

Q&A: Anti-Drug Crusader Roizman Wears Many Hats

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From right to left: Drug Free City founder Roizman and his allies in the Civil Platform party – tycoon Mikhail Prokhorov and singer Alla Pugachyova. **Igor Tabakov**

Dressed in a beat-up denim jacket and with three days worth of stubble on his cheeks, Yevgeny Roizman, 50, looked like an 80s rocker being interviewed after a concert. But the charismatic Yekaterinburg native, with eyes red from a lack of sleep, is a man who wears many hats.

He is a businessman, a published poet, a race car driver and a former State Duma deputy representing the nationalist Rodina Party. Currently, Roizman is a close political ally of billionaire Mikhail Prokhorov, who called him an "honest man with a right cause" in an interview last March.

Yevgeny Roizman

Education

2003 — Gorky Urals State University

Work experience

1992 — co-founded the Jewelry House company

1999- established the Drug Free City foundation

2003-2007- served as a State Duma deputy representing the Rodina party.

2012 — now — a senior member of Mikhail Prokhorov's Civil Platform party.

Favorite book: Moby Dick by Herman Melville (1851)

Reading now: has no time to read, finishing his own book on icons.

Movie pick: Runaway Train by Andrei Konchalovsky (1985)

Weekend getaway destination: Mironovo village, Sverdlovsk region

Favorite restaurant: Shoko Cafe in Yekaterinburg.

Analysts have speculated that Roizman's conflict with authorities was one of the reasons why the Kremlin allegedly orchestrated Prokhorov's ouster from the Right Cause party in September 2011.

Though Roizman's political opponents have criticized him for his 2-year prison term for theft in the 1980s, he has become admired by many in Yekaterinburg as a staunch anti-drug crusader.

Roizman, who founded the Drug Free City foundation and a rehab center in 1999 in Yekaterinburg, has helped many youngsters to stop using drugs.

Some of his methods of treating hard drug addicts have proved controversial, with rehab center employees handcuffing them during withdrawal and feeding them with only bread and water at that time.

The accusations led to the arrest of Yegor Bychkov, a Drug Free City volunteer who was sentenced to three and a half years in prison in 2010. But he was soon freed after a massive campaign in his defense launched by prominent journalists, bloggers and rock musicians. Bychkov's supporters appealed to then President Dmitry Medvedev, who asked the prosecutors to review the case.

Roizman, who calls his anti-drug crusade his main agenda, said he still faces pressure from local prosecutors, who want to close his rehab center.

A historian by background, he is also the founder of a private museum dedicated to the Nevyanskaya school of icon painting, which was developed by local Old Believers. The museum has more than 600 items bought by Roizman and other enthusiasts on display and is free of charge for visitors.

Roizman, who made his fortune in the jewelry business in the mid-1990s, also writes short stories, including anecdotes from his youth that have won critical acclaim. In his office, he keeps shelves with hundreds of books donated by Drug Free City volunteers and patients' parents and confesses that book reading is his favorite pastime:

"I can read many books simultaneously and very quickly. Everything I achieve in my life, I achieve through intense concentration on a subject," he said.

The interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Q: Drug Free City's methods of treating drug addicts have caused a lot of controversy. How can you respond to that criticism?

A: I can reply to my critics in a very simple way. When I am told that we can't work like this, I can argue that we have saved hundreds of lives. While I'm talking to you, there are hundreds of people awaiting treatment at my rehabilitation center and people still continue to come and go.

When we ask our critics how they are fighting drug abuse, they have no answer because they are not doing anything. I will also say that most of the stories about our methods were greatly exaggerated by the media.

All the pictures showing a person chained to a bed with handcuffs were taken openly at our rehab center, which has always been accessible to the media.

All of that began when the state machine rallied against us, even though we had been awarded by the Federal Drug Control Service for our work in the past and worked jointly with law enforcement officials.

When people who live off Western grants come to me and ask me to collaborate with them I ask them what they do. They say they are working to reduce the harm caused by drugs. So I tell them that we teach people not to use drugs and other rehab centers tell them how to do it properly.

Q: Your political alliance with billionaire-turned politician Mikhail Prokhorov has surprised many experts. You seem to be very different people. What brought you closer together?

