

Valerya Novodvorskaya, interview with Philip Boobbyer, Moscow, April 2003, summary in English

*This is a condensed summary of some points from the interview, in the first person, not an exact translation.*

From the moment when the Christian religion was set aside, conscience was effectively forbidden in Russia. For Lenin morality became what was in the interests of socialism. After that morality taken on its own was not welcomed. It came to be classified as something bourgeois. Life was wholly lacking a moral component.

This was all very visible through the events in Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Afghanistan. People did not believe in what was happening, even members of the KGB – people who had had a proper education and access to information. That was very much the case in the 1980s, but even in the late 1960s. The Party bosses were not believers. Maybe Yeltsin believed in it a bit, but his knowledge was limited to the construction industry. Even Gorbachev probably did not believe since he done Law at university.

The 20 million or so who were in the Party remained in it because they were afraid of leaving. Everyone feared losing something. People, members of the intelligentsia, joined the Party in order to be closer to power. The dissidents were no better informed than others, but less afraid of losing something: here it was not a matter of competence, but of conscience. These things came to a head in 1991, as people split into left and right, asking in which system it was easiest to live by conscience, and then again in 1993 when members of Democratic Russia divided over how to respond to events.

Dissidents never had the chance to be involved in politics, that only came later. And when the full range of Western-style political practices came in, of course some dissidents did not want to get involved. We were sceptical about perestroika and Gorbachev's intentions. We in Democratic Union were completely free people who did not share Sakharov's ideas about convergence. Sakharov's constitution was a completely idealistic document, because it still allowed for mass arrests, whereas our version was something closer to the American model. We argued with Sakharov, wishing for a capitalist system and to avoid any connection with the Party. We did not want anything to do with socialism.

We looked with some condescension at people trying to free themselves of the Party influence, as if they were like children trying to take their first steps. We now have better relations with Alexander Yakovlev than we did then. We did not make any compromises. We did not accept the vision of socialism with a human face promised by Dubcek, but wished instead for complete capitalism. For us socialism was unnatural.

A central dissident principle was the idea of freedom of self-expression, freedom of the press etc. Another general principle was not to collaborate with the KGB, to behave well during interrogation etc. Apart from these, people had very different views. The dissident movement was quite contradictory in the sense that it contained people with very varying outlooks and those differences became very obvious in 1993.

Anyone who participated in the Party was responsible for its actions, whether they were personally involved or not, for example for the invasion of Czechoslovakia or the actions of the KGB. We were against the evolutionary approach. We were liberal revolutionaries. We wanted an American-style democratic revolution. We had an argument with Gaidar about this: he said a revolution was undesirable, while we wished for one although believing it was unachievable because of the state of the people.

Solzhenitsyn was of course not a Westerniser, but a pochvennik and monarchist, his conscience was important, 'Live not by the Lies' too, but he knew nothing about economics, and became an extremely reactionary figure. A person who does not accept the Western worldview ends up in a dark place. Prior to the publication of Gulag, he was not ready for confrontation.

I would call myself a Christian democratic of a very worldly type, a modern protestant. The Pope is a very good person, but he is a socialist. Of course, none of us are Orthodox. Democratic Union was anti-communist. We wanted the collapse of the Soviet Union. Democratic Union was not driven by the desire to overcome fear, but by hatred. The Bolsheviks were different in that they hated things that were essential for human civilisation. We simply wanted the Communist Party to be forbidden. That was the difference. We believed that everyone has the right to live within a system of civil law. It is not good to reduce everything to a religious problematic.

Yeltsin did a lot of the country, but it has ended up with the appointment of Putin who is trying to undo what Yeltsin did. If he had been more competent things could have been different. Maybe he was our best chance. He behaved worthily up until 1991, but then there was 1993 and the war in Chechnya and the elections of 1996.

I did not make compromises even from the beginning. Democracy is leading us to a new totalitarianism because people are content with slavery. At the time of the revolution, the intelligentsia was guilty for its readiness to work with left-wing forces.