



## Oleg Orlov of Memorial: “The major menace to us comes from the state”

With Moscow temperatures dipping to -20C, we met the head of the Russian Memorial, Oleg Orlov, who told us about the frozen atmosphere of the Kremlin towards human rights. He spoke of the harassment and threats he and his colleagues face from the Russian state. He also warned of the rehabilitation of the "Stalin myth" and said President Dmitry Medvedev is "a dreamer". On Wednesday 16 December Memorial will be awarded Parliament's 2009 Sakharov human rights prize.

### How will this award change the work of “Memorial”?

It will give additional strength to me and our staff. It is important to get positive external appreciation, because sometimes you feel that you are scooping the sea with a spoon. It is especially felt by our colleagues in the Northern Caucasus.

Previously we thought that this type of publicity and awards would give us additional protection. It was an error, they don't.

### What are the major problems that defenders of human rights in Russia and those defended by them face?

The major problem is that the menace to us comes from the representatives of the state. Of course, additional threats come from neo-fascists. Many of my colleagues have been attacked or killed by neo-fascists.

Governmental threats come in various forms, starting with never ending checks, where we are obliged to deliver volumes and volumes of reports which prevent us from doing our work. This can lead to the closure of an organisation or a criminal case accusing us of extremism, in order to get rid of critical voices.

Even more dangerous are the cases of illegal action and violence against us. They include phone threats to the families of human rights defenders, setting fire to the offices of human rights organisations or even acts of direct violence. In 2007 I was abducted, threatened with being shot, beaten and left half-naked in the snow.

Our close and dear friend, a brilliant protector of human rights Natasha Estemirova, whom we called the “Heart of Memorial” was killed.

The threats to those we protect are obvious. There is the threat that they will get no justice in court, that no criminal case will be initiated or that the guilty will be not found. The second threat is that of the illegal violence from the same people threatening us.

There are racists, neo-fascists who attack immigrants, corrupt militia - police - not respecting laws, representatives of power structures like the FSB (Federal Security Service) menacing those who had the guts to file a complaint in the Strasbourg Court (European Court of Human Rights). Threats to us and people we are trying to protect come from these same forces.

### What changes did the advent of President Medvedev bring?

A lot was said. Unlike the previous president, Medvedev says democratic, liberal and intelligent things. This gave hope to a part of liberal Russian society and some people in Europe. Alas, those words have not been followed by action.

There's a dreamer in Kremlin dreaming about the future of Russia, while the country is moving to a completely different destiny. We would like to see neither dreams nor articles, but concrete decrees and draft laws.

## **Has Russia accepted past crimes committed against its own and foreign citizens? Is the cult of Stalin still alive?**

Russia is in the midst of a continuing struggle. In the 80's and 90's it seemed that we were facing the truth and drawing a line underneath it. But then "a crawling rehabilitation" of Stalin followed. We have to continue our work in this field, because a big part of our society does not wish to know the truth or does not know it. Stalin is becoming a hero to not only to those with communist views, but also to some young people.

The rehabilitation of the "Stalin myth" takes many forms: Not only communist, but also on the basis of a post-empire syndrome. A great empire has collapsed: regions that many Russians considered to be their own walked away. According to the version suggested to them by propaganda, Russia was humiliated.

Hence an image of a leader under whom the empire was great. "The great emperor Stalin" is the foundation on which the reanimation of the myth is based. We have to show the real face of this empire and the price that its citizens paid for its "greatness".

## **What errors were made in Chechnya and how can the Caucasian knot be untangled?**

Numerous and constant errors were made. The major one was that the Kremlin had no strategy, only tactics. They were always solving concrete tactical tasks, often with success, losing out on the strategy.

The major problem of those taking decisions on all Northern Caucasus was disregard of the most important aspect - human rights. Breaches of human rights are destabilising the situation in the North Caucasus, extending the conflict, reducing possibilities to solve it and supporting the basis for a terroristic underground.

One more mistake was the unwillingness during the first phase to negotiate with the separatists, who had normal political objectives, when it might have been possible to rationally discuss problems with them.

Now we have a completely terrorist underground movement, radical Islamic groups you have nothing to negotiate with, plus the biggest mass of the people in resistance motivated by the sense of revenge for killed relatives, humiliation and torture.

Ramzan Kadyrov, (the leader the Kremlin supports in Chechnya) is an absolute ruler of who does not want to observe the laws of the Russian Federation. It's an impasse. All suggestions made by human rights organisations get negative answers from the Kremlin.

« In 2007 I was abducted, threatened with being shot, beaten and left half-naked in the snow »

Oleg Orlov