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People's Deputy: Yuri D. Chernichenko

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The recent elections to the Congress of People's Deputies represent a very complicated and unprecedented example of an attempt at a transition from a totalitarian regime to an authoritarian system, or an attempt at democratization together with an attempt to keep overall policy in the control of the ruling party. That is the meaning of the elections in my view. Many millions of people, at times literally the entire country, took part in these elections as passionately as they had previously drunk vodka, consuming trainloads of tranquilizers because they got so emotional watching television. The elections resulted in defeats and losses for both sides--both for the ruling party apparatus and for the broad electorate in general.

Despite the severe insurance measures taken by the party apparatus during the process of preparation for the elections and the provisions of the electoral law itself, the apparatus suffered enormous losses. Thirty first secretaries of regional party committees were defeated and in the huge city of Leningrad the entire party leadership was rejected. On the other hand, the hundreds of millions of voters, 170 or 180 million people, showed themselves only too often to be very bad voters--they did not know who they were voting for, and elected people either because they seemed nice or people who were indifferent, so that their voting did not convey any real parliamentary meaning. Until very recently the country was a Gulag archipelago in the broadest sense of the word. It made no difference whether it was a university or a party commission, the Bolshoi Theatre or a kolkhoz, everywhere there was the same psychological attitude of obedience, an unwillingness to get into a conflict. The country was a camp within a genetically assimilated psychology, internalized in every cell of the human organism.

Let me tell you about my own experience.

I am a journalist by profession and earned my living by doing television commentaries after I was kicked out of Pravda. I became interested in the complicated question of why in such a big
country with such immense fields their is so little bread. I was never a city person. I am not a Muscovite by origin, although I have now lived on the Lenin Hills for almost thirty years. Consequently when I was nominated as one of sixteen candidates for a seat as People's Deputy from a Moscow constituency I agreed. I didn't see any risk in it for me. I thought I had just a six percent chance of being elected. If you bear in mind that among the sixteen candidates were such names as Academician Sakharov, Boris Yel'tsin, and the historian Yuri Afanas'yev, my chances were close to zero, or even less than that. My wife was willing to let me try this latest whim of mine. But the party apparatus took measures by supporting the candidacy of an astronaut, (Aleksei A.) Leonov, who had taken part in the Apollo-Soyuz mission, and a famous blue-collar worker, (Vladimir V.) Pletnyov. These two were the party's frontmen.

The calculation was that people would like to vote for a famous flyer and astronaut who in the meantime had been promoted to general, or on the other hand for a worker who was a regular guy like everybody else. In this way success was guaranteed. In addition, there was a second line of defense. People who were famous throughout the country were nominated as candidates, for example (Edgar A.) Ryazanov, who had his own television show and has made a lot of films. In this way every possible contingency was allowed for, or so it seemed. But when the real electoral battle started, people began asking about ideology, who has true political beliefs, what a candidate can do for people and what role he had played in bringing about the present situation. All the candidates had to write a brief political platform in the form of a leaflet. Mine only took ten minutes, but my whole thirty-year professional career went into it. It boiled down to the following: You have failed. Now let the people themselves try to feed the country. That's how my campaign got started. In fact I didn't conduct a campaign. Instead of me, people your age got down to work, including sometimes tenth-graders. It was like a mountain avalanche--I don't know where they all appeared from, why they were doing it. Most of them I didn't know at all. They started writing verses during meetings and stuck them up in the subway, shouted all kinds of doggerel through bullhorns about how I was the conscience of the country who had always stood up to Brezhnev. I received no funds at all for campaigning, not a ruble, and I had no printing
equipment available to me at all, so people who had computers were printing leaflets at night. During the night people from the party apparatus would tear the leaflets down. They had to make sure that Leonov won. Then the kids would get up at 3 a.m. and go around sticking leaflets up again in the subway. There was a real war going on. Then there were allegations that I was an agent of the Pentagon, then that I was an antisemite and that I was a Jew--all at the same time. Then that I was a Brezhnev hireling and a communist, so I was attacked by other candidates who claimed they were independent. I was so kaleidoscopic I couldn't recognize myself any more--it was like witchcraft.

Let me summarize the election process by saying that the elections were designed to ensure that ultimate power remained in the hands of people who had not been elected. While all these election battles were going on on the outskirts of Moscow, 750 out of the total 2,250 deputies who had been nominated by the party authorities were virtually already elected, without a ballot box. It dumbfounded one that the Communist Party nominated only 100 candidates for the 100 seats reserved for the Party in the Congress, so that all 100 candidates automatically were elected--it was as simple as that. A similar situation arose in my own family--I had four, maybe even five votes, while my wife had only one. I am a party member, so that in a way I participated in the selection of party candidates. I am a member of the Writers' Union, so that I helped select the delegates of the Writers' Union, and I am also a member of the Union of Journalists, so I could vote for its deputies as well, and finally as an ordinary person I had a vote, so that I had five votes while my wife had only one.

