

## **XV Open Society Forum “Moscow’s War of Influence”**

**Tallinn, November 4, 2010**

### **Guest Speakers Russian journalist Yulia Latynina and civil rights activist Oleg Kozlovsky**

XV Open Society Forum welcomed two distinguished guests from Russia, well-known journalist Yulia Latynina and civil rights activist Oleg Kozlovsky to discuss the current situation and future developments in Russia and beyond.

In order to understand the current situation in Russia and the so-called thug mentality (шпана, schpana) Latynina took the audience back to the beginning of 1990s when in the framework of barter deals some companies were allowed to export oil and timber and supposedly brought back food products of the same worth. Later investigations revealed that whereas oil and timber were indeed exported, the food products never arrived. Companies designated to import foodstuff existed only on paper but the signatures on these papers belonged to Vladimir Putin and his associates.

The current leaders are strong followers of such thug ideology and do not think in terms of efficiency or lasting results, but rely on one single trick to conquer the world. This apparent Buratino (Pinocchio) complex in both internal and external politics relies heavily on the assumption that all it takes is to put the right key to the right key hole to have the entire world at one’s feet.

In 2003 Russia was on the path towards an open society, but soon enough Kremlin sent out signals putting an end to these developments deciding to focus solely on the economic progress. This progress was envisioned as having a rich elite ruling over a poor general public.

Another example of thug ideology is characterized by the events surrounding Nord Stream. In 2005 after Putin had signed the gas pipeline development project, the world became aware of how gas could be used as a weapon. According to Latynina Putin made several propositions to foreign leaders where foreign investors would supply the pipeline and raw materials would be Russia’s responsibility. At the same time Russia expected considerable foreign investments to go into the utilization of raw materials as well as pipelines which were viewed as strategic weapons, in other words energy deals turned into arms deals and under such conditions Gazprom was unable to secure energy networks in France, Italy or the UK for several years.

Putin was always interested in making a quick profit and was very unhappy with the situation where the gas Russia sold to Germany at \$ 250 per 1000 m<sup>3</sup> was resold to consumers in Germany at \$ 500. Securing one’s own pipelines would offset such injustice and assure an immediate profit. While the US and China focus on developing their chemical industries that see initial profits after first 10 years and huge ones down the line, Russia sees no value in that, only wanting cash here and now.

With this short-term vision Putin was unable to foresee any threats to the monopoly it was holding and the considerable drop in energy prices came as a complete surprise. As the demand for energy increased, so did the supply and research showed that gas could be produced from oil-shale in US at considerably lower costs than what Russia was offering. Suddenly the dream of gas as the Golden Key was utterly shattered.

Another key issue deals with the war in Georgia that in its setup was quite similar to the war between Soviet Russia and Finland with both sides claiming to be attacked. Reasons for this war lie in the animosities between Putin and Saakashvili, who according to the legend once referred to the current

Russian Prime Minister as Lilliputin. Latynina, who does not consider Saakashvili a true democrat but slightly resembling Pinochet, credits him for successfully implementing several reforms in Georgia. For example the police in Georgia are no longer corrupt and state-owned companies were openly sold.

In the build-up towards the war several other events took place. First came the pornographic movie with someone strongly resembling Saakashvili in the lead role, then the import bans on Borjomi and discontinuation of flights between the two countries and several other incidents. None the less all these examples do not answer the question WHY these events took place. If the aim was to force Georgia into joining Russia, it was not successful, but if the aim, as Latynina suspects was simply to get pleasure, perhaps this was achieved.

According to Oleg Kozlovsky the reasons for the blitzkrieg against Georgia lie not so much behind emotional reasons, but rather in collapsing domestic policies and failures to successfully communicate with the West. According to Kozlovsky anything Putin calls democracy, is viewed as democracy in Russia and it is the West who is seen as unable to comprehend Russia's unique model. Russia constantly conducts campaigns against Ukraine, Poland, Estonia and Georgia in order to "punish the enemy", even if Estonia or Georgia on its own might seem too small, the reasoning is that behind them stand the US and the West. This sort of hysteria sells, people easily follow and the current leadership is ready to use any means necessary to maintain the status quo. In this respect the current quarrels between Moscow and Minsk resulted in an exceptional situation where people in Russia and Belarus had access to media outlets of both countries and for the first time ever were told the truth by the clashing leaders.

Latynina also commented on the supposed thaw between the relations between Russia and the West. According to her there is no improvement in relations, rather Russia is simply trying to buy Europe. Putin wishes to invest in Europe, send kids to study there, make Europe comfortable with Russia. Whereas Stalinist Russia sent tanks, Putinist Russia sends money and will never attack the banks where his money is kept. In commenting why Russia is none the less dangerous, Latynina referred to the statement by Khodorkovsky that Russia exports corruption. According to the journalist, as long as Putin remains in power, Khodorkovsky's situation will not change and unfortunately his condition is no longer news. "There is no news in dog bites owner, if owner bites dog, this is news", said Latynina.

