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Q&A: Billionaire Fetisov Believes Russia's Future Is Green

By Anatoly Medetsky

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Fetisov advises against investing here due to the political environment. **Vladimir Filonov**

The fine chairs in billionaire Gleb Fetisov's office all feature green leather upholstery.

It is no wonder: Fetisov is chairman of Green Alliance-People's Party, the most prominent, albeit nascent force in the field of green politics.

And he feels for Greenpeace in its standoff with Gazprom about drilling in the Arctic.

Gleb Fetisov

Education

1995 — Financial Academy in Moscow,

master's degree in economics
1988 — Moscow State University, bachelor's degree in economics

Work experience

2012-current — Chairman of political party Green Alliance-People's Party.
2009-2012 — Board chairman at My Bank.
2009-2012 — Deputy chairman of the commission on regional development and local government of the Public Chamber.
2009 — Founded investment firm My Decker Capital in China. The firm has a fund that in 2011 invested $100 million into China's largest retail chain, New Cooperation Trade Chain.
2009-2009 — Head of a United Russia working group on social and economic development.
2001-2009 — Member of the Federation Council, the parliament's upper chamber, chairing the committees for financial and economic policy.
1997-2001 — Member of the Krasnoyarsk regional legislature.
1996-2000 — Court-appointed manager of the Achinsk Alumina Refinery in the Krasnoyarsk region.
1993-1996 — Executive positions at private banks and other companies.

Favorite book: "I Hear You: A Listening Skills Handbook" (1992) by Eastwood Atwater; ''Statecraft: Strategies for a Changing World'' (2002) by Margaret Thatcher.

Reading now: "Hot, Flat, and Crowded: Why We Need a Green Revolution — And How It Can Renew America" (2008) by New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman.

Movie pick: "The Iron Lady" (2011), directed by Phyllida Lloyd; "Heat" (1995), directed by Michael Mann.

Favorite Moscow restaurant : Palazzo Dukale, 3 Tverskoi Boulevard.

Best weekend getaway: Golfing, boat sailing and polo places in the Moscow region.

"I am, of course, on the side of Greenpeace," Fetisov, 47, said in an interview. "In more general terms, we are for development, but the type of development that does not breed double-headed calves, leaves us fresh air and water, and that comes after a discussion with people about important issues."

A soft-spoken economist with a learned appearance of a college professor, Fetisov has succeeded in the telecoms-to-finance business. His net worth of $1.9 billion earned him the status of the country's 55th richest person in the latest Forbes magazine ranking. Now, he is taking a stab at building capital of a different kind.

He realizes that the investment may not repay generously for a long while.

"In my lifetime, it will be a niche party," he said. "But I am deeply convinced that it will be a leading political force, not only in Russia, but also throughout the world, in the second half of this century."

Telecoms, finance and retail — the areas where he has invested — have taken a back seat to mayoral bids in Moscow and Tomsk and broadsides at Gazprom and Shell about pollution concerns.

In Tomsk, Lady Luck turned her back on Fetisov who came in third in the Oct. 13 elections, with 11 percent.

The winner, a United Russia candidate and co-owner and chief of Tomskoye Pivo brewery, Ivan Klyain, swept the vote with 62 percent.

In Moscow, Fetisov was unable to even make it on the ballot for the Sept. 8 elections because he did not muster enough support from municipal lawmakers, a condition that the law set for mounting a campaign.

He seemed determined to plow ahead with his political agenda despite setbacks. His higher goal is to head off a major crisis, like the Bolshevik revolution, he said.

"Instability in all areas of life is so palpable that it is definitely leading to some serious social upheavals," Fetisov said. "We need to avoid those upheavals, especially as we approach the year 2017, which is precisely 100 years after the October revolution of 1917, making this number 17 hang thick in the air.

"You can feel these ions and charges. At least, I can feel them very intensely."

Fetisov sat down with The Moscow Times in his office on Krasnopresnenskaya Ulitsa to speak not just about politics, but also about chess and his past work in Siberia to rescue a starving industrial town whose primary employer almost went bankrupt — although turning things around made the snow there look less white. This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Q: Do you feel for the Greenpeace activists who boarded the Gazprom oil rig in the Arctic?

A: You cannot reduce a conversation about the greens to environmental issues alone. The Green Alliance-People's Party fights for a new quality of life, and the environmental component is just one aspect of that.

In regards to the incident, we favor a dialogue between the government and citizens, and between entrepreneurs and citizens. We believe the environment and economy must coexist. As long as we lack that dialogue, these local conflicts will occur.

As for me, I am, of course, on the side of Greenpeace. In more general terms, we are for development, but the type of development that does not breed double-headed calves, leaves us fresh air and water, and that comes after a discussion with people about important issues. If there is no cheating, and proper waste treatment facilities are in place, people can choose priorities themselves. Everybody needs jobs, a good salary and confidence in tomorrow. As a green party, we do not call on people to return to savagery. We do not have that desire.

Q: You went into politics following a decade when big businessmen have been hesitant to run for office. What prompted your decision?

A: I am deeply convinced that contradictions in our country grew so acute, and instability in all areas of life is so palpable, that it is definitely leading to some serious social upheavals. We need to avoid those upheavals, especially as we approach the year 2017, which is precisely 100 years after the October revolution of 1917, making this number 17 hang thick in the air. You can feel these ions and charges. At least, I can feel them very intensely. If there are no constructive political forces that will offer the country an alternative program for social and economic development and be able to convince people of the effectiveness of that program and have the opportunity to carry it out, all this could end in a new revolution or some other popular uprising that will throw our country a long way back. The Green Alliance-People's Party is one such force.

Q: Why have you chosen the green platform?

