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On the Radical Edge of Left

By Elena Agarkova

LAKE BAIKAL, IRKUTSK—Dressed in black, they march against construction of new nuclear plants, waste incineration, and high-rise developments, against police brutality, neo-Nazism, political, religious and ethnic oppression. Their fathers and grandfathers espoused communist beliefs. Their ideological grand-grandfathers include Russian aristocrats like Count Leo Tolstoy, Mikhael Bakunin and Prince Peter Kropotkin, who advocated individual liberty and dismantlement of the state.

The anarchists have branches in several cities across the country. In January of 2002 they formed a loose coalition named "Autonomous Action." Their website states that their overarching goal involves destruction of the State and all its institutes, and creation of self-government by the people.¹ Their overall numbers remain small, but these young men and women play an active role in modern political opposition in Russia. They are certainly active enough for the Russian police to begin to take a keen interest in them. On May 1 of this year the Irkutsk police arrested eighteen anarchists who took part in the annual May Day demonstration, on charges of hooliganism and violently resisting arrest. I knew one of them, a 23-year-old young man named Igor, through his work at a local environmental NGO,

Baikal Wave. When the administrative judge in charge of the cases took four out of eighteen, including Igor's, to test the strength of police evidence, I decided to attend the court hearings and talk to the people involved.

The anarchists' activism in environmental issues may seem puzzling at first glance, but upon closer examination it makes perfect sense. One of the most obvious connections between modern anarchism and environmentalism lies in tight state control over much of Russia's economy. Who makes decisions regarding development of oil fields, construction of uranium-enrichment centers, hydroelectric dams, and pipelines? The federal government, through its agencies, bureaucracy, state-owned monopolies, and oligarchs who answer the Kremlin's bidding, with little or no public input. So general opposition to governmental authority, espoused by anarchists, logically translates into opposition to state's policies toward the country's natural resources. The anarchists agree with the view that the country's political elite profits by exploiting Russia's natural wealth while average citizens bear the brunt of the resulting environmental degradation.²

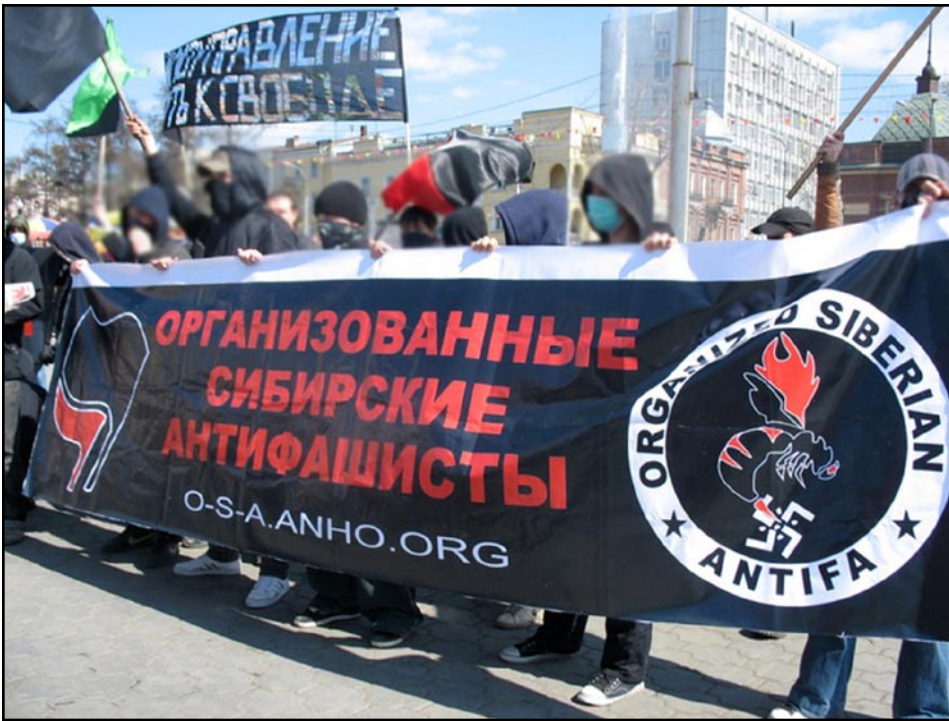
Anarchism has had a long history in Russia, and many different schools of thought have