On commenting the opening of visa-regulations between Europe and Russia, Oleg Kozlovsky doubted the possibility of that happening unless substantial internal policy developments take place within Russia as the country is not ready to be a transit country between the whole of Central Asia and the rest of Europe. According to Latynina Russia is in the business of creating problems not solving them and visa-free travel and membership in WTO are two examples of that. As the country is unable to position itself, it often makes conflicting announcements where at times the West is seen as forcing WTO membership upon Russia and at times unwilling to let Russia in. Regarding the visa issue the situation is quite similar; Russia makes statements demanding visa-free travel but is unwilling to make any concessions itself.

Economically Latynina also saw no cooperation between Russia and its supposed partners in BRIC. India and China have clearly moved on, Brazil also has its own way and Russia is simply falling behind.

When asked to comment on the positive regarding contemporary Russia, Latynina referred to the well-developed middle class of owners and managers who hold no illusions on the current state of affairs. Both speakers saw the spread of Internet as a positive development as it offers competition to the state-run media channels, creates its own news and is easily accessible. Even if state-run media enjoys a larger audience, the level of web-based news is very high. Putin's travels to the Far East no

longer only comment on the situation of the roads, but attack much more controversial subjects. Even if Putin's regime is stable, the influence of Internet keeps growing as well. According to Kozlovsky, the spread of Internet has also empowered civil society in Russia as internet allows for like-minded citizens to get in contact with each other, coordinate events and conduct campaigns both on-line as well as in real life.

Apart from some light-hearted efforts there have also been no real attempts to restrict the spread of Internet. According to Kozlovsky it is partly due to the fact that unlike China or Iran Russia presently does not have the money it would take to counter the information available on the web but also because the current leadership does not fully understand the influence and potential the spread of Internet holds for the democracy movement.

On the subject of developments in Far East, Latynina saw the influence of China growing in the region but regarded the possibility of Chinese military interventions highly unlikely, rather the influence would be economic, social and political. China is used to thinking centuries ahead, Putin only lives in the moment and the corrupt decisions made in Moscow guarantee that the more distant regions slowly die out.

According to Latynina Russia presently still has only one president making all the decisions- Vladimir Putin and Medvedev is his puppet. Recent developments such as Medvedev's visit to the disputed island of Kunashiri or the sacking of Moscow mayor Luzhkov were part of the strategy to humiliate Medvedev.

Kozlovsky approved of Estonia's decision to blacklist several members of the pro-Kremlin Nashi movement as it had considerable influence on their freedom of movement and sends a clear signal that their actions come with consequences and are not easily forgotten. The sense of impunity is so widespread in Russia and this is an area that civil society organizations need to focus on and communicate with their colleagues in Europe.

In Latynina's view the issue of Chechnya has a strong potential to turn into another Algeria or Somalia. Whereas loyal Putinist Kadyrov initially transformed Grozny and held the support of many Chechens, his pillars are crumbling and the Muslim movement in Chechnya is more powerful than ever with the possibility of the next Palestine vs Israel scenario taking place.

Whereas Latynina saw no possibility for opposition in contemporary Russia but only in democratic countries, Kozlovsky maintained that opposition is possible, but is presently very fragmented. Currently the movement faces many internal problems and there is lot of work still to be done in order to be ready when the momentum arrives. Even if there is no hope that Solidarnost (Solidarity) movement will be allowed to run in the 2011-12 elections, they must not simply bow their heads. It will be their responsibility to show the citizens that these elections have no connection to public opinion or public will and the deputies are simply assigned not elected by anyone.

Presently Russia reminds Latynina of Soviet Union during Brezhnev's era- complete stagnation and nothing is regarded as the truth, this is a system that is not self-sustainable and is bound to collapse. Such as it is not possible to solve the situation of traffic jams in Moscow, under present leadership the country will also not carry on. In its current situation Russia poses the greatest threat to its own citizens. As a rock on top of the mountain has no apparent threats, once it starts rolling down hill, nothing will be able to stop it, so it is impossible to currently tell where the threat to Putin's Russia will come, but once it is there, the system will surely collapse.

Even though both Estonia and Russia were part of Soviet Union, the development of both countries has resulted in considerable differences. Latynina admired the economic reforms and lack of

corruption Estonia has in place and Kozlovsky relied on the old saying of “Do not believe, do not fear and do not beg the Kremlin” hoping for similar developments in Russia.