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Q&A: Irina Prokhorova's Faith Drives Ethical Evolution (Video)

By Delphine d'Amora

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Prokhorova remains optimistic in the face of increasing authoritarianism.

In 1992, as the remnants of Soviet society disintegrated around her, a woman with no business experience decided that the time was ripe to found the new nation's first independent literary journal.

"Of course it was absolutely crazy at that time. Even most of my friends said, 'Who needs such a thick, professional academic journal in 1992, who is going to read it?'" Irina Prokhorova recalled with a laugh.

Irina Prokhorova

Education

1986 — Moscow State University, Ph.D.
in philology

Work experience

1992 to present — The New Literary Observer
literary journal and publishing house,
founder and editor-in-chief
2004 to present — Mikhail Prokhorov
Foundation, co-founder
2012 to present — host of "Irina Prohkorova.
Value System" on RBC-TV
2012 to present — host of "Culture of the
Everyday" on Komsomolskaya Pravda radio
2013 — leader of the political party Civil
Platform

But for Prokhorova, 58, the privation and hardships of that time were only half of the story. The other half was an extraordinary exhilaration and sense of freedom — that now, finally, anything was possible.

More than 20 years later, the journal — the New Literary Observer — has blossomed into a thriving publishing house, and Prokhorova is a prominent figure not only on Russia's literary scene, but in philanthropy and politics as well.

Her televised debate representing her brother, billionaire Mikhail Prokhorov, during the 2012 presidential campaign pitted her against Vladimir Putin's surrogate, Nikita Mikhalkov. Prokhorova's eloquence and intelligence left the famous movie director admitting that if it was she who was running, his vote would go to her.

In January this year, Prokhorova stepped up as leader of her brother's Civil Platform party. While the move into politics may seem an unusual leap to some observers, for Prokhorova it is simply an extension of the work that she has been doing all along.

"We still have a mission to enlighten," she said. "The idea of human freedom and independence, a new relationship between society and the government, fundamental ethical and philosophical principles — this is the foundation on which everything else is built."

Despite her many titles and lofty ambitions, when Prokhorova welcomed reporters from The Moscow Times into her office, casually dressed and holding her electric tea kettle in hand, it was clear that this is a woman of few pretensions.

Perhaps it is this lack of affectation that has earned her popularity as the host of two programs: the talk show "Value System" on RBC television and "Culture of the Everyday" on Komsomolskaya Pravda radio.

Q&A with Irina Prokhorova, Editor in Chief of the New Literary Observer publishing house, co-fonder of the Mikhail Prokhorov Foundation philanthropy and leader of Civil Platform political party.

Or, perhaps, it is her passion for the values themselves, which underlie all of her cultural and political activities.

It was the desire to promote grassroots social movements that led to the creation in 2004 of the Mikhail Prokhorov Foundation, which supports cultural projects in neglected regional communities.

Social change is a slow and painstaking process — but there is hope, Prokhorova said, proudly remembering projects that ended with a blossoming of creativity in one of the many desolate single-industry towns of Russia's north.

But no matter how far she has come and how many new roles she has taken on, Prokhorova's motivation is unswerving.

"The source of inspiration is the same as it was in the late 1980s: the feeling of freedom and possibility to do something. I can never get used to it," she said.

Q: Why do you print books and host radio and television shows?

People involved in publication — publishers, journalists — are, by their nature, preoccupied with enlightenment. They attempt to convey some system of values to society. They have a certain compassion for society — otherwise they would do something else.

A publisher is a person who believes, and perhaps deludes himself, that when he publishes a book someone will pick it up and read it and this will change the persons' vision of the world or at least compel him to pause and think of some important things that he has never considered before. Without such a delusion, it is impossible to be in publishing.

I live in Russia, it is my country, and I love it very much. It is very difficult for me to observe the re-emergence of a totalitarian system and understand how it is possible to break this dangerous trend, and in which direction to progress. The more I look at the entire situation that has arisen in the last 20 years following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the more I think that the fundamental problems that society faces now — a new strain of authoritarianism, the destruction of the Constitution, the militarization of consciousness — have come about for the most part thanks to an underestimation of the key role a value system plays in the development of society. Change in society begins with changes in ethics.

In the post-Soviet era we often use terms like "democracy," "liberal values," but as a rule we only see the superficial aspects of these concepts — new technology, style and quality of life — without thinking about their essence. These are all easily adopted, but those countries that we aspire to be like are not flourishing because they adopted some new technology but because of fundamental changes to their system of values and worldview. The ideas of human freedom and independence, a new relationship between society and the government, fundamental ethical and philosophical principles took centuries to find their place. But this is the foundation on which everything else is built. Otherwise, no matter what technologies you use, no matter what you do, you will end up with a totalitarian government.

