

Is there any chance for democracy in Russia?

On the 14th of May 2009 at the Warsaw Kinoteka cinema in the Palace of Culture and Science, a meeting took place with Garry Kasparov, famous chess player and top politician of the Russian opposition. The debate was organised as part of the 6th Planete Doc Review Film Festival and was preceded by a screening of Masha Novikova's film on Kasparov's life and political career, *In the Holy Fire of Revolution*. The meeting was attended by more than 300 people from Poland and abroad, and was chaired by Jacek Żakowski, a well-known journalist and publicist. A record of this meeting is presented below.

New president, old system

To begin with, **Żakowski** asks Kasparov whether the political situation in Russia has improved after Dmitry Medvedev's victory in the presidential elections. Some commentators claim that since the elections the regime has undergone liberalisation and the system itself has moved closer to democracy.

According to **Kasparov**, all authoritarian regimes finally experience a state of agony. However, Medvedev's victory has changed little. There are still political activists who are beaten and persecuted. The authorities are not totalitarian but, nevertheless, practise repression and combat all opposition. Political organisations other than those associated with the government are treated as criminal. The famous chess player says that one should not confuse liberal rhetoric with the actual actions of the authorities. For example, the clearly political trial of Mikhail Khodorkovsky, former Yukos director, is still going on. It is convenient for some people to believe that the political system is changing, because then it is easier to justify their own submission towards the governing camp. But the Russian political system has nothing in common with democracy. It is a mixture of feudalism, fascism, authoritarianism and other systems with few democratic elements. According to Kasparov, it may be placed between Belarus and Venezuela. On the other hand, western countries frequently treat Russia as a rather democratic country in order to justify their cooperation. Hence the theories about the regime's liberalisation which, in actual fact, are not supported by any specific practices. No vital political changes can take place without exerting pressure on the Russian authorities.

After Kasparov's statement, **Żakowski** asks him where such pressure could have come from. The Russian authorities seem very powerful, and it is difficult to point to the source of their potential weakening.

Kasparov believes that the fight against authoritarian regimes cannot be ended with a single demonstration or political clash. What is most important is the inclination towards change which is currently present. Today, political transformation may be fuelled by the economic crisis which the regime is not able to cope with. According to the Russian politician, society sees that the authorities are becoming more and more insecure in their actions and worry about exceeding the critical mass of social discontent. People experience fear, which may initiate social transformation. Medvedev's task was primarily to change Russia's image abroad. He frequently speaks about human rights and sells himself better than Putin, but he has not introduced any significant changes.

Relations between the authorities and opposition

Żakowski expresses doubts as to whether those people who elected Putin and Medvedev would want any other social and economic system. He also notes that even Kasparov has problems forming an anti-government coalition.

Kasparov responds that today, in a time of fictitious elections, it is very difficult to evaluate relations between the authorities and the opposition. Groups not acknowledged by the authorities are politically non-existent, and the system controls not only the governing parties but also the opposition. The 2000 elections witnessed some low-level hoaxes, but in 2004 the scope of manipulations was much broader and in 2008 the situation became almost identical as to how it was in the Soviet Union, which turned democratic elections into a complete fiction. For example, every hour the turnout radically rose and support for the governing camp's candidates approached 100%. Still, Kasparov says that the lack of protests should not be mistaken for acceptance of the authorities. People are afraid of changes for fear of losing what they already have, but Russian society is ready for democracy, and the changes may come very fast.

Referring to Kasparov's statement, **Żakowski** asks whether Russians would elect a democratic party after rejecting Putin, whether power would not be immediately taken by another authoritarian group? What is the mood of the public?

According to **Kasparov**, it is not easy to diagnose the public's awareness in Russia, but many politically involved people would want the introduction of liberal democracy. If fully democratic elections were conducted, many and varied parties would make their way to

Parliament and the governing camp would disintegrate. In Russia there is no consent for dictatorship, and more and more people wish for the decentralisation of power.

End of Putin's reign?

