

“Is Putin Good for Democracy?”

Boris Nemtsov, Member of the Russian Duma,
Leader of the political party Union of Right Forces (SPS)

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Summary by George Soroka, REECA AM '02

Boris Nemtsov began his presentation with a brief autobiographical sketch and a description of the work he is currently engaged in. He then announced that he wanted to cover two topics during his presentation, namely the upcoming December 2003 Russian election and the contemporary state of relations between the United States and Russia.

On the first issue, Nemtsov explained to the audience that only five of the current crop of Russian political parties will be able to overcome the 5% hurdle needed to secure seats in the Duma. The Communist party (KPR)—whose support is “equal to the level of poverty” in the country—will garner no less than 25-30% of the electoral vote in rural Russia and throughout the so-called “red belt” of industrial cities, Nemtsov predicted. The second party capable of surpassing the 5% mark is United Russia, which can count on 15-20% of the vote and which, being the “party of power,” enjoys what he called the “unlimited” financial and administrative support of the Kremlin. However, United Russia is not without its problems, as it is internally divisive and has a contentious leadership. LDPR was mentioned as the third serious contender, with Nemtsov quipping that Zhirinovskiy “belongs to the Kremlin team,” meaning that he serves as a lightning rod for radicals and ultra-nationalists while at the same time distracting voters from real threats to Putin’s power. Zhirinovskiy, however, is an opportunist who is only loyal while he is weak, opined Nemtsov, who thought LDPR will get around 10% of the vote in December.

His own party, he prognosticated, will garner 5-10% of the vote. Supported by twenty-five “big business” donors, Nemtsov contended that SPS is independent from the Kremlin’s influence. He specifically emphasized that SPS stood for individual freedoms and a private economy within an effective state structure. Running on a platform stressing tax abatement, bureaucratic reduction, governmental transparency, privatization of medical insurance, protection of the federative structure and municipal authority, and military reform, SPS also favors the “peaceful development of Chechnya,” according to its leader.

Mentioned last was Yabloko, whose ideas Nemtsov characterized as more leftist or populist than those of SPS. Citing Yabloko’s “relationship” with the Kremlin, he explained that Yabloko will never cooperate with SPS because of Anatoly Chubais’ involvement with the Union, even though an unfruitful attempt at forming a coalition was made in late 2002. Sounding a bit more doubtful than on the others, he ventured that Yabloko on its own may beat 5%.

Looking ahead to the raised hurdle (7%) that political parties will have to overcome in the 2007 election, Nemtsov suggested that the Kremlin leadership was purposefully seeking to reduce the number of active parties in Russia to three or four. Labeling Putin's Russia a "managed democracy," he implied that the Kremlin could manipulate party politics at least partly because it controls "one-hundred percent" of the television outlets in Russia. In light of this and Putin's almost assured second term, the really pressing question, according to Nemtsov, is who Putin will pick to be his successor before the 2007 presidential election. He did not name any potential candidates.

Moving on to address the pressing question of US/Russian relations, Nemtsov cautioned the audience that the situation in Iraq was viewed as a very serious problem in Russia, especially as the Iraqi government is eight billion dollars in arrears. Noting that Sadaam Hussein a few months ago cancelled the oil agreements Nemtsov had negotiated while serving as the Russian energy minister, he observed that now the only country which retained long-term oil agreements with the present Iraqi regime was France. Implicit within this was the fear that Russia, especially in the event of a military strike, would not recoup her debt.

Clear about the fact that he thought war was inevitable, Nemtsov suggested that after the crisis is resolved Russia will have a vested interest in maintaining regional oil prices in the range of \$18-25 per barrel. If the price goes above \$25 a barrel, Russia will lose on the ruble exchange rate. If it goes under \$15 a barrel, Russia's export economy will be in "big trouble." Adding that Russia and America want basically the same outcome, Nemtsov stated that "cooperation about the future oil market is absolutely necessary and possible."

On the matter of Putin's lack of support for the Bush administration's position *vis a vis* Iraq, he suggested that this proceeds from Putin's distrust of the American president. Russia currently feels neglected by the United States, especially in the wake of its support for Washington's anti-terrorism initiatives after September 11th. Therefore, in the current geopolitical climate, avoiding any resolution on Iraq in the UN is in the best interest of the Russian Federation, according to Nemtsov, as it allows Russia to protect her economic interests. Voting the veto, however, would be undesirable from a pragmatic standpoint.

A lively question and answer period ensued, with the first audience question concerning the publication in a Russian newspaper of a comment Nemtsov allegedly made to the effect that Stalin was "not so bad" for the country. Vigorously denying the comment, Nemtsov attributed it to a black PR campaign being waged against him. Pointing out that SPS recently tried to organize a campaign titled "Fifty Years After Tyranny" to highlight Stalin's crimes, he added that he was personally very interested in mounting an exhibit in the State Duma based on evidence DCRES associate Mark Kramer had collected and which was on display outside the seminar room in which Nemtsov gave his talk.

Discussion quickly moved on to other topics. Questioned about what it would take for Russia to support America in the campaign against Iraq, he replied that Russia wants an increase in economic support from the United States, along with assurances that the Iraqi debt will be repaid. Concerning the Nord-Ost hostage taking in Moscow, Nemtsov mentioned that SPS had organized an independent investigation which showed that only four hostages died from the gas itself. The other victims, he claimed, succumbed due to medical mismanagement precipitated by the unwillingness of the Kremlin to share information about the type of gas used in the raid. Asked about the export of nuclear technology to Iran by Russian companies, Nemtsov replied that this was a business matter “not in the political sphere, but economic [sic].” On the issue of the increasingly negative perception Russians have of America, he stated that “Putin forms public opinion,” suggesting that until relations again warm between Moscow and Washington there would be no halt to the anti-American rhetoric. He did, however, note that there have as yet been no demonstrations against the US-led Iraqi war effort in Russia.

The final two audience questions, both of which concerned racism in Russia, animated Nemtsov. Stating that this “is one of the most important questions for Russia,” he noted that fascists today have a real chance to gain political power because of skyrocketing illegal immigration and Russia’s continuing economic woes. Specifically citing the wholesale influx of illegal immigrants into the Russian Far East, Nemtsov suggested that Russia needed to allow increased legal immigration. Doing so, he felt, would allow Russia to settle and exploit its “frontier,” just as America had in the nineteenth century. The only other option was to lose the region.