

Public Lecture by Lev Ponomaryov in the “Russian Voices” lecture series in Tallinn, December 1, 2010

Developments in Current Russia

While the Russian authorities have instated several restrictions for Lev Ponomaryov over recent years, many countries abroad have recognized his work in Russia. Mr. Ponomaryov’s lecture drew a significant crowd also in Estonia as the developments of Estonia’s neighbor in the east fascinate many people.

In Russia it has become routine to use detainment as administrative punishment and Ponomaryov is no exception to that rule, he himself has experienced this form of reprimand on several occasions. According to Ponomaryov, the prequel to the current circumstances surrounding human rights in Russia goes back to the beginning of 1990s. When in the rest of Europe the democratic bourgeois revolutions started with France already 200 years ago, it reached Russia only in 1990-91. The current system collapsed and after 70 years of totalitarian regime, for the first time people felt free. Many went into business, some entered politics, but many also used their freedom to live a life of crime.

Soon enough Special Forces in Russia started to expand and abuse their power as there was no democratic institution to counterbalance them. Since the terrorist attacks in 2001 in democratic countries in Europe and the US Special Forces have taken upon themselves several liberties, but there are also state institutions in place that monitor their actions so that power is not only in the hands of one group. In Russia special forces have operated without any limitations already for the past 10 years.

Unlike in countries such as Burma Russia is however not ruled by a military *hunta* as there are strong ties with Europe in several areas. Money is the strongest reason these connections exist as after the collapse of the Soviet Union “both money and power came to those with military pads”. Money is kept in western banks, kids are educated in the west and in general open economic ties with the EU and China benefit many.

Despite economic freedoms, there exists no democracy in governance. If Lenin ordered to take over bridges, telephones and railways as key posts, the current leadership has gained control over larger businesses, public media and everything that deals with elections. Kremlin controls channels 1 to 4 as was once again just recently demonstrated when Vladimir Pozner’s speech critical of the current leadership did not air in its entirety.

De facto Russia has a one-party system without any opposition, there is no freedom of courts and the banks have all been frightened. Businessmen bow to the Kremlin as Khodorkovsky’s case still remains a frightful warning. In order not to have Europe completely cast Russia aside, the imitation of democracy still takes place with elections as the prime example of that. Even though

, Spravedlivaya Rossiya) is officially an opposition party, in reality it does not differ much from United Russia (*Единая Россия, Yedinaya Rossiya*) with both being equally tied to the Kremlin.

Ideology does not play a large part in politics as it changes whenever a new order is given, therefore Ponomaryov does not regard Vladislav Surkov as the main ideologist of United Russia but rather as its main manipulator. If there is any ideology at all, it could be termed as conservatism- the desire that nothing changes and no power is lost to anyone. Whenever necessary, problems are staged in order to show how the party successfully solves them.

To illustrate the coercion during elections, Ponomaryov elaborated on the elections that took place in Stavropol in 2007. To ensure that the leadership at that time would not continue, right before the elections 150 prosecutors were brought to the city in order to initiate court proceedings against all candidates in the list of A Just Russia. The mayor was threatened with death penalty but he managed to escape to Austria. Currently however the Austrian authorities are planning to extradite him to Russia as "he is a person close to Kremlin, he will be ok".

It is also customary to falsify election results between 10-15%, new parties are difficult to register and current party members are coerced and intimidated on a regular basis in order to ensure that no strong opposition is capable of surfacing. Political opposition is forced to the streets; they have a chance to collect signatures and organize protests, but not actually work in the Parliament.

When Russian journalist Julia Latynina recently visited Estonia, she referred to Medvedev as Putin's puppet; Ponomaryov nevertheless notes the differences in rhetoric between the two leaders. Even if in many cases these are just words, they do shape public opinion. At the same time despite much talk there has been no real progress regarding court reforms, but Ponomaryov regarded it a positive change that FSB's role has lessened and jurors have gained more power which makes it more difficult to control the courts. Step by step society is making more demands and offering resistance to the present order which is making the political elites more fragmented. Similarly to Gorbachev's Perestroika, it is becoming more and more clear that intra-party conflicts and contradictions exist.

Simultaneously Europe should exert more pressure on Russia regarding human rights violations. The only institution, according to Ponomaryov, that to an extent has influence on the situation is the European Court of Human Rights which also receives a large number of complaints from Russia. Many European officials meet with both the civil society leaders and officials in Russia, but always separately and never with everyone at the same table and this continues unchanged year after year. Even in the coming agreement between the EU and Russia there is no separate chapter on human rights; when NGOs inquired about the situation the response from the EU was quite negative- Russia would never accept, best not talk about it. Still international control on human rights is very important as rights are not only violated in Russia; the recent developments regarding Roma once again raised these issues in Europe as well.

For his personal safety Ponomaryov is not afraid and speaks the same way in Russia as he does abroad. He regards this as a way of life, a choice he made as a young man and despite the apparent dangers, he does not feel alone and feels that Nemtsov or Kasparov often take greater risks.

Surprisingly even to himself, there is one area that Ponomaryov shares a common view with Putin and Medvedev, explicitly the issue of visa liberation. Relaxed rules would give enormous benefits to the opposition as the more people are able to travel, the more they realize how democracy really is the best choice. Before any of that can take place however, restrictions that control the freedom of movement of non-Russian citizens in Russia have to be lifted.

Even though the events that took place in Chechnya were extremely tragic, Ponomaryov regarded them rather as a local problem and noted how the dissolution of the Soviet empire was rather peaceful unlike for example the developments in former Yugoslavia. During Yeltsin's time in office firstly the Fifth Directorate of the KGB, the unit that dealt with following the activities of dissidents, was dismantled; limitations to freedom of speech were low, public media was uncensored and slowly but surely Russia was on its way of becoming a democracy. If democrats had come to power after Yeltsin, the current situation in Russia would differ greatly; unfortunately abrupt changes took place in 2000.

Putin's rise to power coincided with increases in oil prices, with economic growth people's wages also grew which created a false assumption that governance had somehow improved. The general public became passive when in fact corruption increased. Current Russia rather resembles a patchwork quilt where the leadership is tightly connected to business interests and criminals. Under these conditions it is impossible for the state to develop, just as easily as the oil prices rose, they can also fall and a continued economic development is only possible in a democratic country. Ponomaryov did not want to speculate when Russia would reach democracy, but commented that immense change requires a catalyst. In the beginning of 90s it was the collapse of Soviet Union, this time it could be enhanced by economic crisis and public protests, as long as they remain peaceful and people do not resort to violence.

Democratic NGOs in Russia are only able to operate due to funding from the West as the state does not support their activities. Despite Ponomaryov's efforts to gain additional state-funding the status quo has not changed and instead of politics his organization For Human Rights often deals with social projects such as advocacy efforts regarding child orphans or the torture of detainees in colonies. In addition to pro bono consultations and recommendations on how to register complaints, For Human Rights corresponds with officials directly who often give very thorough answers and at times take their recommendations into considerations. All this leaves room for optimism that the situation in Russia is not completely hopeless. There is also a lack of cooperation between NGOs in Russia and their counterparts in the West, but plans for a joint platform of Russian and EU NGOs is in the pipeline. This enhanced dialogue is crucial as on the leadership level good relations already exist; Medvedev for example is quite cozy with Sarkozy.

One positive example of how NGOs in Russia cooperate is Strategy-31 which has now grown into the most popular opposition movement. Just as Lyudmila Alexeyeva, Ponomaryov feels it is important to inform the authorities of their protests beforehand as this guarantees that also general public is not afraid to join in. The more people participate in peaceful protests, the sooner democracy will reach Russia.