

Valeria Novodvorskaya

“Short Course on the Historical Philosophy of Russia”

Summary by Kadri Ollino

The event was organized in the framework of the “Russian Voices” lecture series by the Open Estonia Foundation, April 30, 2010 Tallinn

The human rights activist and former dissident Valeria Novodvorskaya began her lecture by apologizing on behalf of the democratic forces in Russia to Estonia, other Baltic neighbors, Hungary, former Czechoslovakia and even Germany for the atrocities committed by the Soviet regime. “What legitimacy does the act of recognition of occupation and crimes against humanity have?” asked Novodvorskaya and went on to explain that the current regime under Putin does not in fact have legitimacy itself as it did not come to power through free and fair elections. Novodvorskaya pledged that when the democratic forces gain power in Russia, the countries that suffered under the Soviet regime would be compensated for financially. She also expressed her hope for that this would take place before Russia runs out of natural resources.

Novodvorskaya stressed that Estonia or any other countries owe nothing to Russia for its 50 years of occupation as the Soviet tanks did not bring liberation but tyranny and slavery and behaved the exact same way as the Nazis did. As long as there are those in power, who take no responsibility for anything, one can be sure that they are not democratic forces.

How did Russia become such a monster? To answer this question Novodvorskaya looked back on the past and explained the cyclical nature of Russian history. The gap between Russia and Europe first occurred during the 10th century when Russians, threatened by the nomadic tribes were forced to form communities in order to jointly combat the common enemy. The roots of the culture of collective farms can also be traced to this period as it cut Russia from the cultural legacy of Europe and Rome. Since that time Russia has been unable to enter into and abide by contracts with other countries. Contrary to the West, there was no confrontation between the secular and religious powers as from Christianity Russia took over mysticism and since the 14th century and Ivan the Terrible, total submission to authority. As Novodvorskaya marked – “The Czar took everything, there was nothing left even to God himself”.

Novodvorskaya also compared World War II to the liberation from the Mongol rule. Freedom from the occupation of the Golden Horde meant people were instead occupied and oppressed by internal forces as well as the end of Hitler’s rule resulted in Stalin’s dictatorship. Novodvorskaya also drew parallels to present day Russia that has no use for the vast conquered territories but simply does not allow people the opportunity to live on their own. As Zhirinovskiy used to say - Russian soldier wants to wash his boots in the Indian Ocean.

The rule of Ivan the Terrible marked the harsh division between the separation of leaders or people close to the leadership versus common people as the idea of equal citizens was a totally unfamiliar concept in Russia.

According to Novodvorskaya the current system of bribery can also be traced to the Mongol rule as the tradition of giving presents to officials and bureaucrats was also a common practice during that time. Even though Russia today complains about corruption, it takes no real steps to counter it.

With Alexander II Russia implemented its first reforms such as applying the modern day system of courts and juries. According to Novodvorskaya, in current Russia one should not trust the judges and jurors, as extremists have no opportunity for fair trials. In addition to courts, also universities have lost their independence.

Reforms by Boris Yeltsin were again only a repetition of history as similarly to the reforms by Alexander II, they lacked any follow-through. Alexander II was defeated by the Uprising in Poland in 1863, Yeltsin by the lack of mandate from the people during economically difficult times when democracy did not become inherent to Russia and free media did not manage to survive giving the example of the radio station Echo of Moscow. Usually regarded as one of the more liberal media outlets, it is in fact owned by the energy giant Gazprom.

In its relations to its neighbors, Novodvorskaya recalled the Russification policy by Alexander III. The Russian Empire held and still holds the position that all the neighboring countries are in fact Russia's colonies. "Only look at what is going in Estonia or the Caucasus," Novodvorskaya noted.

As a conclusion in analyzing the cyclical developments of Russian history, the developing democracy has always been suppressed by the emerging autocracy, from former czars to Lenin and Stalin. Between the rules of dictators there are short periods of pseudo absolutism, the illusion that maybe autocratic tendencies can be broken. The illusion that Russia can be free does not last long until the next dictator comes along. Novodvorskaya regarded the period during Yeltsin's rule right after the collapse of the Soviet Union as the most promising but quickly the newly emerged democracy started to agonize and was finally killed by Putin.

