The politics of no alternatives or How power works in Russia

An interview with Gleb Pavlovsky

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Gleb Pavlovsky, the Ukrainian-born former dissident turned "political technologist", abruptly fell out with the Kremlin in April, reportedly over "indiscreet comments" made about the 2012 presidential elections. In interview with Transit a short while before, Pavlovsky gave a revealing inside view of the workings of political power in the former Soviet Union and in post-Soviet Russia.

On 27 April 2011 the Russian Presidential administration announced it had terminated its contract with well-known “political technologist” Gleb Pavlovsky. His fall from grace was reportedly linked to “indiscreet comments” made about the 2012 presidential elections. A short while before, he was a guest of the Institute for Human Sciences (IWM) in Vienna, where we took an interview with him not knowing it would be his last as a Kremlin advisor. Our interest was not Russia’s political intrigues or the rumours about who would be Russia’s next President. It was Pavlovsky, the public intellectual turned political technologist, and his inside-outside perspective on Russia’s politics that provoked our curiosity. We were interested in Pavlovsky the historian, not the spin-doctor.

Born in Odessa in 1951, his early years were a classic story of a non-conformist young intellectual seduced by the ideas of 1968, who believed in communism but not the Soviet version of it. In his own words Pavlovsky was at that time a “Zen Marxist”. He graduated in history and since 1974 (when he had his first encounter with the KGB) he was a card-carrying member of the Russian dissident movement. In 1982 he was arrested, sentenced and exiled. Before the trial he collaborated with the authorities but during the trial backtracked on his testimony. By 1985 he was back in Moscow and engaged in various civic initiatives. He was an editor of Vek XX i mir (Twentieth Century and the World), an influential intellectual journal, and since then has never stopped publishing small magazines that everybody likes but nobody buys. And he continued to be interested in books and ideas even when neither politicians nor voters were interested in them.

Pavlovsky began to cooperate with the Kremlin at the time of Yeltsin’s re-election campaign in 1996 and since then remained an essential part of the Kremlin’s political
It is believed that he was one of the masterminds behind Putin’s election campaign in 2000, and that he was also active in Putin’s re-election campaign in 2004. After 2008 he continued working for the Kremlin, this time advising Dmitry Medvedev. Foreign journalists tend to agree that he was one of the few Kremlin insiders with a licence to surprise. The Russian liberal public tends to view him as one of the symbols of the Putin decade. But our conversation was not about Putin. It was about the perils of a politics without alternatives.

Tatiana Zhurzhenko and Ivan Krastev

Transit: In 1982 you were arrested and charged with anti-Soviet activities. Looking back today, how do you see the events of 30 years ago? What is your assessment of the intellectual legacy of the dissident movement?

Gleb Pavlovsky: I see it as a forgotten experience. The period from the late 1970s to early 1980s signified the end of an era, a period that has never been described politically because at the time we lacked a suitable political language. Within the dissident movement, the word “political” was regarded as dubious, as opposed to the term “ethical”. We didn’t see a clear link between domestic developments and world events, even ones as significant as Solidarity in Poland, Charter 77 or the war in Afghanistan. Dissident society was marked by a peculiar kind of autism: we felt that everything really important was happening and would happen in Moscow, that the world’s future would be decided there.

My generation reached maturity between 1956 and 1976, the two unique Soviet decades beginning with Khrushchev’s de-Stalinization and ending with the Soviet-US détente. The feeling of freedom grew stronger each year, and each year we met new people who acted independently and freely. This gave us confidence in the progressive trend. Sometimes it was initiated from above, by a Politburo decision, but mostly it sprung from below, from the public atmosphere, from the samizdat, which was experiencing a boom at the time, and from the productive tension between dissidents and power. There was a backlash at the top after the invasion of Czechoslovakia that provoked protests; we began to feel that open civil society was indestructible and that its moral and biographical development was unstoppable. Today we would say there was a process of “liberalisation”.

However in around 1979 or 1980 this suddenly came to a standstill. Pressure from above increased, and as the authorities started targeting civil activists, the influx of new people into the dissident movement stopped. No younger generation stepped forward to fill the void left by people who had been arrested. Had I been asked in the mid-1970s what the future held for the USSR, my prediction would have been optimistic. But by the early 1980s it became clear that the world had entered a new period of confrontation, while inside the country dissidents were being forced into an irreconcilable conflict with the regime.

That is why 1980 is a milestone for the dissident movement. By then I was expecting a crisis, both within the country and globally. Together with a few friends I tried to float the idea of a compromise with the authorities, but it was too late. I was arrested in 1982, and when I returned to Moscow on leave from internal exile in 1984 I no longer found the same free environment. Some had left for the West, others had been arrested, and although the majority remained at large, they no longer formed an independent
community. The dissident movement in the sense of a “network” had disappeared. Those who wanted to go on with the struggle had to find a way of doing so on their own, they could no longer rely on help from others. The enclave of freedom had shrunk and disappeared, and as far as we were concerned we were back to where we had been in the late 1950s. Except that now we lacked the cohesive cultural environment of writers, scholars and prominent liberals that had long shielded the dissident movement.

Transit: What was it that changed so dramatically in the late 1970s compared with the 1960s?

GP: From 1969/1970 onwards a new factor appeared: the option of legal emigration to the West. People who were restless started leaving the country on “Israeli visas”. Friends started disappearing, the number of people on the scene began to thin out, and those who stayed became too conspicuous. It soon became obvious that whenever someone left, the chances increased of those who remained being arrested, because the independent community was now much less tightly knit. As long as key figures of moral authority such as Chukovsky, Tvardovsky and Solzhenitsyn remained in the USSR or were still alive, it was more difficult to arrest people. It was a little easier to arrest people in the provinces than in major cities, and not necessarily capitals of the republics. You had Kharkov, Odessa, Lvov, Leningrad, Tbilisi, Baku, Erevan – cosmopolitan centres, capitals with a tradition of intelligentsia, where they wouldn’t have dared arrest someone without a Central Committee decision. But once prominent intellectuals who could stand up for you started leaving, those of us who remained began to look like small fry and started getting arrested.

Transit: The partial opening of borders, the opportunity to leave, especially for Israel and the US - would you say the regime was trying to ethnicize the opposition?

GP: Absolutely. This was a provocative act of ethnicization of the dissident movement, its racialization. If you left you had to be Jewish. Although of course, not all those who left were Jews.

Transit: Gorbachev emerged in 1984. What was your impression of him then?

GP: At this point I have to return to your first question regarding the legacy of the dissident movement. By the 1980s, the dissident outlook was itself in crisis. During the boom period – the late 1960 and early 1970s – it had failed in its basic task, that of “re-moralizing” the Soviet regime. The attempts at resurrecting it and giving it a more coherent framework – including our journal Poiski (Searches), published in samizdat from 1978 to 1982 – did not succeed. The political experience of the 1960s and 1970s was not translated into the 1980s. The continuity of independent existence and action was broken because a political language was missing. Translation requires working through experience and agreeing on a vocabulary and basic principles. But since we had failed to agree on the meaning of post-war Soviet political experience over the course of 25 years, we had no such vocabulary.

