"The Rebirth of Democracy in the Former Soviet Empire"

by Elena Bonner
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Preview: Since her husband Andrei Sakharov's death in 1989, Dr. Elena Bonner has become in her own right one of the foremost leaders in the democratic movement in Russia. In this essay, based on her lecture presented at Hillsdale College's 20th annual Ludwig von Mises Lectures in the Spring of 1993, Dr. Bonner calls for a new Russian constitution.

The April Referendum

In recent months Russia has been going through one more critical stage of development in the difficult transition to democracy, a stage that is at once cause for optimism and pessimism. This April, key members of the Congress of People's Deputies did their utmost to ruin the national referendum that was in essence meant to determine the fate of the policies and presidency of Boris Yeltsin. Specifically, they attempted to rig the questions on the referendum ballot so as to ensure a vote of no confidence. But their efforts failed spectacularly, and once again the Russian people unequivocally demonstrated their loyalty to President Yeltsin and to the cause of democracy.

An Anticonstitutional Crisis

Russia desperately needs—and needs soon if more violence is to be averted—a new written constitution. Without one, we will see more of what happened in the streets of Moscow on May 1, when deputies upset by the outcome of the referendum incited massive street violence in Moscow—the likes of which hasn't been seen since 1917 when the Bolsheviks used the same tactics in trying to come to power. In this case, tragically, over 500 hundred people were injured and one person was killed.

Democratic, pro-constitutional forces squandered their last political victory in August 1991 after the failed coup attempt when it would have been feasible to painlessly adopt a new constitution and to change the membership of the Congress. They must not squander their victory now. Two or three months ago, you could not have drummed up much interest in a new constitution, but now, after the successful referendum, it is on everyone's mind. On April 29, the Yeltsin govern-
ment unveiled its proposed version of a new constitution. It seems to be the most democratic and the most adequate response yet to the needs of the nation. In my opinion, it still gives too much power to the president, but this can be addressed.

The first and primary chapter in the Yeltsin Constitution guarantees the civil rights of all citizens. The second chapter outlines federalism, in which republics, regions, provinces and local governments retain a large degree of independence. (Anti-reform elements with deputies like Khasbulatov who think decentralized power. But Yeltsin is adamant that weapons to be the only way to save Russia is to allow the West press about the ratification of the START agreements. He replied categorically that the Congress would not ratify any arms treaty until Andrei Kozyrev, minister of foreign affairs and one of Yeltsin's staunchest supporters, was fired or forced to resign.

In other words, arms reduction has become a constitution that can be ransomed only for a certain political price. The Congress is filled with thousands of homeless as a result of conflict with Ossetia; and Abkhasia, which is in need of aid because of its ongoing war with Georgia. Second, the Jackson Amendment of the 1970s should be revived. No U.S. aid should be given to countries where human rights are routinely violated. Other nations should follow this example when formulating their own aid policies. Western creditors should also consider postponing debt payments, especially since the debts in question were incurred by Yeltsin's communist predecessors.

Western Aid

The Nuclear Arms Issue

There is another crisis looming on the horizon for Russia. In an interview a few days before the April 25 referendum, Ruslan Khasbulatov, the chairman of the Supreme Soviet of the Congress of People's Deputies, was asked by

Russia and the CIS

Some say that the real hope for peace and progress lies in once again uniting all the former Soviet republics under the banner of one government. But their ethnic roots, histories and cultures are far too different. Nothing short of World War III would ever unite them again. But the new Russian constitution could be an enormous benefit for all CIS countries. Leonid Kravchuk, president of the Ukraine, acknowledged as much when he endorsed Yeltsin just before the April referendum. The fact that he chose to make his support public marks a watershed in the post-communist era, for up until now CIS solidarity has been a sham. This unprecedented overture has signaled that a new era of cooperation between CIS countries has begun.

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The Generation That Is the Future

said at the outset that this stage in Russia’s transition to democracy is cause for optimism and pessimism. Ultimately, I think optimism will triumph. Why am I so sure? It is not just because of the huge turnout for the April 1993 referendum, even though that turnout was phenomenal by any standards. It is mainly because I have seen who turned out. The biggest pro-Yeltsin, pro-reform group was comprised of Russian men and women between 20 and 35 years old. These young people are better educated and better trained than ever before and they have something that is totally new in Russian society: a global mentality. Moreover, they outnumber those who oppose reform—the retired, the veterans of war, of labor and of the Communist Party. These young people are Russia’s future. They will not give up on freedom and we should not give up on them.

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