'Northern Venice' scenario set back in St. Petersburg

by Roman Bessonov

At around 2:00 a.m. on June 3, as returns were counted in the St. Petersburg mayoral election, the citizens of Russia's second largest city witnessed a tense competition between the two candidates—incumbent Anatoli Sobchak, and the ultimate winner, former Deputy Mayor Vladimir A. Yakovlev, head of the Committee for Municipal Services. This rivalry was not a clash between two "pigs in a poke": The difference between these two persons was visible, and very striking.

A champion in demagogy, who made his career by promoting Mikhail Gorbachov to the newly invented post of U.S.S.R. President, and toppling Nikolai Ryzhkov during the elections designed for Gorbachov's victory; a parliamentary investigator of the 1990 rebellion in Tbilisi, Georgia; a member of Andrei Sakharov's "Interregional Group"; a founder of the Movement of Democratic Reforms; a destroyer of this movement with ambitions of creating a pro-Yeltsin party of his own; a loser in the 1993 parliamentary elections who managed to retain power, despite rage from the Kremlin after the unexpected victory of Vladimir Zhirinovsky; a political broker who tried to play a special role in the Russian-Chechen negotiations; a person who twice got support from Gorbachov and twice betrayed him; a background supporter of the project to make Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin President. . . . This is not everything about Sobchak as a public politician. On the level of the city, he was always a two-faced Janus, one broadly smiling face turned toward the West (but mostly to such damp places as London, Rotterdam, and Hamburg); the other, stern and contemptuous—toward the citizens of St. Peterburg, including those officials who opposed his idea of transforming the huge industrial center into a "Northern Venice" of foreign tourism and casinos.

Vladimir Yakovlev did not join any party (except the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, in which he did not make and wasn't going to make any career). He was responsible for municipal services (housing, infrastructure, sanitation, etc.) already in the Soviet period, and until 1996; a person of no great eloquence, with no specific private interests—although all the other deputy mayors were deeply engaged in one or another economic rivalry, lobbyist interests, and even trade in illegal isotopes. When Sobchak tried to uncover some personal financial interests of Yakovlev, his crew broadcast a photo of a *dacha* belonging to another official with a similar name, and a car which was hired by a different deputy mayor.

To Sobchak's motto "Mayor—to Governor!" was counterposed the modest, mundane Yakovlev slogan: "We have hard work ahead." The second phrase gained more sympathy from the electorate, though it was an open challenge to the consumerist psychology, planted by the ideologue of the "Northern Venice."

A full three years after the breakdown of privatization boss Anatoli Chubais's voucher funds, which buried many citizens' savings, Sobchak suddenly (one month before the elections) was overcome by concern about the victims, and promised quick return of their losses by the state. A cartoon in *Chas Pik* mocked this new fraud, depicting an old man asking a fat official: "Is the money expected in the foreseeable future?" In the background, a long road stretched to the horizon. Some of the unlucky bubble investors were unable to hear Sobchak's promises; for example, the woman who burned herself to death at the doors of the bankrupt "Russian Real Estate" company.

Sobchak also offered free train tickets to all owners of private gardens. (I tried to imagine the face of the railway administration, which has no money to repair its coaches, from which the seats have been ripped out—no doubt by garden owners, using "privatized" planks to heat their houses.) The third "social base" selected by Sobchak was rock music lovers. Free concerts roared in the Central Concert Hall every night, drawing drunken teenagers, half of them below the voting age. After a rock concert in the Palace Square, the area was covered with rubbish, and 14 alcohol- and drug-intoxicated rock fans ended their holiday at the police station. But Sobchak was still nothing for these youths but a nasty old professor, and they rather mocked him, eagerly taking an opportunity for free fun. The outcome of the elections was more likely defined by the policemen, attacked by this hashish-intoxicated crowd, and the parents of the young rock fans, who have no possibility to bring them up properly or give them a good education.

Sobchak's real social base was the consumerist psychology of the new middle class in St. Petersburg, the greater part of which is employees of the foreign companies that have flooded the town and changed its appearance during the past five years—the young girls from shops filled with Mars chocolate bars and Coca-Cola, and incessantly chewing, lazy young guys who guard these shops at night. Sobchak tried to scare them about the alleged "communist thinking" of his rival, hinting that they could lose their jobs, along with their recently purchased brick cottages on the outskirts of the city. When this didn't work, especially after the President declined to endorse either candidate, Sobchak tried to serve his consumerist propaganda under a thick sauce of regionalism. He claimed that Yakovlev was "the hand of Moscow," that Moscow banks "under direction of [Moscow Mayor Yuri] Luzhkov and [Presidential Guard chief] Korzhakov" would loot the city. He insisted that St. Petersburg should be more independent from the federal authorities, especially respecting foreign investments.