The dissidents had their favourite enemy and moral target: the liberal apparatchiks of the 1960s generation, whom we regarded as hopeless collaborators. Nobody remembers that: in Russia today the 1960s generation are equated with the dissidents. In fact, the
dissidents defined themselves in opposition to the 1960s generation – we are not like those mercenaries! We do not belong to Soviet parties and organizations and travel to Paris with KGB permission! We regarded the 1960s generation as people who had brought their misfortunes upon themselves, in conditions that were much more favourable than ours. What with Khrushchev, de-Stalinization, the late 1960s, the journal Novy mir (The New World), they had an infrastructure and opportunities, yet they had given up. That’s how we felt. We were annoyed that we now had to take the rap for these losers.

Of course, we did cooperate with the 1960s generation quite closely, even making use of their connections if need be. Nevertheless, we regarded the liberals of the 1960s generation as yesterday’s men. That is why I was so shocked when, from mid 1980s, they started re-emerging, spewing the same anti-Stalinist platitudes they had done twenty years ago. It was a kind of a zombie reunion! What right did they have to tell us how to live our lives after being silent for twenty years, with their party membership and privileged lifestyle, while letting huge numbers of peoples pass through the gulags and leave the country?

However once the 1960s generation reappeared on the scene in the late 1980s, it was the dissidents who fell silent. Old-school human rights dissidents had absolutely no confidence in Gorbachev and his initiatives. They suspected it was all a KGB provocation. Of course, Gorbachev subscribed to the same worldview as the nomenklatura “liberals”. His language, a mix of dry Soviet officialese and the high-blown moralism of the 1960s generation, substituted the problems of Soviet reality with a search for “violations of standards” – first Lenin’s standards and later “European standards”.

**Transit:** You seem to have quite an ambivalent attitude to the liberal-dissident circles.

**GP:** Initially, various models of action coexisted within the dissident movement. Up until the mid 1970s it was Sakharov and also Tvardovsky who, with the journal Novy mir, represented what I would call the eastern European model. This was based on prominent intellectuals taking a public stance and being willing to interfere in political affairs without breaking with the state. I would call it Soviet republicanism – its equivalent was the Polish opposition of the 1970s and the Czech opposition before the Soviet invasion of 1968. This model collapsed in the early 1970s. Following Tvardovsky’s death, Solzhenitsyn’s exile and Sakharov’s move to radical individual protest, the movement network fell apart and the scene was reduced to a few moral loners. The dissident movement turned into a sect, into a group of individuals proclaiming a moral position with the uncertain backing of western politicians. I believe that if in the 1970s the prominent “republicans” had united with the 1960s generation and offered the dissidents public support, the civic network would have survived. I parted ways with my fellow liberals from the Institute of Philosophy precisely when they refused to defend the dissidents, their own people after all.

That is why, when we speak of the “dissident movement” we don’t mean one project but at least two separate ones. And although the moralist human rights project prevailed in the 1970s, it turned out to be politically impotent and sterile. We defended those who had been arrested and later, when we got arrested, others defended us, and so on, like on a conveyor belt. At some point people started asking themselves: why should I defend these
madmen who don’t even talk to me about my interests? Most of my samizdat writing in the 1970s targeted precisely this ethical autism, this “moral purity” and impeccable-victim discourse. However, as I discovered, you cannot defeat moralist discourse through journalism. My campaign to persuade the victims to adopt the politics of compromise was doomed.

**Transit:** We can’t discuss the legacy of the dissident movement without mentioning human rights.

**GP:** The role that the philosophy of human rights played within the classic dissident movement has been forgotten. In the early 1960s, the movement associated itself with the Soviet constitution – dissidents didn’t invoke human rights as such, only the rights of Soviet citizens. According to the constitution, I am entitled to ignore any limitations the Kremlin might impose on my rights as a Soviet citizen. Behind the phantasm of the Soviet constitution lay something else: a moral community based on law and ethics. The 1965 constitutionalists believed that their actions represented the true Republic, in the Kantian sense, and they stubbornly invoked this “Kantian” interpretation of Stalin’s 1936 constitution. I believe that this model of Soviet human rights activism had some political potential. In fact, in the late 1960s, an open though not anti-Soviet society was beginning to emerge, in which academic institutions and prominent figures began to participate. In some institutes and akademgorodoks, [1] Soviet power “with a human face” really did exist. To take the “soft Soviet power” scenario to its logical conclusion, the independent section of Soviet society could have forced the Kremlin to continue Khrushchev’s course. However this possibility was not pursued nor was it translated into political language.

Gradually, the human rights defence started to change, with dissidents appealing to the world press and the international community – and in actual fact, for US pressure. The argument was that since we’ve failed to cultivate strong public opinion in our own country, let’s use the international one. The West became the “the raw material provider” of the Soviet dissident movement, and this is where it started to derive its legitimacy from in the mid 1970 onwards. “Kant is dead” – or he left the USSR on an Israeli visa – and Kissinger, Carter and Reagan become the new moral authorities. The emphasis shifted from the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Helsinki Accords, where the Kremlin’s actions were monitored by Washington. This represented quite a different notion of human rights, one that was no longer autonomous. The point at which we arrived in the early 1980s was to demand a dialogue with the authorities. But who were the Soviet authorities supposed to talk to in the Moscow human rights community, and what about? We had nothing to propose and we did not pose a real challenge. Soviet human rights campaigners, even as they became newsmakers in international media, looked very weak in the context of the Chilean dictatorship, the Iranian revolution and Solidarnosc.

**Transit:** The 1960s were an era of mass optimism and utopian projects. During Perestroika, the optimism seemed to disappear and people talked only of the past.

**GP:** The “two great decades” of Soviet sci-fi were a substitute for social theory; for upcoming activists sci-fi was the textbook of political action. However utopia itself disappears from literature in the late 1960s. This represents a vanishing belief in the Soviet project, since utopia was supposed to be the end result of the evolution of the
state. The last Soviet sci-fi novel was the last novel Ivan Yefremov published before his death, with significant cuts by the censor because of its anti-Utopian allusions to the Maoist state model. At this point, the Strugatsky brothers emerge with their variety of science fiction, featuring an activist interfering in the course of history. In the 1970s optimistic science fiction completely disappears. The Strugatsky brothers begin depicting risky encounters with alien intelligences imbued with the mythology of the secret police that interfere in the lives of ordinary people. Man is a spy tossed into the distant past or future, deprived of reliable moral references. This tradition of Soviet sci-fi played a colossal role in the development of dissident thought and still exerts an influence on the imagination of our intellectuals.

