

# A Russian debate

*St. Petersburg correspondent Roman Bessonov looks at the sea-change in Russian thinking, since the August-September Moscow apartment bombings.*

*Whoever has his ears open on the world political stage, will not fail to overhear the muffled grumbling in Russia. Deeper than the drumbeat of war in Chechnya or President Boris Yeltsin's recent diplomatic eruptions in Beijing, there is a nationalist shift in the country. After nearly ten "lost years" under Yeltsin and the so-called reform policies, there is an ever more widespread sense among the Russian elites and the population: "Enough of the decline and humiliation; this far, and not one step farther!" The shocking surge of support for the ex-secret police officer Premier, Vladimir Putin, on the eve of Dec. 19 State Duma elections (the election of Yeltsin's successor as President is another six months off), is not merely a function of the frenzied clan versus clan warfare of the electoral campaign, during which mud-slinging on national TV channels has become a major weapon and has reached new heights.—the Editors*

A disappointed Russian intellectual of the late 1990s, an enthusiast of the late 1980s, formerly could try to escape the unpleasant political and social reality of today's Russia, by switching his TV to a Hollywood thriller, or, if his disappointment had reached a deeper level, a sex show, and conclude, far after midnight, that one more day had passed, and what happened on the next day, would happen anyway without his participation.

"Could" means "used to be able to"—the past imperfect, because everything changed at the moment when a Moscow apartment building with more than one hundred families in it, watching TV, drinking vodka, or rocking a baby, collapsed into a pile of dust and shards of concrete, burying all of them, including a correspondent of *Moskovsky Komsomolets* daily paper.

The classic Russian proverb about the *muzhik* (peasant) who never crosses himself until it thunders, is perfectly appropriate for a Russian intellectual. And as soon as the time of troubles has really come, with ruthless physical evidence, any ordinary Russian, of whatever social origin and occupation, wakes up from his state of almost complete indifference, and takes up a very personal concern for his country, about which he used to ironize in its better times, and devotes himself to contemplation of the issues known

as the eternal, or Russian questions: "Who is to blame?" and "What is to be done?"<sup>1</sup>

That is why the TV duel between Anatoli Chubais and Grigori Yavlinsky on Nov. 25, over Chechnya, has become a real event in Russian intellectual life—though from the very character of the persons involved, no final truth was supposed to be found in their debate.<sup>2</sup>

NTV's Yevgeni Kiselyov, in organizing the fierce battle of these two reformists, was probably motivated by a rather trivial political objective. From the standpoint of a partisan media manipulator, the debate was useful for the mutual assured destruction of both Yavlinsky's Yabloko movement and Chubais's Rightist Alliance, and, therefore, for the benefit of a third side—Fatherland-All Russia (led by Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov and former Premier Yevgeni Primakov).

At first glance, the two reformists justified the expectations of the would-be media manipulator, Kiselyov. The pretext for the debate was that Yavlinsky had just issued what he called a draft plan for a political settlement in Chechnya, with, as usual, a lot of paragraphs, sophisticated as usual, and, as usual, inapplicable. Chubais had reacted immediately, in his usual abrupt intonation, but with rather unexpected (from him) arguments: First, he characterized Yavlinsky's proposals as treason, and, second, he claimed that the real spirit of the Russian Army is being born in the Caucasus.

In Yavlinsky's place, it was not difficult to find a counterargument: "But it was your policy, Chubais, which led to the collapse of the very existence of the Army—" His opponent also had a universal counterargument for any attack on his policy:

"While we were working, yes, making a lot of dreadful

1. The titles of two nineteenth-century books, Alexander Herzen's *Who is to Blame?* and Nikolai Chernyshevsky's *What is to Be Done?*, became part of the Russian idiom as "the eternal questions."

2. Chubais, known as the architect of privatization, held many government posts as he became the most detested of the so-called "young reformers." Today he heads UES, the national electricity company. Yabloko Party leader Yavlinsky, also an advocate of free-market liberal reforms, has stayed out of government, becoming a perennial critic from the sidelines.



