The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

In Search of a New Party

By Richard Lourie

July 15, 2012

Vladimir Lenin got off one of his more memorable lines during the First All-Russia Congress of Soviets in Petrograd in June 1918. It was shortly after the tsar's abdication, and at issue was whether to support Alexander Kerensky's provisional government or contest it for power. One delegate asked if there was any party that could say, "Put power in our hands, we'll take over." He answered his own question: "There is no such party."

Lenin retorted: "There is such a party!" meaning, of course, his own, the Bolsheviks.

Now, nearly a century later, the question is relevant again. Many believe the six years until the next presidential election should best be used in building a new party. But what would such a party look like? What would be its ideas, slogan, logo and name, and who would be its leader?

Any new party will have to mix vision and pragmatism, a sense of a new national identity and how to create it. It will have to describe a new stage in political development and present a road map of how to get there. The new party will have to appeal to Russia as it is now, with

liberal and capitalist elements coexisting with strong nationalism and significant remnants of communism. Ordinary Russians want government that is effective, responsive and just. Meanwhile, every natural disaster from fire to flood only reveals how distant that goal remains.

If properly channeled, nationalism can help liberate Russia from its inferiority complex over its lost might and influence. It can also help crystallize a clear national identity that is still lacking 20 years after the Soviet collapse.

Corruption hinders progress where reforms are most needed: in diversifying the economy and in making the judiciary and media independent of government. It may take a 21st-century version of Lenin's Cheka to cauterize the rot.

Vision must be compressed into slogan. With a few exceptions such as "For fair elections," the opposition's slogans have been negative: "Putin is a thief" or "Russia without Putin." But that doesn't tell us what they want in his place.

What's in a name? A lot. Like Bolsheviks (meaning "those from the majority"), the name United Russia also pretends to be more than it is. A new party might also choose to have "Russia" in its name but will need a strong adjective. Maybe, Volnaya (Free), or maybe something entirely fresh that doesn't sound like parties of the past.

United Russia has already appropriated the bear as its logo. St. George slaying the dragon, the symbol of both Moscow and Russia, has a crusading, dramatic feel to it but could put off some of the secular sort, not to mention the non-Orthodox segment of the population. Still, the symbol appears on the presidential flag, and there hasn't been any ruckus over it.

Slogans, logos and platforms can be designed by committees, but leaders have to emerge.

Opposition leader Alexei Navalny is the closest thing so far as demonstrated by his ability to move easily in the boardroom, blogosphere and street. And it was he who created the slogan describing United Russia as the party of "crooks and thieves." But the young activists in many countries believe in "leaderless" revolutions, seeing parties as things of the past, like rotary phones.

Time will tell about that. But to the question, is there any party that is able to say, "Put power in our hands, we'll take over," the answer has to be: not yet.

Richard Lourie is the author of "The Autobiography of Joseph Stalin" and "Sakharov: A Biography."

Original url: https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2012/07/15/in-search-of-a-new-party-a16256