Transit: Did the optimism of the 1960s come from above or from below?

GP: There was definitely a wave of optimism from below. Young people from the countryside were eager to come to the city to study and work. The Stalinist nomenklatura myth collapsed and was even mocked in the cinema, and children from the industrial peripheries in the cities mixed with the children of the nomeklatura. In the 1950s the division disappeared between “Soviet” people and the descendants of pre-revolutionary classes, the “former” people. After all, both had passed through the equalizing cauldron of the camps and the war. These past horrors inspired this incredibly optimistic culture of the 1960s. There was a sense that everything terrible was over: Hitler and Stalin were dead; the Civil War was over. And as for World War III – come on, that’s a load of nonsense! We had absolutely no sense of fear. When I read American memoirs from the 1950s, I am stunned by the fear of the Soviet Union that existed at the time. We had absolutely no fear of America, nobody scared us with war at school. I guess this was official Soviet pacifism for you. After Stalin’s death, the mantra repeated to children was: “You won’t have to fight – we’ve done your fighting for you!” The authority of the war generation that came to power after Khrushchev was also built on this.

One might say that the free man of the 1960s was the Stalinist Soviet man liberated of Stalin. Soviet society in the 1960s and 1970s was built on people who had been educated under Stalin; in other words, pacifist, idealistic and liberal socialism relied on people who had survived Stalin. People toughened by Stalin’s industrial ethics and by the labour quotas they had to meet or face the gulags. And as long as these people continued to work, industry – personified by impoverished technicians and engineers – continued to produce sputniks. These people were incapable of not doing their job well, they were simply too scared. This synthesis of fear, hope and progressive spirit gave rise to the 1960s style in culture, economics and politics.

Transit: Would you say that Perestroika introduced the option of political action?

GP: Yes, but it was an option we made no use of. A notion of politics as a specific realm distinct from the activities of power and moral self-expression didn’t begin to form in Russia until the mid 1990s. In the Perestroika moralist discourse of the 1980s, both Soviet and dissident, politics was usually understood as something nasty. It was Stalin who gave this word its dangerous and dirty connotation. Back in the 1920s you could ask a party member what the political significance of his actions was. However the Terror turned this question into a provocation, even a form of snitching. After Stalin, the word “politics” was very much a taboo, so much so that it was preferable, even for members of...
the Central Committee, not to refer to their activities as political.

I returned from internal exile at Christmas 1985. In September 1986 we founded the first legal political Social Initiatives Club. I became politically active in the autumn of 1986, which is why I can hardly pass for an impartial observer. However the fact that “politics” was a taboo prevented us from discussing what we were actually doing. And it prevented us from understanding the opportunities and risks inherent in Gorbachev’s policies. I realized this very distinctly when Adam Michnik came to Moscow at the time of the Round Table talks in Poland to reach an agreement on Soviet non-interference. And I remember thinking at the time that it would have been impossible for us to frame our goals in these terms in our country.

Transit: Looking back to 1988-1989, did you believe then that the Soviet Union could survive the collapse of communism?

GP: Yes, but we made the mistake of delegating this hope to the authorities. Preserving the country ceased to be a legitimate political goal. To put it crudely, we had a choice between the pro-Yeltsin and the pro-Gorbachev projects. There was no censorship, but neither was there any space for discussing a future politics as such. The opposition politician Grigory Yavlinsky tried and failed with his controversial “500 days” project. It was aimed at reforming the foundations of the Soviet economy, but the only thing anyone was interested in was on whose behalf he was doing it, Yeltsin or Gorbachev? And so his project was turned into a plot. However, I’m convinced that the most active political groups, including the democratic ones (with the exception of some groups in the Baltic countries and the Caucasus and a few people in Ukraine), continued to think in terms of the Soviet Union. At the same time, there was no discussion of how to transform the Soviet Union: this question was delegated either to Gorbachev or to Yeltsin. Gorbachev was the only one who was serious about seeking a new model for the Soviet Union. But hardly anybody showed any interest, not even in his own circles. Everything drowned in the plotting.

Transit: And what about his idea of a new union agreement?

GP: None of the people really interested in a renewed USSR were willing to fight for any of Gorbachev’s political models. Ideas were being formulated but they didn’t solidify into positions. In the meantime, people with their wits about them had started to lay their hands on substantial items of property, which they had no intention of giving up. The distribution of state property started a long time before, but it became obvious after 1990. The first type of property given away without anyone noticing were the centralized mass media, even though these were highly profitable enterprises, monopolies. Glasnost-era newspapers selling millions of copies became the property of their editors-in-chief and marketing directors. Later on, businessmen started getting involved, too. The distribution of industrial assets and the privatization of funds also began in 1989 and 1990, initially through cooperatives. It seems Gorbachev was simply unaware that it was happening. He was developing an elegant but utterly formalistic model of a future USSR, focused primarily on foreign policy. He suggested a tandem of the Soviet Union and the united Germany at the centre of Europe, secured by special relations with the US. But in those days nobody in Moscow was interested in that.
**Transit:** So what were people’s expectations at that time and what were their greatest fears?

**GP:** In 1989 the media had already started to function as the generator and intensifier of mass fears. Some of those fears had a real basis: the pogroms in the late 1980s, Almaty, Sumgait, Karabakh, Baku, Osh and Bendery – all these things started to add up and affect our mental state. But what was really at work was a resurgence of vague historic fears from the old Russian period, fears of a collapse of power and of civil war. I remember all too well the interest in those days in reinforced steel doors. Even though Moscow was relatively safe: the crime rate hadn’t gone up by then and nobody was breaking into apartments at gunpoint. Nevertheless, tens of thousands of Muscovites installed reinforced steel doors in their paupers’ flats, where they kept no money and no other valuables. These doors were very expensive: they went for 500-1000 dollars apiece. But people were willing to pay for their fear; they were already building virtual defences. These fears were exacerbated by people leaving for the West – the late 1980s coincided with the greatest wave of emigration ever – who kept telling each other fairytales about a Jewish pogrom that was about to happen in Moscow the following day. You could even read in the popular weekly magazine *Ogoniok* about mobs armed to their teeth descending the capital from Malakhovka. [2]

**Transit:** How decisive were the events of 1993?

**GP:** In actual fact, I think the decisive game for the future of Russia was played out between 1991 and 1993. It determined everything that was to take place for the next two decades, and maybe even as far as the middle of this century. Nobody can claim to be unblemished in this regard. In those days I myself had great fights with Yeltsin, who was destroying not just the Soviet Union, but every kind of sensible politics. I believed that Gorbachev needed to be given a chance to act. Gorbachev had very little control over what was happening within the country, however he was in charge of the “perimeter of freedom” that comprised the entire USSR, while various social, political, economic and national models were being tested within that perimeter. I thought that this situation was ideal for Russian liberals and that we ought to maintain it and stick to Gorbachev.

