

“Zhirinovskiy Is a New Version of Yeltsin”

Interview with SERGEI BABURIN

Some look upon him with mistrust, others with admiration. But one thing is for sure—one cannot help but notice him. Sergei Nikolaevich Baburin is one of the most charismatic politicians that Russia has produced. His smooth oratory style combined with suave looks and charm undoubtedly make him one of Russia's most popular opposition leaders. With a wife and three children, he went from being the youngest dean ever of the Law Faculty at Omsk University to being elected to the Congress of People's Deputies of Russia in 1990 on the ballot of the Democratic Russia Movement, and to the State Duma as an independent candidate from the patriotic camp in December 1993. He was a co-founder of the National Salvation Front, a hardline coalition of nationalists and Communists as well as the co-founder of a broad patriotic movement, Yedinstvo, which was influential in the Supreme Soviet. He is currently the leader of a large centrist movement, ROS, the Russian All-People's Union.

He was first publicly noticed when he ran for the chairmanship of the Supreme Soviet in a very tight race against Ruslan Khasbulatov in 1991. He later drew attention to himself for being a staunch Yeltsin opponent in the Congress of People's Deputies and in the State Duma. His regular outbursts brought an onslaught of criticism from the reformist camp who see him as a mouthpiece for reactionary circles striving to reestablish the old Soviet empire. His opponents also labelled him an opportunist with a demagogic slant capitalizing on the plight of ordinary people. The West looks to Baburin with apprehension and with disquietude over his haughty statements of a single Slavic state. Rumors fly about his alleged KGB collaboration.

Accused of being everything in the book from a Communist to a fascist, the 35-year old politician from Siberia considers himself a democrat. He welcomes a free market within a strong unified state. He looks to history for answers to today's problems and maintains that traditionalism is the key to the success of Russia's reconstruction. His political stance is in fact very close to the Russian mainstream. This is not solely due to the fact that he strives to be in the center, but that the center is shifting towards nationalism. This can be seen in the government's view of ethnic Russians in the former Soviet republics, on its stance on Yugoslavia and in the Yeltsin February 24th State of the Nation address entitled “On the Strengthening of the Russian State.” There is a new mood in the country. There is a feeling of self-esteem and assertiveness, contradicting the past servitude to U.S. interests. Baburin is riding high on this patriotic wave that is sweeping across Russia at an alarming rate. He has the qualities of a leader—ambition, intellect and charisma. If he plays his cards well, he could be a candidate for future success.

Baburin is back in opposition politics after a close brush with death during the October 1993 crisis. He remained in the besieged Parliament building until the very end. On October 4, armed guards escorted him out of the White House and into an adjacent structure where he was nearly killed by two soldiers arguing over who was going to shoot him. By a twist of fate, he left the ordeal with mere bruises. He was arrested, spent one night in a jail cell and was released the following day. The next

misfortune befell him in the run-up to the election when his office was broken into and 20,000 crucial signatures were allegedly stolen, thereby excluding his party from the electoral list. His remaining choice was to run as an independent in his hometown of Omsk. He won on that ticket. However, following his definitive electoral victory, his opponents tried to unseat him. They claimed that the election results were invalid because another candidate in that election had been improperly registered. A court hearing resolved the issue in Baburin's favor. His persistence had paid off. Determination and cautious calculation gave Baburin a new lease on political life in Russia with a seat on the State Duma.

ROS, which emerged in September 1991, has clung to three main principles—people's power, patriotism, and social equality. Its goals include national reconciliation, preserving the territorial integrity and state unity of Russia, a moratorium on changing the state borders and on talks discussing such changes, a review of the one-sided pro-Western orientation and a struggle against political forces and persons who are actively taking part in the breakup of Russia. Its economic program, which is overburdened with traditional ideas, is still popular among state enterprise cadres advocating limitations on privatization, regulated market forces and state subsidies. ROS claims it has lost a large portion of votes to Zhirinovskiy's Liberal Democratic Party and now has a lot of catching up to do to regain support. At the third congress of ROS which convened on February 20-21, a decision was made to transform the movement into a party. As leader of the party, Baburin will have a stronger power base from which to plan his march towards the Kremlin.

—Heidi Hollinger

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Hollinger: What is your opinion of the October events of 1993?

Baburin: A state coup was successfully completed by Yeltsin. The Congress of People's Deputies was first dissolved and then bombed by tanks. The Parliament building was ransacked. After that all the local soviets were dissolved as were the majority of the regional ones. So it was purely a state coup d'état. As far as my attitude towards this is concerned, I condemn it without reservation. I tried to oppose it in the building of the Supreme Soviet starting from September 20 right up until October 4. After the defendants of the Constitution were crushed by armed force, I still maintained my position that it was a state coup and that the organizers and the people who executed this coup, in short, the culprits, should be prosecuted. I am also convinced that the October 1993 events struck a heavy blow to democracy in Russia.

Hollinger: Upon your suggestion to the Duma, a new commission will be set up in order to investigate the events surrounding the October 1993 crisis. What do you expect to be the outcome of this inquiry?