I have been explaining all this so that you understand how undemocratic the electoral regulations were and why there is such a war going on now before the new elections to the local soviets to ensure that there is a truly democratic electoral law--one man, one vote--and also direct elections without an indirect candidate selection process (kolenchatye valy).

During the election meetings I tried to persuade voters that they should vote for changes so that the country can feel itself, but they would complain that a toilet in the high school didn't work or the light fixtures in their apartment house were defective, or a trench hadn't been filled in so that
people would fall into it at night. The problem is that the capability for democratic thought has not
developed, there is a lack of any understanding of what a parliament is, and an inability to
concentrate on real national issues, instead there is a preoccupation with one's own petty selfish
needs—all this was extremely characteristic of our first elections. At the same time there was the
inability of the top party bosses to manipulate public opinion in order to achieve their aims and
satisfy their self-interest. For example, take Boris Yeltsin, the fallen angel, a member of the
Politburo who did not want to carry out the directives of the supreme leadership group. He was
called to account before a plenum of the party for his insolence and a special commission was set
up, supposedly at the instigation of ordinary workers, to examine his behavior as a party member.
Since he enjoyed the support of the masses, Yeltsin decided to run in the most prestigious of all
Moscow constituencies—the first Moscow national district. All the six million Moscow voters now
had to decide whether to vote for him or to obey the party plenum. I told the members of the ruling
élite that they were making a terrible mistake—if they wanted to ensure he lost they should cover
him with kisses and give him golden stars. That way nobody would be willing to touch him and
his defeat would be guaranteed.

Moreover, all the Soviet military servicemen stationed abroad as well as Soviet diplomatic
employees abroad were ordered to vote in the first electoral district. In this way, all possible forces
outside the Soviet Union that could be easily controlled were mobilized. A joke circulated around
Moscow: "From Tokyo to Krakow, everyone must bail out Brakov," since Brakov was Yeltsin's
opponent in the election. You can forgive an old lady who makes use of the elections for her
personal advantage and tries to get something fixed in her apartment, but the top party leaders
showed an incapacity for fresh, rapid, innovative thinking and consequently a lot of people they
had counted on getting elected to the Supreme Soviet were defeated. In the first round of the
elections none of the candidates got the required number of votes and so there was a runoff
election. Maybe everything was decided on one day, April 2. That day the weather was terrible in
Moscow. There was a strong wind and snow. A large crowd of people came to a meeting to
support me, perhaps 2,500 or 3,000 people, including some good poets, writers and scientists,
they were all shouting or looking through election material, it was a massive meeting. Meanwhile, next door the vast luxurious marble hall in the Olympic Village that had been assigned to my opponent was empty. He was desperately trying to get people to come in, telling them "Come in, sit down, it's bright, warm and comfortable in here!" But no one went in, and it was then I realized that I was victorious. I learned that I had been elected when I was in Japan. Our hosts brought me a bouquet--a "male bouquet." When they congratulated me I asked how a male bouquet differed from a female bouquet. They told me that it had 10 roses--a female bouquet would have either 9 or 11 roses. That was the end or rather the beginning of everything.

As far as the first Congress of People's Deputies is concerned, it was a world-class event. Those 13 days were a real unending Shakespearean drama, with the difference that there was no script. The whole country watched. No one knew how it would turn out, and people didn't want to miss a single minute. If a playwright had written such a script, people would have said he had gone overboard. At the same time there was a railroad disaster when two trains blew up, as well as a monstrous bloody massacre somewhere deep in Central Asia. That unique, holy, humanitarian figure, Sakharov, was treated shamefully and abused mercilessly in the hall. Then a general, a real murderer, was dragged out, given all honors, and adulated in front of everyone in the Kremlin hall. It was just too much, no playwright could have gotten away with it. Then right in the hall a fairly young man suddenly nominated himself as a candidate for the presidency in opposition to Gorbachev. His name was Obolensky. His picture was published in many foreign newspapers, for example in *Le Figaro* next to Gorbachev's. In fact his candidacy was just a big comic parody. But after succeeding in becoming world famous instantly by putting himself on a par with Gorbachev, Obolensky didn't just leave the political scene. Instead, he played a very conspicuous comic role, gave speeches, put on acts, and tried to pick up support. I told him that he was making a big mistake by throwing away all the huge potential that he had immediately won in the beginning.