On the whole, political affairs were still conducted in a parochial, club-like atmosphere. The conflicts were for show, not for real. I had my fights with Yeltsin but at the same time I maintained close links with friends who were his close associates, including people from Gaidar’s team. The split had not yet crystallized. We didn’t realize quite how fragile civil society was. The cultural infrastructure provided by the Soviet system ensured that the authorities showed a modicum of political recognition for the moral authority of society and individual dignity. However once the Soviet system fell apart in 1993, respect for the public and for personal integrity collapsed. The republican option for Russia’s development was undermined. As long as conflict existed between president and parliament, there was still a chance of guaranteeing constitutional and institutional protection of the rules of the game and its players. After 1993, however, the constitution lost its significance and was reduced to Yeltsin’s victory banner hoisted over parliament. Hundreds of small independent newspapers folded. Public activists and people from cooperatives sought refuge in business or politics.

**Transit:** When did you realize that the Soviet Union had fallen apart?
GP: After the farce of the 1991 coup and Yeltsin’s jeering at Gorbachev when the latter returned to Moscow, I couldn’t possibly have any illusions. I realized right away that the Soviet Union was finished, the multinational empire was over, that a new era was dawning and that power was now in the hands of presidents who were lords of their lands and their respective populations. Nevertheless, I was taken aback by the how openly this was flaunted in the Belovezh Accords. This wasn’t a politically considered agreement about the national conversion of the USSR but a deal carving-up territories and their populations. The way this was done in the Belovezh Forest created a new pattern of power negotiation, which has become an integral part of the concept of presidency: a bunch of presidents getting together and signing off their citizens to each other as if they owned them. In an article for Moskovskie Novosti at the time I questioned the legal basis of the Russian Federation as the legal successor to the Soviet Union. After all, Ukraine was just as much of a legal successor, and Kiev had the same legitimate claim to be the capital of the Russian space as Moscow. I thought we should aim for a process similar to that followed in North America in the eighteenth century – free people on virgin land who are recognized as the sole representatives of statehood. Take the people, take the virgin land, let them adopt a constitution and decide how they wish to live together. In this respect I was against the “post-Belovezha” order, since the nomenklatura had obviously joined forces with the old executives on the one hand, and the brokers of Soviet assets who helped to dismantle and sell off the Soviet economic complex on the other. Berezovsky turned out to be a master of this art. Basically, the Belovezh Accords were the egg that hatched Berezovsky. Interestingly, the ease with which the USSR was dismantled provided encouragement to the ambitions of the likes of bin Laden and Shamil Basayev in the Caucasus – they understood that it is technically possible to destroy great empires.

Transit: What was your attitude to privatization?

GP: The architects of privatization ruled through fear. Yegor Gaidar kept saying: there is no alternative to my programme, we don’t have a choice, it’s either that or hunger and the horrors of civil war. Thousands of food packages were sent to Moscow from Germany, with pictures of a “starving Russian child”. But in fact there was no real hunger, and as it later turned out, there was never any danger of it. It was just a myth. And civil war was another myth. In fact, nothing Yugoslav-like was happening, with the exception of the Caucasus, where the Karabakh wars and the wars in Georgia helped to let the genie of Dudaev’s Chechnya out of the bottle. Not long after - in 1993-94, partly as a result of the reforms - millions of families experienced destitution. However analysis of the press and political debates shows a lot of fear: fear of hunger, fear of civil war, fear that “Yeltsin’s hands are tied”. The democrats were sowing fear of “brown-red” forces and of “another coup”. The communists were expecting an anti-communist witch-hunt and to be hanged from lampposts. Mythological horrors have a tendency to take on a life of their own, helping to legitimize “reformers’” and their radical voluntarism.

Transit: So you say that by ruling through fear and raising the spectre of hunger, the authorities changed to a politics of paternalism: of “taking care of the population”. But didn’t Yeltsin’s liberals continue to appeal to a “society of readers”, which had emerged under Glasnost?
GP: Yes, it was only after 1991 that the “society of readers” of the Perestroika period turned into a TV audience. For Yeltsin, Russia basically consisted of administrative spaces – later they were renamed regions – each with its own lord – Rakhimov, Shaymiev, Luzhkov. The lord was responsible for his territory and had to be loyal to the President, who was the supreme lord. It is interesting that Yeltsin rapidly reverted from local democratic “aides” or “commissars” to landlords. An aide is not a landlord, he’s a favourite and Yeltsin didn’t need aides, he wanted each region to have a landlord, and all these landlords had to report to him – the Landlord of the Russian Lands. These landlords, along with the red directors and business executives, were Yeltsin’s key constituency. Yeltsin himself didn’t use the word “elite” but he did create it in a new, non-Soviet sense. The actor Nikulin, the writers Pristavkin and Belov, the film director Nikita Mikhalkov, Berezovsky the “businessman”... these were the people he surrounded himself with, and as their benefactor he basked in the light that was reflected from them. He was completely at ease in this company.

Sometime in 1993 Valentin Yumashev [4] invited me to the Ogoniok anniversary party – Ogoniok kept finding new excuses for celebrating its centenary. This was before parliament was dissolved, before the big bloodletting. Our friends the democrats were there, as were academics, writers, bankers, circus artists and gangsters. People notorious for being gangsters and for killing people, which they sometimes did under contract from entrepreneurs. What really impressed me was how all these people got on with each other, they way they went around embracing each other. That’s when this gangster habit of greeting one another with a kiss became fashionable.

Transit: And when did Pavlovsky the political technologist emerge? Where does the Foundation for Effective Politics come from?

GP: The term “political technologist” entered common usage after 1996 and after Yeltsin’s re-election. The idea was to start “meddling” in politics, but to do it strategically. Elections had been held before, but it wasn’t really considered politics. The rigged parliamentary elections in 1993 and Yeltsin’s constitutional referendum, with its use of media and the chanting of “Yes-yes-no-yes”, [5] made a powerful impression. Yeltsin managed to win, albeit with a small majority. People were beginning to suspect that “the next Yeltsin” might turn out to be even more dangerous. This fear, the fear that there was no alternative to him, started emerging as early as 1993.

Actually, the whole issue of “no alternative to Yeltsin” is very interesting. Later we recalled that we also used to say there was no alternative to Gorbachev. But it transpired that there was an alternative to Gorbachev and also to Perestroika – as soon as Yeltsin appeared, it was immediately proclaimed that there was no alternative to him. That is why Yavlinsky’s article in the spring of 1993, entitled “I am prepared to be an alternative to Yeltsin”, caused an enormous uproar. It made his name as a politician. That’s when I realized that if you’re not powerful, there is always a way to become powerful, either by challenging someone else’s power or by impeding their power somehow. We had fully understood this by 1999. That’s why, when Putin came along, it wasn’t us who came up with the slogan “There’s no alternative to Putin” – it came from below, without our instigation. But we latched on to it fast.

