

A TURN TO THE LEFT

Written by Mikhail Khodorkovsky

Published by *Vedomosti*

August 1, 2005

It is generally accepted nowadays that authoritarian trends are returning in this country. Furthermore, these trends are so lacking in creativity that one is reminded of the days of Chernenko. No one would disagree with that. But I do disagree with many of the analysts both in Russia and abroad who are somehow linking these trends with President Vladimir Putin and his group of “Leningraders”.

Authoritarianism was relegated to Russia’s history in 1996 at the time when Boris Yeltsin became president for a second term of office.

I can remember that dreary January of 1996 very clearly. At that time most liberals and democrats (and of course, without delving into the meaning of those words too deeply, I considered myself to be in both of those categories) felt disheartened because of the landslide victory by the CPRF in the Duma elections of 1995. But I was even more disheartened because so many members of Yeltsin's organization were willing to stand in line to greet Gennady Zyuganov and, as they smiled subserviently, waited to be forgiven for their fling with democracy and to be presented with newly minted purchasing cards enabling them to buy merchandise from a special store.

At that point, neither I nor those who thought as I did had the slightest doubt that Zyuganov would win the upcoming presidential election. And this was not because it looked as if Yeltsin was seriously ill or drinking too hard or had lost interest in being in power. At that point we were not familiar with the political jargon of the day, but we nevertheless could feel that there had been a change and that there was something that one could call a national agenda.

In 1990 and 1991, when everyone was becoming aware that the soviet system had lost its relevance and was no longer viable, the whole country dreamed of being free. Everyone dreamed of having the right to be one’s own person, to be able to think, speak, read, see and listen, even to go abroad. They dreamed of not having to attend Party or political meetings every week, or having to work on communal vegetable gardens, or having to account for every action to the head of their block. We were looking forward to democracy, believing it would miraculously resolve all our difficulties in the decades to come without any effort on our part. [We believed] that by using the magic recipe of democracy the Soviet Union would become a huge, wealthy and tidy version of Switzerland or even Finland in about a year. We all thought that is how long it would take. But by the mid-1990s it had become evident that the miracle of democracy was not working – freedom did not bring us happiness. We were simply incapable of being like the bourgeois Swiss - honest, moderate and neat. The country and our people were

confronted by very different problems such as justice. Who should get hold of Soviet Socialist property which three generations had created by their own blood and sweat? Why did people who were neither known for their brains or education make millions while academicians and heroes, pilots and cosmonauts found themselves living below the poverty line? Doesn't that indicate that Soviet Socialism which had been simultaneously so blessed and so maligned had not been so bad after all?

The sense of national dignity: why had the world respected us when we lived in the "bad" Soviet Union, or at least they had feared us? Yet now in the age of freedom we were being looked down upon as being stupid and penniless?

There was the question of morality in politics: we had not liked the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and the Central Committee of the Young Communist League because they were cynical and had secretly received favors that they did not deserve. But we certainly did not deserve rulers who were ten times more cynical and a hundred times more devious than the party overlords who, looking back, seem like nice retired country grandfathers and grandmothers compared with the new group.

There was fear of an uncertain future and a lack of goals: we had been thrown out of a dilapidated old Zaporozhets vehicle and were promised a Mercedes, but instead we were simply tossed out on a muddy road at the end of the world. Where are we? In what corner of the world? And is there some constant source of light for us there?

Only Gennady Zyuganov could answer all these questions convincingly at that point, whether we liked it or not. That is the reason why in March 1996 along with thirteen other leading businessmen (that is to say they were leading by the standards of the time) I signed a letter that has almost been forgotten by now, entitled "Breaking the Deadlock". The intent of the letter was very straightforward and it is important to add that we really believed in it. Boris Yeltsin should remain as President of Russia as the guarantor of fundamental freedoms and human rights. But the leader of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation would serve as prime minister and would have broad powers. This is what we proposed because economic and social policy had to become more leftist because, the letter said, a "post-election war" was inevitable. We had to turn towards the left so that we could reconcile freedom with justice for the few winners and for the many who felt they had lost out in the wide-ranging liberalization process.

