Interview with Sergey Tsyplyaev
WE ARE ASPIRING REPUBLICANS

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Sergey Alekseyevich, what were your feelings when Gorbachev's *perestroika* began? Was there a demand for change in Soviet society?[1]

– Indeed, the new General Secretary had a different style. He met people, talked off the record, and the general mood was that something was about to change. On the whole, every new leader of the country generates inflated expectations. At that time, the general feeling was that we were clearly lagging behind – that problems had been aggravated and that we could not go on living like that. But no one had a clear understanding of how to live further. At that time, the intelligentsia had persuaded the citizens to follow the so-called Western path and opt for liberalization. The basic slogan was 'Look, the standard of living is better in the West, because they have this, this and that. Let's do the same and we'll follow the same path.' Inflated expectations were followed by bitter disappointments, since the path to democracy required everyone to work comprehensively with their individual cultural values and attitudes, which in reality didn't happen. Of course, at that time it was expected that things would get better instantly and that we would simply have freedom – in all spheres. The first stirrings of the wind of freedom were in the air. The expectation was that things would never be the same.

Gorbachev's role in the changes of the late 1980s is still debated. Some believe that without him there would have been no *perestroika*. Others are convinced that Gorbachev was hostage to the critical situation and that his actions were largely forced by circumstance. In your opinion, which factor predetermined the start of the reforms of the 1980s: personality or circumstances?

– We tend to overestimate the role of personality in history. People think that whatever the leader decides is how it's going to be. Not at all! In critical situations, the role of the individual is of course key, but the individual cannot stem the tide or stop progress. In the 1980s, it was unrealistic to maintain and preserve the *status quo*. Most importantly, back in 1986, it was clear that the Soviet Union had suffered a complete economic catastrophe. Until 1980, the price of oil was extremely high. At the current exchange rate, it was about USD 100 per barrel. Back then we could afford the Olympics, we could celebrate the laying of submarines' keels one after another, and we could enter Afghanistan[2]. But, after 1980, the price of oil started to fall. Gorbachev started his rule with *uskoreniye* (acceleration), and no mention of any political reforms was made. But 1986 saw a plunge

1 Interview recorded 18 January 2022.
2 The Soviet–Afghan War (1979–88). In Russian political discourse, this refers to the invasion of Afghanistan by Soviet troops to support the Marxist–Leninist People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan who was in power at the time.

in the price of oil, which fell 2.5 times and remained at the same level for the next 16 years. The Soviet economic model died of a heart attack. This situation could have been resolved peacefully, or through a bloodbath like in Yugoslavia. But it was impossible to maintain the *status quo*. You see, not only was there no money to buy grain, but there was even no money to pay the freight to bring it in. Food coupons were introduced in the USSR and famine was looming. I think we were very lucky that Gorbachev was aware of the need for reform and did not try to forcefully hold on to a moment that was far from wonderful.

Why was the USSR posing as a superpower while its citizens had nothing to eat?

– This comes as no surprise! The USSR was a superpower in the field of armaments, but there was no budget left for anything else. The country had long reduced its economy to the commodity-based model, which boiled down to selling oil and gas to the West and buying everything there: from Finnish boots to butter. From 1961, the Soviet Union even began to import crops from Canada. The country that had been Europe's breadbasket under the Tsarist regime turned into the world's largest importer of wheat as a result of Bolshevik collectivization. This was the result of the destructive reforms that were carried out in the countryside, in villages. This is how almost the entire economy was destroyed. By the 1980s, it was clear that everything was out of order, there was no progress. People no longer remember but, back then, food was the most acute issue. It was surrounded by myths. For example, there were rumours that trains carrying grain were stuck near Moscow and St Petersburg, and some unknown forces, the Americans for sure, were preventing them from entering the city. In reality, however, the economic system was at a dead-end. It had long been based on the sale of fossil fuel, and the drop in its price instantly destroyed the Soviet economy.

You mentioned the role of the intelligentsia. They supported the idea of *perestroika* with great enthusiasm. However, by 1991, this stratum of society was deeply disappointed with the transformation. Why did the intelligentsia give up on the idea of change so easily?