*The televised duel of two “liberal” reformers, Anatoli Chubais (left) and Grigori Yavlinsky, has become a real event in Russian intellectual life—though from the very character of the persons involved, no final truth was supposed to be found in their debate.*



mistakes, but moving ahead, you were doing nothing but brilliantly shaking the air, with a lot of intelligence and eloquence—”

After a short while, however, the personal attacks reached the point when the original subject no longer seemed important.

**Yavlinsky:** “I was brought into the political elite by my voters. You were brought into the political elite by the fact of taking care of the President’s chamber-pot. You can run [for the State Duma] from any district, and anywhere you’ll get zero—”

**Chubais:** “I recently talked with the Communists in this hall. It was the same. But even they are possible to change, and you are getting boring. Your people will leave you. I’d be very sorry.”

Actually, either of the “duellists” could have found a pretext to bang the door and leave the podium, or start splashing orange juice over each other, as Vladimir Zhirinovskiy and Boris Nemtsov did during a discussion on a similar subject five years ago.<sup>3</sup> But the stakes were higher now, and, as was becoming clear, exceeded both the subject—the policy in Chechnya—and the election campaign, with Yabloko and Rightist Alliance as rivals for the electorate of relatively well-to-do intellectuals. The discussion ascended to the area of the eternal, or Russian questions.

3. Vladimir Zhirinovskiy is the boorish leader of the self-styled supernationalist Liberal Democratic Party of Russia. Boris Nemtsov, now in the Rightist Alliance, was a “young reformer” as first deputy premier in 1997-98.

**Chubais:** “Grisha, I asked you to join the government in May 1996, at the crucial point, to take the post of First Vice Premier, but you didn’t. There was a choice only between Yeltsin and [Communist Party leader Gennadi] Zyuganov, and no other—”

**Yavlinsky:** “But I was still not going to help Yeltsin . . . as I was not before. You say you are always the same. But you remember what you said to [human rights militant] Sergei Kovalyov when you decided to stay in the government during the Chechen war? When were you sincere, before or after?”

**Chubais:** “I wanted to be sincere, that is why I went to talk with him. . . .”

### The ‘Russian questions’

It was becoming clear that the two sides were speaking not just on behalf of their parties, and not just in order to expand the base of their electoral support. The participants in the TV duel represented two approaches to the eternal, or Russian questions, two basic types of Russian thinking, relevant to two types of characters which, under any historical circumstances, would behave according to their once established identity, and not in any other way, both absolutely unable to convince each other and leaving the solution to the audience—exactly according to the tradition of Russian classical literature. The same dialogue of the same two types—one “worldly,” energetic, resolute, somewhat cynical, and flexible in practical activity and communication, and the other one romantic, reflective, contemplative, with bookish language and a rigid range of behavior, which, or its absence,

is never left without philosophic substantiation. Exactly those two types between which the eternal questions, or Russian questions, or accursed questions, are supposed to be discussed.

A similar debate took place between Yevgeni Bazarov and Arkadi Kirsanov in the nineteenth-century writer Ivan Turgenev's novel *Fathers and Sons*. "My friend Arkadi, don't speak so beautifully—" A similar debate took place between the bed-bound Oblomov and the enterprising Stolz in Ivan Goncharov's *Oblomov*.

Moreover, the best known poetic novel for any Russian, Alexander Pushkin's *Yevgeny Onegin*, which dates from the 1820s, also contained a controversy, and a physical battle, between the cynical Onegin, who "neglected Homer and read Adam Smith, being keen on economics," and the romantic Lensky, who brought "an ardent and rather odd spirit," along with long black curls, from "misty Germany," or rather from its Kantian school. The name of Onegin originates from the large Lake Onega in northwest Russia, which is still but Western, with its connection by the Svir to Lake Ladoga, and by the Neva to the Baltic Sea, while "Lensky" derives from a fast-flowing river, running from the high Eurasian mountains not into the warm Caspian Sea, but across the enormous expanse of Siberia and finally into the Arctic Ocean.

