to leave the boat. But you have to understand. Those who will not play under new rules will have to pay for today and for yesterday." That's the first thing I would say. I would then add, "Now you have to take your paid people in my government and take them back. No problems with these people, no punishment, nothing. But all those officials you have corrupted will be withdrawn." After that, all new corruption will be punished, and so on, step-by-step. But the general scheme has to be—new rules of the game. Everyone who wants to play by the new rules [is] welcome.

Demokratizatsiya: In Russia, human rights activists such as Sergei Grigoryants continue to be harassed by the *vlast*, by the authorities. The war in Chechnya is still burning. Georgia and Moldova continue to have attempts against their sovereignty by elements in Moscow. What is the root cause of all this malaise? Is it all the same root cause?

Yavlinsky: The answer is a kind of state ideology, a kind of *derzhavnaya ideologia* [ideology of great power], an imperial ideology. That's the key. And he [Putin] was very explicit in this ideology when he made his state of the union address. Very explicit, from my point of view. In that speech, he said for the first time, very clearly, "I am in favor of an imperial course. I am not a liberal." That was message number one. For the first time since Gorbachev, such a speech included nothing of the kind as the individual, the human being as the center of efforts, none of that. He said, "we paid a lot, we suffered a lot, we suffered for our loss of empire and we are going to rule the same way," something like that. Secondly, what he said was "I will not discard these democratic elements which

we have in the society such as elections, like human rights and things like that. But these are not the most important. I will even use some of these liberal instruments to achieve friendship or good relations with Europe, better relations with the United States.” But the key for the future is the imperial course. That is the root cause, and that is his mandate. If you look at the developments in Chechnya, the developments following the terrorist attack in Moscow [of October 2002] and all that, this is it.

Demokratizacija: There are two types of post-communist transition leaders that emerge from the democratic forces. On the one hand are those that dismantle the structures of the old regime—leaders such as Mart Laar, Václav Havel, [and] Zoran Djindjić for example. Then there are those that leave everything essentially the same—as Emil Constantinescu in Romania. When and if you become president of Russia, in which of these two groups would you like to be seen?

Yavlinsky: I want to emphasize this as strongly as possible: In changing the political elite, and in changing the political class of Russia, I am absolutely sure that the Russian people deserve real change and a really different view of life, from what those people who, in fact, represent the former communist system.

Demokratizacija: In your view, why were reforms in Poland successful, but not in Russia?

Yavlinsky: In Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary, there was a change in the political elite whereas in Russia, there was not. That is the key. And why was there a change in the political elite there? Because the revolution in Hungary started in 1956, in the Czech Republic in 1968, and in Poland it started in the mid-1970s, before it was put to an end by marshal law. And in Russia it just started in 1991. So what we have at the moment is only the preparatory phase for the real changes ahead.