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'Present at the Creation': Genesis of a Multi-Party System

By KEITH ARMES

[Interview with Father Gleb Yakunin, co-chairman, DemRossiya, by Keith Armes, editor of Perspective, in Tacoma Park, Maryland(1)]

Perspective: Do you consider Vybor Rossi to be a presidential party?

It is a completely mistaken view to consider Vybor Rossi a presidential party. Earlier, there was indeed an attempt to create a presidential party. Yel'tsin himself talked about this more than once, and finally Gennadi Burbulis tried to establish such a party.

In view of the election campaign, a new organization, Vybor Rossi, was created on an urgent basis as an electoral bloc, or "movement," as it is often called. DemRossiya, the best-known political formation, of which I am co-chairman, allied itself with this new movement. The negotiations to set up this new electoral alliance were very difficult, and the situation that resulted was very confusing. We did not combine DemRossiya and Vybor Rossi, although some of the DemRossiya primary organizations did in fact join Vybor Rossi. Many representatives of Vybor Rossi had an extremely negative altitude toward DemRossiya, considering that we were an excessively radical organization. On the other hand, in some regions there was a very acute problem in that the members of Vybor Rossi were the local nomenklatura, i.e., presidential representatives, their advisers, apparatus officials, and many members of DemRossiya considered that these nomenklaturshchiki were too closely identified with the course of "perestroika" and the "reforms"--which in their view were being carried out badly. This led to conflicts in many cases, and these disputes are still continuing.
Consequently pressure was put on people, and attempts were made to force out [Lev] Ponomarev and me, with the result that when the Vybor Rossii bloc met to select candidates for election on the party list we were not included. The majority had an extremely negative attitude toward DemRossiya and didn't want to elect any of our members--only their own people. But ultimately reason and political calculation [triumphed].

Even though we did not get on the central list, we realized of course that if the election had been in accordance with our objective political rating, Ponomarev and I would have been far from the bottom of the list. But for us, what was most important were the political end-results and the future.

We were bearing in mind the results of the elections in Poland, where the democrats and anticommunists received a lot more votes in total than the communists, who got only a small number of votes, yet the communists won because the other parties were split into small blocs.

We realized that if DemRossiya did not form a bloc with Vybor Rossii, but went into the elections separately, in view of the presence of the other blocs, such as Yavlinsky’s--whose program was closest to [ours]--and also Shakhrai’s, which was also centrist (or at least he’s not a communist), the result would be that the democratic forces would be defeated. So that we reconciled ourselves to this political necessity and--politically speaking--showed a truly Christian attitude.

Perspective: The criticism was made that Vybor Rossii was indeed created artificially, without any broad-based popular support.

That's right. If a party is created in cerebral fashion, created in an unnatural way from above "on command," there is always the danger that it will be half-baked (skorospeloi). Tensions will always exist among the primary organizations at the lower levels, and
ultimately there will be splits in the party. No government party or for that matter an opposition party--can be created in one, two or three months.

This is an important argument against the creation of a presidential party, but the principal argument is the following: As soon as all our middle-ranking and lower-level nomenklatura--all our corrupt officials, the huge army of local parasites--hear about the creation of such a presidential party, they immediately rush to join it... The result is the degradation of the party.

Consequently in a very short space of time we will get second CPSU--a party essentially like the CPSU, corrupt and internally decayed. The CPSU ultimately collapsed because the party changed from an ideological organization into a gang of corrupt bureaucrats whose sole aim was their own self-preservation.

We put forward all these well-founded arguments when we saw that Vybor Rossii was being created in an overhasty way, as the forerunner, prototype of what was to become a presidential party subsequently. But the elections were approaching, and in view of this vital strategic issue in our political life we had to abandon all our fears. The desire to create a broad, viable bloc capable of winning victory in the elections turned out to be the most important argument for us.