Transit: Since the emergence of Medvedev as president it is no longer possible to say:
there is no alternative to Putin. Or: there is no alternative to Medvedev.

GP: Yes, the tandem has destroyed the very logic of a “politics of no alternatives”. Because the idea that there was no alternative to Yeltsin’s power proved effective in elections, I started wondering about the real way power has been organized in Russia. I discussed this question with the historian Mikhail Gefter in historical terms. Once I started realizing that we still deal with the same kind of power, I developed some idea on how the political potential of “no alternatives” could be used.

Transit: So political technologists became experts in the politics of no alternatives?

GP: Precisely. “Effective politics” equals the politics of non-political power. Here it’s worth recalling the post-Gorbachev Kremlin pattern – the “Yeltsin-Gaidar” leadership. This is where the idea of power outside of politics first emerged. Gaidar explained that his job was to deal with “economics”, while the President would remain in charge of “politics”. To safeguard the welfare of the population, Yeltsin had to be given the opportunity to be personally in charge of politics, which of course meant “power”. Gaidar said: “People have to be made to understand the extent of the responsibility we are shouldering. We can then capitalize on Yeltsin’s popularity: the president will entrust us with his personal capital of power, which we will expend on reforms”. And Yeltsin himself added: “Yes, one day the people’s confidence in me will be spent by the reformers, but by then everything will have been achieved.” This offers a perfect description of power without representation or the consideration of the interests of those being governed. “Technological” power does everything that needs to be done but it doesn’t tell you what it is it’s doing. When used by power, words lose their communicative meaning and are taken over by political technologists.

Transit: So on the one hand, there is power without representation, but on the other hand public opinion is crucial. This isn’t the same as classic authoritarian power that doesn’t have to care what people think because what they think is taken care of by the secret police.

GP: It is a more archaic kind of power – a Russian “manorial” power. It is the power of the landowner who used to delegate the management of his manor to a German while he went to Moscow or Paris. The peasants might revolt, they might ransack the estate and kill the German if he is too harsh. But he manages in the landowner’s name, not his own. The Belovezha Accords are another example of this manorial model – Yeltsin’s estates became Russia and Kravchuk’s estates became Ukraine.

Transit: But let’s return to the politics of no alternatives. Were the Communists really perceived as a serious threat in 1996?

GP: If we recall that in January 1996 the communist Party leader Gennady Zyuganov’s ratings were 40 per cent while Yeltsin’s were only 5 per cent, it is hard to deny that it was conceivable. But of course, a “communist comeback” was to a large extent a myth on which we based the 1996 election campaign – the myth of the Bolshevik with a knife in his teeth who will come to take away your property, your apartment and so on. From 1995 onwards, what was very important for me was the realization that in Russia attitudes to freedom do not actually split the political field. In reality, there was a
consensus between the democrats and Zyuganov’s communists over the interference of the state in citizens’ lives. This basic liberal package involved the freedom to travel abroad, freedom of economic activity, rallies, demonstrations and elections – and none of that was under threat.

**Transit:** So what were the issues that split society?

**GP:** It was the attitude to the Soviet Union and to Yeltsin. The opposition between Left and Right played almost no role at all. What mattered was the attitude to Yeltsin, whether you were for him or against him. Initially, popular opinion was not in Yeltsin’s favour but there was a willingness to support those in power, and that’s what we focused on in 1996. Yes, Yeltsin’s ratings were only 5 per cent, but even those who hated Yeltsin regarded him as the last bastion of power. Society was willing to believe anything at all, but not that Zyuganov was a man of power.

**Transit:** What did political technologists know in the 1990s that politicians did not?

**GP:** For us the 1995 parliamentary election was a key test. It was held under the joint supervision of Yeltsin and Yeltsin’s head of security, Alexander Korzhakov. There was the project of the Congress of Russian Communities (CRC), which I developed and which was constructed to bring together the platform of liberalism on the one hand and that of mass social populism on the other. A peculiar option, something similar to the Tea Party in the US: a rightwing programme couched in leftist terms. That was exactly our thinking: if you set out to convince the voters of something that seems to contradict their natural, most personal interests, you have to present it as an expression of power to which there is no alternative. General Lebed was chosen as the face of CRC. He had a scary voice: in the Transdnistrian war his voice was used to subdue resistance – it was broadcast aloud so that students from Chisinau in the trenches would hear it and start trembling. But Lebed was a nervous and fragile military intellectual who pretended to be a terrifying monster but in fact lacked self-confidence. In fact, it’s quite common for Russian politicians to lack self-confidence and self-esteem.

The CRC programme stood for liberalism on behalf of ordinary people. By the time the election came we had managed to inflate a virtual bubble: in all the polls the Congress of Russian Communities came second, after the communists. The communists were scared – but the CRC didn’t even pass the threshold. I think it could have passed it but with a little bit of help it didn’t. But the real problem was that we lacked a regional apparatus. That’s when we realized that it’s easy to inflate a bubble but to harvest all the votes you need local machinery. The communists had their machinery but we had failed to put one in place. This was the basis for planning our 1996 model. This time the entire campaign was built on local bosses, some of whom were disloyal. The point of the first round was to show them that resistance was useless – they had to switch to Yeltsin’s side. Admittedly, Yeltsin didn’t win the first round. But he had to demonstrate that he would not lose, that he wouldn’t allow the second round to be lost. Our political strategies were a way of establishing Yeltsin’s hegemony as a leader without an alternative. By voting for Yeltsin people were voting a) for power and b) for their fear of being left without power.

**Transit:** The western idea is that in the Yeltsin era there was democracy, maybe imperfect, but democracy nevertheless, and that there was political competition.
However once Putin came to power he established an authoritarian regime, a completely different model. As an insider, how do you see the difference between Yeltsin’s and Putin’s regime?

**GP:** The term “new regime” appeared at the same time as Putin came on the scene. But in the early years the style of Putin’s politics was the same as that of his election campaign. It involved putting pressure on public opinion and on elites within the existing institutional framework. Yeltsin’s system of governance didn’t change straight away. Initially, the new system of presidential envoys and federal districts worked in a non-bureaucratic, purely virtual way. It was meant to demonstrate the federal claim on power, the Kremlin’s willingness to bring Russia together. Putin’s team gathered up power bit by bit wherever it could be found.