¹ From the Autonomous Action Manifesto:

"Who are we? Autonomous Action is a community of people for whom 'freedom without socialism is a privilege of injustice, and socialism without freedom is slavery.' For us the most important things in life are not consumerism, career, power or money, but creativity, sincere human relationships and personal freedom. All of us: workers and unemployed, students, government officials and activists, are united by our opposition to any dominance over one person by another, to the state, capitalism, and the official bourgeois culture being forced upon us, by our desire to not be an agreeable cog in the mechanism of the System, but oppose it collectively, and by our need for free self-realization.

Our ideals and goals. Autonomous Action is against any forms of dominance and discrimination, in the society as well as in our organization. The System of Dominance is a tight network of the repressive state apparatus, industrial capitalist economy and authoritarian, hierarchical relationships between people. We consider every state to be an instrument of oppression and exploitation of the working majority by the privileged minority. The power of the state and capital means oppression of everyone's identity and creative energies. That is why we consider libertarian (free, stateless, self-governing) communism, a dominance-free society, to be a necessary social order. But our immediate goal is to establish a tradition and a base of the new humanistic culture, social self-organization, radical opposition to militarism, capitalism, sexism and fascism."

² Of course even if the state's involvement were minimal, environmentally-conscious anarchists would oppose what they see as corporate (or capitalist) exploitation of the environment.



"Organized Siberian Antifascists," at the May Day demonstration in Irkutsk.



made their mark on the country's politics and culture. Leo Tolstoy toward the second half of his life became a Christian anarchist, setting out his criticisms of the government and the organized church in *The Kingdom of God is Within You* and other works. A pacifist and a vegetarian, Tolstoy called for a society based on compassion, nonviolence and freedom. He borrowed the title of a book written by the French anarchist Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, *La Guerre et la Paix*, for his masterpiece *War and Piece*.

In 1857 the tsarist government sent Mikhael Bakunin, a nobleman who would in a few years become one of the most influential Russian anarchists, into Siberian exile. Upon moving to Irkutsk (Bakunin's second cousin was

the governor of Eastern Siberia), he became part of a political circle that resented St. Petersburg's treatment of Siberia as a colony (even then the capital siphoned off the region's wealth), and advocated creation of a United States of Siberia, independent of Russia and possibly part of the U.S.

By the end of 19th century non-pacifist anarchist cells staged terrorist actions in Moscow, participated in the revolutionary uprisings, and led peasant revolts in the Ukraine. But even though anarchists took part in the revolutions of 1917, they disagreed with Bolsheviks, rejecting the idea of the dictatorship of the proletariat. As Bolsheviks came to power, they suppressed and eliminated anarchists along with other political opponents. More than 60 years would pass until anarchists re-appeared in Russian political life, including in Irkutsk. In March of 1980 a student of philology at the Irkutsk State University published the first (hand-written) issue of a magazine dedicated to anarchist ideas. Eight years later the former student gave an interview to the official magazine called *Soviet Youth*, in which he tried to distinguish anarchism from anarchy: "Anarchy is what's happening in our country right now. Anarchism, to us, is purposeful work toward creating a grass-roots democracy, or government by the people. We oppose violence and therefore support federalism, as an effort to avoid situations which can lead to civil war, through accommodation of interests. We advocate self-governance, as an absolute right to

inner autonomy, and partylessness, as a renunciation of group struggle for power. Anarchism is a non-party movement for stateless socialism. This doesn't mean that political parties should be prohibited, only that no one of them should be in power."