The question then arises, what is our future policy to be? In this regard disagreements arose between me and Ponomarev. Ponomarev considered that we need to make every effort to continue this alliance. On the other hand, I consider that we have seen too many cases in the provinces where our organizations were forced out by local officials against whom they had been fighting for several years. In some instances this was deserved, where our DemRossiya people were political extremists--our opponents call them "demshyzy" ("dem-schizos"). But in other instances completely politically mature organizations at the local level which observed democracy have been eliminated. These officials are trying to get seats as Duma deputies, and to make use of DemRossiya to carry out their own agenda.
Perspective: Are you satisfied with the progress you made in setting up a network of local *DemRossiya* organizations?

As far as *DemRossiya* is concerned--the same applies to other political organizations--there is a general law that you have a situation resembling a patchwork quilt everywhere throughout the country. Just as the economy is developing differently, the political structures are far from uniform in various regions.

There are dozens of regions with strong democratic organizations, including *DemRossiya*, for instance Omsk, Chelyabinsk, and Nizhni Novgorod. In these areas *DemRossiya* actively cooperates with other parties in Public Committees for Reform. There are other regions, for example Ivanovo, where *DemRossiya* itself has split. In some areas *DemRossiya* is in acute conflict not only with the governors, the heads of the regional administration, but also with the presidential representatives.

... I believe we have succeeded in reorganizing our membership, and that we will emerge renewed from this strike against us--the attempt to swallow up *DemRossiya*. We will need to restructure our organization and accept the loss of some local organizations, but those that remain will be strengthened, and at our next congress we will overcome this crisis. We were categorically opposed to creating an organization hastily from above. This didn't suit us at all. There is another factor. It would be stupid to create a party of support for Yel'tsin if the president himself says that he is going to leave in two years. It takes time to organize such a party to back the president, and it would be impossible to get such a party functioning properly in only one year.

Perspective: How do you see the future of *DemRossiya*?

Of course, in general *DemRossiya* cannot survive indefinitely leading a Medusa-like fragile existence. On the other hand, it has brought enormous benefits. Just think how many well-known political stars, superstars in fact, have come out of *DemRossiya*--i.e.,
Travkin, Afanas’yev, Sal’e, Gdlyan. This a natural process—a protoparty is a kind of maternal organization which gives rise to other parties.

**Perspective:** In fact, it has contributed to creating the basis for a multiparty system...

That’s right. *DemRossiya* gave birth, as it were, to all the other parties... After a number of years—say in 10 years' time—I think we can expect that ultimately this huge *DemRossiya* organization will reshape itself into a party on the lines of the Republican Party or the Democratic Party in the United States, where there is no rigid discipline and no formal membership. It would become extremely active during electoral campaigns, but the rest of the time would just have a small central apparatus and no formal membership.

**Perspective:** I understand that right now, incredibly enough, you have a staff of only 15 people in the central apparatus... That’s right. So we will see how the organization develops. But at the moment for us the financial problem is important. **Perspective:** What is the source of most of your funds?

We get funds from businessmen, from new developing businesses, they give 'us help. We have enough funds.

**Perspective:** You have enough funds to run the electoral campaign?

Yes, for running the campaign and for congresses and conferences. Bear in mind that right now transportation costs are enormously high in Russia. An air ticket to Vladivostok costs nearly half a million [rubles]. However, so far we haven't gone bankrupt. But getting adequate office space is an tremendous problem. We don't have adequate office space either at the local level or in the center in Moscow. After the first putsch, and then even more after the second putsch, [we started to obtain] some space in the former Parliament Center.
A dangerous process of corruption is already starting. Some small parties have suddenly become millionaires as the result of contributions from rich businesses, and already they are ending up with a lot more money than DemRossiya. Also Civic Union is supported by the managers of state enterprises. Clearly if a state governmental party were created, a Yeltsin party, there is the danger that it in turn would become bureaucratized and corrupted.

The greatest danger in the newly elected parliament will be the complete independence from party structures of a large body of the deputies--the half elected in individual constituencies. As a result, there will be no party discipline. Major issues of principle may be decided by only 10, 20, or 30 deputies.