Whatever remained of the capacity to control and subjugate was suddenly mobilized. All this happened as a result of Putin’s landslide victory, this almost accidentally successful coup, which was then transformed into a permanent referendum: society was being asked, on all sorts of matters, whether it was for Putin or against him. Yeltsin’s old infrastructure of a president without alternative, with more or less the same actors, was maintained. However, several new goals were added. For example, Yeltsin didn’t know what to do about the legacy of the Soviet military, which is why he kept the army more or less outside the state system, basically deprived of regular funding. In this respect Yeltsin suffered from a Soviet-era personality split. On the one hand, he believed that a superpower needed a powerful army, while on the other hand pacifism – of a Soviet, quite radical kind – was also part of his nature. So he dithered and the army, without any funding from the state budget, hovered above the constitutional system as a potential threat. It was a kind parody of the Latin American model: an impoverished army facing pacifist elites that were enriching themselves. Democracy was being built in a way that left the army somewhere outside its framework. Nobody had any idea what was going on in the army. Generals were embezzling state funds and officers and rank-and-file soldiers were literally starving. What sort of effect can an army like that have on a country? Nothing good can come of it.

**Transit:** Was this connected to the Chechen war?

**GP:** There was another, forgotten motive behind the Chechen war: to give the infuriated army something to do. In the 1990s the state was short of legitimacy and lacked the power to force people to go to war. People who fought in the first Chechen war were those who, for one reason or another, believed they had to serve or those who got caught up. It soon became clear that this kind of army was not capable of fighting, and they started sending the police and OMON [6] troops to Chechnya, deploying them in rotation from each region. Our entire internal force passed through a war that was not only real but also very bloody and national. This is a key point for understanding their later “devolution”. They have been incredibly brutalized. At the same time, many of these people displayed great heroism, for instance the OMON troops from Ryazan’ who, after encountering Chechens in a ravine, refused to surrender and, like the three hundred Spartans, were killed to the last man. But once these same people returned home, having tasted blood, they became dangerous, many of them merging with the criminal underworld.
Transit: Under Gorbachev the police couldn’t bring themselves to fire on the people – this, too, is an eastern European phenomenon. Is it due to Chechnya that the police are now willing to do so?

GP: Yes, but there was an earlier instance. People who are willing to fire provided someone pays them to do so first appeared during the storming of the White House in 1993. Oligarchs close to the authorities – they included the future Yukos bosses by the way – delivered bags of money to tank crews. This is a well-known fact. Some 900 people were killed, 700 of them in secret. [7] However, until Putin came along, the army, the police and the FSB remained isolated from the state. Yeltsin was not paying them, but neither did he disband or reform them. He just allowed them to get their income any way they fancied, basically without any control. Nobody knew the real picture of what was going on inside these structures. People would sit in their government offices openly pursuing commercial activities or covering up for gangsters. What did Putin do? He brought the army and the FSB back into the power system and got rid of everyone who disapproved. He began to purge the FSB as early as 1998. However, when the siloviki returned to the system of power they brought with them their businesses, their criminal links and commercial appetites. And Putin did not take them on, since it was too risky.

Transit: What was Yeltsin’s view of the future of the post-Soviet space? Why, for example, did relations with Ukraine and Belarus develop in very different way? Why was the idea of a union with Belarus not realized?

GP: All joint union projects with Belarus were basically tailored to Lukashenka. He intended to become the president of both Russia and Belarus after Yeltsin. This outcome would have been practically unavoidable had there been a fair vote because, until Putin appeared, there was no comparable populist around. A section of Russia’s economic elite, primarily the industrial one, also had a pro-Minsk orientation. Belarus was the most highly developed section of the Soviet military-industrial complex, the most recently modernized, in as late as the 1980s. Lukashenka wanted to swap Belarus for the Kremlin. Whereas those in the Kremlin began to wonder, as early as 1996, how much it would cost to buy Belarus from Lukashenka. They were prepared to pay any price except for the Kremlin! This is how the style of bargaining in Russian-Belarusian relations developed, and why it came to a dead end. The dynamic with the Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma was quite different. He was doing a balancing act between Russia and the West, but without ever giving the impression that he was willing to let Ukraine to be annexed by Russia. As for the notorious “Russian Crimea”, this issue had always been secondary for Yeltsin and he was not the one pushing it.

Transit: But still, what kind of Ukraine did Yeltsin want?

GP: I think Yeltsin was autistic in geopolitical terms. He loved grandiose, grand-style politics, summits and so on. But as far as he was concerned all that mattered happened in Moscow. He wasn’t really attuned to what was going on in Ukraine. He understood Kuchma as a Soviet manager; they shared a common language. But they never discussed the idea of resurrecting the Soviet Union. Besides, Kuchma was a somewhat scared of Yeltsin. Following the Belovezha Accords many thought Yeltsin was unpredictable. That is why Kuchma had his people in the Kremlin to keep an eye on what was being planned.
**Transit:** And what about Kuchma’s opponents in Ukraine, did they travel to Moscow for advice?

**GP:** Of course, all politicians from Kiev came to the Kremlin from time to time but real negotiators appeared relatively late. By the 1990s there were already some autonomous quasi-political forces in Ukraine, political parties of the kind that didn’t yet exist in Russia. But Yeltsin didn’t understand how parties worked; he didn’t understand what they were for and didn’t know how to talk to them. He couldn’t understand the Ukrainian political parties with their regional apparatuses. This was also when Kuchma’s business barons emerged, people he had initially cultivated but who grew bolder and later entered politics. The counterparts of Russian oligarchs, the kind of people with whom Yeltsin knew how to talk, only appeared in Ukraine later, after Yeltsin was gone.

**Transit:** How could Moscow have got the 2004 Ukrainian presidential election so wrong? You were there at the time, working for Yanukovych. How do you see this failure today, now years have passed and there’s been a change of power in Ukraine?

**GP:** It was Kuchma who spoiled the whole thing right from the start: he imposed his own game on us, which wasn’t really our game.

**Transit:** Are you saying that operation “successor” didn’t happen?

**GP:** It did, but it wasn’t us who picked the successor. Kuchma played a game of his own. At the same time, he sought our approval for his plan at every stage. But his plan was constantly changing. At first he was going to run for another term. Even quite near to the election, as late as spring of 2004. There was this famous three-day drinking spree with the Ukrainian parliamentary speaker Volodymyr Lytvyn, when he nearly persuaded Kuchma to stay on.

But then Kuchma decided to look for a successor and he came up with Viktor Yanukovych again. He didn’t have a clear plan. As far as I know, he was keeping Yanukovych in reserve, in case something terrible happened, which is what happened in the end, precisely as a result of this unfortunate candidacy. Yanukovych wasn’t suited for this role at all. He is like General Lebed, a seemingly scary figure but in reality a man without a backbone. At the critical moment he is lost. If his team is working well he is a good leader. He would probably have made a good apparatchik in the Soviet days. But as a politician he wasn’t suited to conflict.

