

Vladimir Bukovsky

Putin will be turned in by his own entourage because they will not be willing to sink together with him

Vladimir Bukovsky is a well-known Russian human rights activist and a member of the Federal Political Council of the Solidarnost movement, a former Soviet political prisoner and one of the founders of the dissident movement in the Soviet Union. He spent 12 years in prisons and forced confinement (are we referring to psychiatry hospitals? If yes you should say it) in the USSR. In 2007, he was nominated for Presidency of Russia by the Opposition.

Interview conducted in April 2013

Elena Servettaz: In this book we discuss whether the European Union needs the Magnitsky Act. Or, I'd rather rephrase the question - will Europe dare to follow the US in matters related to human rights legislation?

Vladimir Bukovsky: I support the campaign for the adoption of a Magnitsky Act in Europe. I find this Act extremely important and I believe it is unique. The reason being that during the Soviet Union such a law could never have been adopted because the problem with the Soviet Union was the entire system rather than individual officials. At that time it was impossible to make the West boycott the Soviet system as it was against its interests. The West wanted to maintain relations, no matter how poor they were. And the post-Communist regime is different as it creates the impression that individual corrupt officials are guilty of everything. Therefore, a law adopted against them will not mean a deterioration of relations with the Russian state. That is, no deteriorated relation with the state, and if the corrupt officials react how we know they tend to, it's their problem. The West never sets the goal of upsetting relations with Russia; on the contrary, it helps the Russian government in fighting corruption: it is prepared to disclose information on all their savings, accounts, etc.

So, diplomatically speaking, the post-Communist system made it possible. It was impossible before. Will it have any effect? Absolutely, because the position of today's Russian ruling upper circles are rather schizophrenic with the West being the enemy and wanting to pull their people to their position, on one hand. While on the other hand, the West is a safe harbour for them, because this is where they park their money, their children and their families. A rather cynical dualism, so to speak. This is why this Act hits them so hard.

I think, Garry Kasparov once put it right: "Today's Kremlin government wants to rule like Stalin and to live like Abramovich." Of course, you can never have both - it's either one or the other. And the Magnitsky Act aims exactly at that. It is very well done, even though it is now in its early stages and the list of names proposed by the Americans is ridiculously short, but Congress is going to expand these lists no matter how much the Department of State resists. Will Europe follow this course? Most European countries have already confirmed they will. They are not planning to adopt a special Act, but they are willing to follow the principles of the American Act. Let us see whether it will be applied in practice; all the same, they can be pressured by society in this regard, and if they are untrue and fail to observe the Act, a pressure campaign may be initiated against them. This Act is a positive phenomenon in itself.

Elena Servettaz: We have mentioned the Russian authorities' reaction to this Act and if we remember certain statements made by officials, Vladimir Putin's press secretary Dmitry Peskov keeps saying that this Act is Russophobic. But neither of them - neither Vladimir Putin nor Sergey Lavrov, the head of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Russian Federation, nor the deputies of the ruling party - attempted to answer the question - why nobody in Russia has already investigated the case of hundreds of millions of dollars misappropriated from the state budget?

Vladimir Bukovsky: You see how such investigations end: Sergei Magnitsky investigated and where is he now? Any person, any individual or public organisation attempting this investigation in Russia will follow in Magnitsky's steps, and everybody is well aware of this. The statement of the Russian leaders - the leaders of the Kremlin - can't fool anybody. The Russian people have a clear idea of what this is about and are very sarcastic about them regarding it as Russophobic. People understand everything, but it is very difficult to do anything about it. This is a terrorist regime which will not hesitate

to kill. I noticed that since 2000, during Putin's time in office, the number of political murders has increased, there are more of them than in the entire Soviet era. We had murders in our time, too, but they were rare. And now we have a wave of murders and everyone has a clear idea who is ordering them.

Elena Servettaz: Don't you think that the European leaders have enough power and strength to do as the Americans did? We remember how Putin can threaten them: he can cut off gas for some and electricity for the others, etc. Is Europe afraid of Putin?

Vladimir Bukovsky: Europe is much more pragmatic than America. I want to note that Obama's administration was not particularly happy about the Magnitsky Act and tried to block, dissolve or diminish it, in every possible way. As a result, they achieved a ridiculous number of people in this list. But this is temporary, because beside the Congress and the Senate, there is society, which is behind it and wants it. It's the same in Europe: our European leaders are pragmatic, not willing to think about ideology or moral values; all that is in the past. They want to maintain good relations with all countries, including Russia, on which they depend for power supply. And they see nothing to be ashamed of here. Nowadays moral values are no longer mandatory. As a result, there is complete amorality in our politics, something that has never occurred before. Therefore, we cannot wait for them to make their lives difficult. Everything will depend on the public response and on the pressure that society puts on European leaders. And if the pressure is sufficient, they will adopt the same laws.

Elena Servettaz: Incidentally, since we're talking about society, I recall a number of high-profile deaths or murders in the UK. I hope that the British police will eventually disclose all the documents related to these cases. I recall Alexander Litvinenko's story and the case of informer Alexander Perepilichnyy who, an apparently healthy 44-year-old man, died suddenly. Also, it is totally unclear what happened to Boris Berezovsky. How does British society react to such "Russian events"?

Vladimir Bukovsky: The public has no doubt at all that these are murders arranged by the Kremlin. This is expressed quite openly and also by journalists. As for politicians, they are scratching their heads and thinking what to do about it. If this is the third murder in a row in their territory, they will have to sever their diplomatic relations with Russia, which is unattractive for them. Therefore, they understand that nothing else can be done, though three

murders one after the other is too many, especially with Alexander Litvinenko being a British citizen. In the past, such events could lead to wars. Today it is impossible, we are living in a different world, but nevertheless an adequate answer is required. When Litvinenko was murdered, I suggested that they officially, and through television, expel Russia from all public international organisations, for example, from the Council of Europe, the NATO observers, the G8, and so on. These were our demands made five years ago after Litvinenko's murder.

