

Intelligentsia and Power

Galina Starovoitova

*A speech from the
“Congress of Russian intelligentsia”
Collective works
St. Petersburg 1998*

The theme “intelligentsia and power” is very much a personal theme for me. According to statistical parameters I am, it seems, representative of the intelligentsia. At the same time I am a veteran of politics, almost the last remnant of the Inter-Regional Group of Deputies, which was, you may remember, a collective of many great minds and bright intellectuals: writers, artists and actors. Today, conversations with most deputies of the State Duma are not intellectually challenging. But what can be done? The people elected them. They were chosen by our “god-fearing” nation, by our “god-fearing” electorate, I should say.

But today I will elaborate some arguments which are unpopular in this auditorium. I will tell you that politics is in itself an activity of the intelligentsia; it is a creative labour of the intellect and it carries with it a responsibility. Egor Gaidar mentioned this heavy responsibility yesterday. And he knows it firsthand. He took responsibility on himself in January 1992 when the country was on the brink of famine, and again in October 1993 when he went to the Square in front of the Mossosvet building with three generations of his family. At that time an assault mob was preparing to tear down the city, having already stormed the Duma, the Mayoral building and the Ostankino television centre. The situation was saved by a hundred thousand of the intelligentsia who came out on to that same square in response to Gaidar’s appeal. This tipped the balance of power and decided the position of the military and the secret services who, up to that point, had been waiting to see who would come out on top. This demonstrates once again that the intelligentsia is capable of action as well as words.

Yesterday nostalgia for times past and disappointment were voiced. We all understand these feelings. We were hoping to build a different society and we will, I hope, build it to be better than it is today; but I do not share the position of those who negate all our achievements. I feel close to the position of Fazil Iskander who longs for the government to shine as a clear mountain summit, as an example and a beacon for us all. We all know, and Fazil Abdullovich knows better than we do how utopian this is, but nevertheless he is right. His idea, however crazy it might sound ought to be realised.

One of the aims of the intelligentsia is to unite politics and morality, the way it was done by the academician Andrei Sakharov and by Yuri Orlov – president of the Helsinki convention.

We should require moral probity from politicians, but require it not through some abstract illusion, not by naively waiting for it to happen. Nowhere in the world does the economy rely on morality. Codes of conduct and practice have to be established. That's the way it should be here and in the West. When a speaker of the US Congress published a book and received royalties of 4 million US dollars, he had to explain the legality of his royalties and how they were spent. He had to work with public opinion, which unfortunately is not being done by today's intellectuals in our government. It has to be stated that, in the West, there are appropriate mechanisms in place for accountability that do not exist in our country. We should demand them from our government.

Before "perestroika" an "Iron Curtain" existed, but now that we have travelled the world we can compare impartially, having lost many of our illusions. To many of our human rights campaigners it seemed that in the West, beyond the «Iron Curtain», a higher justice prevailed.

It seemed that as soon as the "Iron Curtain" – the totalitarian regime – was removed we would join in the civilization of the world and all would be fine. Today we know that things are not that simple and that everyone has their own national interests.

We have noticed another specific feature. In developed countries, people can just exist and simply enjoy the process of living. A Russian is built in such a way that he cannot and does not want to live without purpose. We need a meaning, an idea, a calling. Millions of our citizens have visited abroad. They came back (tens of millions came back) but some did not; for example, two hundred thousand scientists stayed abroad. They do want to come back and, if the conditions were there for them to work, they would. And tens of millions have come back having found out how things are abroad and wishing that things could be better here. They are a large social group and our strong hope.

Another hope lies with those who practice the "theory of small deeds" in the provinces. Usually we expect fresh ideas from the towns and villages of Russia. It is a pity that in yesterday's speeches the idea of Russia as the "messianic great power" was voiced.

Yes, Russia is great. No one doubts that, but how is it great? By its missiles, or by its morality? Or is it great through its ability to repent for all the crimes that have been committed against its own people? This repentance was undermined by the previous speaker and by some of yesterday's speakers, whilst many in the auditorium applauded because people are becoming bored with repenting. But let us ask who has repented? I cannot remember any such case.

Gorbachev's perestroika began when the film "Repentance" was released, directed by Tengiz Abuladze, that great representative of the intelligentsia, but no real repentance has taken place.

Where there is no repentance for previous crimes, a feeling of vengeance appears and grows. Did the persecutors of the academicians Sakharov or Vavilov repent?

They are our contemporaries – they did not live in the last century. Did the ‘putschists’ of 1991 and the assault squads of 1993 repent? Perhaps it is because they did not, that we have the rise of Fascist parties today as mentioned here by Galina Tuz. I am grateful to her for raising the subject. Not only in Stavropol, but also in the streets of many of our cities their placards and customised swastikas cover lampposts and walls. Doesn’t that alarm you?

You might say, ...what can our weakened, dismembered, impoverished intelligentsia do against that? Indeed, it cannot do much if it continues to stay in such a weak and pathetic state as we are now. (Perhaps my thought will be unpopular but I will express them nevertheless). The intelligentsia will be able to do little, unless it can overcome its estrangement from today’s government. We have heard many critics of today’s government here and, yes, it does many repulsive things. But I have to state that this is our government, it was you and I who brought elected it. And that includes Nicolay Shmelev who has been criticising it in his publications, which has also helped. We must criticise it, we must correct it, but we must also help it. Or perhaps you think that the next government consisting of generals will be ‘ours’? Or perhaps the corrupt, State chauvinists who have pretensions to the next presidency will be ‘our’ power? Or maybe the Fascists, if they come to power, will be ‘our’ government?

Let us abandon all illusions. Today we have the government that is there and let us help it with hard, constructive criticism. The next President will be the one that we, the intelligentsia, will support and elect, just like the one before, who was elected by the intelligentsia. The intelligentsia is always a leader of public opinion but we have not as yet agreed on the next candidate for the Presidency. We don’t have one. This is also a sign of our weakness, like the fact that we don’t have a ‘shadow’ cabinet. If, for example, we were to be given power today and told: “...you don’t like Chubais and others? Change them all”. Do we have the names of people who would step forward? I am afraid not.

Certainly we must call this regime to account, protest against its outrageous deeds. But let us not be under the illusion that we can do without them and that they can do without us. Let us not be voiceless. Let us act.