

Public Lecture by Lyudmila Alekseyeva in the series “Russian Voices”, March 11, 2010

During the first installment of the lecture series "Russian Voices", human rights activist Lyudmila Alexeyeva spoke about the current situation of human rights and civil society in Russia. She began by comparing the current situation to the Soviet times, stating that the situation has improved because while in those times a person would be imprisoned for expressing their opinions, it would not happen as readily nowadays. Freedom of speech does exist, however, it is expressed through independent TV and radio, which caters to an extremely small audience. The majority of the population is informed via mass media, which is strictly controlled by the authorities, in order to manipulate election results.

While in the Soviet times there was only one party and one candidate, making the elections more of a farce, Russia now has a multiparty system. However, these small democratic parties have very little power and the United Russia coalition is very similar to the former communist party. Elections nowadays do not change the political status or the leaders, because everything is controlled, even on a local level. At the beginning of the 90s, there was also no democracy, however, the situation was different because the government was just too weak to suppress civil society. Currently, the situation is worse, because if in the beginning of the 90s Russia was at least moving towards democracy, then now it's certain that there is none, Russia is an authoritarian state. The president and the government would like the system to be a totalitarian one and that is why we see the introduction of increasingly strict laws, which only serve the interests of the authorities and definitely not of the people. However, alongside this trend, there is another one – civil society is developing more and more despite these attempts at suppression.

The main obstacles of democracy are poverty and oppression. It is difficult to judge exactly the extent of civil action in Russia, because statistics do not reflect its scope. Registration for NGOs has become so complicated and cumbersome that organizations no longer register. So you have to actually live in the country to feel what is going on, because you will not see it on TV or hear about it in the mass media, which only reflects life as Putin wants you to see it. But civil society is getting stronger and in some cases there are even people among the authorities who provide aid and information. There are more and more events and regions, where civil society succeeds in making their opinion heard. For example, currently there is heated discussion about the use of Stalin's portrait during the 60th anniversary of the Great Patriotic War. Opinions in the society are split, but it's not likely that the portrait will be used in the end with so much of the society opposed. There are numerous examples such as this one.

2 years ago Mrs. Alexeyeva believed that Russia will be a democratic state in 10-15 years and that opinion has not changed. She believes that in 10-20 years Estonia, as well as other neighboring countries, will feel much more at ease, because their big intimidating neighbor will be a democratic one.

The second panelist, director of the Baltic Center for Russian Studies Vladimir Jushkin, asked Mrs. Alexeyeva why the dissident movement in Russia distanced itself so much from politics, because other such movements went directly into politics and are now in power. He also asked her about how she can justify participating in the president's human rights council, sitting at the round table with him and whether she trusts the current power. She replied that she does not trust the current system and that human rights activists and politicians simply have different goals. Politicians want to change or take power, while human rights organizations just want the authorities to respect the dignity of each individual and protect those oppressed by the government. Human rights activists cannot change the situation just by talking amongst themselves – they have to talk to public officials. There are two ways to communicate, by fighting and by discussing, but the second one is more likely to yield the desired results. The president's council is a useful place to be, because it opens up doors and provides the opportunity to lobby in places that otherwise would not be willing to talk to just an activist. Being a member of these types of organizations means directing attention to human rights violations. If a person sets out to defend human rights violated by the state, then they need to speak directly with the state. Protecting the human rights of even just one person is not a waste of time, because if nobody protected them, their lives would be destroyed.

Article 31 of the Russian constitution deals with the freedom of gathering, however, if people do try and gather to make themselves heard, they face consequences. That is why every other month on the 31st, people in different parts of Russia gather in protest. Last January on the 31st, 17 towns and cities participated. This year at least 25 will take part. These gatherings are not given permits, but yet they press on. While political parties in Russia are weak, human rights networks are strong. Mrs. Alexeyeva has often times been urged to go into politics, but she feels her business is civil society and human rights.

While Mrs. Alexeyeva mainly deals with human rights, she also helps out movements across Russia when people turn to her for assistance. That is why she knows, for example, about 30 of Russia's 85 regions being involved in a farmer's movement that is not officially registered. She has been asked by members of various movements to pass messages to the president, but these have not produced any results. So these people have to resolve their problems differently, by organizing conferences, for example. These types of movements are increasingly arising and the changes are felt even in the highest strata of the society. Her Moscow Helsinki group is an organization that monitors the

human rights situation in different parts of Russia through local organizations, creating a wider network. Another goal of the organization that is equally important is supporting those local organizations through resources and by acting as a protective shield.

Mrs. Alexeyeva also has family ties to Estonia – her maternal grandmother was Estonian, their family moved to the Crimea at a time when Catherine the Great was giving land to peasants in the area. An Estonian village was established there, with a Lutheran church and a school. Since her grandmother married a Ukrainian, the language spoken at home was Russian. Under her grandmother's protestant upbringing during her mother's PhD studies, she acquired a work ethic that has greatly influenced the course of her life.

When asked about Medvedev's judicial reforms, Mrs. Alexeyeva speaks of the Russian judicial system as one that is ill and in crisis. There are prisoners of conscience, such as Tarkovsky, who was imprisoned simply because the authorities wanted to claim his assets. Then there are political prisoners, the limonovists, who are victims of political oppression. Moslems are also imprisoned on accusations of terrorism. Very few of them actually are terrorists, but that is because real terrorists are dangerous and hard to capture. It is much more convenient to take peaceful Moslems and imprison them.

On official relations between Russia and Georgia, Mrs. Alexeyeva feels that there are none to speak of and if there are any, they are weak. For example, there are no direct flights from Russia to Georgia and visas are hard to obtain on both ends. However, these are two countries who have been friendly for centuries and people in Russia all know that the Georgians are kind and hospitable people. She is proud of the Moscow Helsinki group for initiating a dialogue with Georgia and they keep ties by meeting in the Ukraine, which citizens of both countries can visit without having to apply for a visa.

When speaking about the Bronze Soldier affair, Mrs. Alexeyeva said that the Moscow Helsinki group was ready to come to Estonia when the action unfolded, but the issue faded quickly and others came along that overshadowed it. However, she humorously interjects, if it happens again, they'll be ready to come and be independent mediators. On a more serious note, she says that the incident taught those in power to be more delicate. But at the same time, when hearing about the Bronze soldier, she asked why blame Estonia, let them decide where the monument should stand.

The internet, she feels, immensely widens possibilities and it can not be completely censored, however, the scale of independent information dissemination on the internet is a marginal part of the Russian society. Her activists use it to organize events and to effectively distribute information. She doesn't know if it would be technically possible to restrict internet access, but if it's tried, they will try to protect themselves.

By Tiia Falk

When asked whether too much freedom wouldn't be destructive for a country as large as Russia, she replied that in theory it is possible. A strong central power is necessary for suppressing civil rights. She feels it is unfortunate that some of her compatriots regret the collapse of the Soviet Union and hopes that her country will not have to go through that again, because each cataclysm is hard first and foremost for all of its people. Many people won from the collapse of the USSR, but it was also a painful experience. But whether it collapses or not, in the end, what is most important is that people are able to lead comfortable lives.

Each democracy has its peculiarities. The democracies in the Netherlands and France, for example, are much different from the one in the United States. The Russian democracy is also different, but the basic underlying principles are the same. The people who support the current power in Russia do not understand the situation and are not well informed about politics. When asked whether they support Putin they are very enthusiastic, however, when questioned about the economy, human rights or education they are dissatisfied, indicating the existence of political illiteracy. As for Putin himself, she concludes: "let him die a fool".