So it was Kuchma who proposed Yanukovych and Moscow didn’t interfere with this process. Besides, by the time Kuchma finally made his decision in June 2004, it was too late to retreat; the election campaign was already beginning. Even then, Kuchma controlled Yanukovych’s campaign and didn’t allow him to present himself as the future president. Kuchma wanted to keep the opportunity to outsmart everyone right to the very end. That is why he kept his cards close to his chest, and that had a strong impact on everyone involved in the campaign. They were obliged to be loyal primarily to Kuchma, and not at all to Yanukovych. Actually, Yanukovych’s team was quite isolated in Kiev; it formed an enclave within a system that was entirely under the control of Kuchma and his people. I believe that this schizophrenia of Kuchma was the main cause of the outcome. His people were controlling every stage, they checked everything, they asked all the
questions. He would stage these ridiculous stunts. For example, I’d be ushered into a
room and asked to wait; the US ambassador would then be brought into the same room.
And they would say - oh, we’re sorry, and I’d be ushered out again. Quite ridiculous. The
Kremlin is a weird place, too, but not that weird, let me tell you. But of course, the events
in Kiev, especially the speed of the split within Kuchma’s circles, made a strong
impression on Putin. He knew that these things happen in theory but here he saw an
apparatus collapse before his very eyes. Kuchma was suddenly completely out of
everything; everyone, including his closest bodyguards, had switched allegiance.

**Transit:** Why did Moscow bet on Yanukovych alone? Why did you put all your eggs in one
basket?

**GP:** It was all the same policy of no alternatives. The nature of politics in the post-Soviet
space has always been ultra-conservative. It’s a kind of Metternichian legitimism. The
only exception has been Georgia, starting with Zviad Gamsakhurdia, the first president
after independence. This was the only exception, a president who wasn’t seen as
someone to whom there was no alternative. In all other cases, the following scenario
applied: we would bet on the president and on his chosen successor. I don’t really have
any idea why.

**Transit:** Let’s now talk about Putin. In the early 2000s Putin was an authentic figure, a
political leader to whom there really was no alternative. Had he decided to run in free
elections in 2004 he would have won. Why was that election manipulated?

**GP:** 2003 was a key turning point; it had to do with the arrest of Mikhail Khodorkovsky.
That’s when the political atmosphere changed and the whole idea of a second term
changed with it. Parliamentary elections in Russia are the beginning of the presidential
campaign, the one merges into the other. During the 2003 parliamentary election, Yukos
wasn’t the only one grooming its candidates for a “post-Putin era”. Yukos decided to unite
Grigory Yavlinsky’s party Yabloko with the Union of Right Forces, but then suddenly
changed course and decided to make the liberals charge in two columns. This was
making Putin agitated. But regardless of this, he decided to promote United Russia in this
election. If the party hadn’t participated in the 2003 election it would have ended up as
just another electoral project of the party of power. It was necessary to create at least
one permanent party. And this course is still kept today – the transformation to a one-and-
a-half party system. Our main target in that election were the communists. Yabloko and
the Union of Right Forces were expected to get into parliament but in fact they didn’t
make it. That is why the approach changed and since then the liberals have not been
really taken into account in political projects.

Putin didn’t see any serious opposition but he didn’t want to compete against small fry.
The basic idea behind the 2004 presidential election was to turn it into a referendum – a
“confirmation referendum”. At that point there was really no alternative to Putin as
president and the election campaign scenario brought this political reality to light. The
problem, however, was that in an election you need other candidates, too. It was
important to make sure that Putin did not overlap or enter into conflict with them, even
virtually. This wasn’t so much a political as, I’d say, an aesthetic issue, something like the
ceremonial appearance of the Basileus, the unrivalled “First Citizen”. At that point it was
simply a question of campaign design, not politics. But afterwards it turns into a political
Transit: So “no alternative” to Putin was both a problem and a solution?

GP: The first and foremost postulate of the election campaign was that “there wouldn’t be a new revolution”. The revolution of 1999-2000 was to be the last. All our past elections were linked to revolutions. Voters knew that after an election a revolution was to be expected. Putin’s task this time was to make sure that that idea shouldn’t even occur to them. Hence the emphasis on stability and triumphalism of the highest order. If the task had been to “imitate pluralism” it would have been very easy to pull off.

Transit: Although the demonstration of stability succeeded, apart from Khodorkovsky’s arrest, 2003-2004 also saw Beslan and the Orange Revolution in Ukraine.

GP: These were milestone events. They demonstrated to Putin that no real reliable defence mechanisms exist, either in terms of foreign or domestic politics. Russia is responsive to nihilism and everything can change at any moment. By that point a new kind of politics had entered the post-Soviet space, including the involvement of youth organizations. The Bush factor played an important role even before this. I think Putin was sensitive to Bush’s image; he regarded him as a model of presidential behaviour. At the same time Putin began to realize that this fellow Bush had quite a few opportunities and that technically it was possible that after Iraq and Afghanistan he might focus on Russia. Suddenly the old Russian pattern was resurrected: to hell with it, we’ve been best friends with America and they’re going to do a 1941 on us. Of course, it was after Ukraine that the Kremlin started feeling this way. And Bush’s new programme – to spread democracy around the world – helped to intensify it. This fear was the key domestic policy issue of Putin’s second presidential term. The key framework in the pursuit of domestic policy was the notion of defence against an external attack by means of soft power.

Transit: How stable is Putin’s regime? How important is stability to him?

GP: Stability is a propaganda thesis, after all. There is real stability, one that can be verified in relative terms, and there is stability as political priority. Political priorities were proclaimed before there was any stability at all, at the beginning of the last decade, that is to say, when almost everything was unstable. There wasn’t even a stable team; Putin wasn’t in control of his own team. His team was more like raisins in a biscuit, people who were embedded inside someone else’s team, Yeltsin’s team, which was closely-knit, held together by their links to the past and their attitude to Yeltsin, by property and views. That is why there was no stability. And stability was what he wanted.

How did Putin understand stability? He didn’t want to be a transitional president. He saw that many regarded him as just a transitional figure, whose job was to give them time to prepare for the next election. And as far as I know, many in Yeltsin’s team really thought this way and saw him in this way. But he didn’t want to be temporary and he didn’t like being controlled or having his ideology controlled. Sometimes he managed to impose something of his own, for example Russia’s national anthem: that was his idea, which he managed to pull off. But in his early days as President most decisions weren’t his to make. Basically, this was the problem Putin was trying to resolve in 2003. That is why he
entered into open conflict with Alexander Voloshin. He used Khodorkovsky’s case as an excuse. But in reality I don’t think Yukos was a key issue for him at the time. The key issue for him were the relations within the Kremlin team. It was a way of getting rid of the guardianship of the Family. This was important to him, but without getting into an open conflict with Yeltsin. He never wanted direct conflict with Yeltsin. That is why he didn’t touch people with close links to Yeltsin, for example the oligarch Oleg Deripaska. But Khodorkovsky was never close to Yeltsin.