– This is very logical, and it has to do with the following. First, there were illusions that the transformation would be quick – that we would simply adjust some screws, and everything would be great. There was

Yavlinsky's '500 Days Programme'[3]. Just think about it – 500 days! It's been 30 years, and they wanted to implement the programme in 500 days! Second, the intelligentsia believed – and I observed this many times when meeting representatives of academia – that everything had to change except for them. They didn't want to make the slightest change. The intelligentsia had no understanding of market principles, no openness to change, nor any internal acceptance of change. They'd say, 'No, no, we don't need any of this [reforms], just give us money! Let's go back to when it was hard but peaceful!' A huge number of employees of large defence research and development institutes who supported Gorbachev's *perestroika* were disappointed because *perestroika* and the reforms required them to retrain, change profession, and find a place in the market. Many of them were advanced in years and were not ready for this. In other words, they were not ready for what they had called for.

However, *perestroika* did have achievements, including pluralism and glasnost. But why did society end up abandoning them?

– In fact, *perestroika* has had many more achievements. I've always repeated that, at this stage in history, we'll probably not be able to maintain the full set of human rights and freedoms that we laid down in our Constitution, simply because we're culturally unprepared for it. It would be a great historical achievement if we upheld at least the concept of private ownership, which, in our country, emerged and lives on due to *perestroika*. This is one thing. Second, we've been through the hardest transformation and walked over the precipice of civil war blindfolded. Just look at Yugoslavia, which is much smaller, but it cost them seven years of war and several hundred thousand victims. We could have suffered a similar fate, but we managed to escape it. It is a gargantuan achievement that we were able to resolve the issues of statehood relatively peacefully.

Now, why couldn't the results of *perestroika* be maintained? As is always the case, society, having had inflated expectations, sank into bitter disappointment. We were not the only ones to experience this. For instance, the entire Muslim world, which after World War I thought that it would quickly catch up with the West, experienced it and then decided that it didn't need it – that Muslim countries should go their own way, moving away from the West. We also failed to catch up with the West in one leap, and now we're saying that since we've failed, we do not need to.

[3] '500 Days' was a programme developed by a group of economists in the autumn of 1990 that envisaged a rapid transition from a command economy to a market economy in the USSR. Its team of authors included: Sergey Aleksashenko, Yuri Bayev, Andrey Vavilov, Leonid Grigoryev, Mikhail Zadornov, Vladlen Martynov, Vladimir Mashchits, Aleksey Mikhailov, Nikolai Petrakov, Boris Fyodorov, Stanislav Shatalin, Grigory Yavlinsky, Tatyana Yarygina and Yevgeny Yasin, *Perechod k rynku* (Moskva: ÈPIcentr, 1990).

Moreover, any revolution is always followed by an era of restoration, when nostalgic sentiments naturally build up. We are now in a period of restoration. The question is for how long will we be stuck in this, how far will we go, and when the next wave of modernization will begin. Our culture and level of societal know-how are slowing down these processes. Russian society follows a chiefdom model. In it, the tribe always tries to rally around an irreplaceable and infallible leader, and any dissent is perceived as an attempt to undermine the principles of the tribe's existence. Thus, dissenters are ostracized, expelled or physically annihilated. No criticism is allowed, and the culture is totalitarian in nature. A similar totalitarian model with an infallible leader as its core is characteristic of all of our educated class. You'll encounter it everywhere – in science, the arts, theatre or cinema. No form of objection or dissent is tolerated there at all. This is the traditional state of our consciousness: one truth, one people, one leader. If something contradicts the proclaimed 'truth', it is immediately declared heresy. Such a culture does not allow for pluralism, a multi-party system, or competition of ideas. And this is a problem. Look at the Russian parties. They are all built around irreplaceable leaders who have been at the helm for 30 years, no matter what slogans they come up with.

The model of social organization is the same, and, unfortunately, we haven't mastered a different one. This will be our task for hundreds of years. We still believe in organizing the country as a military camp with a centralized command. This is deeply rooted in centuries of our historical experience. Russia has always been a warrior state – it has always been preoccupied with military activity. Military valour always comes first, and no one cares a jot about entrepreneurial valour. The ideology of the noble class has been dominant to this day.

In one of your articles you wrote that if there is no debate about development goals, society runs the risk of stagnation…

– This dialectic that the only source of development is the struggle of opposites was taught [at institutions of higher education]; we constantly repeated it but never believed in it. It's always been either–or: either the struggle of opposites, which leaves everything in tatters; or unity without any opposites, which destroys the sources of development. This is a serious problem, and it is not yet clear how to solve it.

Let me emphasize: even our most refined intelligentsia are essentially imbued with an ideology that is totalitarian – or at least authoritarian. No matter what they're working on, they get the same result. Just take a look at the Russian Theatre Union, headed by Comrade Kalyagin, who

has embarked on his sixth five-year term,[4] while reports from their meetings resemble those of the Communist Party Congress in the Soviet days: praising the leader, stories about how great everything is in our country, and complaints about regional problems.