Kasparov's answer to the question about the potential date of the end of Putin's reign is that his power may end even before 2012. A lot will depend on the stability of the Russian financial system which is shaky, even now. Financial reserves are quickly diminishing, and the country will become insolvent in a dozen or so months if oil prices do not rise soon. What is more, the authorities may strive for war in order to strengthen the economy and sustain the regime. It is also possible that Putin will turn into a scapegoat of the system with responsibility for all pathologies being shifted to him. The Khodorkovsky case, which has recently been directed to Strasbourg, may be of vital importance here. A decision adverse to the Russian authorities here may well trigger political changes. Similar consequences may follow the deepening economic crisis.

After answering a number of Żakowski's questions, the Russian politician elaborates on his views by answering questions from the audience. In response to a question about cooperation with Nazbol (National Bolshevik Party) and Limonov, and the boundaries of potential political alliances, Kasparov says that he is open to the formation of broad coalitions. The basic condition for cooperation is the approval of fundamental principles such as freedom of the press, freedom of assembly, and judicial independence. In addition, the organisations which Kasparov has worked with have never used violence. Kasparov's Solidarity movement displays a different approach to politics than Limonov, who aims at direct hard actions and refers to symbols that are prohibited in Russia. On the other hand, Kasparov does not rule out another coalition with Limonov because the key views that matter to him include the approach to free elections and democratic freedoms, and not to the war in Serbia or the role of Stalin in the history of Russia.

Are Russians ready for democracy?

The next question concerns the data about the Russian society's awareness and their readiness for democracy. According to Kasparov, opinion polls cannot be relied upon in Russia because it is a police state. People are afraid to tell the truth. Still, 30% of the public have openly declared a critical opinion of Putin's reign. With regard to questions about specific spheres of social life the percentage of negative voices is even higher. But during the elections the candidate support polls perfectly correspond to the final results, which can only

mean that both results are manipulated. In this situation it is difficult to define the public's attitude towards democracy, but it seems that the wave of critique is rising. Russians are pragmatic, and associate democracy with prosperity. When the situation improved during Putin's reign, some thought that level of democracy had expanded. But when the Russians' situation deteriorates because of the economic crisis, their trust in the authorities may also significantly drop.

The next question refers to the opposition which Russians would want. In Kasparov's opinion, people learn about politics primarily through the media, which currently belongs to the authorities. During the first two years of Kasparov's activity, the vast majority of the population associated him with chess, and started to match him with politics only after his participation in demonstrations. On the other hand, opposition organisations are becoming more and more numerous, though the authorities have not stopped trying to repress them. People who do not support the government are dismissed from work or imprisoned, protesting students are expelled from universities and opposition organisations are outlawed. However, there is a growing tendency towards critique of the authorities, and ensuing changes may take place rapidly.

The next question touches upon the possibility of rifts in the governing camp. Kasparov says that crisis always weakens the authorities and causes unrest. In his opinion, it is Putin who will lose most from the crisis.

In response to a question about the role of young people in political life, Kasparov says that Russia is currently experiencing a demographic depression, but that young people are gradually taking a more and more active part in politics. Their situation in Russia is rather bad: education requires money, unemployment is rising, and the only way out is emigration or rebellion. For this reason, the Kremlin tries to use young people for its own purposes but, in the long run, they may rise against the system.

How can the Russian opposition be helped?

The next question refers to the possibility of increasing the scope of Solidarity's impact and of supporting Kasparov's organisation. The Russian politician answers that his movement is present in the media in many countries. But in Russia it reaches the public primarily via the Internet, as the major media outlets do not allow opposition politicians to voice their views. Changes in this area will be very difficult to achieve, but every bit of help is extremely necessary. Moral support may be essential, as it strengthens the organisation's faith in its mission, and people begin to overcome their indifference and start to believe that they can change something. Such support was voiced for Polish Solidarity, and contributed to its

victory. Democratic countries should not sanction Putin's regime. The Soviet Union collapsed despite having many tanks, and the same might happen to the present system of power in Russia. Today's authorities care mostly about the rise in oil prices, and may enter another military conflict. What is more, the budget in Russia reduces resources to all spheres of life except for the police, prosecution and propaganda. This last item involves creation of a better image of the country abroad, as exemplified by the information policy regarding the Georgia conflict.

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