Voloshin and his team couldn’t give in and the conflict started to escalate. Putin didn’t go for compromise, even though at first this seemed possible. And that’s when new power started to emerge around him and he started concentrating it. That is why the 2004 election was both an expression of triumphalism and the claiming of a new type of power, a stable power that could ensure stability. It wasn’t about stability of the political regime – I don’t think Putin thinks in these categories. It was about stability as a social construct, as a way of organizing society.

**Transit:** Did Putin want to reach an agreement with Khodorkovsky?

**GP:** I think that between the beginning of the war with Yukos in the summer of 2003 and Khodorkovsky’s arrest in October there was a time when they tried to reach an agreement. But as far as I know by that point Mikhail was no longer interested in an agreement. He wanted something different, and who knows what exactly? And that is why all sorts of terrible ideas started floating around: some people saw this demonic Rothschild figure, there were all sorts of rumours about Russian Federation’s nuclear reserves. It wasn’t obvious what he was driving at. Khodorkovsky was rushing around talking non-stop, making strong statements, but he wasn’t actually doing anything.

He made all the wrong moves. At this time he should have reached an agreement, or left the country, or taken a clear position but he didn’t actually take any position. It was only later that he developed a political position but by then it seemed that he wanted to become Putin’s equal and that he had started recruiting armies that nobody could see. He really let down those who worked for him. There were people who had worked for Yukos and they were really in trouble.

The fact remains that an agreement with Yukos was never reached. Whether Putin wanted it or not, we will never know; these things are unfathomable in politics. I don’t think he expected it would come to a tragic end. He’s quite a careful person, after all, and he wouldn’t have stated that Yukos would be all right, that the company would be preserved, he wouldn’t have said all the other things that turned out to be nonsense six months later. Nevertheless, everyone reached an agreement eventually, except for one person who was left out of all the agreements. Voloshin now has an office in the same building as Putin’s.

**Transit:** We’ve talked about the lack of alternatives to Gorbachev, Yeltsin and Putin. On the eve of the 2012 elections, are we facing an end of the politics of “no alternative”? Or is it possible to arrest time and maintain the existing status quo?

**GP:** I believe that neither Medvedev nor Putin think that the present situation can continue for another term. Their assessment of the situation is different but neither of
them thinks that the tandem can continue. Although some people around them would probably like that. They would like the tandem to stay, since the rules of the game are quite clear. It’s not very convenient, that’s true, you need two telephone lines, but you can get used to it. But Putin cannot simply return to his old post. He’s looking for a new idea for his comeback.

**Transit:** But why can’t he just come back?

**GP:** To follow whom? To follow a candidate he himself had proposed? That would make him the lame duck. And he would have to spend the entire next term in office explaining why he made this mistake. That’s not who he is, this is not his way of thinking. He needs some powerful, unexpected move of his own, some sort of a new ploy, through an unexpected entrance. And at the same time, Medvedev is livid that none of the things Putin created works. There are buttons on his desk, he can push this one or that one, but the cables underneath are missing. On the other hand, he understands that he cannot end his presidency with this election. Unlike Putin, he has his own vision of the state. He has to realize this vision. But he can’t afford a conflict with Putin. This is very difficult. After all, it’s about the ethics of friendship. Friends can’t betray each other. This wouldn’t have been an obstacle for Yeltsin, of course. His path was strewn with former old friends, there was hardly a friend left whom he hadn’t let down really badly.

So the tandem is a non-starter. Medvedev doesn’t want to go on like this for another four years. Putin doesn’t want it either. But it would be even stranger if he became President and Medvedev Prime Minister. That would be just surreal. And Putin also understands there is a global mainstream that he has to follow. You can’t be too eccentric.

What is needed now is an idea similar the “stability” of the late 1990s. At that time the majority of people longed for strong power and stability. Now the mood has changed. The section of society that has emerged over the past decades, those who are referred to as the middle classes, are not too optimistic. They are in a state of constant irritation. I think it’s more an appearance than reality, but they like to talk and they keep castigating power. Social networks have also imposed a new style of discourse about power. The Russian Internet has adopted an extremely negative kind of discourse. If you have a positive disposition, you just won’t be heard on the Internet.

The Internet is a radical medium: it mostly reflects polarized positions.

**GP:** Yes, virtual polarization has to be distinguished from true polarization. But the real problem is that the authorities enjoy very strong passive support, as confirmed by elections, but this support is impossible to mobilize. It doesn’t take the form of political mobilization; it is not prepared to form a coalition around an idea or around a programme. Nobody knows what to do about this. All you can do is keep checking your ratings feverishly. But even if the ratings are good, the fear remains, because whoever you turn to you get zero response. This is what happened to Medvedev and his modernization idea. I believe it was a new and unpleasant experience for him to discover that even those who ought to be interested in modernization, the business circles, didn’t really respond. Those who are scared of Putin didn’t respond either. Or maybe they aren’t really scared of him? That is why it’s not really clear what is to be done in this situation.
It is a problem that cannot be described in terms of politics of change: swapping one kind of politics for another. Perhaps it could be described in terms of regime change. In Russian discourse, regime change is described as Perestroika: let’s switch off all means of influencing the system and see what happens. It’s scary, really scary, for everyone, actually. And after what we’ve seen in Manezhnaya Square, [9] the liberals are also scared.

That is why I’d say we have never been so close to an election without having a solution. The parliamentary election campaign is formally due to start as early as in six months’ time. 2012 does sound like some kind of apocalypse. In Moscow everyone is talking about the Mayan calendar – 2012 will be the end of the world. In 2012, the earth will shake, the heavens will thunder, and a gigantic stone with a new calendar will fall from heaven. And a voice will sound: thank you for using our calendar. I mean, it will be almost like the end of the world, but the script sounds like a tautology. But the general sense that is growing independently of the propaganda is that Medvedev is most likely to stand for another term as President and that Putin is trying to decide what role to play after the election. What he will come up with is anyone’s guess.

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Footnotes

1. Akademgorodoks: science cities.


3. Yegor Gaidar: the architect of Russia’s economic reform and Deputy Prime Minister at the time.

4. Valentin Yumashev: The president’s chief of staff and former journalist.

5. The slogan "Yes-Yes-No-Yes", widely broadcasted on radio and TV, suggested the "correct" way to answer the four questions of the referendum so as to support Yeltsin in his conflict with parliament.

6. OMON: special police force.

7. These figures are controversial. According to government estimates, 187 people were killed and 437 wounded, while sources close to Russian communists put the death toll at as high as 2000. See: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1993_Russian_constitutional_crisis

8. Alexander Voloshin: A member of Boris Yeltsin’s team, head of the presidential administration under Yeltsin and later under Putin; he resigned following Khodorkovsky’s arrest in October 2003.


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