What is anarchism? The word probably connotes chaos, disorder, and violence for most people. Its etymology comes from the Greek *anarchos*, which simply means "having no ruler." The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines anarchy as 1) absence of government; 2) a state of lawlessness or political disorder due to the absence of governmental authority; 3) a utopian society of individuals who enjoy complete freedom without government. The definition of

anarchism, on the other hand, states that it is a political theory holding all forms of governmental authority to be unnecessary and undesirable, and advocating a society based on voluntary cooperation and free association of individuals and groups.

Perhaps weary of the negative associations that most people have with the word anarchy, today's anarchists often call themselves anti-fascists. (However, even though almost all anarchists ascribe to anti-fascist views, not all anti-fascists are anarchists.) This label has its downsides too, despite the mythological status of World War II for most Russians. Russian neo-Nazis have stepped up their level of violence lately, attacking migrant workers, people with non-Slavic looks, liberal journalists and lawyers. The anarchists' anti-nationalist views have also made them a target. One of the murders took place in Angarsk, a city 30 kilometers away from Irkutsk, two years ago.

Angarsk is an industrial town, built mainly by prison labor. It used to be a "closed city," missing from the maps and train schedules. Several highly polluting enterprises functioned in the city over the years, including the Angarsk Electrolyzing and Chemical Combine (AECC), established in 1954 to produce enriched uranium for the Soviet nuclear program. The complex also operates one of Russia's two large conversion facilities producing feed material for uranium enrichment facilities (uranium hexafluoride). Even though it is not as radioactive as uranium,

depleted uranium hexafluoride is a dangerous, reactive substance that forms highly toxic uranyl fluoride and hydrofluoric acid upon contact with water vapor. The government has not released information regarding the exact amount of radioactive waste that has accumulated at the AECC site, citing "commercial secrets." Environmentalists estimate that there may be as many as 250 thousand tons of depleted uranium hexafluoride on AECC's territory.

In 2006 then-President Vladimir Putin raised the idea of creating international nuclear enrichment centers. He stated that such centers would give countries transparent access to civilian nuclear technology without provoking international fears that enriched uranium could be used for covert weapons programs by "rogue" nations. Russia's plan called for building the first such nuclear enrichment center on the base of the AECC.

In March 2007 the International Atomic Energy Agency deputy director general Yuri Sokolov stated that the agency supports the idea of setting up an international uranium enrichment centre in Angarsk and will provide guarantees for the project. Sokolov described the center's fundamental purpose as bolstering the nuclear nonproliferation regime. He expected over 30 countries interested in developing their nuclear power industry to become Russia's partners in the project.

The initial purpose of the Angarsk uranium enrich-





On April 26 of this year Irkutsk activists demonstrated against the proposed nuclear enrichment center and commemorated the anniversary of the Chernobyl catastrophe.

ment center seems to have faded into the background as Russia struggled to attract potential partners for the project. By the end of 2007 Russian officials used another argument in support of the proposal, assuring “energy autonomy for nations.” First deputy prime minister of Russia, Sergei Ivanov, said that due to the depletion of hydrocarbon reserves, the world is increasingly looking to nuclear energy as an alternative. He added that oil and gas supplies were highly contingent on military and political situations, which have been unstable of late in the main producing regions. Ivanov also said that any country willing to contribute money to the Angarsk uranium enrichment center will receive fresh uranium supplies for its own nuclear programs from the facility. Critics of the project pointed out that Ivanov’s assertion opened the Angarsk nuclear fuel supply to anyone with the cash to pay for it. Environmentalists opposed the project for several reasons, including the fact that creation of the uranium enrichment center in Angarsk will greatly increase the amount of radioactive waste at the AECC. Some critics see the project as a ploy by the federal government to make money off dumping other countries’ nuclear waste in Russia.

The first public protests against the Angarsk uranium enrichment center started in Irkutsk at the end of 2006. In April 2007 environmental activists held a rally under the slogan “No Chernobyl at Baikal,” which they characterized as a protest “against the environmental colonization of the Baikal region.” In the summer of 2007 local environmentalists and anarchists, joined by activists from Moscow and the Far East, organized a “tent

city” in Angarsk to express their opposition to the uranium enrichment center. On July 14, before the protest camp began functioning, local police officers took ten activists to the Angarsk police station for questioning and identity checks. The activists reported that Federal Security Service agents conducted the questioning itself.