The debate of the two classic Russian literary types reached its peak in the tragic magnifying glass of Anton Chekhov's plays, where (in *The Cherry Orchard*) Lopakhin, cynical but also romantic, in a very new fashion, ruthlessly cut down the cherry orchard, representing the old pastoral still life, with the intention to build a factory on the place of this *nature morte*, while a desperate Platonov, rejecting his own Oblomovite reflective type of romanticism, helplessly tries to drown himself for the sole reason that he has reached the age of 35, having done nothing.

**Yavlinsky:** "But I could not behave otherwise, as this would have been treason against myself—"

**Chubais:** "... Okay, that is convenient. But what should I say to the director of Grozenergo, whose son was kidnapped, whose father was killed, and who, in case of a so-called ceasefire, would be exterminated? How can I betray him?"

A trivial political discussion, dealing with an issue discussed for years, unexpectedly turned into a real intellectual duel, echoing with a dialogue inside a Russian individual, historically doomed to a narrow choice, which suggests losses in the event of either of the two options, but hints at the slight possibility of a solution with one of them.

## Historical truth

In the real history of Russian society, educated, from the peasant to the nobleman, on Classical literature that was accessible to the whole nation, this debate of Onegin and Lensky, continued through the tragic controversy in the characters of Tolstoy, Ostrovsky, Chekhov, finished, mysteriously, in

the midst of destruction and uncertainty, at the moment when a short man with no curls at all, also named "Len—" after the Lena River, but ending with "-in," banged his fist on the tribune and said: "It is a lie that no party can take responsibility. Such a party exists!" And a nobleman with the delicious name Felix, in the name of the Revolution, eliminated the class of nobility—especially its part which joined the foreign armies with the White Army, in other words, the enemies of the Revolution, that is, the traitors to the Motherland.<sup>4</sup>

This was a piece of real truth that no politician nor TV observer could neglect, 80 years later. This real truth was correctly addressed by Chubais (as assured of his own progressive role, and as doomed, as Lopakhin), who reminded his opponent that besides the two of them, there exists a vast majority of the nation which would like for both reformists, no matter what approach to anything they declared today, to be hung upside down in the central square, along with other "talking heads" from the TV, including, evidently, Mr. Kiselyov the moderator, and maybe even starting with him, and the whole cherry orchard-full of the convenient and useless thriller-sex-entertainment industry.

It is true—for Red Square in the heart of Moscow has existed not for 80, but for 800 years, and even the most radical reformists, arguing for the removal of Lenin's mausoleum from that place, have forgotten to request the elimination of the ancient scaffold (Lobnoye Mesto), remaining there as a universal warning since the time of Ivan the Terrible in the Sixteenth Century. Dzerzhinsky's statue does not decorate Lubyanka Square<sup>5</sup> any longer, but the desperate majority of the nation, mentioned by Chubais in his polemics, is perfectly ready to elect a President originating from the service founded by the Iron Felix, as he was already called during his lifetime. Even if this career service professional comes from the same class of reformists as the hated Chubais and the despised Yavlinsky.<sup>6</sup> Even if he is short and not eloquent. Even if he is an officially named successor of the President who introduced the generally hated reforms.<sup>7</sup>

According not only to opinion polls, but also to the statements of persons whom this author knows quite well—of people who were painfully divided in the times of tragic choice in 1991, 1993, and 1996—that same successor from Lubyanka, or his elder ex-colleague,<sup>8</sup> is likely to gain very serious support among intellectuals. This fact will be certainly interpreted by professional skeptics as more evidence of the

4. Felix Dzerzhinsky founded the Soviet secret police. The White Army resisted the Bolsheviks' Red Army, during the Russian Civil War, 1918-21. The "foreign armies" included French and British forces of intervention.

5. Lubyanka is the secret police headquarters.

6. Premier Vladimir Putin is a career security officer.

7. Upon naming Putin as the fifth Premier in less than two years, Yeltsin said last summer that Putin later would succeed him as President.