**Perspective: Are you in favor of a coalition with Yavlinsky?** Of course, naturally we are for a coalition with his bloc, at least on questions of principle. It's impossible to say that we have major differences with Yavlinsky's program as far as substance is concerned. Of course, he criticizes the government more sharply for its failures and its mistakes. That's only natural.

**Perspective: He's strongly opposed to "shock therapy," for example.**

Well, I consider his position on this to be wrong. It has a populist-demagogic character. Without shock therapy we would never have been able to achieve anything, we'd never have been able to improve the financial system, which was in a hopeless state, on the brink of disaster. We'd have ended up with a catastrophe like the Ukraine--there you have a classic case of financial disaster. So Yavlinsky's position on this is beyond doubt an unworthy demagogic ploy. So to go and say that shock therapy is bad in view of what happened in Ukraine...

**Perspective: You don't take his criticism seriously.**
Certainly I don't. It's direct demagogy. But in principle he's in favor of a market economy and radical measures.

As far as Shakhrai is concerned, what also worries me is that he's accepted into his group an individual like Abdulatipov, who compromised himself by remaining in the White House until very late in the day, and gave his cooperation and political support to Khasbulatov. For this reason alone I wouldn't have wanted him... Since Shakhrai is so omnivorous that he's willing to accept such compromised politicians in his ranks, I wouldn't vote for him. In practice he acts like a centrist.

There's another problem. He hasn't demonstrated sufficiently that he has the ability to be captain of a team. He behaves like an individual, a political figure working within the executive structure.

**Perspective: Surely many people consider that he was a very capable legislator.**

He was a very talented deputy. He was brilliant at drawing up legislation when he was chairman of the legislative committee. He did a great deal that was helpful and important, but as far as his abilities as a politician are concerned, my feeling is that he lacks the capacity for teamwork (chuvstvo loktya). After all, a major politician should be able to create a team around him. Take Gaidar--although he was not a politician, he succeeded in creating a brilliant team. He made extraordinarily talented ministers out of such people as Chubais and Kozyrev...

**Perspective: Do you think Shakhrai's regional policy encourages separatism?**

Yes, he is betting on the regions. But I don't think that this is separatism. Rather he's a supporter of what I would call a firm center. But his weakness is that I doubt his ideas are going to be appeal to people at the local level.
Perspective: If the regions are not tending toward Shakhrai, whom are they supporting? What about local leaders, the *nomenklaturshchiki*?

I'm afraid they're tending toward Zyuganov.

**Perspective: What about the centrists?**

Centrism in Russia has always had a sad fate. Before 1917, the Russian centrist parties were weak and they lost out. In reality, there was no center in the parliament--and in my view this was no accident. Indeed, in a country which is carrying out a virtual revolution, I don't think that centrism can have broad support among the population. What you have is either support for the democrats or else for their opponents--either the communists, or the communofascists...

As you suggested, I think that the *nomenklatura* will support the center--these are precisely the people who will. But ultimately the local *nomenklatura* doesn't have total influence on the electorate. We had the experience of the previous elections three years ago, when the CPSU possessed a complete monopoly of the press and the mass media, exercised all forms of pressure, yet nevertheless the majority of people voted the way they wanted.

**Perspective: What about the Agrarian Party?**

Unfortunately, the Agrarian Party is strong, I believe. Why? The reason is the feudal collective farm system. The real peasants were wiped out in the 1930s. All the rural creative forces were destroyed. There is support for the Agrarian Party because of the conservatism of the agricultural sector. Of course, in the future, when we have two to three million private farmer-entrepreneurs working on the land, then...

**Perspective: There's the new decree on the privatization of land...**
But so far it's only on paper. The main thing is to implement it—that's where the problem lies. I fear that there will be monstrous resistance. It's a great step forward that the president issued the decree, but it's very difficult to set up proper mechanisms to ensure that it's carried out.