To mention a major economic achievement of the Congress—the three Baltic republics demanded and actually obtained economic independence, or at least a law was passed to introduce
independence in 1990. But in my view the most important political achievement was the creation of a political minority as an expression of the sociopolitical independence of part of the population. The two most important emotional events, to which the whole population reacted deeply, were what was in effect the trial and condemnation of the murderers of Tbilisi, and the vengeance that was taken on Academician Sakharov by supporters of the Afghan war.

With regard to the political achievement of the Congress and the powers it gained vis-à-vis the party, I could point out some positive things. For instance, the Congress and the Supreme Soviet were able to vote down a very large number of minister candidates proposed by the party. we also passed a few laws, but when I proposed a major piece of legislation providing for payment in real money [foreign currency] to peasants for grain, instead of paying America in hard currency, two days later I was told that the Politburo had considered the proposal and decided against it. And that was it, period. This shows you what the real situation is.

Let me conclude by saying that the main thing is that despite all the abuses, violations and dictates, a large number of good people became members of the Congress of People's Deputies and the Supreme Soviet, people in different fields--scientists, artists, economists, creative individuals. I consider that this is a great achievement with which the people itself is to be credited. Some of these people have become world famous: Sakharov, Shmelyov, Popov, Afanas'ev, Yel'tsin and Gdlyan. Now their names are in the paper everyday, but until recently none knew who they were. The whole world knows Academician Sakharov now, but until the Congress he was largely unknown to the Soviet population after spending many years in exile living in a bleak apartment house in Gorky.

Question: Who was your opponent in the runoff round of the election?
Chernichenko: My opponent in the runoff election since noone got the minimum percentage of votes for election, was a professor of international relations from the Institute of International Relations in Moscow (IMEMO), a very prestigious, comfortable institute for producing specialists in international relations. We used to joke that its job was to produce specialists on Sweden. His name is Professor Gennadi K. Ashin. He is a very erudite man, it's
just that he didn't do anything when times were difficult. I should tell you that we now have 357 members in our clearly defined opposition group, the Inter-Regional Group. However, they took our newspaper away from us and prohibited us from publishing it. They also prohibited us from setting up a fund to support it to which we had contributed. Despite all this, there is an opposition, it has a platform and it's growing--people are still joining it.

Since I have an American audience I would like to tell you how it works financially. As a People's Deputy my salary is 200 rubles per month. I hired an administrative assistant, a young final-year law student at Moscow University, who gets 300 rubles a month. I didn't have any say over whom I hired, and naturally the apparatus is trying to control the process. I should tell you that since I now have no time to devote to literary activity, my financial situation has deteriorated greatly. At all hours of the day and night I get calls from my constituents and you cannot imagine what a bedlam I'm subjected to, what Soviet people these days can demand of their deputies. But I'm still glad that I got involved in the elections. When my wife complains what a torture it is, I tell her that otherwise I would have been left alone with her while all my good friends--Shmelyov, Afanas'yev, and so on--are in the Congress, and she keeps quiet.

Question: What is the difference in functions between the Congress of People's Deputies and the Supreme Soviet?

Chernichenko: That is a very big question. Only 450, i.e. 20% of the number of People's Deputies, became members of the Supreme Soviet. What the mission and function of the remaining deputies is supposed to be and how they are to perform their lawmaking role between elections is still not very clear. But what is clear about the Supreme Soviet is that very many of its members came from the most conservative portion of the Congress of People's Deputies. It was formed by the Party authorities and was obedient to them. Now, however, it's changing radically under the pressure of public opinion and the electorate. The Supreme Soviet is meant to be a permanently active lawmaking body. Since a member of the Supreme Soviet gets 500 rubles a month, plus 200 rubles as a People's Deputy, he should be able to live reasonably well on his salary. However, if he had been a kolkhoz chairman or a plant director from the south or Siberia,
for instance, and now becomes a full-time professional legislator, then he loses all his job benefits and is in a very complicated situation--I don't know how such people get by.

Question: What to do about the problems of the nationalities? Is it thinkable that the Congress would tolerate a plebiscite in each of the republics to decide whether it wants to belong to the USSR or to become independent? Are such plebiscites possible?