Sobchak's approach to foreign investments was really rather original. For example, to prepare for the 2004 Olympic games, he found a Korean businessman named Lim, who was not only in the construction industry, but also sponsored a so-called "Christian cooperation," uniting 21 of the so-called "charismatic churches," based upon "distribution of humanitarian aid" and different methods of hypnosis. The "cooperation," co-founded by the Bible Foundation (affiliated with the famous London Bible Society), has just opened an "ecology department" under Lim's "personal" institution, the "Emmanuel Church."

Sobchak's support networks

There is nothing strange in the fact that Khojakhmed Yarikhanov, "minister of culture" of the Chechen rebels and linked with the most criminal sorts of separatist terrorists, was invited to St. Petersburg. Autonomy from the Russian Federation was an *idée fixe* of Sobchak. It came up when he was planning to transform the city into a free economic zone, already in 1990; just three months ago, Sobchak said that if the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF) won the Russian Presidency, St. Petersburg would secede.

Implementing his idea of the Northern Venice, Sobchak revived the role St. Peterburg played in the early 20th century, as the center of separatist projects for various parts of the Russian empire. Nowadays, these are developed at the New Age Center, the Psychoanalytical Institute, the Free Culture Center, and confederalist ideological centers at the Institute of Ethnography, and some departments of the National Library. Several big libraries were literally bought by companies controlled by the British Council, which has its headquarters right in the historic Smolny district, in a building that used to house a music school and a college of arts.

The pro-separatist activity of the Northern Venice network is far-flung. The House of Nature, the former Finnish Church, now houses the headquarters of the Unrepresented People's Organization. It is situated halfway from Sobchak's flat to the casino where his daughter prefers to spend time. The Friends of Tibet Society is nearer to Sobchak's office: Its windows look out on Smolny, the city government building.

During the campaign, already targetted by the investigation of his real estate ventures, Sobchak attempted to hide behind the back of Gazprom, the giant Russian natural gas firm. The example of Chechnya, like Chiapas in Mexico, exposes the fact that fuel monopolists don't care much for the integrity of countries. They prefer as weak a central power as possible. For a corrupt regional baron, such an alliance is most profitable, and in a bad situation it seems the best way to save one's career.

Three other political supporters of Sobchak were Yegor Gaidar, the shock therapy "surgeon"; Anatoly Chubais, with his reported special affection for Britain's Prince Charles; and Galina Starovoitova, the instrument of several British-manipulated destabilizations in the Caucasus.

In the TV debate on May 31, Sobchak looked embarrassed and exhausted. The talented demagogue could hardly connect his arguments and appeared unable to repeat his own fabrications against his rival. Two hours before the debate, TV reported that the St. Petersburg Police Department on Organized Crime had tracked down and arrested Aslan Usoyan, one of the four patriarchs of the Caucasus criminal brotherhood, convicted many times for arms and drug deals. The old man, with two persons of Syrian origin, was seized in a Volvo, whose license plate showed that it belonged to the City Assembly. The driver appeared to be an assistant of Viktor Novosyolov, deputy head of the City Assembly, who has his own history of relations with organized crime—and, was very active in Sobchak's campaign. That last detail was not mentioned in the TV report, but Sobchak appeared to have lost his gift of eloquence.

Annushka has spilled the sunflower oil

In Mikhail Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita,* the devil, disguised as a "foreign specialist," sadly says to Professor Berlioz, "You see, Annushka has already spilled the sunflower oil." The bewildered professor says good-bye, hurries to the nearest tram stop, slips on the rails, and gets decapitated by a tram, because a girl named Annushka has just spilled a bottle of sunflower oil right there.

Sobchak's TV ads stressed the word "head," in Russian *golova,* which was used before 1917 to mean "mayor." But Sobchak's head is not to decorate Smolny any more, and "Annushka" was to blame again:

Anna Yevglevskaya is presently in Moscow, in the Lefortovo jail. The State Prosecutor's Office is investigating several cases of bribery, involving over a dozen St. Petersburg

officials. Annushka is president of a small private construction company called Renaissance.

Six years ago, soon after Sobchak came to power, one of his new "democratic" officials, Sergei Tarasevich (he was responsible for half of the historical city center), transferred a nice, three-story mansion, on a quiet street not far from the Neva River, to the newly founded Apracon Company. It was going to build a new kindergarten with a swimming pool, medical services, and all. Apracon set up a daughter structure called Renaissance. After four years, there was still no swimming pool, and the kindergarten had been evicted.