Basically, my programs, all that I do in the publishing house, in the philanthropic foundation and now my initial work in the party, is centered around promoting these humanistic values

and explaining that they are not some abstract idea, that all human life is based on these and that the answers to many question lie precisely there. That as long as man is demeaned, as long as there is state despotism in which the purpose of human life is to sacrifice oneself for the might of the empire, as long as this value system reigns, progress is impossible. I think that now this is understood by a great number of people.

Q: What obstacles did you encounter when you started the New Literary Observer?

The funniest part was when I had finally published the journal and we had to begin distributing it. In Moscow we had already made arrangements with several stores on a trial basis, but we also had to go to St. Petersburg. I called a member of the editorial board, Konstantin Azadovsky, a famous scholar in German studies, who by the way had been in prison for several years in the 1980s — he was a dissident and they simply jailed him. I called him and said: "I want to come to St.Petersburg to distribute our magazine, can you help?" and he said, "Yes, yes, of course, we will meet you."

We brought 200 copies of the journal to the train station in a large number of packages. Our authors and friends helped me throw all this in the train car; I stuffed half a compartment with them, while all the people looked on in horror. I arrived at the train station in St. Petersburg. It was winter. Konstantin Azadovsky and another colleague were standing there with two sleds, like during the blockade of Leningrad. The entire train car helped me unload these packages. We loaded them onto the sleds and pulled them along Nevsky Prospect to the main bookstore, Dom Knigi. We stood there on the street with these sleds and Konstantin Azadovsky went into the store, where they all knew and loved him. He told them, "Our colleague has come with this wonderful journal, look!" but in the meantime we were standing there with these sleds ... They accepted the journal, there were wonderful sales people there, an old guard of book-loving, intellectual people, they really helped us. And so we went around St. Petersburg, distributing the journal.

Everything began as an unbelievable, wild scheme, and from the outside seemed quite frivolous, but in fact it was very serious.

Q: What problems does the publishing house face now?

Something we might encounter, although we haven't yet, is this new injection of ideology into the liberal arts, which really worries me. The problem with history, that again they are trying to write only the correct history — this situation affects all of the humanities. If censorship begins even in one discipline, inevitably it will lead to everything being censored in our sphere, which has been free for so many years, where at last we were able to do normal research. I hope that this will not happen, but there is a danger that the persecution of academics who do "incorrect" science will begin again, as it was in Soviet times.

Q: Many foreigners wonder why Russians tolerate such restrictions.

First of all, not everyone puts up with it, otherwise there would not be demonstrations and strikes, otherwise people would not be moving away. On the other hand, people who have lived here for a long time understand that there could be genuine repression, which is really quite frightening.

Here the idea of stability is very important. People are tired of upheaval, and so often they are prepared, not really understanding the consequences, to give up some rights and freedoms, because they are told: "What is this freedom of speech to you? In exchange we will give you safety."

Here we need to see the situation somewhat differently, and partly even to respect people's misconceptions, because this trauma is in our DNA, it passes from generation to generation. And it is impossible to treat it lightly. I understand where it comes from.

It is a long process. Of course we want quick fixes, to immediately open people's eyes, but being a historian of culture and studying other countries, I know that changes in value systems actually took centuries. We often parade around with borrowed theories, but they have to be deeply felt and adapted to Russian reality. It is a complex and painful process. But I am not at all a pessimist in this regard.

Actually there is a great deal that has changed for the better, although it may not be apparent superficially. In Russia, since for a long time there was no freedom of speech, a kind of devaluation of speech took place. There is a disconnect between what is practiced and what is called rhetoric or discourse. When you ask many people what they think on a political level, they will tell you some horrible things, all of that frightening rhetoric.

But, if you ask them how they see their children's future, how they really work and act, on the level of personal strategies it is suddenly clear that they live entirely by democratic principles. They describe it in somewhat different terms, but it suddenly becomes clear that nobody wants to be downtrodden.

Q: What modern authors should we read in order to better understand Russia?

I really love Lev Rubinstein, a splendid and highly original writer. In the 1970s and 1980s he was known as a very original poet. Since he was working as a bibliographer in a library, he began writing a kind of poetry directly on library cards. They were these individual lines which could be assembled in different orders. But they were also a striking cross-section of the age, of the sound of its language, it is as if he heard what the street said, what people said, and from this assembled a fabric of this life. To this day when you read them there is a breathtaking effect, because he recreates that entire system of values, words, prejudices and insights.