Baburin: The most urgent task of this commission is to reveal the actual role of the Supreme Soviet and the system of representative organs of power, to bring to light their strong and weak points, to show where the Parliament went wrong in its defense of the Constitution. These are the main tasks of the commission. As regards to the activities of various ministries and of the president, I am doubtful that the commission will touch on these problems. There is no way of exploring them because there is no objective way to carry out the investigation.

Hollinger: Which politicians have a chance of becoming the national leader?

Baburin: It is impossible to say right now. I am convinced it will be a decisive leader who stands firmly behind the national and state interests of Russia. Boris Fyodorov is a very promising candidate for the presidency. It is not accidental that he did not become Gaidar's deputy in the new Parliament. He went into his own faction.

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Hollinger: What do you think about Vladimir Zhirinovskiy?

Baburin: I try not to think about him—it's better to think about your health. Zhirinovskiy is a man who, since December 1993, has become a first-rate politician. He is the leader of the Liberal Democratic Party which received a plurality of the votes in the past election, so everyone is paying a lot of attention to him. However, he takes the majority of our program's principles to the point of absurdity and sometimes turns the meaning of our principles completely upside down which I utmost regret. It goes without saying that I am not impressed with his eccentricity, passion for diverse escapades, scandalous behavior, rudeness and boorishness. That is what I think of him.

Hollinger: Do you take him seriously?

Baburin: I do not classify him as a serious politician. I think of him as a dangerous politician. That is, through his eccentricity and populism, he is capable of destroying the civil peace. I would say that Zhirinovskiy is a new version of Yeltsin. Frankly speaking, I am not fond of the first or second versions.

Hollinger: What do you think about Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin and his newly acquired power base?

Baburin: It is true that he has a lot of power but he is not an omnipotent leader. Let's wait and see. I don't have any personal sympathies for him because even if they existed in the past, they suffered greatly as a result of the events of 4 October 1993. Hopes for his pragmatism did not always materialize. I think that in the near future, through our work in the Duma, we will exert serious influence on the government

starting with his resignation. I am not saying that it will definitely be soon, but I am not excluding this possibility. And maybe on this issue we will be acting in cooperation with Gaidar. If the government follows the wrong path and Gaidar demands Chernomyrdin's resignation, then there is a chance that we may follow Gaidar's demand.

Hollinger: Will Yeltsin stay?

Baburin: There is no point in discussing Yeltsin. He has carried out a coup and has shed human blood. From a legal viewpoint, he has not been president since 21 September 1993.

Hollinger: In your opinion, what is the way out of the current political crisis?

Baburin: Maintaining the civil peace through the efforts of the Duma. Not that everybody has to be in complete harmony but at least for there to be an understanding not to use violence to solve national political struggles. That is the main function of the Duma. Let there be all kinds of political fights and battles in the Duma but keep them out of the streets.

Hollinger: How does the Duma differ from the old Supreme Soviet?

Baburin: The Duma is in fact repeating the same pattern as the former Supreme Soviet. The only difference is that the divisions are more clear cut. There are extremist positions on both sides. Some deputies can't get away from this fear syndrome. They are afraid of repeating the fate of the former Supreme Soviet and very afraid of being dissolved. The Duma's deputies are ready to make the most unprincipled compromises and here I should include the speaker of the Duma, Ivan Rybkin.

Hollinger: Where do you position yourself and ROS on the political spectrum?

Baburin: In this situation, you cannot properly classify us as left-wing or right-wing. If we take a socialist basis to mean left-wing then you can say that there are left-wing elements in our program, as we are based on the principle of social justice. If you consider the Right to mean conservatism then we are right-wing because we are conservatives. So you can argue that we are left-wing conservatives. That may sound strange for Europe, but for us it is normal. So in order not to confuse anyone, when people ask me what I am, I say that I am a traditionalist. This is something close to early Peronist politics. Something close to European conservative movements, like the Conservatives of Great Britain. But all in all, on a lot of topics we are similar to the liberals or the Labour Party. So it is not a very clear-cut boundary. Basically we stand in the center or to be more precise, a little bit to the left-of-center.

Hollinger: What prompted you to shave your beard?

Baburin: I was sick of it. People kept discussing my likeness to Lenin, Trotsky and Mephistopheles. And plus I also want more people to vote for me.

Hollinger: What have been the main political events in Russia since the August coup of 1991?

Baburin: Besides the October crisis and the December elections, the main event during this time was of course the actual and judicial collapse of the USSR and in its place the formation of the Commonwealth of Independent States. The next thing in order of importance was the established insolvency of Yeltsin's politics and his loss of social support within Russian society. The next is perhaps what is becoming more and more substantial—that we are beginning to recover from the “sickness of sovereignty.” In all the former Soviet republics there is a growing desire to unite the country, not in the form of some kind of federation but as a single state. I would especially like to emphasize the Congress of Belarussian People which took place on 11 September 1993, in which a declaration was made to the people of the former Soviet republics about the creation of a unified government. This was a grass-roots event in Belarus and not one originated in Moscow.