Chernichenko: Of course, it would be possible to hold plebiscites, but the problem is that since the fall the centrifugal forces in the Soviet Union have become so powerful that plebiscites will have to be held all over--in Moldavia, Armenia, Fergana, among the Meskhetian Turks, in Estonia, among the Polish minority in Lithuania. It's a problem of the fundamental construction of the conglomerate of nations called the Soviet Union. One must remember that the Soviet Union was created in the 1920s as a prototype--a basket which was meant ultimately to include all the peoples of the world. If you ask me why the Soviet coat of arms has a globe on it, it does not mean that I am an imperialist and plan to seize other people's territory. The Turkish national flag has the moon on it, but that does not mean that they plan to occupy the moon. The construction of the Soviet Union reflects the ideas of the period and the Communist International. From the original Soviet Union would arise a union of republics from the entire world. Now, however, our federation is being subjected to horrendous earthquakes. How this will end up, our Congress of People's Deputies will attempt to decide. The writer (Valentin G.) Rasputin has made the bitter joke that maybe the Russian Federation should be detached from the USSR.

Question: Is it possible that in the next few months the communists will be removed from power in the Soviet Union?

Chernichenko: Right now there is a fierce discussion going on about Article 6 of the Soviet Constitution. This article stipulates that the Communist Party of the Soviet Union is the only leading organizing force in Soviet society. Personally I believe that--to be objective at this time of extremely acute social crisis--the Party remains a cementing and pacifying force which is protecting Soviet society against the possibility of an explosion and bloodshed.
Question: When will the elections for the local soviets take place? How will the election laws be changed? And do you expect that the elections will strengthen liberal forces in Soviet society or the contrary?

Chernichenko: Each republic will have its own electoral law. In a number of republics electoral laws have already been passed. In comparison to the previous electoral law under which we were elected, the provision for district pre-election meetings for the selection of candidates has been eliminated, and there is now a requirement that there be more than one candidate for each position. In addition, in the Baltic republics, for instance in Estonia, there is a minimum period of residency required before one can be a candidate in elections.

Question: What can you tell us about Ligachev?

Chernichenko: The first question I’m always asked in the Soviet Union is, "What did Ligachev do to you after you excoriated him at the Party Congress?" Ligachev is a sufficiently experienced person always to smile at me happily when he sees me, demonstrating his optimism and undiminished activity. For me, he is the very personification of the party apparatus. If he were appointed director of the Harvard University Russian Research Center, he would call a staff meeting on the third day, assign tasks, fire someone. If there were a need to add blacks to the staff, he’d add blacks, if he needed to get rid of Jews, he’d get rid of Jews. Everything necessary would be done. It's completely immaterial to him what he's in charge of. Consequently, when after being responsible for ideology he was put in charge of agriculture, he didn't hesitate for a second about accepting the job.

Question: Can I have your comments please on the ramifications of Gorbachev asking for powers to prevent strikes and the legislature refusing to grant him that power?

Chernichenko: I was already in the United States when the debate on that in the Supreme Soviet took place, so I cannot comment on it. I can only express my personal opinion. Soviet strikes are very different from strikes here in America--they amount to a form of warfare. Azerbaidzhan has seized the entire republic of Armenia by the throat. There's no bread, power supply or fuel. It's not a question of nationalism on my part, but this is impermissible,
disgraceful. The country will disintegrate as a result of these strikes. What we have in this case is not workers fighting for their rights, but manifestations of nationalism, often even nationalistic feelings. Consequently to some extent I would support the President [Gorbachev] over this in trying to defend the country from the dictates of strikes. I hope you'll appreciate that I'm completely on the side of the strikers in the Kuzbass, and even more strongly—in view of my ethnic origin [Ukrainian] — 150% on the side of the Donbass strikers.

Question: What is your strategy and that of the opposition in general for the legislature to enjoy real power, rather than share power with the Communist Party?

Chernichenko: As far as strategy is concerned, I would be completely untrue to myself and I would betray my voters if I were to give up my activity as a writer or a television commentator—that would be the best present I could give to Ligachev. It would be a grave mistake for me, thinking in strategic terms, to stop using my old ideas and my approach to influencing public opinion. My entire strategy is to continue to work as forcefully and thoroughly as I can within the Supreme Soviet and to keep on writing, propagandizing and pushing my ideas. I am a member of the Inter-Regional Group and I was elected a member of its board (executive) of twenty members. We have a platform that we plan to publicize widely and defend in every possible parliamentary way. The most realistic strategy for us to follow is to ensure that the land belongs to those who work it. Laws on the land, land leasing, and on property must be passed. If we don't manage to get these laws through against the opposition of the most reactionary, reptile-like members of the parliament, we are all worthless. If we don't succeed, then in my view it will be impossible to smooth over the crisis, and we may end up with a very big explosion. As far as a well thought-out parliamentary line is concerned, that is not my job. I am a writer, and I produce ideas which I then advocate in my books and television programs.