8. Former Premier Yevgeni Primakov, also an intelligence officer.

traditional lackeyism of the Russian intelligentsia, part of which has always glorified the most brutal political regimes. But even the most profound skeptics recognize some indisputable authorities, and, confessing their respect for the talent and personality of Pushkin, they will have to admit that the relations between him and the supreme power in the country were not as simply hostile as interpreted in Soviet-era textbooks. A time which dictates equality of the motives “to be with the people” and “to be with the power,” urges a Russian intellectual, even a most anarchist type of a person, to choose the side and the effort which stands for the endangered statehood.

Even a most profound skeptic would also admit that, in a debate over Chechnya, the greatest poet of Russia would not have taken the side of Yavlinsky with his “five conditions and ten preconditions” for the enemy of the Russian state. Probably for that reason, in the TV debate, Chubais replied to Italian journalist Giulietto Chiesa precisely in the intonation and spirit of Pushkin’s poem “To the Slanderers of Russia” — the theme of which, by 1917, developed into the irrational, furious, and scathing “Scythians” of Alexander Blok, challenging all of Western civilization on behalf of the vast, “Asiatic,” shapeless, selfless, nomadic culture.<sup>9</sup>

It is noteworthy that, just days after delivering its “peace settlement” proposal, Yavlinsky’s party hurried to explain that its real meaning was different, and suggested diplomatic pressure, but not concessions to the Chechen separatists. Not just out of election considerations, but rather due to a certain fear of self-isolation from the people, Russian parties and politicians, leftist or rightist, are in a competition for looking like better patriots — in a certain way, directly contrary to their behavior in the late 1980s. Which is quite natural for the situation when the whole nation feels separate from the West, mistreated by the West, robbed by the West, or, at least, betrayed by the West.

Some former Chubais fans, who are few, are really disturbed by his open and aggressive support for the Russian Army. Most haters of Chubais, of whom there are really a lot, don’t believe one bit in the sincerity of his patriotic declarations, suggesting that they reflect nothing but a desperate attempt to save his career in Russia, since in the West he — even he — is not needed. But, if the separatists hoped that Chubais’s patriotic declaration could change the general feelings in the majority of the population in their favor, this would be a great miscalculation.

The OSCE summit in Istanbul sounded like a funeral bell, tolling not for Russia’s diplomatic relations with the Western establishment, but for Russians’ general view of the West. It provided an additional guarantee that the next leader of Russia will be a representative of a service with a name including the

9. Pushkin’s militant, nationalist poem was written in 1831, when members of the French Parliament urged military intervention on behalf of a Polish insurgency against Russian rule.

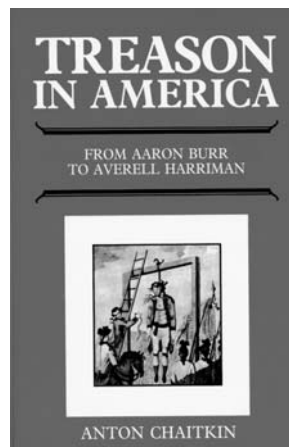
words “state security,” most likely the younger one of those two potential candidates for Presidency from the same service, the one who does not call western European leaders his personal friends.

The cherry orchard of late-1980s illusions is deserted and miserable on the eve of a cold winter and hot warfare. This depressing anticipation of cold and heat terrifies those who would prefer one more year of lukewarm stability, though without prospects — stability at any cost. It encourages a newly-emerged type of optimist, cynically ruthless toward the elder generation (wiser, but more burdened with decades of survivalism, which the younger types often despise or view as a precondition for betrayal).

On the psychological level, it recalls the same philosophical debate in Russian literature. A young Bazarov, of middle-class origins, not keen in the rules of the high society and unsuccessful with women, contemptuously rejects the way of life, the values, and the very appearance of the elder, noble, and respectable Pavel Kirsanov. And though the aggressive younger type is shockingly rough, and uses some improper words, the educated audience subconsciously sympathizes with him, feeling some kind of hope coming with him, like a stream of oxygen. And, as usual, the possible dangers brought by this stream are being underestimated — as they are never the point in a Russian debate.

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