Novodvorskaya regards the divided memory and sense of frustration as the national psychological characteristics. Despite all of its national resources Russia has remained poor and uneducated. Suffering from its imperial complexes, Russia uses its limited economic resources only for cultivating hate and revenge. Especially after the war on Georgia, the West should have been more decisive, but instead Russia was not expelled from any international organizations.

As the anniversary of the end of World War II and victory over fascism approaches on May 9, the celebrations Putin plans have nothing to do with reality. Instead on May 8 Novodvorskaya suggested we remember those who suffered under Soviet oppression.

Former member of the Russian Parliament and economist Konstantin Borovoi stated that the opposition in Russia is getting louder and louder. The results of the current transitional period largely depend on economic developments. It is important to monitor the activities of neo-Nazis in Russia that have a growing support among the younger generation. At the same time it is also beneficial for Putin who can argue that the voters only have the choice between the Nazis and the current regime.

Estonian politician Trivimi Velliste was interested in Novodvorskaya's opinion whether Estonia made the right choice in 1939 when it signed the agreement allowing Soviet military bases to enter the country. Novodvorskaya argued that if all the Baltic countries had joined forces and similarly to Finland attempted to counter Russia, if nothing else, the myth that all these countries joined the Soviet Union voluntarily would never have emerged. The tactics that Estonia chose instead were justified neither morally nor pragmatically.

On the current situation of dissidents in Russia, Novodvorskaya feels that their actual influence on society is less than during Soviet times as the authorities have become cleverer. People today have the chance to read the books they were not allowed to read during Soviet times, but the support from the public is much lower than during that era. But the moment dissidents become too dangerous and pose an actual threat to the regime they are simply killed, just as Anna Politkovskaya. Possible exit from this prison of democracy and door to freedom lies in the Constitution as people should refer and implement daily the different articles of Constitution.

Novodvorskaya was also critical of the Presidential Council of Human Rights as she sees it legitimizing the current regime. The human rights activists have almost no power as people such as Khodorkovsky are still imprisoned. It simply provides for lovely pictures of Medvedev talking and listening to human rights activists and both sides have the illusion that they get something from it. Perhaps some people of less relevance are freed but on the larger scale the terror of the country is prolonged and enforced.

Konstantin Borovoi was also critical on the current business culture in Russia as the small businesses suffer the most in the current climate of corruption and bribery. Economic and political freedoms are closely related and it is impossible to do independent business in Russia, as bribes are the only way for businesses to exist. The situation with the media is the same; they call themselves independent but in fact are instruments of power and propaganda.

Tunne Kelam, Member of European Parliament, shared the widely spread understanding in the West, that Russia is not yet ready for democracy which in turn is useful for Kremlin as Russia is given more and more time by the West. Novodvorskaya agreed that this flexibility that the West applies towards Russia is damaging to everyone. Borovoi added that the current regime is not self-sufficient and in order to survive it will have to confront the Baltics, the West, NATO and Czechia.

In regard to Russian-Ukrainian relations, Novodvorskaya stated that the Ukrainian president Janukovich is publicly selling Crimea to Russia, a mistake, Novodvorskaya hopes will be fatal to Janukovich.

Novodvorskaya was also very vocal on the statement often heard in official propaganda that there is a "special way" to develop Russia. Even if one does not believe in the law of gravity, it does not make it not true, the same way if the regime moves the opposite direction from democracy and calls it the 3rd way, it does not make it right. Due to this 3rd way of life, one possible result will be the beginning of World War III. Borovoi added that this special way of development often takes the form of billions of dollars spent on propaganda outside Russia, paying for articles, setting up TV-stations etc. The goal of today's speakers is to defend democracy in Russia as if they don't succeed, Russia will turn into a terrible neighbor, something that the Eastern European neighbors have already understood.