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BREAD & BRAINS with Eduard Nazarski

Human Rights in Russia

*On Thursday 10 October 2013, **Eduard Nazarski**, Director Amnesty International Netherlands, gave a lunch lecture on the contemporary developments of human rights in Russia. Given the current nature of the topic, Nazarski decided to highlight some of the recent events that have shaped the discussion and emphasised, in particular, the recently amended legislature concerning a. propaganda for different sexual orientations and b. the obligation for organisations to report foreign funding, relations, and actions to the Russian government.*

Eduard Nazarski began his speech by boldly naming some of the Russian journalists and human rights advocates who have been violently targeted by Russian hostility. It is imperative to realise that the fight for more freedom occurs at a personal level involving valiant Russian individuals who risk assassination, incarceration in psychiatric hospitals or Siberian gulags, or simply being reported as *missing*. Yet despite these intimidating circumstances, Nazarski pointed out, some positive developments are taking place, such as the awarding of journalism prizes to progressive Russian journalists. This way, Nazarski stated, an important message is given by the international community to support Russian freedom advocates.

Recently, Russia amended important legislature affecting essential LGBT rights and freedom of speech and activity for organisations. Firstly, 'any form of propaganda' stimulating sexual orientations or activity deviating from the traditional male/female marriage is prohibited. Secondly, all organisations are obliged to report foreign funding, relations, and actions to the Russian government. These amendments severely limit the freedom of the LGBT community and human rights advocates. In order to establish an understanding of these developments in Russia, Nazarski emphasised three characteristics of Russian society. According to Nazarski, the current human rights developments should be interpreted within the context of these societal traits:

Firstly, Russia's economy and energy are highly important. Increasingly, the nation has been focusing on its energy sources and as a result the nation has

been showing some societal features similar to the wealthy Gulf States. A development of an increasingly wealthy upper-class is taking place, devoted solely to becoming even wealthier. Russians belonging to this class are intertwined with politics and highly powerful.

Secondly, Vladimir Putin has strongly been investing in promoting the 'Russian soul' of Russian people. Accordingly, and as a highly patriotic man, he aims to establish a common identity for the Russian people. In addition, Putin formed a strong partnership with the Russian Orthodox Church, sharing the same views on the LGBT community. This partnership is a vital feature to note, as during the Communist Era the government was not partnered with the Church, and thus lacked a large supporter's base.

Thirdly, for the majority of Russians human rights are not a priority. According to conducted research, only 15 per cent of the Russians are in favour of universally applied human rights. Russians much rather emphasise factors such as 'order' and 'stability' as important for their society.

Significant Russian-Dutch events

Nazarski proceeded to elaborate on the Russian-Dutch relationship. Accordingly, he highlighted some important events that have occurred or will occur in the near future.

Firstly and most evidently, we are in the midst of the Russian-Netherlands year that is supposed to stimulate exchange of culture and history and further develop the relationship between the two nations.

Secondly, a Greenpeace ship sailing under Dutch flag was hijacked by the Russian marine. The activists



on board were arrested and have since been kept in prison on grounds of ‘piracy’. They remain in prison despite the fact that it is evident that ‘piracy’ is out of order.

Thirdly, this week a Russian diplomat was arrested in The Hague, which led to fierce protest by Putin. Minister of Foreign Affairs Timmermans offered a formal excuse, yet a day later posted the song *Je ne regrette de rien* by Edith Piaf on his Facebook page suggesting he did not regret the actions undertaken by the Dutch police.

Fourthly, in February 2014 the Olympic Games will take place in Russia. According to Nazarski, not only the Dutch Olympic committee but also the international Olympic committee should be much more outspoken about the current developments in human rights. In this light, lessons should be learned for football organisation FIFA that organises the World Cup in Russia in 2018. They have a moral obligation to take a proactive stand on these important topics. These large, influential international events can be used to address (the violation of) human rights.

International civil society

Eduard Nazarski furthermore underlined the importance of European civil society and Russian civil society upholding cooperation and communication. It is important that Russian individuals who are threatened by the Russian government or violent citizens’ groups feel supported by the international community. It is, however, imperative that we remain careful in our approaches and strategies. As Nazarski stated: “We, as Amnesty International and other international organisations, should not focus on LGBT rights solely as this could endanger individuals in Russia. Moreover, it could work counterproductive as a large majority of the Russian population is against gay rights. Organisations should therefore focus on the broader spectrum of the improvement of human rights in Russia as this is a less sensitive topic than LGBT rights.”

Most importantly, we should let the local offices of Amnesty International and other partner organisations in Russia decide on the best approach since locals are the ones who can decide what is most effective. For individuals, but also organisations, it is imperative to maintain some level of patience and flexibility in order to achieve set objectives.

Questions and Answers

The first question from the audience addressed the impact of the amended legislature on the work of Amnesty International in Russia. According to

Nazarski, the work by organisations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Organization has not been limited by the adjusted laws as the Russian offices are branches from the headquarters based in the United States.

Another member of the audience critically noted that Amnesty International merely employs moral tools in the fight for human rights, instead of legal tools. He wondered whether the recently amended legislature is in violation with the European Convention of Human Rights, which was signed by Russia. “What is Amnesty International’s stand on employing legal objections?” he wondered. Nazarski acknowledged the fact that Amnesty International does not address human rights issues within the legal context often. It is very rare that cases are taken to court. He did, however, think the organisation has the expertise to do so. In the future, Nazarski replied, this is an area that could, and should be explored.



Recommendations

Nazarski concluded the discussion by recommending the audience to break the silence and speak out about the worrisome developments in Russia. We should organise support for the Russian people and pressure our government to express dissatisfaction with the current situation on behalf of its Dutch citizens.

SID NL and the Humanity House organise monthly Bread & Brains lunch discussions with prominent speakers. Everyone is welcome from 12:00 onwards to take a break, have some lunch and meet new people. The monthly lunch meetings focus on pressing issues in the field of international development.

Contact: SID Netherlands

Zeestraat 100, 2518 AD The Hague, The Netherlands

Website: www.sid-nl.org

E-mail: info@sidnl.org

SID Netherlands sidnl