In general, our intelligentsia makes me sad. They constantly write letters to the president [of the Russian Federation] demanding that he intervene on an issue, regardless of whether or not it is within his scope of powers. That is, we as a country still expect the president to be an absolute dictator. If he is not, we say he is not a true leader.

It turns out that Russian society is woven of thousands, hundreds of thousands of micro-models akin to the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), literally in every nook and cranny...

– This is the monarchical model of social organization that existed during the Soviet era. After the revolution, different forms of collegiate governance were introduced, but in reality the structure of society remained unchanged: unconditional subordination to the leader was required. We are still reproducing the monarchical model.

If we go back to August 1991, the impression is that the vast majority did not care about what was going on. In those watershed days, people preferred to stay in front of their TV sets and watch Swan Lake. There was no sense of civil war looming ...

– If you remember, Moscow's White House was encircled by defenders, and people voicing their civic position gathered outside the Mariinsky Palace [in Leningrad]. Yes, it was a minority, but it took to the streets. And then there was the decisive question of how the army would behave. It turned out it was not ready to shoot at the people, despite all the verbal orders and instructions.

However, the conflict in Moscow is only one side of the story. What if the central government had called for the territories of other republics inhabited predominantly by Russian-speaking populations to be claimed? This was the problem of Yugoslavia, where they tried to seize territories inhabited by Serbs. This would have been a bombshell that could have exploded between all the republics, as in the case of Armenia and Azerbaijan. Imagine similar hostilities at the borders of Russia and Ukraine, Russia and Kazakhstan, Russia and the Baltic states. We managed to pass peacefully

4 Alexander Kalyagin is a Russian actor, director, teacher, theatre professional and People's Artist of the RSFSR (1983). Since 1996, Chairman of the Russian Theatre Union. He was awarded the Order 'For Merit to the Fatherland' of the 3rd class (2007) and 4th class (2002). See: Tat'jana Nikol'skaja, 'Kaljagin', *Bol'šaja rossijskaja èniklopedija* <https://bigenc.ru/theatre_and_cinema/text/4344082> [accessed 24 October 2022].

through this moment because the Soviet and Russian leadership were not nationalistic bigots. They could have attempted to redraw the borders by force. It would have been difficult to mobilize people to defend the CPSU government, but these sentiments of revanchism and ressentiment are deeply entrenched and could have resonated with the public. That is why I believe that we managed to avoid a disaster at that time.

Nevertheless, in Russia in the early 1990s, calls to redraw the borders with the former Soviet republics were quite frequent. Many politicians made careers out of this. One might think of Sergey Baburin, Dmitry Rogozin...

– This means that such rhetoric was in demand. And the Russian leadership could have taken a similar stance, but it did not do so.

Many believe that it was not Putin but Yeltsin who started building a rigid power vertical. Don't you think that centralization of power prevented the development of democratic institutions?

– If we look at the 1993 Constitution, it is built on horizontal structures. And it was Yeltsin who forced all governors to run for their posts in elections despite their resistance. They begged the president not to do this. A system of elected officials replaced the system of political appointees. A federation was built, which implied a separation of powers between the centre and the regions. And this road [to democracy] was just being built.

Yes, instinctively, of course, on a subconscious level, we tried to build verticals everywhere. I remember when Our Home – Russia[5] and Rybkin's party [Ivan Rybkin Bloc] emerged: all of officialdom complained that it was making their heads spin. They were waiting for the command for where to go. What was the right place for them to make sure they stayed in the system? Multipartyism found it difficult to take root in Russia.

As for the centralization of power, it was necessary at the time because there was essentially no rule at all. But power was consolidated at a certain level: there had to be a well-functioning centre, but there was none, and there had to be efficient power in the regions. But when the construction of the power vertical began, it was a completely different scope of centralization. It swept away regional authority, and now local self-government has been eliminated, although under the Constitution it is supposed to be independent and not part of the system of state government.

5 Our Home – Russia (NDR) was a Russian pro-presidential centre-right political party founded in 1995 and chaired by Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin. In the 1999 election, NDR failed to make it to the Russian State Duma, and in 2000 it merged with the Unity bloc, which in turn was reorganised into the United Russia party in 2001.

Common sense – a sense of equilibrium – is necessary. Currently, we are far behind the optimum.