We've just been marking time the last few years—we still don't even have as many as 500,000 private farmers, and so we have this political problem...

It's not too surprising that the Agrarian Party succeeded in collecting 300,000-500,000 signatures. But there is still the question how they collected them. In a factory the director will say "Pick up everybody's passports... All go sign the list." That's how it's done on a *kolkhoz*, too. The management calls in everyone and tells them to come back with their passports. It's easy for them to collect signatures [for registering a party].

**Perspective: What's your view of Zhirinovsky as a politician?**

I consider him a brilliant performer [*artist*]. I've watched him and found that in everyday life he's a completely different person. When he speaks in public, it strikes me it's typical playacting [*artisticheskaya igra*]—but nonetheless he enjoys favor with the electorate.

Zhirinovsky has imposed iron discipline on his people, and it's a disciplined party...

Zhirinovsky probably will drive out such people as Baburin, Chelnokov, and Konstantinov—demagogic speakers like them. If Baburin had got on the ballot, that would have been to our advantage, since as a result more people would have voted for the democrats. Former deputies with such a negative image like him have a certain usefulness.

**Perspective: What is your view of the RDDR (Russian Movement for Democratic Reforms)?**
The RDDR includes very prominent politicians, big names-- stars of the first order. They are party ideologists, first-rate theoreticians. Their weakness is that they don't have a broadly based structure at the local level. Of course, they do have a limited structure, also they've got money. I don't know [the sources of their] financial support...

**Perspective: What is your view of Nikolai Travkin and his Democratic Party of Russia?**

As a result of his personality problems and autocratic nature, plus his constantly changing political positions, he virtually wrecked his own party--which at one time was the largest Russian political party. At the local level, his own party people are opposed to him. However, our bloc has a good relationship with the DPR, and we've been actively cooperating on some issues.

It's a pity that Roy Medvedev's party did not get on the ballot, since we would have wanted to work with him. Essentially, his group is a socialist party they're not communists.

What is surprising is that there is no social-democratic party. Lyudmila Valtazarova and Roy Medvedev would have been completely capable of fulfilling a civilized function as communists--communists acting within a legal framework. But there you have Russia's special character. Berdyaev as well as many other philosophers wrote about Russia as a country of extremes. This is an alarming situation.

The "independents" are people who've succeeded in demonstrating that in a situation of difficult economic reforms, economic crisis, they've really been able to do something for ordinary people and have tried to alleviate some of their everyday problems. Typically, they are individual state farm directors and former Soviet government officials whose work has been viewed positively by ordinary people. However, there will always be a party or political alliance behind all these individuals supporting them.
Perspective: What is your view of the electoral system that has been adopted?

You have to understand that everything was adopted in a great hurry. A unique historical opportunity occurred to create a new system. It gave the current president the possibility to create a constitutional system extremely quickly, and in the process the president had to make constant corrections by *ukaz* in the electoral law and the constitution itself. In view of the haste it was inevitable that mistakes were made.

As in the German system, five percent is decisive--if a party only gets four percent, it's a catastrophe. It's like a game of poker--everything depends on the hand you have and the concrete political panorama on the day.

The main problem that we see is that the major industrial centers, especially Moscow and St. Petersburg, stand a whole magnitude higher, as far as the balance of political forces and the political consciousness of our citizens is concerned. Whereas in the villages you still have the complete dominance of the *kolkhoz-sovkhoz* feudal system. The people vote the way the *kolkhoz* chairman tells them to vote. We mustn't underestimate the danger.

Perspective: I understand that DemRossiya made a proposal to the president for the introduction of a run-off ("Second Ballot") system.

We begged Yeltsin to institute a run-off system. In that case, we would have won a complete victory over the communists. Let's take an example: You have six candidates in a constituency--a communist, a centrist, a Shakhrai candidate, and three democrats. The communist may get 15 or even 20 percent. The rest each get 5, 7, 10 or 15 percent, with the result that the communist wins with 20 percent. That's what happened to us in the Non-Black-Earth Zone in an election for a regional governor. It's also what happened in Poland in the recent elections. This is a terribly dangerous situation. . . The run-off elections would have applied to all the individual constituency voting. If none of the candidates [received] 50 percent in the first vote, the two candidates who came in
first and second would be on the ballot in the run-off, and the one of the two who got a majority would be the victor.