The protest camp officially opened on July 20. The local administration initially opposed the protesters’ plan to hold rallies in selected areas of town, stating that they scheduled “other public events” in those locations. The protesters persisted and managed to receive permission. It turned out that the administration “misinformed” the anti-nuclear activists and no “other public events” has been scheduled anywhere in town after all.

In the early morning of July 21, 2007 “a group of young men armed with knives and bats stormed the anti-nuclear tent camp in Angarsk.” The prosecutor’s office reported that out of eighteen people present in the camp at the time, eight received serious injuries. One young man, Ilya Bondarenko, died at the hospital. Ilya was an anarchist from the city of Nahodka in the Russian Far East. Another two remained hospitalized with head concussions, broken arms and legs. According to the prosecution’s report, at least 13 young men from Irkutsk and Angarsk, ages 16 to 22, participated in the attack. The police arrested several of them the next day, and the youth testified that they attacked the camp in retaliation for a beating a friend of theirs allegedly suffered from



Police present at the demonstration did not seem particularly concerned.

"anti-fascists." The camp activists reported that the attackers burned their tents and belongings, stole their personal things, including passports, and cursed out anti-fascists. The camp participants had no doubts that they were attacked by neo-Nazis, even though local police initially denied that they even have Nazi followers in Angarsk.

Igor, who participated in the anti-nuclear camp, told me that they received warnings about a possible attack for several days in a row. One of the local boys said he got a text message on his phone advising him not to visit the camp that night. "The police also warned us, from the very beginning, that we were in a criminal area and that we should leave," said Igor. Camp participants wondered whether a connection existed between the local police, who performed daily identity checks on the camp activists, and the attackers. "The organizers [of the attack] definitely were neo-Nazis. The rest were just people they knew, because in reality there are not that many of them and it would've been difficult for [the Nazis] to gather a crowd of 20 or 25 people. Some of the attackers said later that their brother called them, asking to 'join in', or a friend invited them." I asked whether these guys really showed up just to beat up people they didn't know personally. To Igor that did not seem strange. "What do you think youth violence is?"

However, he thought that the attack was a big event for its organizers. "They had a plan of our camp, knew who they wanted to beat up, and who was sleeping in what tent. One of our daytime visitors must have been a scout of theirs." Still, Ilya, the young man who died in the hospital from the injuries he received during the attack, may have been an accidental victim. "The [local neo-Nazis] could not have known him even though he was a famous activist in his town and many, even the fascists, respected him," said Igor.

Our conversation took place outside the administrative court building during a break in the hearings. The administrative judge acquitted two of Igor's friends the week before. She agreed with the defense that the police failed to prove any elements of the alleged crimes and relied on inadmissible evidence. Police reports had only general accusations of the anarchists "cursing obscenities at the government and the police," throwing smoke grenades, and resisting arrest. In court police witnesses gave inconsistent testimony regarding all charges. For example, some police officers testified that "all of the anarchists yelled obscenities." The mayor, who personally arrested Sergei, one of the first anarchists to be tried, could not say for sure whether Sergei cursed or not. Another policeman testified that Sergei did yell obscenities but when asked for specifics, said that Sergei criticized the government, the president, and the local administration.

Police evidence had other serious flaws. Two people who signed police reports as "attesting witnesses" testified in court that they did not attend the demonstration and did not see the arrests. Instead, as they walked by the police station two hours later, a policeman asked them to come in for several minutes. The "witnesses" signed all

18 arrest reports without reading them. At the hearings the judge asked whether police explained to the witnesses their rights and responsibilities. "No," said the young woman who signed the papers accusing the arrested men. "Why didn't you read the reports?" The girl blushed. "This is the first time for me. I've never done this before."

