

Open Lecture by Victor Shenderovich in the Russian Voices Series in Tallinn, September 15, 2011

Abstract compiled by Kadri Ollino

In his lecture the well-known Russian journalist, political activist and satirist Victor Shenderovich analyzed the current political situation in Russia with a special focus on the role of liberal democrats in Russia's future developments.

Shenderovich called elections in Russia only a simulation, where ever since Vladimir Putin's rise to power positions have simply been assigned or reassigned during the last ten years. The last elections, where the stakes were really high and the winners were not known beforehand took place in 1996. The current elections are simply a competition among representatives of the service industry and the competition is only in the details. True opponents of the system are not registered in the list of candidates, attacks among competitors are very personal, no one shies away from publishing the opponents' private medical files and the counting of the votes takes place under strict guidelines. Shenderovich even predicted that during next elections the United Russia (*Yedinaya Rossiya*) Party would win with 65% of the votes. According to Shenderovich elections in Russia are nothing more than Russian nesting dolls, where inside one empty matryoshka is another generation of empty dolls. Currently Russia's main problem is not Vladimir Putin, he is simply one of the symptoms, and the main problem lies with the liberal democrats themselves.

When in 2008 representatives of several liberal parties met and discussed possible actions, every other person later reported to the Kremlin on what was discussed. If one agrees with the opponent to the extent of possible criticism beforehand, it is no longer politics and it is impossible to implement any liberal programs without criticizing Putin. From time to time it is necessary for Russia to demonstrate to the rest of the world and especially the USA that it is a democratic country and this is why the Rodina or Motherland-National Patriotic Union was created. The new party dismantled the former left-wing groups, but when the party leader Dmitry Rogozhin became too independent, he was sent off to Brussels; in the coming elections, he however seems to reappear in Russia. Shenderovich also briefly spoke about Mikhail Prokhorov and his role in Russian politics. Prokhorov had thought that investing large sums of money in the system would make him politically independent, he felt as if he was a driver in charge of his own car, but the Kremlin viewed him simply as a driver who could be replaced whenever necessary.

What Shenderovich considers most tragic, is the total disgrace of the democratic idea during the last 20 years. According to him the last true democrats were Sakharov and Afanasyev, but ever since them people in power lack any ideals. If previously people were stealing from the state with communist slogans in the background, nowadays they follow the same practices with a liberal backdrop. The hope of right-wing liberals that they can agree with Putin on anything reminded Shenderovich of the story about a young boy who married the old lady in hopes of getting her inheritance. When the boy died, it was the old lady who inherited his toys. The main assignment, according to Shenderovich is to restore the understanding of who are the service personnel, who are the democrats and what can and cannot be done. Even if everyone agrees that things must change, no one ever dares to mention the name of the author behind the current chaos. Shenderovich considers Putin the main author and views Medvedev simply as part of the scenery.

Political life in Russia reminds the speaker of a tightly closed bucket that is bound to explode at one point or another. 20 or 30 years in history is simply a small deviation, ideologically Russia continues to live in the Soviet Union, but according to Shenderovich the change is near. Just as the world leaders and thinkers could not predict what was about to happen in Northern Africa, Shenderovich was not able to determine what the detonator would be in Russia, but was nonetheless certain that

the current system is about to fall. The speaker hoped that the apparent changes would follow an evolutionary path similar to the bloodless revolutions in Europe and not imitate Tunis, Egypt or Libya so that lives would be spared in the process and people agree on common fair play rules. At the same time Shenderovich recognized that for leaders such as Putin or Lukashenka it is very difficult to step aside as being in power guarantees they never have to explain or justify their actions.

It also worried Shenderovich what the uniting factor would be when the current system collapses. Poland was once united by Catholicism and a shared understanding of nationalism, but contemporary Russia has no common ideology, views about the past and the future differ greatly and the new generation feels pride over events that they should rather be ashamed of. Every time power changes in Russia, the discourse of history also changes and therefore it is of utmost importance that when the system collapses, it is the Soviet Empire that crumbles and not the Russian nationhood. If the Soviet syndrome does not disappear at the right time, the entire nationhood might vanish. Estonia shouldn't fear for the consequences because Estonia would only be hit by ideological debris. If for example oil prices in Russia fall, it is important for the system to establish enemies that are usually either liberals or the West who cannot wait for the country to fail. As Estonia could never be enemy Number One, Shenderovich also doesn't believe the events of 1940s could ever happen again.

When discussing the events of May 9 and the Bronze Soldier, Shenderovich referred to the author Yury Trifonov who once wrote that history is like a wire with many strands that cannot be cut but must be carefully dismantled. During the May 9 events the wires melted into one, people thought they were fighting against fascism and for their fatherland, but later it turned out they were fighting for Stalin. Extremes on both sides only make things worse and judgments can only be given when people have tried to understand both sides. Even then it is only possible to judge the system, but individuals who are very often forced to swim in the lava must be viewed separately because historical processes often leave very little room for personal actions.

Russian émigrés to the West show that as an ethnos they can be competitive, it was Igor Sikorsky who invented the helicopter and Sergey Brin the Google, so Shenderovich considers it vital that people are being educated and not blamed. Nowadays all Russians want to taste the fruits of democracy, but people don't understand that proper infrastructure, social guarantees and other benefits result from the separation of powers. Even though the current situation angers and saddens also the speaker, Shenderovich referred to personal experiences in 2005 when he was running for office. When he really took the time to explain, even old ladies were able to understand what was going on in Russia. Even if blaming the public and taking offense seems to be in fashion, it is important to talk to the public and try to explain what is really happening, the guilty ones must not be let off the hook even if they are punished decades later, because the sense of impunity creates an illusion that those in power are immune.

Not casting your vote or voting for any other party but United Russia seem equally bad choices for Shenderovich. He is also skeptical about the proposal by an editor from Novaya Gazeta newspaper of setting cameras in every polling station to stop fraud, but thought that it might be possible in 1% of the stations. The movement Naf-Naf calls people to mark all ballots so that they couldn't be used by those wishing to falsify the results. Whatever the strategy, what is most important to Shenderovich is that as many honest people as possible agree on a common set of rules that do not necessarily guarantee anyone a seat in the Parliament, but bring back fair and open elections. In 1991 when Yeltsin came to power, democracy didn't prevail because people simply slept through it. People were tired from the epochal events and societal explosions and didn't have the strength to monitor political developments during the years that followed.

Even though Shenderovich personally would prefer to have visa-free travel and less bureaucracy, he also recognized that until the problems with people such as Andrey Lugovoy remain, no changes are

possible as those who blow their nose in the host's curtains are no longer invited for a visit. In his final remarks regarding the situation in Chechnya Shenderovich was not very hopeful because after the murders of Dudayev and Mashadov it is only bandits, who are either backed by Russia or al Qaida that have remained there.