This would guarantee an accumulation of votes for a particular candidate. Otherwise what would happen would be that a candidate who enjoyed only the relative confidence of the voters, the support of less than a majority, could come in and impose his ideas in the name of the entire constituency. That's a completely wrong situation. What we proposed would be a very fair system.

**Perspective: Could you spell out for our readers how this run-off system would operate to the advantage of the democrats?**

If there were two candidates in the run-off election, one of them a democrat, and the other a "conservative," all the rest of the population who were anticommunist would go and vote for the democrat. Since the communists don't have an overall majority, in the majority of cases they would lose.

If a democrat, for instance a Yavlinsky supporter or a Shakhrai candidate, came in second, while a communist was first, our people would vote for the Yavlinsky candidate or Shakhrai candidate, and so would the Greens. In this way we would have been able to guarantee that the parliament would be normal, good, and democratic.

**Perspective: Why was Yeltsin opposed to the run-off system you proposed?**

I don't understand why he didn't accept it. It would not have been expensive to administer.

**Perspective: It seems to me that the electoral system, with its two different methods for the election of deputies, one-half on a party list basis, and the other half by individual election in constituencies, together with the complex**
mathematics for the calculation of seats to be allotted in accordance with the party lists, is too complicated.

There is a problem with all the different colored ballots for elections to various bodies. In addition to the votes on the constitution, the Council of the Federation, and the State Duma, in some cases there are elections to regional and municipal councils...

**Perspective:** As I understand it, on the ballots the candidates' party affiliations are not given. Do you consider that it would be advisable to give information on party allegiance?

You are right, party affiliation is not indicated on the constituency election ballots. I think that it would have been better, indeed just great, if parties had been indicated, but in fact it is not a terrible problem.

In any case, what does party affiliation really mean? Many candidates are not formally members of any party. Rather than which party he belongs to, it would be more important to indicate which party actually supports a given candidate. Only five percent of candidates are members of a party.

**Perspective:** What is your view of the changed system for election of deputies to the Council of the Federation according to the new Election Statute, compared with the earlier Draft Constitution?

I don't understand it. According to the Draft Constitution, there were supposed to be two representatives from each region--one representative from the legislative branch (predstavitel'naya vlast') and the other from the executive branch. The result of this change is very unjust...

Personally I don't understand--and I'm sure Yel'tsin doesn't understand either--how the upper chamber is going to work, or what functions it will have.
Perspective: Clearly the upper house is going to play an important role, yet my impression is that the democratic parties haven't seriously campaigned for their candidates.

Yes, I'm afraid that in general we democrats haven't paid sufficient attention to the upper house.

Apart from the issue of run-off constituency elections to the Duma which we discussed, Yel'tsin has made another major mistake over the Council of the Federation to be elected on federal party lists [as in the case of one-half of Duma deputies], without having to collect signatures and run for election in constituencies, I would have been the first to run, and would have had an excellent chance of getting elected. The result of such a system would have been that we democrats would have been able to strengthen our position considerably, since many of us would have gotten seats in the upper chamber.

Perspective: Why did Yel'tsin make this decision over the system of election to the Council of the Federation?

I don't understand it myself. At least a decision has been made about the upper house, whereas previously the position was completely unclear. However, thank God he didn't require the regional governors and representatives of regional legislators ["the representative power"] to serve [in the Council of the Federation]. It seems to me that in future we'll need to change the laws on the upper house as we go along. Just imagine that we were to have local elections right now for the local parliaments. In any case, a year and a half from now we'll have to gear up for new elections, since we're to have a two-year legislative term [for the newly elected Duma and Council of the Generation].

