

Russians Must Shed Fear

INTERVIEW WITH MARIA GAIDAR

Maria Yegorovna Gaidar is the founder and leader of Da, a nonpartisan youth movement in Russia that seeks to promote civic values in the citizenry and involve them in public life. In this interview, Gaidar speaks about the goals of Da, its achievements, how it is different from other youth groups, as well as the perceived threat from the Kremlin and its sponsored youth group, Nashi. Gaidar also reflects on Russia's present political state and the possibilities of another democratic breakthrough.

Demokratizatsiya: What's the difference between Da and the youth branches of the main democratic parties, and also Oborona?

Gaidar: Da is a movement organized by youth that had the same ideas, that want to change what is happening in Russia. Da has its goals, its methods and its organization. Da's main goal is to attract new people to civic activity, though it is not directly political. If we look at the political parties, say, United Russia, we see that the initiative does not come from the bottom-up. We see that the parties are really the tools of some people that have a youth branch mainly to use it for their campaigns. The members of the party youth branches are not many, since the young people do not believe in politics and in the democratic parties. This is one of the many problems facing the democratic parties in Russia. We can say there are three basic problems for them. The first is that young people are not interested in politics, in what is happening around them. The second is that when they do get interested and see problems that they want to address, they do not know where to go to get involved. They do not go to the parties, and they also do not go to social movements since they may not like what they're about either. And the third is that many who do get involved are really after a career. So several youth movements such as Nashi and Molodaya Gvardia fit this last model, like a Komsomol where one can build a career. Da was made for those who see problems around them but do not know what to do, where they can make a difference. Normal people who are ready to do something. It is also a nonparty organization. So that is why we attract people who have never participated in any movement or party before. So these type of people come to us. We also attempt to differentiate ourselves from the human-rights groups, since if you are too identified as a human-rights group or use their methods, you will never really become a mass movement, especially a

The interview was conducted in Moscow on March 8, 2006, by *Demokratizatsiya* founder Fredo Arias-King. Copyright © 2007 Heldref Publications

youth mass movement. Also, one must avoid the confrontational style of other groups that go out and protest against, say, Putin. There will be people who agree with you, no doubt, but most will just think you are crazy, that you are marginal with no future. Others will agree but will not join you, since they think there is no future in that movement. People who may join you may not agree on everything your group stands for, but what is important is that they think that something can be done, that their efforts will not be in vain and that something can change. And in Russia's present conditions this strategy implies many years of work; it cannot be expected to yield results by 2008, or even for 2012. So this organization that shuns party or human-rights identifications and relies on the self-organization of people from the bottom-up is what we are after.

Demokratizacija: Where do you derive your inspiration? Do you have a model from other transition countries? Also, how did you get this idea to found Da?

Gaidar: It was really a collective effort that reflected the internal problems of Russia, that originally did not follow any other models. Since then, of course, we have noticed first and foremost some examples from Ukraine, from Georgia, and even from Poland and Slovakia. Of course Ukraine is the main one, realistically speaking, since there is more exposure between our activists and theirs, they are very much like us with similar problems. Also, what struck me was their spontaneity. This was not some big politician like [Viktor] Yushchenko organizing them, but students and other young people that one day decided to organize themselves and just did it.

Our activities have more resonance than some bigger events from ordinary politics. In a poll from the Levada Center, it turns out that 4 percent of Russians have heard of Da, even though we are a small group and mostly concentrated in Moscow. That is a lot. We work effectively with the mass media.

Demokratizacija: Do you think that there will be another era in Russia like in 1989–1991, when society was mobilized and politicized, and there was that breakthrough to freedom?

Gaidar: I do not think there was a breakthrough to freedom per se. It was really a group of dissidents and intelligentsia and other activists that had this goal, but the mass of people went out to the streets not because of freedom but because of hunger, because there was no work. Many of the initial protesters were miners, many of who have since then supported communist and other illiberal movements. These changes that came, Why did they fail to reach stability? Because in that situation, these changes could only come from above, and were not claimed from below, in the narrow sense. Optimally, any major change should come from a social choice, which has never really happened before in Russia.

