

Russia: Permanent Narrow Escape

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It is only sheer historical luck that Russia in the last six years has persisted as a country with elements of political democracy and glasnost, and mankind will be even luckier if this nuclear superpower steps into the third millennium as a democratic, nontotalitarian state.

However, there are many troubling signs that Russian democratization is not consolidating as hoped. Some examples can serve to illuminate this hypothesis.

Red-Browns Rising

On 22 May 1997, the Committee on Legislation, Courts and Legal Reform of the State Duma, which is controlled by a Communist majority, again dismissed a proposal to present to the full Parliament a law that would forbid Nazi-like propaganda. This type of law was passed earlier by the Moscow City Duma, and there were several subsequent attempts to pass the same law at the federal level. Anatoly Lukyanov, a former member of the Communist Party Politburo and a 1991 coup co-conspirator, presently the “Red grandfather of brown puppets”—as *Moscow News* called him (11 May 1997)—is also chairman of the aforementioned Committee on Legislation. He torpedoed the law because of the “inadmissibility of the restrictions on freedom of speech in a democratic state.” The actual reason, in the opinion of many, is that the anti-Nazi law will also work against the Communists, since they built their present-day popularity not on their discredited ideology of old, but on ultra-nationalistic slogans.

The defeat of the Communists and nationalists in the 1996 presidential election was only a narrow escape, a historical accident. Alexander Lebed took 15 million votes away from them, which made victory for Boris Yeltsin possible. The extremely difficult personal economical situations of millions of Russians convince one that this defeat may not be the end of the Russian red-browns.

There are a number of fascist-like (nationalistic, anti-Semitic), rather aggressive parties and groups operating in Russia. They have their own newspapers with

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an impressively wide readership. What is most dangerous is the popularity of these ideas in the private security companies being established, as well as among many officials at the Interior Ministry, in the procuracy, and in other state structures. After seventy years of Communist “red” ideology, communism has lost its authority in Russia. That is why a new, “red-brown” ideology was quickly created by the former Communist Party, the KGB, and top military nomenklatura. These same forces attempted to destroy the budding Russian democrats with their coup of August 1991 and again in October 1993. Both times, their defeat represented another narrow escape from something truly terrible.

KGB Regaining Its Powers

Recently, the State Duma and its Communist, nomenklatura majority passed a new law, “On the Protection of Witnesses.” The most essential and frightening position of this law is that it allows the courts to use testimony in the absence of a witness (“for the sake of his security”). If the law is passed by the Federation Council and signed by President Yeltsin (who is often vulnerable to the illegal machinations of treacherous elements), the Ministry of Security (the KGB) and the Interior Ministry investigators will receive a new and powerful tool for arbitrariness and falsification. The Communist chairman of the Committee on Defense and Security of the State Duma, Viktor Ilyukhin, a former KGB general, defends the law with the same arguments used by the ministries that will make the best use of it. In other words, there is good fraternal cooperation between the Communist and nationalist deputies in Parliament and the power ministries in the government.

In addition, Ilyukhin proposed to Parliament recently a draft law “On Anti-Terrorist Actions,” which incorporates the necessity of creating all over the country a special network of “anti-terrorist” units (a newborn Cheka/NKVD). If the Duma adopts this law, it is likely to be vetoed by Yeltsin. But who will be president next? All of those draft, vetoed laws will sit on the shelves awaiting the signature of the next Russian president. Again, Yeltsin’s veto will be a situation of narrow escape.

The Authoritarian Luzhkov

In June 1997, Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov issued an order to clean Moscow of all people without official registration (the new name of the notorious Soviet-era *propiska*), first and foremost those of Caucasian nationalities. Hundreds of people captured (and robbed and beaten) by the Moscow militia enforcing Luzhkov’s decree appealed to human rights activists for help. Luzhkov stands now as one of the few potential successors to Boris Yeltsin. He knows many democratic words, but criticism of him is practically impossible in the Moscow media—rather painful reprimands follow immediately after (in contrast with Boris Yeltsin, who is the target of daily barrages of all sorts from the Left and from the Right, in print and on television, without any repercussions). Luzhkov has created his own state-within-a-state in Moscow, governed not by the Russian Constitution but by his own decrees. He is a very skillful master and also skillfully uses his racist slo-

gans to win popularity. According to opinion polls, 90 percent of Muscovites approve of him.

