The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Russia Needs New People

By Victor Davidoff

September 19, 2010



The mass media campaign against Mayor Yury Luzhkov has given bloggers lots of fun as they try to guess what will happen to him. A poll carried out by the fourth most popular blogger on Runet, Anton Nosik, showed that oddly enough, bloggers are rather well disposed to Luzhkov. Forty-three percent think that he'll stay in his post until June 2011, when his term ends. While they make fun of Luzhkov's hobby of beekeeping, bloggers are predicting that after he retires, Luzhkov will be able to devote himself fully to his beehives without worrying about accusations that in any country in the West would lead to a long trial.

The results of this poll might seem paradoxical, but they are based on good historical precedent. In recent years, many extremely unpopular regional bosses have been removed, and all of them received golden parachutes. For example, when Bashkortostan President Murtaza Rakhimov retired, he received an annual pension of 9 million rubles ($290,000), which is about $100,000 more than a U.S. president receives for his pension. It turns out Russians were wrong when they thought that the job of U.S. president is the best in the world.

On Runet, bloggers have been discussing the prospects of the newly created bloc

of oppositional organizations headed by liberal opposition politicians Mikhail Kasyanov, Vladimir Milov, Boris Nemtsov and Vladimir Ryzhkov &mdash although the general view is that they don't have a chance, even if they can get through the obstacles to register their candidates. They also have been paying attention to the new movement within the State Duma called Go Russia, whose main focus is to support President Dmitry Medvedev's modernization policies. Go Russia is planning its founding conference on Sept. 25.

Go Russia is called an "oppositional" movement. Only in Russia could a movement to support the standing president be called "oppositional." All the same, the general opinion is that the Go Russia cross-party movement might become a real alternative to Putin's United Russia party, which now has a reputation just about as bad as the Communist Party in the last years of the Soviet Union. But the pro-Medvedev "opposition" has had a hard time rallying supporters. Igor Yurgens, director of the liberal, pro-Medvedev Institute of Contemporary Development, infuriated the liberal Internet community with his statement that the main obstacle to modernization of the country is the people &mdash the lack of interest among the majority of the country's elite and the old-fashioned, backward attitudes of the citizens.

Many bloggers passionately disagreed with Yurgens. "Corruption and authoritarianism are the main roots of the problem," wrote one blogger. "No country with such high levels of corruption and absence of freedoms has been able to carry out real modernization." But Yurgens has access to nationwide polls, and it's possible that he knows more than many liberal bloggers.

This week's most popular post on Runet was a diary of a blogger from the Siberian city of Bratsk in the Irkutsk region. The diary describes life in the country, which is more reminiscent of some Tolkien kingdom of Orcs than human civilization. In this world, there are beings who not only live on their salaries of 8,000 rubles a month, but manage to get drunk, too. "Sept. 1 is the day of knowledge. On the streets today there are a lot of drunken children and their parents.

"In the winter, crooks grab fur hats and sheepskin coats off passers-by. In the summer, they steal cell phones, watches &mdash anything that can be grabbed.

"The trees of the taiga are being ruthlessly cut down. The mayor said that forests outside Bratsk will only last another 30 years." And the ecological situation is dire: A pulp and paper mill "is located almost right in the center of the city. Smoke constantly hangs over the city. ... The stench is revolting."

There isn't any liberal opposition in Bratsk. The only real political force is a Communist Party cell that is made up of people whose age and intellectual abilities are like dinosaurs.

You could argue that the backwardness of Bratsk is representative of most of the country. Perhaps Alexander Pushkin was right when he wrote almost 200 years ago that the government was "the only European" in Russia.

Victor Davidoff is a Moscow-based writer and journalist.

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow

Times.

Original url: https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2010/09/19/russia-needs-new-people-a1547