Demokratizacija: At the Solidarność birthday conference in Gdańsk this past August, you mentioned that Russia cannot be defined as a dictatorship, and that it will also be many years before the democrats reach power. What kind of system is Russia today, and when do you think that we can witness a change of this system?

Gaidar: My opinion is that Russia is an authoritarian regime that gradually is transitioning from a softer version to ever harder ones. But “dictatorship” is a harsh word. Rus-

sia is a form of closed democracy, where there is almost no open repression, where the mass media has been rendered ineffective, where there is a market economy but where the state is expanding its activity. It is an authoritarian regime in an open world, where it depends on economic and political relations with the whole open world. That is why it has to put on an internal democratic façade. It is not like with [Alyaksandr] Lukashenka, who does not care being labeled a dictator and knows that nobody will take his call. For Putin, on the other hand, it is very important that they sit with him at the table, that they take his calls, and that they treat him as a partner. It is important to him for domestic politics. That is why it would be very risky for him to impose a harsh dictatorship here. For Lukashenka, it is not a problem sending the tanks to quell a demonstration. For Putin, that probably will not happen, or at least it will happen if he will not be fingered as the culprit who gave the order.

Demokratizatsiya: What has been Da's biggest success, and what is your ideal goal?

Gaidar: We would define many successes, probably the main one being that people actually do come out to our meetings, and that for such a short period of time in existence, we have wide recognition, without any support from parties or anything, without money. So proving that it can be done was the biggest success. The second biggest success was what we did during the Moscow City Duma elections, where we put forth candidates and also deployed observers. While other groups got a lot of Western money to deploy and train observers, we did it absolutely for free. We monitored the University okrug in Moscow with three hundred observers that we found as volunteers, and they turned out to be the most professional and motivated observers. Again, we proved that it can be done. Another one is our work in public control of the police. There has been a positive change here because people have slowly begun to understand that the police work for them and that they have a right to exercise oversight over the police.

So our campaign of positive activities centers on small actions, not large ones with some superficial success, but that can be done and show people they can make a difference. To answer about our global goals, we can look at it two ways. We would like to build a sort of civic political team of like-minded people, who can then expand organically and organize their own branches. For that we need branding. We can also sponsor political debates, say between a professional politician like Nikita Belykh and some amateur politician that appeals to young people. Or between [leader of the Rodina Party Dmitry] Rogozin and [leader of Yabloko youth branch Ilya] Yashin. Even if it is just done in our club with no television coverage, it will be worth it. So it is not about me doing everything, but somehow putting things in motion so that others will adapt these ideas and stimulate some kind of civic activism. This can germinate for big future events, such as big protests or maybe some successful political careers, or maybe someone going to Harvard. The goal is that Da lives and even grows, that it is contagious to people who are passive now.

Demokratizatsiya: What do you think of Nashi?

Gaidar: Well, the problem with Nashi is that it does not solve anything, it is not really about something. It opposes us, it opposes our actions. When you have a group of young people who are for something, who are fighting for, say, liberalism, religion or even for

communism, that is normal. But when you have a group of young people who are about nothing, who are not interested in anything or need anything, whose goal is the fragmentation of society, that is disturbing. Things will hopefully change when normal people will feel empowered. Maybe one way to achieve this for Russia is for the organization of “block communities” like in the United States, where democracy is organized by local communities and their local papers. It should happen here gradually as well.

Demokratizatsiya: Are you afraid of Nashi? And I don’t mean as a personal threat to Da or to you, but its pseudo-fascist nature, its Hitler-Youth type model, and its dependence on the Kremlin to maintain the status quo.

Gaidar: Well, yes, insofar as they are sufficiently nasty in that sense. They are built around the principle of the internal enemy, against “fascism.” But anyone can be a fascist in their lexicon—so we are fascists too, as well as human rights advocates. They accuse their enemies of being either fascists or foreign spies. On the upside, their slogans are very simplistic, and their managers are not crazy people who believe in those slogans, but simply careerists. In that sense, they do not worry me, since, like United Russia, they just want power. When the money runs out, their disintegration will be quick. The danger, in my opinion, lies in that some genuinely crazy people will believe in Nashi’s slogans. We will see. But to tell you the truth, I am not very afraid of them.