Elena Servettaz: Why does nobody do this? Are the “agents of influence” so strong in the UK? However, France also has enough Putin lobbyists and Kremlin-leaning pseudo-political analysts and even economists.

Vladimir Bukovsky: Of course, we have lobbyist groups hired by Russia. Also we have press media owned by Russian people of dubious reputation. For example, Alexander Lebedev owns three newspapers, and there is also a TV channel called Russia Today. That is, their positions for influencing the public are quite strong here and, definitely, there are lobbyist groups. The major lobbyist is BP, which is constantly involved in some kind of debt or conflict. And the government is forced to constantly save it. Today's politicians are spineless people having no spirit, will or thoughts. And this keeps “sliding through” but all the same there is still society, which is the “controlling interest”, difficult to bring to fruition.

Elena Servettaz: Do you remember that discussion on whether the names in the Magnitsky list should be published or whether the list should be restricted. Which option do you find more effective?

Vladimir Bukovsky: I see no contradiction here. With a certain amount of effort, all these people can be identified and their guilt can be determined. All these contradictions are far-fetched. For example, the head of the Investigation Committee, Alexander Bastrykin – do we need to prove to anyone that he is directly responsible for the Magnitsky investigation? We don't. By law he is responsible, as head of that group. You see, there is the bureaucratic principle of the senior officer's responsibility, and nothing needs to be proved here. Therefore, I see no contradiction, and we have nothing to be shy about: name the names, and in a couple of months you will receive information on these people in detail from Russia. Today the internet does it in no time.

Elena Servettaz: Yes, but today human rights organisations in Russia are

being investigated and are being labelled as “foreign agents”...

Vladimir Bukovsky: Listen, the press has been calling me a paid agent of international imperialism for 30 years of my life, maybe even 40. I am used to such terminology and, of course, in Russia they also know what kind of agents this means and what they have to do with this. This is planned. Already two years ago we all knew that the government was preparing a persecution campaign – it was scared by the mass protests and had decided to put a stop to all such protests. The persecutions will increase, new laws will be adopted. Thus, the laws on non-profit organisations, and espionage under which any Russian citizen communicating with a foreigner is already a spy, have been adopted. And the Bolotnaya case is expanding, it is not clear anymore; there are several dozens of people that stand accused. The Navalny case is underway. And this volume will grow until a resolution to crush this protest movement from all sides is adopted. Do they see this movement as dangerous for them? They do. In the current form they may not be as dangerous, but officials all see very well that with social tension, such movements will increase and the increase will be quick and it will totally get out of control. They realise that this is inevitable and that they'd better nip it now in the bud.

Elena Servettaz: “Nip it in the bud”... The Russian protest has not been crushed yet, but it has been asleep for a while... Will it take new arrests for us to stir again?

Vladimir Bukovsky: The protest will not be crushed. I have survived several such persecution waves in my life and have fallen under them. Usually this comes in waves. Now they will fight off this wave, but in a year it will appear again because the objective conditions of life in the country will force the people to protest: when people already have no means to pay their housing bills. You see, their backs are against the wall, they will protest because they have no other way.

Elena Servettaz: What is your forecast? Of course, it's difficult to imagine what is in Vladimir Putin's head – the head of a man thinking in ways totally incomprehensible to us. But what is he counting on, anyway?

Vladimir Bukovsky: He hopes to fight his way through. And he succeeded in these elections when he almost lost and his own team was ready to betray him, he knows all that and everything was touch-and-go. But, still, he pushed through the elections. And he hopes that he will be as lucky always. He has no choice: as soon as he surrenders power he will go to prison, if he

doesn't get murdered. He is very well aware of this, like everybody else. So, he has no choice. Another issue is that his entourage at any moment may betray him because they do not want to "sink" with him. This is a common practice in Russia.

Elena Servettaz: Now I will return to the law again: there was a proposal that this law should be applicable not only to people from Russia violating laws on human rights, but also from other countries. Let's look at what is going on in Belarus, Ukraine and other post-Soviet countries. As you can see, the picture is not pretty. What is your opinion of that?

Vladimir Bukovsky: Not only the post-Soviet territory, look at Iran or Syria. This proposal was discussed by the US Senate. This is where they disagreed with Congress. The Representatives insisted on the exclusive application of this act to Russia while the Senate claimed that it could not be allowed, that the law should be the same for all. They made peace for some time to squeeze the Act through somehow, otherwise it would not have been adopted in time in Congress, or it would have been a different law. But this does not mean they are not going back to this issue. Ultimately, the legislation will evolve in that direction. Finally, a law discriminating politicians and public figures involved in human rights violations will be adopted in most of the Western countries.

Elena Servettaz: And do you approve the possibility of such a general law against all human rights violators or abusers to be named after Sergei Magnitsky and to be applicable in Europe?

Vladimir Bukovsky: It does not matter to me how it will be named, I am not obsessed about this case. There are very many similar cases, this case caught Browder's eye by pure chance and he, being a person of great influence and power, decided not to let go the idea to make his friend Sergei Magnitsky remembered. In fact, there are loads of similar Russian stories of a large or small scale. So, it does not matter to me how this law will be named.

Elena Servettaz: The main thing is that the guilty ones are punished...

Vladimir Bukovsky: Yes, so that there is a law and so that we finally have the opportunity to prevent these corrupt violators from using the benefits of Western civilisation, bank accounts and all.