

In International Politics, Everyone Is for Himself

INTERVIEW WITH ALEXEI MITROFANOV

Demokratizatsiya: You are the chairman of the Committee on Geopolitics of the State Duma of the Russian Federation. It seems to me that a lot of people don't understand the purpose of your committee and its major goals.

Mitrofanov: Our committee is involved in political questions which have strategic character. For example, the ratification of main international agreements such as START II, the Chemical Weapons Convention, and so forth. In this area, we are working together with the committees on Defense and International Affairs. We control all of the questions connected with continental shelves and exclusive economic zones, criminal and civic responsibilities for violations in these areas. Now, for example, the committee just finished preparing the law on foreigners and their legal status in Russia. The law was adopted by the Duma in a third hearing, and its contents partly resemble their American counterpart. All of this presents problems on a big political scale.

Demokratizatsiya: Isn't this problem connected mainly with foreign policy?

Mitrofanov: Not necessarily. There are a lot of things that you cannot divide between internal and external policies. For example, foreign debts, which is an issue for our committee. First of all, it's a very complicated internal political and economic mechanism of decisionmaking. The legal status of foreigners in Russia is also a Russian internal question. Ratification of routine agreements, the appointment of ambassadors, and interparliamentary contacts are going through the Committee on International Affairs.

Demokratizatsiya: You occupy a big political post in the State Duma, which you received as a member of the LDPR fraction. Why do you think that in Rus-

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sia and outside of Russia there is an extremely negative image of the LDPR and its leader, Zhirinovskiy?

Mitrofanov: You know, I think that there is a very specific decisionmaking procedure in the West, which reminds me of the old Soviet style. As we used to say, "There's a certain opinion." Vice President Al Gore in December 1993, when Zhirinovskiy won the election, called him a fascist. And from this moment everything started. The Russian democrats began to call Zhirinovskiy the same thing, and all of the West as well. And now, public opinion has already labeled Zhirinovskiy in this stereotype.

Demokratizatsiya: But Zhirinovskiy himself has many times given credibility to this stereotype, You cannot deny this. Do you think his, lightly speaking, abnormal political behavior and mentality are coming from his personality and mind, or is it part of his propaganda campaign to catch public interest?

Mitrofanov: The fact that the LDPR won one election completely and on the second one, notwithstanding the terrible campaign against the LDPR, received second place, can tell you a lot. This means that Zhirinovskiy sharply sees reality appealing to the sensitivity of many people and touching the feelings that really exist in Russian society. This is what the West neither values nor understands in Zhirinovskiy.

In 1993, maybe even earlier, Russia became an object for much propaganda of Russia's inferiority complex. Russia's propaganda has promulgated for several years this complex in our minds. Propaganda has convinced us that the last seventy years of our history has been a mistake, and that the guilt for Stalin's repressions lies on all of us. The propaganda worked with us like it did with Germans after World War II. But Russia did not lose a war. Everybody understands very clearly that we did not have a romantic Gorbachev; everybody could be different. I don't think that he was an evil man, but he was a romantic of the generation of the 1960s, which spent all of its life dreaming of how to get a bit of freedom. It was a very romantic generation, not like the previous one, which went through World War II. And Gorbachev did lots of things correctly. That is why some people have the feeling that, allegedly, because of this fool, everything went wrong in this place. But nobody feels that we lost something—as a war, for example. People are talking about Gorbachev's foolishness, and the same with Yeltsin. Allegedly, he came, got drunk, signed something, and so forth.

But propaganda works with us as it does with the losers. But we didn't lose anything—we even won a lot. In this case, it's an extremely important moment for understanding the phenomenon of Zhirinovskiy. A lot of people are extremely irritated by the current situation, and Zhirinovskiy appealed to them, and very successfully. He sharply saw and beautifully understood this feeling of social dissatisfaction. He is a professional politician. I even think that he is the most professional, the most talented, person in Russian politics today. I think that everyone will agree with this.

It is one thing to be an engineer and then to become a politician. Almost everybody, from Yeltsin to Chernomyrdin, came to politics from some technical back-

ground. Nobody came to politics with a political background in Russia. The educational background of Zhirinovskiy was the closest to politics. He is a political scientist, he worked in international organizations—even if in minor positions. This is why his aim was very exact in 1993. All of the others thought that they would get support and they would talk about common human values, but everything happened in the opposite way. Nobody expected Zhirinovskiy. Nobody paid attention to his 1993 campaign. Nobody opposed him directly during this campaign.

However, after his first victory, everybody immediately wanted to destroy him as a politician—especially because he appeared out of nowhere. But in 1995, there was a huge effort against him, because everyone realized that he was the favorite. The goal was very simple—to destroy Zhirinovskiy and in his place, in place of national patriotism, put their own man from the Kremlin. Yeltsin understood that Zhirinovskiy had found a niche in the population—that Zhirinovskiy understood what the population wanted now. And Yeltsin decided to use the same slogans, to appeal to the same feelings, to play with words as Zhirinovskiy did. In 1995, for example, the case of General Lebed was not successful because we worked against him—we even had a special program. But in 1996, Zhirinovskiy did not pay attention to Lebed, and Lebed achieved his zenith.