Igor hoped that the judge would dismiss his case "by analogy," but he could not be completely sure. The police chose to separate the cases instead of combining them, even though they involved the same charges, same witnesses, and same evidence. The lawyer who represented Sergei told me that this complicated defense, since different attorneys represented each person. They had to arrange for the witnesses to appear in court several times to repeat the same testimony. "The witnesses can get confused and say somewhat different things each time. Every attorney may have a different point on the best way to defend his client. We don't have time to coordinate the defense and we cannot combine the cases at this time." The lawyer in question, Alexander Dubrovin, said he took Sergei's case after one of the communist organizers of the May Day rally called him and asked for help. Alexander, who is semi-retired, took the case for free. "Am I to ask for money from a penniless organization?" He has been an attorney for 20 years and it appears that he has often done pro bono work for the Communist Party in the past. He thought that authorities arrested the anarchists to discredit the local communist branch and to make it harder for the party to receive rally permissions in the future.

Not everyone thought that the demonstrators pursued pure ideological motives. One of the policemen who testified at trial as a witness told me that "either the youth have nothing better to do or someone is sponsoring them." This police officer, dressed in plain clothes, followed the anarchist demonstrators the entire time of the May Day rally. At trial he claimed he received second-degree burns after a hot substance landed on his head and jacket. He told me he did not want to file any charges, especially since he did not see who threw the substance in question. "But my boss ordered me to go to the hospital and file a report. I said, 'What's the point? It's not going to hold up in court anyway.'" He worked at the criminal unit and initially was surprised to hear that the head of local police ordered his unit to participate in following the May Day demonstrators: "We usually just deal with petty thieves."

Sergei Baksheev, Dubrovin's client, is a young man studying to be a lawyer. He became interested in anarchism after he saw a movie about a Ukrainian anarchist Nestor Makhno, who in the early 1920s led an anarchist peasant army in a revolt against both the Bolsheviks and the White Army. No current political parties appealed to Sergei before that. He told me that local communists may have had several reasons to help the arrested anarchists. "The Communist Party has gotten old. They need new blood. They are very dogmatic, even though they sympathize with us."

The fact that communists need younger recruits can



At May Day demonstration this year in Irkutsk, one of the old communist women stands next to a banner held up by Autonomous Action anarchists: "Freedom, Equality, Anarcho-Communism. Autonomous Action."

be witnessed by anyone who attends one of their rallies. Pensioners, old men and women who worked their entire life for the State and have seen their savings and their pensions vanish, make up the vast majority of people in attendance. This year's May Day demonstration in Irkutsk was no exception. Old men with canes walked side by side with a small, tight-knit formation of young men in black sweatshirts, who carried black-and-red banners. One banner identified them as "Organized Siberian Antifascists." A banner in the middle of the group stated, "Self-governance is the way to freedom." A video posted on YouTube shows that as the group passed by the Irkutsk Art Museum, hand flares³ began to fly out of their formation, leaving trails of smoke and landing on the sidewalk with a loud hissing noise. The people who walked nearby did not appear concerned. A few minutes later the police descended on the group and began to drag them away. Some of the old ladies tried to stop the policemen, yelling, tearing at their uniforms and even trying to block the road for the police van.

Igor told me that even though the local anarchists have attended May Day rallies for five years in a row, they have not had problems with police earlier. However, police have been showing interest in their activities. "When you begin to participate in political activism in Russia, at first you are fine, but as soon as you are 'spotted,' they begin to work on you." I asked him what he meant. "I think

they enter you into some database. I haven't seen it myself but based on what I heard from others, they start a dossier on you. I must have 'blown my cover' sometime in 2006. By that I mean that when we sent in notices of demonstrations, we included our personal information. Of course it doesn't just vanish without a trace, and the public safety police documents it. In 2006 the G8 summit took place in St. Petersburg, and a lot of anarchists, as well as leftist activists in general, went there to protest. Here [the authorities] put a hard stop to it. In Irkutsk two or three of our guys planned to go, but all of a sudden it turned into a [Hollywood] thriller. [Police] were spying on people's homes, following them, putting pressure on them at work not to go. In the end three of our guys left, but only one made it to St. Petersburg. The others were taken off the train along the way."

