The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

The Prokhorov-Khodorkovsky Tandem

By Alexei Pankin

September 05, 2011



Soviet communism was ultimately buried by two of its most prominent native sons — Communist Party General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev and Moscow Communist Party chief Boris Yeltsin. Now it seems that Russia's neoliberal capitalism will also fail thanks to two of its greatest beneficiaries — former Yukos CEO Mikhail Khodorkovsky and billionaire Right Cause leader Mikhail Prokhorov.

I came to the first conclusion after reading an enormous number of articles published in recent weeks on the August 1991 coup that resulted in the collapse of communism and the Soviet Union. It was Gorbachev who, without any pressure whatsoever from below, took the country along the path of democratic and market reforms, thereby paving the way for Yeltsin's political career. And it was probably the personal conflict between these two party chiefs that explains why subsequent events were more counterrevolutionary than evolutionary. After Yeltsin won and the counterrevolutionary excitement faded, the popularity of his neoliberal ideology began a steady decline — to the point where liberalism today has become a bad word.

The second conclusion occurred to me several months ago after reading an issue of Forbes magazine online that ran a selection of quotations showing Khodorkovsky's ideological evolution. The list began with his "The Man with a Ruble" essay co-authored in 1992 with his future Yukos colleague Leonid Nevzlin and ended with his prison writings that can best be described in modern terminology as left-wing social democracy.

Ekho Moskvy radio recently aired a program titled "The Left-Wing Manifesto of Right Cause," referring to Prokhorov's party. Many of the points made in the manifesto seem to come from the Bolsheviks in 1917. Prokhorov's promise to give out free land to people willing to work it is a repeat of the Bolshevik slogan "Land to the Peasants." The call for "universal military duty with voluntary enlistment" is essentially a militia system of manning the armed forces that existed in the Soviet Union until the early 1930s.

The media seized upon these and many other parallels and emphasized how far removed Prokhorov's ideology was from the usual neoliberal Gaidar-Chubais line of thinking. But it is not important how dissimilar Prokhorov's manifesto is to the principles of the young economists who tried to liberalize the Russian economy in the early 1990s. What counts is the extent it answers the needs of the present day. In my opinion, it answers those needs quite well.

It does so all the more because the old labels lose their meaning in modern life. The militia principle — that is, universally arming the people — is how the army is built in Switzerland, the most bourgeois country of the world. The promise to give land to the peasants is an update of the U.S. Homestead Act of the 19th century, and Prokhorov's call for the state and society to focus their efforts on developing this country's vast, untouched stretches of land is the Russian version of the U.S. drive to settle the Western frontier.

It is even more interesting that both Khodorkovsky and Prokhorov achieved remarkable success and wealth in the post-Soviet system. Despite the very different circumstances in which they now live, both have come to the conclusion that the country must move toward a more socialistic future. The two make an interesting tandem.

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