In June 1994, the whole house became the private property of Mrs. Yevglevskaya. Newspapers in St. Petersburg have reported on its disposition: One of the flats already was given (as a present) to a certain Marina Kutina, the mayor's niece. A three-room, 100-square-meter flat was sold for 1.2 million rubles (then approximately $400, or the cost of 1 square meter of floorspace in Moscow) to Viktoria Zibarova, the common-law wife of Tarasevich. Oleg Kharchenko, the chief architect of the city, got to switch (without paying any additional fee) his 70-square-meter flat on the outskirts, for a 168-square-meter flat in the city center.

At the same time, Sobchak's wife undertook manipulations to "double" the mayor's flat by connecting it with the neighboring one. Had she succeeded, the family of three persons (mayor, wife, and daughter) would have gotten a huge apartment of over 300 square meters. Sobchak's elder daughter, as well as his brother and his sister-in-law, got new pieces of "elite real estate" at the same time.

The market economy enthusiast received all this at taxpayers' expense.

Of course, the loss for the city budget from these deals cannot be compared with the losses for the nation from Chubais's privatization. But it gives a certain impression of the politician who began his career as a professor of law, exposing the prime minister's mismanagement with an expression of indignation on his face.

A Russian proverb says that apples don't fall far from the tree. In summer 1995, Sobchak's daughter Oksana was picked up in a police drug raid on the casino in Konyushennaya Square. The 16-year-old girl was let go, but the story got into the papers.

Rumors and publications about Sobchak's life of luxury fell, like drops of sunflower oil, on the tracks of the future elections.

The Moscow alternative

After the elections, Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov, who did not conceal his support for Yakovlev, hammered the last nail into the coffin of Sobchak's career, interpreting Yakovlev's victory as "the end of the era of demagogues." The Muscovites remember Luzhkov's comments on the poor budget results of the privatization in Russia: Addressing Chernomyrdin at the congress of his Our Home party, Luzhkov advised him not to accept Chubais into it, "or otherwise he'll drag everything out of your home and sell it for nothing, like an alcoholic."

Anatoli Chubais was the main supervisor and aide in Sobchak's campaign. Having begun his career on the Leningrad Executive Committee in 1990-91, Chubais owes the city not only for the despair of the deceived investors in pyramid companies, but for immense losses of income from real estate privatization. Huge buildings of plants and supermarkets were sold for nothing. The greater part of these deals went to the buyers "under the counter," avoiding payments into the state coffers.

As a result, construction ground to a halt. Next came the collapse of infrastructure. The number of public transport routes decreased twofold, the reconstruction of one of the biggest bridges over the Neva stopped for three years, and one subway line was closed indefinitely after a water breakthrough. Specialists blamed a rising level of ground water, caused by declining water use by industry. During the elections, one liberal paper quoted another specialist, who thought the anti-flood dam on the Gulf of Finland was really to blame; but that interpretation evidently had to do with the fact that the dam's director, communist Yury Sevenard, was running against Sobchak in the first round. That dam, begun in the early 1980s, is still unfinished—due not to Sevenard's political orientation, but to the shock therapy reforms that undermine and criminalize industry. St. Petersburg's industrial giants, which previously employed over half the population, are in decay. The situation is the same in most of Russia's industrial centers.

But the situation in the world is not the same as two or three years ago, and the strategic significance of the city on the Baltic, known as Russia's "window to Europe," is getting more and more important, especially after the Central Asian states of Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan pulled in the other direction, contracting fuel agreements with Iran. Those in the Russian leadership, who want at least to try to save industrial capacities, can't rely upon such a regional leader as Sobchak. The person of the St. Petersburg mayor began to be seen as a problem of national economic security.

At first, the preferred St. Petersburg mayoral candidate of the Moscow opponents of Chernomyrdin and Chubais evidently was Yuri Boldyrev, deputy head of the Counting Chamber and a former member of the U.S.S.R. Supreme Soviet, representing St. Petersburg when it was called Leningrad. With an image as a fair democrat who really exposed corruption in the Executive branch, Boldyrev was rather popular in the city.

But Boldyrev had not a day of experience as a head of *anything* (Sobchak, at least, had headed a university department). There was some concern, that he would be easily

manipulated by financial and political string-pullers. St. Petersburg already had the experience of left-liberal populist Aleksandr Shchelkanov, head of the Leningrad Executive Committee in 1990-91, through whose fingers a lot of city funds slipped into the pockets of the "first generation of privatizers," who thrived under Chubais (at that time, head of the Leningrad Executive Committee).