A: I want to engage in the type of political activity that does not make me feel ashamed. When my colleagues and I say 'clean,' we mean not only clean air and water, but also clean politics and clean elections and clean morals. That is all blended in the activity that I am pursuing.

The green ideology is extraordinarily positive and is gaining popularity around the world. In Germany, the Green Party garnered 7.3 percent of the national vote earlier this year, while France's Green Party took an unprecedented 5.7 percent of ballots in the national elections last year.

National-patriotic ideology is a way to nowhere; I would even say, to a disaster and discord in such a multi-ethnic country as ours. I do not know a single example when flirting with national-patriotic ideas led to a country becoming more open and democratic and not forcing distrust and hostility among its citizens. We would surely not be an exception.

Many people talk about the social-democratic idea. From my perspective, for as long as

the Communist Party continues to exist, it will not be possible to spin social-democratic ideas. People do not discern between these shades.

Green ideas are unlikely to resonate with most of our people in conditions of low living standards, but where environmental crimes are blatant, people are ready to vote for us. We believe that the party's potential is 5 to 15 percent. In my lifetime, it will be a niche party, but I am deeply convinced that it will be a leading political force, not only in Russia, but also throughout the world, in the second half of this century.

Q: What is your view of the series of elections in September?

A: It was the first full-scale political season for the party. In July 2012 we gained the right to participate in elections, but the elections last year came already on Oct. 14, meaning we had insufficient time to create teams. Nevertheless, we ran a campaign.

This season was more comprehensive. We nominated more than 900 candidates in 24 regions for various positions, ranging from governors to local councils. The geography ran the gamut from Vladivostok to the Murmansk region.

I am satisfied with the results. While we had only two representatives elected to the government last year, the number at the latest elections was 40 representatives, which is not bad for a new party.

Of course, the expectations were bigger. I expected that we could have about 100 candidates elected. But it must be noted that we were the runners-up with a very slim margin in almost 50 cases, and in some other cases we encountered downright machinations and falsifications, as was the case in the Voronezh mayoral elections. Our candidate, Vera Kudryavtseva, was the person who should have won that election.

The elections showed that people do not trust the government, the Central Election Commission and the political system. People ignored the elections, as shown by the extremely low turnout. This distrust makes me anxious about prospects for the social and economic development of the country.

For people to believe in elections, the votes need to be counted fairly. I do not understand what the authorities are afraid of. It is obvious to me that United Russia is, as of now, the leading political force in the country. Of course, it does not enjoy the support of the number of people that is ascribed to it in various regions. The most it can hope for is 25 or 30 percent of the vote. It is quite fine.

The president tells us to search for spiritual values, pillars and clamps, but the election system is one such fundamental value. The most valuable thing to do would be to dispel people's disillusionment about the election system. In order for us to build a democratic state and have citizens involved in all matters, such as economy, public and art life, there must be political and other competition. As soon as competition fades away from any area, it brings about a degradation, which may easily lead to the loss of our statehood.

Q: Who or what inspires you?

A: First of all, my family and my children. Second, I am a workaholic. What I am doing

in politics is a conscious choice, a result of serious thought.

Q: What problem would you call the most difficult of those that you had to tackle in your life? What did you learn from it?

A: In 1996, a court appointed me to go to Achinsk, a town of 125,000 people whose main company, an alumina refinery, had not paid salaries for nine months. Stores and service outlets were closed, heating was intermittent, people were genuinely hungry and feeding on potatoes and other vegetables that they had stocked up from summertime. With the alumina refinery down, the snow was whiter than white. To jolt that clunker back to life, to restart the plant and give the city a second chance was the most difficult task, and the one that makes me most proud. Nine months after I took over as a court-appointed manager, the plant returned to profit, people began getting paid and you could see how the town came back to life. I realized one thing after that stage in my life: There are no unmanageable tasks in business and social development. If you can produce goods or services that people need, you will achieve anything in business, running a city or art.

Q: What is the single piece of advice that most influenced your life?

A: I played chess professionally as a child. Bobby Fischer's and Mikhail Tal's combinatorial playing styles impressed me with their elegance. You could feel that they were geniuses. My coach told me that what makes a genius is only 10 percent talent, and the remaining 90 percent is hard work. He told me that Fischer had a row of chess tables on the way from his bed to his bathroom, and he would play the game if he had to walk the distance at nights. So, the advice was that you need to work hard if you want to be a high-level professional.

Q: What would you like to be remembered for?

A: I would like to carry out projects that would be of use for generations of our citizens. I would like to set up a university, for one. What I am seeing now is strikingly different from what there is in the U.S. My son is studying at Stanford University, which draws most of its profits not from the interest on its huge endowment, but from big corporations that order research. My son's courses include three by Nobel Prize winners.

America's success is based on two things: First, they did much to attract successful people in various areas, and second is stability. If our country does not turn into a magnet for these people and provide stable conditions for life and development, we do not have a future.

At this point, I am far from putting the university dream into practice because I am in politics. I might deal with the idea closer toward the age of 60 or 70.

Q: What advice would you offer a foreigner who wants to invest or expand in Russia?

A: I would advise against doing business in Russia. As long as the current political situation lasts, when a single party has full control in the State Duma, there is always a risk that in business competition you will encounter the interests of this party's representatives. Then, your business will be very quickly stifled or pushed out of Russia.

Any businessman must understand that if he is treated unfairly and with support from a political or government-related force, he had better have the option of turning to another

political force for reinforcement. I am not talking about multinational corporations, which have the political support of their governments. I am referring to small and medium-sized companies. For them, the risk of losing everything here is very high.

Also, a quarter of the seats in the State Duma belong to a party that calls for nationalizations. With a parliament like this, the business environment is very bad.

Q: What has recently made you feel surprised, happy or disappointed?

A: My participation in election campaigns and political activity.

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