In the beginning of the 1990s he began to write collections of essays, which simply describe existence in an incredible way. They are short, exceedingly witty, astute and refined. We published one collection called "Chasing Hats." If you read it, you can understand what happened in the 1990s — not those 1990s which are common in the mass media, which were depicted as turbulent, terrifying and so forth. On the contrary, they show the birth of a new consciousness, existence in a free environment, including that unbelievable liberation and opportunity to look back at the Soviet past with the eyes of free people and re-evaluate it.

As a publisher I see a major problem. Russia has the image abroad of what I would call "oriental-exotic." We present our books abroad and try to sell the rights to the foreign publishers, but they are interested primarily in our real-life horror stories. Very often they seek stories about Stalin's camps, about the mafia or corruption and other frightening things.

As soon as you propose a book that is on a different plane altogether, they tell you that it is not "Russian" enough. This is a huge problem, this highly negative reputation. Honestly this really distresses me, and in large part we must blame ourselves, because after all Russian politicians present an image of the country that is not terribly positive.

Q: What is your working relationship with your brother, Mikhail?

Everything to do with big business is absolutely his affair — I do not get involved. Our cooperation is on some humanitarian projects. He is also a co-founder of the New Literary Observer, even though it is my project. I am co-founder of the Mikhail Prokhorov Foundation, which he began 10 years ago, and since the foundation supports culture, I manage it. And then recently, in a sense, I have become his assistant in the political party.

At the New Literary Observer, he is not the boss. It is my project. I manage it completely independently. He is my main donor, of course, but that does not prevent me seeking additional funds, it is really my project.

Q: What is the main focus of the Mikhail Prokhorov Foundation?

We work in the Russian regions, and it is very apparent how society is evolving, there is great creativity there, but few who support it. We try to support these local initiatives.

For example, a group of young artists came to the city of Kansk, in the middle of nowhere, a small city that had a population of 90,0000 in its heyday. It was a single-industry town and of course the factory there is no longer in use. The city is gradually deteriorating; the population is already less than 60,000. This group of young artists decided to do a crazy project there, the so-called Festival of Alternative Cinema.

We have supported this Kansk video festival from the very beginning, for the first few years we were their main sponsors and partners, essentially the only ones. And just imagine, this crazy project actually became international. Each year they were able to gather more and more films, additional local sponsors appeared, some associated services appeared in this city, some hotels, and more and more people began coming. In a strange way, around this festival the system began to take shape all over again.

Q: Tell us about a failure you experienced and what you learned from it.

There was a very interesting example in the very beginning, when we were working in Norilsk. One of our first projects was this idea for public service announcements. We invited one of our project managers from Tyumen, she had this project called "Tyumen: City of Warmth." It was various photographs of society, of children and so on, which were simply displayed on billboards, a completely modern form or art. And we decided to do "Norilsk: City of Warmth."

But what we failed to consider when we were studying the city: the photographs were black and white. And in Norilsk they have constant snow, which is sometimes even black, no plant life, darkness: their main problem is lack of color. Because of this their interiors are painted in these lurid, bright, aggressive tones.

And they found the photographs depressing. So they said: "It is difficult and depressing here

already, and then you went and hung these up, and in black and white no less."

And we immediately understood: this is what ignorance and disregard for local convention means. Afterwards we began to take this very seriously, and before initiating any project, we ran it through focus groups and checked to make sure that we would not accidentally offend people.

Q: How do you measure your success?

The measure of success is the quality of the applications for philanthropic support that we receive. Each year these applications become better and better. At first it was: "We need to buy computers," which was logical — in 2004 few people had a computer. There were some very touching, small, local projects, like an exhibition of cactuses that they wanted to bring. When we began to support these projects, society was amazed. The distrust toward charity was very high.

At first we were somewhat exasperated, it is vexing when you come and want to do something and they do not trust you. On the other hand we realized: our people have been duped so many times. They see such horrible corrupt things, so of course they do not believe. You could get offended, but instead let's try to persuade people through our deeds that we work honestly. And we managed to do this, by approving the applications of common people and not the ones the officials wanted.

Q: How do you see the role of culture in Russian society evolving?

Trust and respect for education and culture are very high. As a publisher I can say that modern literature is very vivid and interesting, there are many bright names.

I think that precisely this tradition allows us, despite all complex and unpleasant things, to reconstitute that cultural backdrop. In Russia the sphere of culture, which has always been important, has also always been a social sphere. Since this country has always been authoritarian or totalitarian, culture took on the functions of social life and political debate and so on. The language of culture in Russia is much more than just conversations about art and literature — it is a social and political language. It is through cultural metaphors that society speaks about political problems.

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