Generally speaking, Zhirinovskiy during the last campaign behaved very unusually. I can tell you honestly that there were some agreements. He behaved very passively, and his supporters felt it. Zhirinovskiy did not have any stimulus. He knew he would not be first, yet second or tenth place in the presidential campaign really do not matter. This is a big point! In the parliamentary election, each percentage point is very important because behind it are thousands of voters, and the size of your fraction determines your influence for the next years. But in a presidential campaign, there is nothing to a second place except history. Who remembers now that in 1991 Nikolai Ryzhkov was the second in the presidential election?

Demokratizatsiya: How does the LDPR see the near future of Russia? What kind of social and political evolution do you predict?

Mitrofanov: The worst but possible way is a conflict, and civil disturbances.

Demokratizatsiya: Who can provoke it?

Mitrofanov: I think that if it happens, it will happen in the regions. It may be very easy. For example, in the Far East, any given province will start to agitate and refuse to pay taxes to the federal government. The complete division of Russia is unlikely. It is too dangerous for the rest of the world—What will happen with our nuclear and our chemical weapons? Of course, the best scenario is if Russia will confidently move in the democratic direction.

Demokratizatsiya: Is Russia moving in the democratic direction now?

Mitrofanov: Unfortunately, absolutely not. I think it's another one of the deceptions that the West sees as true. It's a kind of optical illusion. There is no progress in democratic reforms. We still have the power of the same party, which of course transformed itself a little bit, but with the same tools of ruling the coun-

try, but maybe a little softer. But there is no real democracy—neither in politics nor in the economy nor in the cadre policy.

I expect the move to democracy to happen when the new generation comes to power. The historical merit of Zhirinovsky is that he has taken in his political train the new Russian generation. The generation, as he said once, will outgrow him one day. The Communists are not taking anybody with them. They are the consortium of nomenklatura that united in the face of the fear to hang divided. Zhirinovsky is a different thing. He is taking many young people who realize that the world is different, who understand that you cannot manage a factory producing nothing but asking for money from the budget. Yet 90 percent of Communists are working this way. You cannot rely on the state to forgive your debts, you cannot steal ninety kopeks from somebody's ruble for your own pocket. But old Communist directors are thinking that this is okay. They think that they worked so hard all of their lives, that now they have the right to steal as much as they want.

I think that this is already irritating even the West. The new generation should come—those who want to be owners. The generation that has another thirty or forty years of life—a good reason to achieve stability in the economy and in production. That is why they have to do everything to make my house safe, my family secure, and my economy stable. The Communists don't think so, and neither does the party of power. We have an absolutely Communist mentality—give me money, give me benefits, give me free tickets. In the old system it was logical. It was a compensation for living under socialism. Now everything like this should die. But it is not dying because people at the top have remained the same and are keeping this system. Like Clinton in the United States and Tony Blair in Great Britain, somebody absolutely new will come to power in Russia, but even much more young than Clinton.

Demokratizatsiya: Your party has a very sharp anti-NATO position. What are you going to do now that NATO has started to expand to the east?

Mitrofanov: There are many ways to fight with NATO. The main political question is which way to go. Not the military way of course, but there are other methods of counteracting NATO. But neither one of these methods will be used by the current government, because they are weak, they don't need anything, they just want to remain in those positions two or three more years. What kind of goals can Yeltsin have—to survive two or three years up to his pension? Same with Chernomyrdin. And what, they will fight with everyone because of NATO? Yeltsin liked the fact that everybody flew to Paris just to meet with him; as an old timer, he liked it. But you cannot build politics on this.

There is a mass of possibilities for counteraction toward NATO. First of all, Russia can start to intrigue inside the members of the Western alliance. The Western alliance is not as monolithic. There is, for example, the Germans, and possibly with them we will start our intrigue. We will start to move the Germans from the common Western dialogue. And I think there are good reasons for this—Kaliningrad. As soon as we start the discussion about the destiny of the city—just discussion, I am not talking about something bigger, just discussion—for example, negotiation

with Germany about the renaming of Kaliningrad back to Königsberg—I am sure that in the West we will see very nervous convulsions. I am sure that any German chancellor will not be able to resist the possibility to start discussion about this.

Demokratizatsiya: How far can Russia go on this question?

Mitrofanov: I think very far. The question is what we can get out of this. If we can get an agreement from the West to split Ukraine and absorb its southern and eastern parts, as well as Byelorussia, the north of Kazakhstan, and so forth, then Russia can go very far—there is nothing to conceal here. Life is life and everyone is for himself.