Igor said that afterward police started "visiting" him under different excuses. "They'd come to my home saying, we have information that your son served time, and we are checking all those who have been in prison. What do they mean, I served time, if I never had? So they started to take an interest in me. At first I got scared. I mean, it's always unpleasant when strangers come to your house and start saying something strange to you. I kept thinking that it will affect my studies somehow, but it didn't. The heavy stuff started after the [anti-nuclear] camp in Angarsk. The day before our final conference two officers showed up at my house, and under various excuses took

³ A hand flare (the Russian name for it comes from *falschfeuer*, meaning fake fire in German) is a signaling device that produces bright white smoke and a loud hissing noise for several minutes. The Russian law does not appear to prohibit their use, and one can buy hand flares in hunting and sporting goods stores. Football fans use them often during games. On the other hand, a smoke grenade, which the police alleged the anarchists used, is a military weapon.



Another anarchist banner at the May Day demonstration, "No Capitalism, No Crisis."

me and my dad to the police station. I managed to leave, but my dad stayed and the head of the station gave him a talking-to. There are plenty of such examples that happened to others, too."

Igor was born in Irkutsk and received his degree in international affairs from the Irkutsk State University. He has an air of asceticism about him, which could be the result of his veganism. He got interested in anarchism during his college years. I asked him what he found attractive about it. "The theory itself, that a man determines his life himself, that there is no higher authority or structures which dictate [the terms] to you. That is very appealing to me, that I can decide how I want to live, how I choose my life path. That in principle society should be organized according to principles of justice and not according to market laws or laws of the political elite. In general society should strive toward justice, for all of its members, as opposed to laws of force." When asked what justice means to him, he replied: "That people are equal, that everyone has equal opportunities. The state does not exist, because if there is any such structure and it has even a modicum of power, it will still dictate. As long as it has power, it will abuse this power." He said he believes that everyone in a community must respect the rights of others. "Complete freedom does not mean anything that's good for me. Of course you must not harm other members of the community."

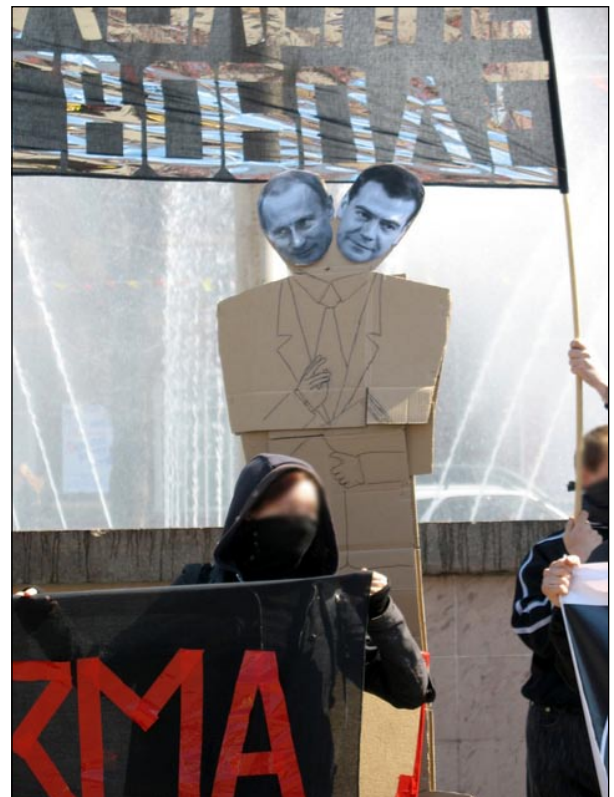
One would think that after centuries of revolutionary upheavals, spilled blood and resulting dictatorships Russians would discard idealism, but Igor and his friends surprised me. They have even organized businesses based on anarchist principles. "In Omsk, for example, I talked to people who created teams which renovated houses, and divided proceeds equally. They didn't have a boss or someone running it, a director who would first take all profits and then re-distribute them. Right now our friends in Ir-

kutsk have a project distributing Linux, the free alternative operating system for computers. Two or three of them organized an enterprise based on libertarian principles, meaning they are not in it to make lots of money; they are distributing a non-corporate product, and they charge only for their services."