As everyone now knows, this Yeltsin-Zyuganov partnership compromise never came into being even though it was justifiable from a historical point of view. There are people who, unlike me, had close ties with the Kremlin and they know why that never came about. Yeltsin's closest advisers, who did not want to share anything with anyone even if it would have avoided an extended period of instability, should probably be the ones to take the blame. Or perhaps Gennady Zyuganov should be blamed. He was either unwilling to compromise in any way since he was absolutely certain that he would win or, like many of those who agreed with his philosophy and his writings, he simply decided against taking over power in Russia because he feared that the burden would be too great for him to carry.

Thus they decided on a different strategy. Millions [of rubles] were poured into a machine to manipulate public opinion that would culminate in a Yeltsin victory. Without a doubt, this was an authoritarian strategy. The values of the late 1990s were formed at that time and chief among them was the concept that the end justified the means. If we need to win, bar Communists from appearing on television, and work out later whether it was right or wrong to do that. Bring in General Lebed who could gain 15 percent of the votes that would have gone to Zyuganov and then forget about him. It was at that juncture that journalists started moving from being formers of public opinion to becoming the servants of their owners, and when independent public institutions became the voice of their sponsors. We have known since July 1996 that "money wins out over evil" and only money can do that.

In 1996, the Kremlin already knew that it was becoming impossible to extend the existence of the right-wing Yeltsin liberal regime by democratic means: if all things were equal, Zyuganov would be unbeatable. Then it became clear that the regime could not remain in power in 2000 unless there were compromises on democracy. At that point, Vladimir Putin came on the scene. It fell to Putin to take on the burden of the second Chechen war. He then had to develop a strategy that would ensure "stability in power and stability in the country".

In the summer of 1999, at a time when Yeltsin's health was raising ever more doubts and questions, the new generation of Kremlin leaders decided that the regime could only survive by means of a scam on a huge scale. We had to pretend that we were answering all the key questions of the agenda that had been frozen since 1995 but in real life, where there is power, property and money, we continued to act just as we had done in the past. This scam was the principal element of the Putin-2000 project which was the logical extension and outcome of the Yeltsin-1996 project.

The contradiction between expectations and reality began to rise to the surface in 2005. One sign of this was the January demonstrations against the replacement of benefits by monetary payments. "The Putin majority", even though poisoned by television and inspired by calls to "eliminate opponents", suddenly realized that it was simply being used whereas no one was even planning to change the government's strategy.

We are once again facing these same hard questions that remained unanswered in the past. The agenda has not changed. But the people's desire to achieve justice and see change come about has become more entrenched and more pronounced. No one should be misled by the fact that the price of oil has reached 60 dollars a barrel. Social upheaval takes place not when the economy is on the verge of collapse, but when it is time to distribute the results of an economic recovery. It does not happen when all are more or less equally poor. It happens when one percent of the rich and nine percent of those who are fairly well off are removed both materially and psychologically from the 90 percent of the poor and (and this is even more important), from those who have been humiliated [by events]. More than two million signatures were collected in May and June of 2005 in support of a general strike by Russian teachers. Is further proof needed that stability in this country is an illusion and that the "crisis has come to a head"?

Russians have become much more aware than they were ten years ago and we should not ignore this. They have been cheated repeatedly and refuse to be deceived again, even if it is by means of very clever and complex strategies. In that sense, the fate of the Successor-2008 project is not so easy.

Kremlin spinmeisters are aware once again that they can only continue on this course by means that are not democratic. They are more than ever convinced of this. They are convinced that the left would win if there were an honest and fair election. The screws are therefore being tightened, a monopoly is being placed on television air time and electoral law is being changed so that all parties except those that are 102 percent controlled by the President's administration will be barred from taking part in the elections. And national referendums will be banned so that no one would by any mischance be able to discover what kind of ideas and values people really support.

However, opinion polls that matter (including the latest poll by the Levada Center) leave no doubt that people are adopting leftwing values: 97 percent of Russians are in favor of free education; 93 percent feel that pensions must not fall below a level providing for a minimum standard of living; and 91 percent are claiming that savings people made before the reforms should be restored. At the same time, 81 percent want a return to the direct election of governors; 59 percent are in favor of restoring the institution of single-mandate deputies. In essence, this is an agenda for the next Russian administration: state paternalism and democracy, freedom and justice together, all lined up on the same side.

