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Fighting "Jurassic Park" capitalism

# Russian Social Forum Success

- IV Online magazine - 2006 - IV380 - July-August 2006 -

Publication date: Tuesday 15 August 2006

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**The second Russian Social Forum has just come to an end in St.Petersburg. Despite various obstacles put by the state authorities (including arbitrary detention of activists and other forms of police repression), more than a thousand people from different regions of Russia, and also from many other countries, attended the gathering. The forum declared its support for a number of constructive program proposals concerning education, housing policy, labor issues, human rights, energy and environment. Those who love bloody spectacles and unhealthy sensations were disappointed; the alterglobalists did not organize any brawls, and no shop windows were smashed.**

### **1. Why riot- and mayhem-lovers were disappointed**

Unfortunately, in today's Russia (and not only here), philistines and journalists pandering to the philistines' taste prefer to report crimes, violence, bloodshed, scandals and other "hot" topics. For this kind of public, a serious, constructive debate on urgent problems faced by people in Russia and other countries is simply too boring.

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/Putin.jpg>]

There were no fistfights, so the alterglobalists' scheme was a 'failure'. And you can explain endlessly that the forum organizers had other goals, and those goals were mainly achieved. The gathering was organized not by "antiglobalists" guided by moth-eaten ideas of isolationism, Stalinism etc. but by supporters of world integration quite different from the present one that is imposed by the so-called "G-8".

For us, the aim of integration is not in realizing the US and NATO geopolitical ambitions, nor in helping to satisfy the profit-thirsty transnational corporations who dominate the world markets under the cover of the slogans of free trade, nor in the spiralling growth of international financial speculations (up to 2500 billion dollars a day!). It is something else. We say, "A different world is possible!", and on the basis of world experience and expert studies, we show, just what kind of the world this would be.

We call for a serious debate on possible alternatives. Neither the authorities, nor the philistines, nor mass media serving their demands like the idea of such a debate.

So what are these alternatives all about? Who were the participants at the forum in St.Petersburg, and what were they doing there?

### **2. Who we are, and what are we going to do.**

The Russian Social Forum is a network of diverse social organizations

and movements, a network that shows in practice, constantly working, that another world is possible and necessary - a world oriented not toward the "market fundamentalism" but toward human development and solving social and environmental problems. Among the most active groups that took part in the forum were: independent trade unions; campaigners against the commercialization of housing and communal services; the "Education for All" and "For Human Rights" movements; alterglobalist organizations proper, such as "Alternatives" (a movement that supports citizens' social initiatives), "Collective Action" Institute; organizations of victims of the Chernobyl disaster and those who helped to liquidate its consequences; "greens", and dozens more.

In all about 1500 people registered at the forum that took place on July 14 and 15 in the Kirov Stadium in St.Petersburg. Many of them came simply to see what was happening at this gathering that frightened the authorities so much. In the author's opinion, about 300 people worked actively in seminars, round-table discussions and symposia at the forum. Many militants of left-wing youth organizations, anarchists and other politically-oriented activists saw participation in meetings and protest actions outside the stadium as their priority.

### **3. What happened at the forum, and what are our positive demands**

The opening event was intended to be a working session, including presentation of main thematic blocks of the forum's work, but the well-timed visit by the St.Petersburg Governor Valentina Matviyenko kept us busy for some minutes. The journalists who flocked towards the big boss, with their usual servility, inevitably diverted general attention to a certain extent, and we decided to make use of this situation in order to protest against the detentions and arrests of our comrades. The forum participants chanted "Freedom!" and other slogans denouncing the repression by the authorities, while Matviyenko tried to explain that the authorities loved us.

Despite all that, the basic aim of the plenary meeting - providing information about the main directions and tasks of the forum's work - was achieved. Then, the serious work started.

Discussions were held on issues of defence of human rights, forms and methods of the struggle against "filling-in" house construction, against evictions from dormitories, against the rise of costs of housing and utilities, and so forth. As a result, constructive recommendations have been developed - what needs to be done and how should it be realized, with creation of new networks and strengthening of old ones. In a longer term, these networks will provide more effective organizational base for citizens defending their rights and interests as inhabitants.

Similar steps were made to develop solidarity of independent trade unions that are defending workers' rights in the conditions of Russia's present-day "Jurassic Park capitalism".

The forum discussed a wide range of human rights issues, from developing constructive steps consolidating the structures of civil

society to very definite demands for release of political prisoners and our arrested comrades. Facts were presented demonstrating that in Russia, there is more and more arbitrary repression by bureaucrats and police, less and less real democracy, and that it becomes more and more difficult to exercise elementary civil and social rights.

Important practical steps toward establishing a united action network involving "traditional" human rights defenders and left activists campaigning for social justice were proposed. At the forum, one could point out a positive role played by Lev Ponomarev, the leader of the movement "For Human Rights", and by Lyudmila Alekseyeva, the head of the Moscow Helsinki Group. They stated unambiguously that human rights defenders in Russia are increasingly oriented to a constructive dialogue with left-wing defenders of social justice.

Among the most important constructive initiatives proposed at the forum was the "Education for All" program document presented and discussed at a special symposium where it was shown that the government's policy, with its efforts to privatize educational institutions and to introduce a new Chubais-style "voucherization" (this time in the field of education), would lead the country to a loss of what remains of its (once great) intellectual potential, making it impossible to achieve a "society of knowledge" in a proper way. The positive part of the "Education for All" program contains concrete proposals for ensuring high quality and universal accessibility of education; these are measures that would allow the education to be oriented to human development, not to "the markets".