Under Yeltsin, the presidential plenipotentiary had no regulatory powers. It was largely a political figure, an instrument of influence and information. Centralization was not that advanced back then. Regional authorities were independent and had their own funding. Governors were often in political opposition to the centre. The presidential appointment of the head of a region was simply out of the question.

In the aftermath of the collapse of the USSR, the Central Eastern European countries (CEE) went on to establish parliamentary systems, and many of them successfully transformed into consolidated democracies. Post-Soviet countries for the most part opted for presidential republics, which in some cases resemble an outright dictatorship. Which model suits Russia best: presidential or parliamentary?

– This is an erroneous assumption. Parliamentary republics are mostly common in the West. They have been formed in countries with a fairly long tradition of a developed political culture, which implies the political maturity of a nation capable of running a state. In a parliamentary republic, there is no division into executive and legislative branches of power. The backslide into totalitarianism can happen much faster; that's why it is not possible to build an effective parliamentary republic everywhere.

We lived under a parliamentary republic for four years [1990–1993]. We had a president who made no decisions and a government that relied on a majority in the State Duma. Did we like it?

Besides, who says that the political reality will change under a parliamentary republic? Everything will remain unchanged. After all, as soon as a new party appears in Russia, what question do we immediately ask? What is the party's manifesto? No. We want to know its leader! When we look at the political system, we first of all want to know who the main boss is. In a parliamentary system, people vote for political parties – not the prime minister. This is a very dangerous situation.

Consequently, in terms of governance, the presidential model is far more advanced compared to a parliamentary republic. But it is not easy to establish. Our attempt to build a republic by the American standard threw us into a fierce conflict between the legislative and executive branches, which ended in tanks being deployed [in October 1993]. Then we moved to the semi-presidential French model. This involves the greatest separation of powers, with the arbitration of the president as head of state standing above all the branches. This is the model for aspiring political nations.

In other words, you are not a proponent of a parliamentary republic…

– The idea of building a parliamentary republic in Russia is usually promoted by armchair humanitarian theorists who believe their theories written on paper will come true. Well then, let's import a parliamentary republic into an African country, get it endorsed by a tribal council along with a package of the best European laws. Will it work? No, of course not! If the political system does not correspond to traditional behaviour and understanding, it won't work. Eventually, at some point, that infallible and irreplaceable chief will come to rescue.

It is impossible to build a republic without republicans. If most of the population has a monarchical type of allegiance, it is extremely difficult to build a parliamentary republic. Look at how the Weimar Republic was built by the Germans and what is happening to the parliamentary system in Italy!

A parliamentary republic is like a unicycle: it's the easiest and simplest build, but you have to know how to ride it. A presidential republic is like a two-wheeler: it's easier to ride, but you have to work hard to find compromises between the executive and legislative branches. And the semi-presidential republic resembles a tricycle: it moves slower but is more stable. I am a proponent of the presidential republic, but we should at least master the semi-presidential model. But tradition constantly pushes us back into autocracy. As long as everyone in the country appeals to the president to solve their problems, we cannot build anything but an autocratic state. The same model is being reproduced no matter who the president is.

Is it a generational issue?

– It is about both a generational change and personal experience. I've always said that the key task of the country's political leadership is to create local self-government. Even the pro-democratic parties are not discussing this issue, but they're concerned about the person occupying the top seat in the Kremlin. And I'm asking about the fate of the local self-government. If you create a local government, you build a democratic edifice. If not, who cares what the federal centre looks like? We have failed to create local self-government even at the level of dacha owners. There, too, a satrapy instantly emerges, accompanied by endless thievery, scandals, its endless rule, and so on.

Let us go back to the events of October 1993. You appealed to the people of St Petersburg at the time to sort things out at the ballot box – not in firefights and battles with police. But those events did help to significantly

expand presidential powers. How do you perceive those events now? Did the president do everything right back then?

– It was not a clash between the president and the parliament, this is a misinterpretation. It was a fight between the president and the Congress [of People's Deputies of the Russian Federation]. And the Congress was an absolute collective dictator, because it had the right to take any issue under consideration and resolve it, including amending the Constitution. An infallible leader was about to emerge at the helm of the Congress. We had to come to an agreement with him. Otherwise, the executive branch had no chance because, after the change to the Constitution, the executive branch would have become impotent. This was the mistake of both Gorbachev and Yeltsin. They believed that assuming presidential power made them the main players. Not at all! All power remained in the hands of the Congress. And as soon as control over the Congress was lost, so was control over the country. Under Gorbachev, this did not have time to fully develop, although Anatoly Lukyanov was already making attempts to seize power. And after the collapse of the USSR, this tendency came to fruition: the Congress had the upper hand. It transpired that the Congress could ultimately smash the executive branch and – given the hodgepodge nature and diversity of the Congress – it would not have been able to solve the problem of the country's system of governance.