Perspective: Were you in favor of the change from a four-year term to a two-year term for this legislature?
Yes, in the Constitutional Conference we democrats insisted that the State Duma and the Upper House have only two-year terms. We are going through an evolutionary period, and popular attitudes are changing rapidly. The electorate itself is growing politically.

We need to ensure that our political structures, especially the elected organs, do not lag behind the electorate, in order to ensure that there are no more crises like the one in October. For this reason it is very useful to have frequent elections.

**Perspective: Do you consider that Yel'tsin was right not to go for re-election next June, as he had originally promised he would do?**

Yes, I believe that Yel'tsin was absolutely correct to decide not to go for re-election in June as he had earlier announced he would do, under the pressure of the opposition. First, there is the legal justification that he was elected only two years ago. Secondly, on April 25 there was the national referendum, the result of which is correctly interpreted as unquestionable, complete support for Yel'tsin.

**Perspective: What do you think of Yelena Bonner's proposal to hold a constitutional assembly on the grounds that at the present time it is premature to adopt a constitution?**

A constitutional assembly is a very beautiful idea, a sort of political idyll. But in real life it would have been, the most appalling mistaken for Yel'tsin not to make use of the unique opportunity provided by the defeat of the putschists in October -- the second antigovernment putsch in Russia. Yel'tsin was absolutely right to move ahead, rewrite and radicalize the constitution, removing all the concessions that had been made to the conservative forces and the White House [former Supreme Soviet]. He took advantage of what constituted a unique opportunity...
Perspective: In an article we published in *Perspective* in October, the constitutional expert Kronid Lyubarsky also maintained that it is premature to adopt a constitution in view of the impossibility of foreseeing how the political situation will evolve. In his view, it would be desirable to wait another two years.

I categorically disagree. We are living in revolutionary conditions, and we need to finalize everything as soon as possible.

**Perspective: There was controversy over whether government ministers should have the right to campaign for seats as deputies.**

The main issue is whether parliamentary deputies can be ministers in the government. I am a member of the Constitutional Conference and we tried to ensure that such people as Yavlinsky, Gaidar, Chubais, and Kozyrev can combine service as deputies with ministerial posts.

At the Constitutional Conference there was acute controversy over this. The majority of parties that were not in Vybor Rossii bloc were terribly indignant over our proposal. In particular, they felt that government ministers would enjoy an advantage in the electoral campaign, since they would have unfairly great influence on the mass media, and as a result supposedly the elections would not be free and equal.

On the other hand, I would say that it would be stupid to limit artificially the activity of such ministers as Gaidar, Chubais and Shakhrai --true politicians and leaders who determine the policies of their parties and the policies followed by the whole country -- not to give them a real role in political life and in the parliament.

In terms of constitutional principles, since, as it were, the locomotive should be at the head of the train, perhaps this is not the right course to follow, but our country is taking a revolutionary path of rupture with the past.
Certainly, it would be the normal, civilized, evolutionary path of development if in our country well-known politicians, who have achieved prominent positions of authority in their parties and won the confidence of the people as expressed through the electoral system, were to be invited to join the government as prime minister or as one of the ministers. This would be a normal, natural process. Whereas in our country completely unknown people like Gaidar and his team were appointed. It’s true that they have proved to be remarkable individuals.

**Perspective: How about the difference between the American and British system in Britain government ministers are obliged to sit in parliament...**

Exactly. Since in our country a constitutional, state system essentially is in the process of being built, I think it would be wrong to impose any rigid restrictive measures in the political sphere, to bring in any innovations. I think we should just proceed by trial and error. We should give ministers such opportunities to participate in political life.

We need to experiment and see how things work out in practice. The country won’t suffer as a result. If it turns out that this System is inappropriate, we will be able to change it by the time of the next elections. This is one of the advantages of holding frequent elections.

**Note:**
1 While this interview was conducted on the eve of Russia’s December 1993 parliamentary elections, Father Yakunin’s inis

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