Hollinger: What kind of union are you talking about?

Baburin: Similar to the Soviet Union. The republics that want to unite will unite—Belarus, Ukraine, Russia, and only those that are willing.

Hollinger: What are the political perspectives for Russia in 1994?

Baburin: I think that there will be a transformation in Russia, meaning its rebirth and its dawn through the reunification of Russia with other territories beginning with Prednestrovia [Transdnistria], Abkhazia, the Crimea and ending with the larger republics.

Hollinger: Are you talking about the rebirth of the Soviet Union?

Baburin: I am talking about the rebirth of Russia in a completely new form. What is extremely evident to me is that without a solution of a political nature, economic success is impossible.

Hollinger: What are the perspectives for the democrats, the centrists and the Left opposition?

Baburin: I feel that the most acceptable variant for society would be a strengthening of the centrist positions which is where I stand with ROS. Any extreme is dangerous whether it be Yeltsin's extremity or the Left's or the Right's.

Hollinger: Therefore, it would be correct to say that you and your party are situated in the center of the political spectrum?

Baburin: We are trying to form a national patriotic center or movement of the center because both a Communist dictatorship or an anticommunist dictatorship are equally unacceptable to society. We don't want anarchy or the mafia instead of a civilized market. We don't want totalitarianism like we had before.

Hollinger: Do you consider yourself a democrat?

Baburin: In Russia, the word democrat has acquired some negative connotations. I however would never use this word in a cursory manner because the democrats are us. We want everything to be executed according the law. In this respect I scold a great deal of opponents. The other day when I appeared on television, the host reproached me for so often standing in opposition to the opposition. This is because I never sold myself out. Not to the Communists and not to Yeltsin. I was offended in the past, in the present and, I'm afraid, I will be offended in the future as well.

Hollinger: Many people consider you a Communist. What is your political orientation?

Baburin: The Russian All-People's Union is a socio-political movement that is headed by Communists and non-Communists. It is based on a completely different value system which arises from tradition. I was a member of the CPSU starting from 1981 right up until its prohibition. I did not leave the Party when it was banned and I consider that I stopped being a member of the CPSU at the moment when the Constitutional Court lifted the ban on the Party. This decision was rather ambiguous and today is a completely new era. The form of Marxism-Leninism that existed in the USSR is buried in the past and there is no need to try and drag it back.

Hollinger: What is your view of foreign policy, including towards the new republics?

Baburin: It is totally unsatisfactory. I have recently prepared an article with one of my colleagues, the head of our expert committee, called "Russian Foreign Policy Strategy: Protectionist Pragmatism." The cornerstone of our argument is that today we must construct our foreign policy, firstly, from traditional approaches of the Russian empire and the Soviet Union to every region concerned with maintaining the continuity of these approaches. Secondly, taking into consideration the weakening of Russia itself, we must create economically favorable conditions for the development of national businesses which includes more careful regulations of foreign investment in Russia. Lastly, I think that what was instrumental for the Soviet Union is not always suitable for Russia and that in the near future Russia should officially renounce its unilateral declaration of non-proliferation. We should officially declare that if somebody attacks our country, under necessity we should respond by using all means available. That is our view of foreign policy.

In addition to this, it goes without saying that I am interested in the development of goodwill, friendship and mutually profitable relations with the former Eastern

Bloc and socialist countries, meaning our close neighbors like Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Romania, Hungary, Mongolia, China, Bulgaria and other neighbors, and also with more developed countries like the United States, Germany, Japan, Canada, the United Kingdom, and others. In line with this, for pure geographic and traditional reasons, I think that we must pay close attention to what we can learn from the experiences of Japan and Canada.

Hollinger: What are Russia's national interests?

Baburin: This is a theme for a long separate discussion for which time does not permit at present, so therefore I will limit myself to a general statement. The essence of the matter is that the national interests of any given government are the guarantee of economic development through foreign policy, the guarantee of security of that government through internal and foreign policy and the guarantee of the socio-economic and political development of the government through cooperation with other countries.

Hollinger: How can you advise Clinton in regards to the relationship of the United States and Russia?

Baburin: The longstanding confrontation between both superpowers, the U.S. and the USSR, showed that the eventual comprehension of reality between the politicians and leaders of these countries has had a beneficial effect on the international scene. Today, I would urgently request the leaders of the U.S. to understand that the internal affairs and processes of Russia and the former USSR are very serious and complex and not to meddle carelessly. If the U.S. is interested in Russia becoming a democratic country, then they should not take such a stand towards Russia. They should not interfere.

Hollinger: How are they interfering?

Baburin: Through the totally absurd support for a discredited political regime. When the common voter in Russia is told that Yeltsin managed to produce a 1000 percent increase in prices in two years and that this was supported by the U.S., and that it was done through their advice and recommendations, then don't be surprised later with the rise of hardened anti-Americanism in Russia. I fear that when a more realistic government comes to power in our country, it will have a difficult time fighting against anti-Americanism.