The conflict between the president and the Congress was profound. Unfortunately, it could not be resolved within the elite. In the end, the *siloviki* and the masses got involved, which never ends well. I can say that we got off lightly. It could have ended much worse.

As a result of these revolutionary events, we have a Constitution that is not as bad as we might think. It's beyond our reach at the moment; it offers room to grow. And if we look at the powers of the president, their scope was not foreseen in the constitution. We endow him with an increasing scope of powers, and our demands are growing. Nothing is wrong with the Constitution. Something is wrong with the way we construe power.

The next major event in Russia was the parliamentary election of December 1993. The biggest surprise was the landslide victory of the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR). In other words, the people voted for an essentially imperial project…

– It wasn't even a project. It was a protest vote and the early stage of backsliding under difficult economic circumstances in a restoration period. The protest, of course, was building. What else could be expected?

You mean that people were willing to give up their democratic prospects just like that?

– To think consciously about democratic prospects requires a different political culture, tradition and voter experience that is almost non-existent in Russia. Look, the English parliament has been running since the twelfth century, the mayor of London has been elected since the thirteenth century, while we elected our leaders for the first time in 1991. It is impossible to bridge the gap of 700 years in 30 years. We are aspiring republicans.

Yeltsin was actually pressured to call off the elections, create a presidential political party, and restrict media freedom. But he resisted this pressure and paid for it with his reputation, although he was a traditionalist in many respects.

For example, when it comes to relations with his neighbours. Although Yeltsin himself never openly voiced territorial claims, he did not enter into polemics on this subject, even with his cronies, like Alexander Rutskoy...

– Rutskoy could not be prevented from speaking out because he was a vice-president elected by the people. He was not an appointee, and that was a big problem. Yeltsin had no right to dismiss him.

...But there was also Minister Andrey Kozyrev, who – like the rest of our diplomatic corps – was very sceptical about the independence of the former Soviet republics...

– In fact, this problem emerged a long time ago. Already at the Congress of People's Deputies of the Russian Federation, the Moscow and St Petersburg delegations had opposite opinions on that. We had no disagreements on the general humanitarian democratic agenda; however, as soon as we got to this issue, it became clear that the Muscovites were mostly imperialists, while the Petersburgers did not support the desire to reign supreme. There was still a chance of transforming the Soviet Union into something like the European Union back then. It was buried by the attempted *coup d'état* of August 1991. The attempt to keep things as they were by force put an end to the idea of a loose federation.

At the moment, Russian society and the Russian authorities want to regain their sense of being the core of an integration project and a serious global player, but this is very difficult to achieve. It requires a serious economic foundation and the goodwill of neighbouring states. Russia is flexing its muscles in its confrontation with the West, but the question is – at what cost? Last time, a forceful confrontation with the Western world resulted in the Soviet economy collapsing under the load of its defence shield.

Of course, Russia may be in conflict with the West, but the latter is the only source of currency and importer of our oil and gas. We buy everything we need based on these revenues. I don't really understand how the Kremlin wants to reconcile Russia's economic model with its current foreign policy. In my opinion, these models are incompatible, and we have to be aware of that. Thus, the original USSR–USA construct cannot be recreated – we cannot bear it economically.

How do you see Russia in ten years?

– I see two options for us. Either we follow in the footsteps of the Swedish Empire, which used to be one of the most powerful empires of Europe but turned into a country that could guard its sovereignty but no longer had much influence on international affairs, or else we will eventually overcome our phantom fears of NATO and solve the problems on the road to NATO membership, which will remove the whole confrontation with the West that we don't really need. Unless the 'hawks' in both Russia and America need it. It is their joint business.

It is in Russia's interests to bridge the technological gap in the spirit of the policies pursued by Peter the Great, Alexander II and to a certain extent Joseph Stalin. The latter carried out industrialization with the help of Western specialists – purchased Western equipment and technology. If Stalin had introduced import substitution everywhere, our military would have been running around with outdated Mosin rifles in 1941. Therefore, today, Russia's strategic task requires the closest possible contacts with the leaders of global economic growth.

Interview conducted by IGOR GRETSKIY