The decision to promote Yakovlev was made in Moscow only in early April, according to various sources. Sobchak's people pointed to Luzhkov and Deputy Prime Minister Oleg Soskovets as Yakovlev's main supporters in the center. Yakovlev was fair enough not to conceal this fact. "Okay," he said, "I am a hand of Moscow. But whose hand is Sobchak, in this case?"

In response to Sobchak's attacks on him for allegedly "communist views," Yakovlev said, "We should not divide the city into whites and reds." In the second round, Yakovlev was supported by centrists associated with Presidential candidate Grigori Yavlinsky, but he rejected official support from the CPRF organization.

A window of hope

The St. Petersburg elections were not quite a victory of good over evil. The new mayor depends on his Moscow and local support groups, who depend on the world financial elite; he is dependent on the logic of the Presidential election, which can make him say things opposite to what he thinks or believes; he is dependent on the government, which is still headed by stooges of London and the International Monetary Fund; he is dependent on his staff, which will not be easy to replace with reliable and professional people. But no matter how talented or weak Yakovlev proves, his victory has given hope to hundreds of thousands people who, unexpectedly, realized they were still able to change something.

It was a victory not for communist or anti-Western views, but for human dignity. Harping on the fact that Yakovlev was not born in Leningrad (he was born elsewhere, only because of the wartime evacuation), the Tashkent-born Sobchak did not realize that the city where he became a near-dictator, imposing stricter press censorship and stricter security procedures at Smolny than in the times of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, had its own collective feeling of dignity. It rested on the city's responsibility for Russian economy, culture, and science. This dignity had not vanished since the period of postwar reconstruction.

The invisible force that turned the election comprised the majority of those citizens, whose professional honor was humiliated by the Gaidar-Chubais reform: Scientists from the famous Lengiprogor institute (it designed towns for Siberia and the Far North), who haven't been paid for months; skilled workers from the now-struggling Baltic Shipyard, where the pride of the Soviet Navy was built; actors of the now almost lifeless Lenfilm studio, formerly the second largest cinema producer; teachers at the Conservatory, which is crumbling into ruin; and so forth. These people realized that the problems of the city are a part of the nation's, but they still could not believe that the city budget has no money, when the press chatters about evening balls and parties of some organization of "old Russian noblemen," or orgies in casinos and private banks celebrating their five-year anniversary, or foreign investments for the Goodwill Games which vanished in an unknown direction, or revenues from luxury hotels which appear not to be collected by the city. Add to that, businessmen not included on the list of the privileged; presidents of construction companies choked by taxes; and even realtors, who don't understand how the municipal housing agency can be, at the same time, a privileged commercial company.

Sobchak received his lowest vote level in the military satellite town of Kronstadt, a fortress in the times of Peter I and a strategic base of the Baltic Fleet until recently. There, sailors from the former military units in Estonia and Latvia have to live in so-called "floating bases," actually in ships, since not a single house was built on the island for the last five years. The other citizens of Kronstadt are desperately waiting for their town, previously the pride of Russia, to be transformed into an international casino, with a new highway across the Gulf, bringing Swedish tourists to mock the remnants of Russian glory. The statue of Peter I at the Kronstadt quay, seeming to be darker than ever before, looks with rage and contempt at its cartoon double, with a tiny head and big belly, installed at the Fortress of Peter and Paul by the peculiar postmodernist Mikhail Shemyakin, better known as Michel Chemiakine.

During the war, besieged Leningrad was connected with the mainland only by one route, across the ice of Lake Ladoga. It was called the Road of Life.

The fate of St. Petersburg depends on what happens with Russia, and the whole nation more and more depends on the situation in the world economy. So, we have no illusions about Vladimir Yakovlev as some kind of magician. But there is an impression that now the city, which he does not divide into "reds and whites," will work hard together with him, and we'll survive together with the whole country.

Our predecessors walked through fire and icy Ladoga water. We had to make our way through the temptation of the cosy liberal mirage, through the glistening halls of supermarkets, through the disgrace of humiliation—to our identity. Those who care for this city as a part of Russia, its history, its glory, its optimistic tragedy, those who have not forgotten what this city meant for the country, those who prefer work to casino leisure, those who haven't lost their human and national dignity, have won.

I see my dear native city again through the rubbish of British and Swedish signboards, I feel its heart beating. It is my city. It is alive. The Hero-City has defeated the Northern Venice.