The basis for elaboration of the program was provided by materials prepared by O. N. Smolin, professor and State Duma deputy, and by dozens of well-known scholars, teachers, and education experts. It also explains how to obtain resources for the development of education, and how to use them effectively, how to make attractive the teacher's work, and much else. The All-Russian Movement "Education for All" becomes, more and more, the organizational basis for realization of this program, in collaboration with trade unions and youth organizations.

These are only a few examples of specific documents discussed at the forum, and practically-oriented decisions made. There were also documents on energy, environment and other issues.

So, we have carried out the work that was intended to be done in St.Petersburg. In this respect, the forum was quite successful.

Very important was the fact that activists of social organizations, parliamentarians, young people from many countries addressed us at the stadium and worked together with us. The forum participants reacted enthusiastically to interventions by a well-known Italian social activist Vittorio Agnoletto. A member of the European Parliament, where he serves in the Human Rights Commission, Agnoletto sharply condemned the police outrage initiated by the Russian authorities. Speeches by German comrades, French trade union activists, many other guests from abroad were received with enthusiasm. The youth delegation from Ukraine, young people from the Baltics and Poland were particularly active.

At the same time, the forum encountered a lot of problems and contradictions. A major problem was arrests and detentions of our comrades. There were also numerous internal disputes and disagreements, some of them essential, others arising from difficulties in understanding and interaction between such diverse groups as human rights activists, left political organizations, youth groups, anarchists, "presentable" professors from education networks...

Sometimes we could not avoid organizational problems and disputes. We also had to discuss at length how to react to the police blockade of the stadium and to the authorities' ban of our demonstration. Some members of the organizing committee reacted positively to the idea of our meeting with Putin, that originated from within the presidential administration. However, an agreed decision was made: we could engage in a dialogue with the government leaders only on the condition that all our comrades were freed (of course, they weren't, and no such a "dialogue" took place).

Nevertheless, all these disputes did not prevent us from carrying on our work.

#### **4. The right hand of the government doesn't know...**

...what the left hand does. As a result, more than two hundred people arrested, held in custody, humiliated...

An extremely harsh attitude of the authorities was a feature of this forum. More than two hundred participants were arrested, held in custody, or persecuted in another way. In some cases (including that of the author himself), the dialogue was conducted politely, but many of our comrades were detained without explanation or taken off from trains, and some were charged with criminal offences, with explosives or narcotics planted on them.

A couple of days before the forum, the member of the organizing committee Mikhail Druzhininsky was arrested, and later, another organizing committee member, Ilya Ponomarev, was detained. A number of the St.Petersburg activists could not return home in the evenings, since they had been told that preparations were being made to detain or arrest them.

During the time the forum was held, especially on July 15, our comrades were constantly being detained using all sorts of cooked-up pretexts. After the end of the forum, several dozens activists who participated in anti-G8 protest actions were taken into custody.

We should give their due to a number of media outlets, and in particular to the radio station Moscow Echo, as well as to a number of internet sites who reported honestly on these repressive measures by the authorities.

Most of the pro-Putin media, however, reported "a picture of total harmony" playing up the fact that the St.Petersburg authorities had provided several army tents and a field kitchen for us. At the same time, there were "inaccurate" reports that the participants were also given free meals. Everyone who attended the forum and ate that soup and buckwheat knows that we paid for everything ourselves.

The fact that we were allowed to occupy the stadium was the result of a compromise with the authorities, compromise not very pleasant for us. They agreed that we would use the arena of the stadium (which, it should be noted, was closed for reconstruction) only after they had understood that we would not change our minds about holding the forum in St Petersburg anyway. Probably, they decided that it was better to lock us up in the stadium than to face far bigger problems if we would hold the forum somewhere else, in more "open" place.

Some representatives of the presidential administration constantly tried to convince us that federal authorities' attitude to the forum is exceptionally democratic and friendly. But mass "clean-ups" of our comrades, the ban on demonstrations, and riot police in vast numbers around the stadium clearly showed exactly the opposite. So, it was very relevant that before the end of the forum, Lev Ponomarev presented a declaration strongly condemning the authorities' actions and demanding release of our comrades and stopping their persecution.

### **5. The alterglobalists: "white fluffy kittens", or...**

In concluding these quick notes that are being written during the first hours after the end of the forum, I would like to stress that organizations and movements that form the network of the Russian Social Forum are not "white fluffy kittens" admonishing everybody "to live together peacefully". Not by chance, the main slogan of the forum was: "Rights cannot be granted ? rights are to be conquered!". We'll demand from the authorities that our legitimate social and civil rights be realized. We'll fight for this demand using all methods permitted by international law and by the Russian constitution. We'll advance it resolutely, in serious dialogues between experts, at meetings and in discussions, - and, if the authorities are unwilling to listen to citizens, in the same way as participants of protest actions against the "monetization of social welfare benefits" did it in early 2005; many of those people who took part in the second Russian Social Forum were also active in the 2005 campaign. At the same time, we have been and remain opposed to senseless hooliganism and to provocative violent acts. The image of "antiglobalists" smashing windows is forced upon us by those people who are really afraid of our constructive initiatives. And the authorities are afraid; otherwise, they would not have detained scores of citizens who wanted to make their way to the forum.

In any case, what the authorities think of us is not so important. We know perfectly well that the government implements its policies of "market fundamentalism" and bureaucratic lawless rule not because it is ignorant of the interests of citizens, but because these policies

are beneficial to those who put the government in power. This is why we address our words and actions, above all, to the society, to the citizens, to those who solely is able to change our life, finding in themselves the resolve to unite with comrades, so that another way of life, more humane and just, will become possible in Russia and throughout the world.