As a former researcher from the Institute of the USA and Canada, I am trying to explain here, but nobody understands me, that this is a very American way of thinking. Everyone is for himself. If something is threatening an American—his house, his family—he simply takes a Winchester and goes to the

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main road. This is his house, he is used to living there, and he will never understand how somebody can confiscate part of his house saying that it’s not his anymore.

Please realize that we are not trying to get something that will bring us a headache. For example, western Ukraine was always a headache for us. We don’t need it. We are not going to absorb it. But what is ours is ours—including Byelorussia. Nobody even speaks Byelorussian. What kind of hysterics is the West organizing because of our possible merger with Byelorussia? Kiev and Kharkov are ours. But we don’t want Lvov. You can take the entire Estonia but Narva is our territory. Let’s start to decide the question of Abkhazia! I mean, there is a circle of our interests. Of course, we are not talking about war—the political language is different now. We want natural borders. But I hope everybody will understand that any of our affairs with Germany will change the entire picture of the world. They will change, for example, the Polish situation, the new world order itself.

Demokratizatsiya: Besides Germany, with whom can Russia, as you call it, start its intrigue?

Mitrofanov: There is another strong way—southern. We should strongly say to Turkey: “Messrs. Turks, if you, as one of the sixteen NATO members, will not use your veto when the decision comes to expand NATO to the east, we will open up the Kurdish question again, and we will start to support them very actively. We have no other way. We don’t want the extension of NATO.” But nobody told them that, unfortunately. Turkey, as all of the NATO southern flank, can be a subject of real conversation. Yevgeny Primakov is, let’s say, a member of the Politburo. He is working very slow, like he has twenty years to spare. It’s a real Brezhnev. But you should act absolutely differently when the situation is changing so dynamically.

Another conversation can happen with Japan. I think that the dialogue about the Kurils is possible. The big point is, What conditions? But let's talk about it, let's keep our military bases forever there, if the Japanese will agree to this. Then we can talk about economic development there. Nobody talks to Japan from this point of view. We talk about the mutual management of the territory. What the hell do we need this territory for? We need military bases. But everybody understands that from military will come economic meaning.

Demokratizatsiya: In this case, what has happened with China? Let me ask you a broader question. Where should Russia move, to the west or to the east?

Mitrofanov: I think that the most dangerous tendency in Russian policy is to define where to go. "Where is Russia going? Let's go to the west! No, west is bad, let's go to the east! No, east is bad, let's go somewhere else."

We are not going anywhere. We are working with everybody, and squeezing as much as we can for ourselves from everywhere—from east, west, south. And no more principled positions! We have to finish with principles and Russian understanding of this. Look, when the Serbs were attacked, the Russian tsar did everything to defend them, but lost his empire. We don't need that anymore! We have to understand that we don't have any plans toward Serbia anymore. We have no master goal to defend Armenians or Bulgarians. To destroy Russia while defending them? Thank you, we don't need it. We don't have this goal. We don't have the goal to keep Chechnya in Russia at any price. A goal we do have is to use Chechnya, to use Ossetia, to use everybody, and to get maximum dividends for ourselves.

The same situation with China. NATO doesn't want us, so let's play with China! We will accelerate this game, but at the same time, we will play with the other hand with Taiwan. Why shouldn't we play with Taiwan? All of the Duma reacted as if we will worsen our relations with China if we play with Taiwan. Stupidities! We always tried to define—Somalia or Ethiopia, Israel or the Arabs. Why? Israel *and* the Arabs. Ethiopia *and* Somalia. Even more, inside Somalia, with any party! This is real politics, the way it should be. That is the American way. But our educational system teaches us differently. Let's define some principles. We don't want any more principles. Yes, we are with the Chinese, but only until they start to irritate us. An absolutely pragmatic way! Stop all of this conversation about orthodoxy. We are allegedly brothers with the Orthodox Georgians, so, let's give them Abkhazia as a gift for that! What kind of Orthodox are they? Let those Orthodox go to hell!

There is a very dangerous factor, the religious infiltration into politics. Look, Bulgarians are Orthodox, yes? But they twice fought against Russia on the German side—in World War I and World War II. Orthodox? Brothers? And we defended them with all of the power of the tsarist fist. Why, I am asking you? If need be, we will support Armenia, but we will not go crazy if something is not okay with them. Let's work on Russian interests! We will not do anything for nothing.

Demokratizatsiya: What level of support can you find in the Duma and in the government for these kinds of ideas?

Mitrofanov: You know, I have found support, but it's very difficult. You know, two or three years ago nobody understood even what the Kurdish question is about. Who are they? Where are they? And now, the Duma already passed several resolutions on the Kurdish question. So, something is going on but it's very slow. Russia is an elephant—pushing an elephant to dance is very hard work. The trainer must torture himself a lot. But we are trying, and are not going to give up!