



Perspectives of the Russian Left

Aleksandr Buzgalin Wed, 15/07/2020 - 14:27

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This interview, with Aleksandr Buzgalin, a speaker for the political-academic association "Alternativyi", took place in the middle of June, 2020.

Q: Aleksandr, how is the situation in Russia concerning the pandemic and the political development? In the western media the focus is on the strong rise in numbers of the infection, there are reports of respiration equipment not working and as always about repression.

A: The situation is not easy. All mass actions are banned. The Left is reduced to internet activity which for me personally is very tiring. But the dominant factor is the economic crisis. We don't have reliable statistics, but there is at least a 10% decline in income. This decline is not equal, the rich can accumulate their wealth, the poor are hit even harder. Some people can work from home, but most people cannot, so they simply lose their income, even if they can keep their jobs formally.

The minimum wage is approximately 12000 roubles which is about 150€. Even in small towns, 70% of that goes into housing costs. In Moscow, the average income is 4-5 times higher than in central Russia, but prices are also higher. Poverty is a mass phenomenon; we estimate that 20 million could be considered as having less than those 12000 roubles. This comes after 10 years of stagnation. The dramatic fall of the oil-price has added to that.

About the pandemic I can say that the health situation is not as bad as the economic situation. Why? As a legacy of the Soviet Union we still have a quite well spread healthcare system. Numbers of hospitals and beds have fallen, but health care is still free of charge. There are many nurses and doctors who are real heroes in working for the people. So, we do have many cases of infections, but the death toll is rather low.

But the pandemic has added to the social polarisation. The rich have increased their wealth by \$50 billion in the last weeks. The working people do not get sufficient help from the state and it disappears often before it reaches them. Imagine a whole family living in 45m², how to keep distance and deal with personal conflicts?

Putin's popularity is still at about 60%, but it is declining.

Q: How do events on the global level affect Russia?

A: There are more tensions and Russia is very much affected by them. Of course, the dominating conflict is between China and the US, but tensions have been rising between the West in general and Russia. Russia and China have more cooperation now, but Chinese capitalism is also very aggressive, and so is Russian by the way.

People see that all this leads to the growth of brutal egoism, everyone feels the force to adapt to it. Socialism is seen by many as a solution. To the question whether socialism or capitalism is better, about 50% prefer the first, but there are many doubts about the functioning of socialism in practice. The Soviet Union is still seen as a better time than today, the memories are still living.

Q: How is the Left in Russia doing?

There is a strong patriotism which also affects the left. The 75th anniversary of the victory in WW2 revived the wish for a "strong country", not to dominate others, but not to be bullied by others. This is combined with a wish for peace and this patriotism is explicitly "antifascist". This is true not only for the Left, also the right wing, nobody wants to be a fascist.

The CPRF has 15 percent of the seats in the state Duma and many in regional and local parliaments, but the most you can call them is social-democratic. They do but up some democratic or social demands, but they combine it with hailing "Russian values", the church and Stalin. There is no criticism of Stalinism.

Inside the CPRF there is a small group of around 1000 people who orient themselves on Churkin (?), Trotskij and Bucharin???

The Russian Communist Workers Party is small, around 2-3,000 members, but well based in the trade-unions, rather activist and more in the Stalinist tradition. Of course, they follow its stages-theory. The United Communist Party, OKP, is even less than the RWCP, many of its members have been excluded from the CPRF, some tend to Stalinism, some claim to be Trotskyists. The OKP is also very active, especially in organising demonstrations and meetings.

But the new and interesting development is that very young people, some less than 20 years old, organise themselves in study-circles to study Marxism. They regard the CPRF as traitors to Marxism. There are maybe 200 such circles with up to 15 or 20 members.

There are some You-tube blogs, Station Marx or Commandante Major which get 10-50,000s of clicks for their posts. We have our YouTube channel "Alternatives" which is more oriented towards Marxist education and has only 1-2,000 clicks per lecture.

This new Left is yet quite raw. It is critical towards capitalism, the oligarchs and strongly against US-Imperialism. This goes together with some patriotism and left-populism. Some stand behind Putin, but many see him as part of the problem, as part of the system they are against.

Also, on the academic Left, there are still many who are involved in serious Marxist education and research. We can bring together some hundred people in conferences and now in web-based lectures.

Q: You emphasised in the past the need to re-establish an international left movement after the Social Forums have ceased to exist.

A: On some levels these Forums still continue, but a restructuring is necessary. This has theoretical, strategic and tactical aspects. The International Forums were an important place of exchange of opinions, but they were politically impotent. A few big international actions were decided on. The MST has now proposed to build a new coordination for Action, a good initiative but on the global Left there is stagnation.

We should think of a new kind of structure; not party, not movement; a dialectical negation and integration of both; and definitively not parliamentarian. But I admit that I cannot explain how to build this Post-party/Post-Movement project.

For sure in the time ahead there is real work and real social praxis waiting for us. And also real research: On the economic crisis, on the social crisis and how to connect the existing groups and circles into networks, on national and international levels.

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