

By Tiia Falk

**Public Lecture by Lyudmila Alexeyeva in the series “Russian Voices”, February 21, 2012**

In this next installment of the lecture series “Russian Voices”, which was opened and further inspired by Lyudmila Alexeyeva, the main discussion centered on the voices that go unheard in the Russian media. To a certain extent, there have been signs of awakening and ice breaking in the media and among the wider population as well, so Alexeyeva’s talk also focused on what could be expected next, now that the ice has started to move, and, of course, on the upcoming elections that will take place on March 4<sup>th</sup>.

On her 80<sup>th</sup> birthday six years ago, Alexeyeva predicted that Russia would be a fairer democratic state in approximately 10-15 years. Since then she has been repeatedly challenged with respect to this prediction, but she still believes that the year 2017 will be a significant one for Russia. Russia has started to wake up and nobody can doubt the existence of civil society in the country. The Russian society understands what is going on and that things are moving in the right direction. It takes time to build a democratic, constitutional state, and she believes that despite the already apparent shifts, it will be at least 5 years before we can speak of a democratic Russia. When questioned about whether this change would be revolutionary or evolutionary, Alexeyeva replied that it is her hope that this is a natural, evolutionary process that unravels without any bloodshed. Since Russian history has been a difficult one, especially the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the country is experiencing demographic problems, despite its size, so any bloodshed would be a tragedy in this respect as well. The change has to come about through negotiation and mutual understanding, whereas this negotiation has to happen between the authorities and the society. The society also needs to undergo changes and to form democratic institutions that make up a democratic state. The building of these kinds of institutions began at the beginning of the 90s; however, 8 years of Mr. Putin’s rule have destroyed the work that was done before.

It’s been said that this is a “mink revolution”, that Putin is opposed mainly by the affluent, and that his support comes from rural areas and small towns. However, public opinion polls conducted by independent authorities (the Public Opinion Foundation, POF) show that this is not the case. POF asked respondents 15 years after the collapse of the Soviet Union whether the state helps them in their everyday life. 42% responded that no, it does not, and 25% said that not only does it not help, it hinders development and personal achievement. The Levada Center has also polled to probe current issues and found that Putin’s support lies mainly in the big cities. The need for changes arose from the deprived rural areas that depend more on state funding – that is where unemployment rates are high, the infrastructure and industries are failing, so the youth have no prospects there, but they can’t leave either due to a simple lack of money. The changes started there and moved on to the bigger cities. However, small town voices are not heard, because even though they do not vote for Putin’s Unified Russia (UR), the voting results are falsified to reflect the opposite. For example, the most extreme cases showed Putin winning 120% of the votes after the last presidential election. When it comes to remote, peripheral and isolated areas, where internet access is inexistent and the television only shows state controlled programming, even there the people do not support Putin. As far

as the mink coats are concerned, then Alexeyeva believes that this label is a counter step exaggeration.

When asked whether people are aware of all this, Alexeyeva replied that throughout Russian history, the governments have always had their secrets, however, the information always seems to leak as well. Everyone knew about the falsifications before it was published in independent media. Before elections, the authorities conducted a secret survey that showed UR's support to be around 30%, which led to large-scale falsification. Specialists say that less than 5% falsification is difficult to ascertain, however, over 20% is hard to disguise, so they estimate that around 15% of voting results are falsified.

The upcoming elections have been much discussed, since it is common knowledge that they are not organized in a fair way. People are asking what to do to make the authorities see what the people think. There are many ideas, some more radical than others, for example, some suggest tearing up ballots; however, Alexeyeva shares the opinion of the popular Russian blogger Navalny – everyone has to go and cast a vote. If people don't participate, the committees that run the polling stations will just take empty ballots about an hour before voting ends and they will sign and fill them out with votes for UR. Tearing up ballots achieves nothing, since it just reduces the voter turnout percentage. Alexeyeva suggests finding someone, anyone other than Putin for whom to vote. During the State Duma elections, she voted for the democratic party Yabloko, even though she knew that they wouldn't cross the 7% threshold required to gain seats in the duma. She believes that those votes eventually were taken by UR. Due to laws that Putin has adopted, it is impossible to currently start new political parties, even if the legal criteria are fulfilled to 100%. If the Kremlin doesn't want the party to exist, the obstacle is insurmountable. The ECHR in Strasbourg ruled that the registration annulment of Vladimir Ryzhkov's party was illegal, but it is doubtful that the Russian state will heed this decision, so conditions on the political landscape are dire.

The youth are now participating in elections more than they did before, and there are also grassroots movements to observe the elections. So there is an increasing amount of vigilance on the part of the general public when elections are held. In the presidential election, there are no candidates for those who are democratically minded, and Alexeyeva believes this is purposely so. If the presidential elections should go into a 2<sup>nd</sup> round, some are suggesting electing the communist Zyuganov, since he would be easier to unseat. A 2<sup>nd</sup> round of elections would also make the elections at least seem more legitimate.

When asked about Navalny, Alexeyeva said that it would be preferable to have a president with more experience in hands-on political leadership of the country, since Russia is a difficult country to lead. There are 86 regions, some as large as France, and even though they may not have the spirit that Navalny has, a more experienced person is needed.

When it comes to civil society, Alexeyeva repeatedly cites the American example, where organizations are divided according to interests, and suggests that the Russian model is a similar one. She also recalls being moved to tears when she saw protesters on the streets with slogans that her HR movement has introduced in Russia, calling for equality in the eyes of the law, just elections, and the right to congregate. When it comes to a dialogue between the state and civil society, then she recalled an attempt by Putin to gather all representatives into one committee, however, the civil society could not agree

to the terms he presented. Through negotiating they finally succeeded at working out a form of dialogue, so this showed that the society can, in fact, influence even that kind of a government.

Power has to change hands, otherwise it becomes corrupt. Those at power will do anything not to lose what they have gained, however, Alexeyeva would like them all to just take their money, go live in peace and let others in Russia live in peace as well. The Russians are able, hard working people who can gain all these riches anew. After all, it's no coincidence that Russian specialists can be found around the world, in places such as Silicon Valley. Her message to Estonian Russians is to definitely vote, but for anyone but Putin. As for the Yeltsin statue discussed in Estonia, she believes it is completely natural for an independent state to want to grant honors, and if the people appreciate it, it is just another way of reminding them of that independence.