This means that the left is bound to win, despite all the gimmicks. And [they will win] democratically, as expressed by the will of the voting majority. And they will do this by any means possible. Whether it is by means of elections or not, or even after the elections have been held, a turn to the left will be inevitable. And as a result, those who are now seen as the direct successors to the current administration will no longer be viable.

Of course the Kremlin may still believe that they can block the path of history by resorting to authoritarianism all over again. [They can] Impose even greater control on the country, close down the uncensored newspapers and radio stations that are still in existence, seize the assets of those who do not toe the line, etc. But the resources of the post-Soviet authoritarian days in Russia are gone. First of all, authoritarianism is opposed by people who are not afraid that their assets will be seized because they have no assets in any case. They are prepared to choose for themselves, not as they are told by the official media, but based on their own feelings. Secondly, an authoritarian project needs leaders like Lenin and Stalin, or even Trotsky. People like that are utterly convinced that they are right; they are motivated by ideology and the power that was given legitimacy by that ideology. They are people who are prepared to die and to kill to have this power. There are no people like that in the Kremlin today: Russian leaders nowadays want only contentment for themselves and for the rest of the Russian people. And those Russians are too entrepreneurial and too bourgeois to imagine them in the role of bloody butchers and executioners. I say this as a person who has just been sentenced to serve nine years in prison.

In most formerly socialist countries, the left-wing forces came to power in the mid-1990s and they linked freedom with justice. As a result, the power structure in these countries steered clear of the awful crisis of legitimacy, the crisis that usually marks the start of all revolutions. But the post-Soviet area did not turn leftwards in time, because those in power thought they could avoid having a basic discussion of the real national agenda by seducing people with a false sense of stability. The result was the "rose revolution", the rallies on Maidan, Kiev's main square, and the "yellow tulips" uprising. And now the Ukrainian authorities that have arisen from the rallies on Maidan are raising the issue of revising privatization so there is no reason to feel you have been cheated and to hold your head in your hands: if the question of the legality of the privatization process had been raised by the ruling power structure five or six years ago there might not have been an orange revolution.

Let me point out with reservations that the much-touted legalizing of the privatization process does not mean nationalization of the economy in which major enterprises fall under the unlimited control of bureaucrats who are not accountable to anyone. On the contrary, the result of legalizing the privatization process will be to consolidate a class of actual owners who would be perceived by the people not as bloodsuckers, but as legal owners of legitimate assets. This means that large owners need to turn leftwards as much as the majority of the people who are still insisting that the privatization of the 1990s was unfair and was therefore illegal. Legalizing the process of privatization will become a justification for property ownership and people's attitudes towards that ownership, perhaps genuinely for the first time in Russian history.

The next Russian administration will have to include the Communist Party of the Russian Federation and the Motherland Party, or the historical successors to these parties.

The left-wing liberals, including Yabloko, Ryzhkov, Khakamada and others should decide whether to join the broad social-democratic coalition or to remain grumpy and without relevance on the political sidelines. In my opinion, they have to join because only the broadest composition of a coalition in which liberal-socialist (social-democratic) views will play the key role can save us from the emergence, in the process of this turn to the left turn, from a new ultra-authoritarian regime.

The new Russian authorities will have to address a left-wing agenda and meet an irrepressible demand by the people for justice. This will mean in the first instance the problems of legalizing privatization and restoring paternalistic programs and approaches in several areas.

These issues will have to be addressed even if the next president is the liberal Mikhail Kasyanov or a successor appointed by Putin, for example, Sergei Mironov. If this is not done, the state will explode and the energy of the protest will burst through the weak shell that protects the authorities.

A leftward turn is as necessary as it is inevitable to the fate of Russia. And Vladimir Putin won't have to put himself out too much to allow a peaceful leftward turn to take place. All that he would have to do would be to retire in accordance with the Constitution and

ensure that democratic conditions for the holding of the next election were in place. That alone would guarantee a prospect of sustained democratic development of the country without upheaval and the risk of disintegration.

The author is a private individual who is a citizen of the Russian Federation and is now held in Correctional Facility No. 99/1 in Moscow.