Alexander Nikitin

The present Russian situation may be described as “departmental feudalism” and “regional feudalism.” Mass-scale violations of human rights in today’s Russia have their roots in the independence of the feudal lords from any rule of law whatsoever. Army and military-industrial groups are members of this dangerous medieval “round table.”

Radioactive pollution from the wastes of the Russian Northern Fleet is a global threat. Norway and the United States are ready to finance necessary measures to reduce the possible damage. On 12–17 May 1997 in Oslo, a meeting of Amek (the Russian-Norwegian-American program on environmental security in the Arctic region) was held. However, Russian military lords resent any attempt at independent control or oversight of the ecological situation there. That is why in July 1995 they forced President Yeltsin to cancel his initiative on creating a special civil supervisory group on the safety of nuclear commodities under the Ministry of Defense. This is also why the Norwegian environmental group Bellona, which sought independent supervision of the ecological damage, was attacked in the fall of 1995, and Alexander Nikitin, who was a Russian working along with Bellona, was arrested and accused of betraying his Motherland on 6 February 1996. Bellona personnel are not permitted to enter Russia.

American Policy

The Jackson-Vanik amendment, which was adopted twenty-three years ago, was the first real step in defending basic human rights in the Communist world, and it effectively worked during all those dramatic years, as it effectively works today. Russia’s total exemption from the Jackson-Vanik amendment (being negotiated by Rep. Steny Hoyer under the joint Duma-Congressional Study Group), would be a disaster.

The main argument for exempting Russia from the Jackson-Vanik amendment is the low number of refuseniks in Russia today. A special commission in the Foreign Ministry headed by First Deputy Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov is in charge of resolving issues concerning the remaining refuseniks. This special commission was created only because of the Jackson-Vanik amendment.

Leonid Paperno, a member of our Moscow Research Center for Human Rights/Movement Without Frontiers Group, has visited every sitting of this special commission for four years (he cannot actually sit in while they deliberate because classified topics are discussed, but in the hallway he has the possibility to discuss the problems with the refuseniks, and he is in possession of all of the official data on the work of the commission). This special commission is under great pressure from the military-industrial complex and from the armed forces. They, in full violation of the Russian Constitution, produce plenty of refuseniks. And every refusal canceled by the special commission (it cancels 80 to 90 percent of refusals) resulted after a bitter struggle with these military feudal lords.

At its latest sitting on 28 May 1997, the special commission gave in to pressure to violate the permitted five years of refusal under current Russian law, and permitted eight years in one case just because “we were asked to do that,” in the words of Ivanov.

Since fall 1995, when paranoia over “state secrets” produced the Alexander Nikitin case, the pressure of the KGB/military lords has strengthened considerably. They insisted on full abolition of any mention of the Foreign Ministry’s special commission in the new Russian law “On Exit and Entry,” which was passed by the State Duma in July 1996. Four articles of this law, including the one that mentions the special commission, were proposed by the Movement Without Frontiers Group. Lobbyists from the KGB and military were rather active but we [the Moscow Center for Human Rights/Movement Without Frontiers] were active as well. However, our proposals were supported by the members of the parliamentary committee and by government officials only because of the anxiety that the United States would use the Jackson-Vanik amendment.

Similarly in the Alexander Nikitin case, the same members of the Russian Parliament trying to sweet-talk the American delegation into exempting Russia fully from the Jackson-Vanik amendment, in April passed an amendment to the law “On State Secrets,” which declares classified any information on military radioactive materials. Hence, if this law passes the Federation Council and is signed by the president, then every environmentalist who reports on potential new Chernobyls will be arrested for revealing “state secrets.”

Abuses of the term “state secrets” to include reporting on military dumping of nuclear waste or any other attempts by the KGB and military to classify ecological threats must be another area of application of the Jackson-Vanik amendment. Jackson-Vanik and American pressure in general are our only defense.

Conclusion

We know from history that feudalism is substituted by authoritarianism (or totalitarianism). Will the same happen to modern Russian feudalism? We know that the departmental interests in Russia that possess money and power must be stronger than the journalists. Why then, is glasnost not over in Russia as it is in Belarus? It is a historical paradox—a permanent narrow escape.