A: We sat down and began to talk. I myself was in business before and I understand how things work and how much time and money should be invested to create thousands of jobs. When we spoke, he said that he had enough money to buy several islands somewhere and reside there

peacefully, but he wants to change the situation in the country and that is very dear to me.

He has a lot of energy and a spark in his eyes, which is the most important factor.

Q: How do you view the bill seeking to increase penalties for insulting believers' feelings, which is currently pending in the State Duma?

A: I believe that Pussy Riot's performance in the Christ the Savior Cathedral was meaningless and ugly, but the maximum penalty that should have been imposed on them was to throw them out with dirty rags or publicly show them that their action was shameful.

Everything that has been done to them caused a major split in society, since people started to pay more attention to the church hierarchy, seeing their behavior as an attempt to drive Russia, known for its scientific achievements, into the Dark Ages. All of this has little to do with faith.

On the other hand, I have met quite different priests such as Father Roman, a friend of mine who believes that Russia can be saved through education, especially natural sciences. He says that the study of science makes it possible to understand the divine.

Today, the ruling elite is dividing people, and things like that can't be resolved easily. Society has not determined the basic vectors of the state ideology and its attitude toward Stalin's crimes, and it is not clear what period we should look back to for guidance. The government makes spur-of-the-moment decisions. If it is profitable to promote Stalin then they bet on him, if it is profitable to tout the church, they bet on the church.

But if you promote Stalin, you need to understand that he was one of the destroyers of the church. When communists tell me how good it was under communism, I have no problem about it, but they still lost the country. You can develop a country by fits and starts for 15 years, but you can't do that for 70 years.

Q: As a former businessman, what do you think needs to be changed to attract foreign investors to Russia?

A: To become an attractive country for business, Russia has to have business freedom and clear rules that will be able to curb corruption somehow. For example, Yekaterinburg is a good and powerful city, with a huge potential, and has a spirit similar to that of the country's capital. But most regional officials here, from the local police chief to the head of the Federal Security Service branch and the governor, are outsiders who have nothing to do with this land and are not going to live here.

We are suffering from constant scandals in the police force for which no one is held responsible. We have many local problems that need to be resolved, while the governor is engaged in colossal projects like the 2018 FIFA World Cup and Expo 2020.

Q: What do you think about the state of U.S.-Russian relations and how can they be improved?

A: I am 50 years old, and during these fifty years, except for five years of rapprochement, I have heard that the U.S is "the Empire of Evil," and it will soon collapse. I do not even know anymore if America exists or not. But in general, I believe that the image of an external enemy in Russia is being artificially created and it is being done quite deliberately.

As an historian, I understand what the expansion of China will mean for Russia. This is not a war of conquest, but it is an expansion that poses a threat to Russia up to the Urals. And it makes sense for Russia to be closer to America to oppose this expansion.

Moreover, I believe that in order to stop this expansion in the Far East we have to work with the Japanese. Our foreign policy should be more balanced and flexible, while everything that happens in our relations with the U.S. now is very ugly. But I do understand the American mentality, they may not even pay attention to Russia, they have a lot of other things to take care of.

Q: How do you motivate people to support your foundation?

A: The foundation is an organization where we hire people from the street. Everyone works because I work. If a person steals himself he cannot tell others not to steal. Previously, it was only funded with my money and, when it ran out, I had to ask people to donate. When I collect money, I understand that it is important to donate your own funds first.

Q: What inspires you?

A: Sport. It saves me from daily routine. When I start to exercise, I remove all my negative energy. The same can be said about the icon museum. The Drug Free City foundation is my rebellion, which I started because it was necessary to resist drug use, and the museum is my real life. It was established in 1999 and it is the first private icon museum in Russia.

At the museum, there is a research center. Being an expert on the Urals Old Believers, I am currently spending all my spare time to write a work on the history of the Nevyanskaya icon painting school.

Q: What keeps you awake at night?

A: Authorities are trying to strangle me and I feel very bad because of that. I have never met such ungrateful and wicked people in power. All those anti-drug foundations that the government creates do not achieve anything. After the latest search at the foundation's premises, I came home and my wife said: "You're 50 years old, you are a researcher with a good name why do you need all of that?" I understand that I am tired and I want to give up. But when parents who can't find their daughter turn to me and we find her alive and well, that gives me some motivation and hope.

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