To me such enterprises seemed similar to Israeli kibbutzes. "If you take communism in its pure state, it has very much in common with anarchism," acknowledged Igor. "An anarchist commune is really the same as a communist society. That's why it's often referred to as anarcho-communism. Many anarchists sympathize with "leftist communists," the non-authoritarian ones. Often [anarchism and communism] are mutually complementary." However, Igor considers himself a man of practice and doesn't pay too much attention to

theory. "What's the point of theory? So we'll write a few really good books, distribute them, people will read them and not do anything. If they don't actually try to build this society, nothing will happen. You have to try it out in real life. That's why I'm always a bit skeptical of theory — I always think about how you can realize it in practice."

I asked Igor what changes he would like to see happen in Russia, in practice. "I'd like to see people really use



An anarchist poster with a Medvedev-Putin tandem, sometimes called "Medveput."

at least their political rights to the full extent. That they don't go to jail for this, that there is no moral or social pressure on them. Also, certain social justice, but the most important thing is self-autonomy, that people stop depending on state structures and begin to organize their lives themselves. There are some very good examples [of such autonomy] in the Irkutsk community, of people defending their homes and their territory against high-rise construction projects. This is a great example because most of the people involved were grandmothers. They formed a powerful nucleus and I think they even won several law-suits. It was very simple. People self-organized and were able to defend their backyards. And at first they did not ask for help from any political parties. Only later, when they had the first breakthrough, different parties and politicians started to come in, offering their services, trying to climb on the bandwagon."

When I asked him whether he considered most people in Russia to be apolitical, he disagreed with the form of my question. "It is not entirely correct to say that they are apolitical. First, what do we mean by politics? For me politics, at its basic, is not about parliamentarians or sessions at the Duma [the Russian parliament]. My convictions are politics. How I build relations with others is also politics. That is politics in the larger sense of the word. How I build relations with a certain group of people. For example, I find fascism or Nazism unacceptable. That's my political position, and it's politics, because I project it somehow, I try to show people what I consider wrong."

But he did admit that Russians had low direct participation in political issues. "Direct participation in political life, in elections or in specific political movements, here we have problems. It's often difficult to move people to action. But we have to keep in mind that we had an era of totalitarian government, when all political rights were reduced to voting 'the right way,' and then the stormy '90s, when political intrigues and make-believe presidential elections made people lose faith. It's a difficult issue. But I think that overall the situation is improving."

When I asked him to explain, he said that people have been taking more initiative. "Look at the movement against high-rise construction projects. They always pushed such projects through in Irkutsk, brazenly, but then the movement [against them] started, and these grandmothers began to put up a fight. Of course if we dig deeper we'll probably find that they have



Igor in front of the court entrance, waiting for his hearing.

different political views, or don't have much of an idea about different political parties, but the fact that they stand up for their rights to me means there is politics involved. It so happens that many novice politicians try to build their career on such movements, because they represent a real force. The issues involved cause a visceral public reaction."

Our interview took place on a porch in a courtyard outside of the administrative court building. The spot felt strange — the building that houses the administrative court of Irkutsk and every building around it look just like regular apartment buildings. As we talked, one of the anarchist activists came up to us to say that the case prior to Igor's had just been dismissed, for lack of evidence. I watched Igor walk into the building, wondering why he cared so much.

Anarchist demonstrations and similar instances of public outcries may not seem that meaningful in the overall scheme of Russia's current history, but I agree with Igor that one has to look at them in the proper historical context. It is only in such a context that they acquire real and important meaning. In contrast to the U.S. or countries of Western Europe, Russia has had only glimpses of democracy. And whether one agrees with the ideals espoused by the Russian young men and women who want to abolish the government, one has to admire their courage and hope that they will serve as an example to others to stand up for their beliefs. □

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