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**A ZHIRINOVSKY'S NATO**

by

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**Abstract**

*In May 2008 the author gave a paper about NATO enlargement in the former Reichstag building in Berlin. Here is a brief description of its reception by Vladimir Wolfovich Zhirinovskiy, the leader of Russia's Liberal Democratic Party who is well-known for his lively approach to political debate. This was no exception.*

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## ZHIRINOVSKY'S NATO LESSON

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An invitation to speak to a NATO committee in Berlin's revamped Reichstag building rarely comes the way of a British academic, so it seemed worth the effort to reschedule an earlier commitment to speak in Sweden on the same day.<sup>1</sup> Thanks to the flexibility of my Swedish hosts I was able to arrive in Berlin the evening before my address was to be delivered to the Political Committee of NATO's Parliamentary Assembly on 24 May.

Although I prefer not to read from a prepared text, having been an interpreter earlier in my career, I readily agreed to supply a copy of my speech—entitled 'Medvedev's Presidency: implications for NATO's future relations with Russia'<sup>2</sup>—a full week in advance, thus giving my erstwhile colleagues every chance to familiarise themselves with the content. Never having attended previously a NATO meeting I was unsure whether I would be addressing an audience of a few dozen in a small committee room or a UN-style gathering of several hundred (the latter turned out to be the case). More importantly, although aware that Russia sent delegates as observers to this committee, I had little idea of exactly who might attend. I was in for quite a shock.

As my address was scheduled for the afternoon, I was not due at the Reichstag building until lunchtime. This gave me a free morning to collect my thoughts and see a bit of Berlin around my hotel, situated just a fifteen minute walk from the

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<sup>1</sup> A conference at the University of Lund entitled 'Islamism, the State, and the Quest for Community', 21–24 May, 2008. My paper on Ramzan Kadyrov, the Chechen president, was delivered on 23 May.

<sup>2</sup> The full speech may be accessed on <http://www.nato-pa.int/Default.asp?SHORTCUT=1538>

Brandenburg Gate. For my post-war generation, Berlin holds very special memories: my stepbrother had been serving with the Royal Signals when the Wall went up in 1961; in the 1970's, I regularly passed at night through the intimidating *Friedrichstrasse* Station in the East on trains bound for Moscow, the quintessential Cold War experience; and in 2005 I had given a paper during the ICCEES World Congress<sup>3</sup> at Humboldt University, a part already of Germany's reunified capital city. Now, sitting in the sun on *Unter den Linden* just yards from where the Wall once stood, watching thousands of Berliners 'free wheeling' in the bicycle equivalent of a 'fun run', I experienced a keen sense of my own, my family's, even the world's recent history, a feeling made all the more poignant later as I passed the cross commemorating the last East Berliner to be shot dead attempting to escape West in February 1989, just months before the Wall came down.

My address followed that of former US Congressman and ex-President of the Parliamentary Assembly—Douglas Bereuter—now head of the Asia Foundation. The fact that this experienced legislator was speaking on a subject about which he has considerable expertise (working with Muslims, with specific reference to Afghanistan) did not prevent him from being roundly and loudly taken to task by one Vladimir Wolfovich Zhirinovsky. The leader of Russia's misleadingly named Liberal Democratic Party has gained quite a reputation worldwide for his intemperate behaviour (including throwing orange juice over a liberal opponent live on TV) and extreme nationalist views (most famously dreaming of the day 'when Russian soldiers can wash their boots in the warm waters of the Indian Ocean'). Often dismissed as a self-promoting publicist and buffoon, Zhirinovsky nonetheless represents a chauvinistic, some would say fascist, tendency that is alive and well in Russian

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<sup>3</sup> ICCEES is the International Council for Central and East European Studies

society, as being selected to represent his country's parliament in Berlin testifies. That we were in the very building in which Hitler curtailed Germany's freedom in 1933 and which still bears the graffiti of Soviet soldiers from 1945 just added to the occasion's tangible sense of history.

Stepping up to the microphone, I noticed that Zhirinovsky was a mere ten feet away, already eyeing me as a hungry wolf would his prey. I had prepared a robust speech, calling upon NATO to exercise restraint in its expansion eastwards, while not allowing Russia to veto the democratic aspirations of ex-Soviet republics such as Georgia and Ukraine, and for the West to reconnect with its own civic society. Bruce George, leader of the UK delegation, characterised it as 'a hefty kick in the groin of both NATO and Russia'. Markus Meckel, Chair of the Political Committee and formerly one of the East German pastors who had kick-started the 'peoples' revolutions' of 1989, also recognised my call for greater understanding and reconciliation.

Not so Zhirinovsky. It is difficult to know for sure whether he really is angry or is just a natural performer who tends to get carried away by his own rhetoric and self-importance. Suffice it to say that he manifestly did not enjoy being 'lectured' to by an unknown Brit, enquiring 'and how far is Bradford from Russia?' After having a couple of pot shots at Winston Churchill's democratic credentials during and after World War II, Zhirinovsky attacked the poor record in terms of democracy of some full members of NATO. He then turned to the 'war on terror' and the West's 'abject failure' in capturing Bin Laden, adding that, 'in Russia we destroy our terrorists, you cannot even catch yours!' As to my claim that non-Russian minorities often were treated as second-class citizens in his country, he protested that, clearly, I was 'mixing with the wrong (i.e. democratic?) sort of Russians' and needed to be shown the real

Russia by someone such as himself. When his words were lost as the Russian into English interpretation broke down not once but twice, Zhirinovsky claimed, admittedly half in jest, that this, too, was a political provocation. So animated did he become as his performance gained momentum that, had the Chair not asked him to conclude, I thought that we might be treated to a repeat of Khrushchev's famous 'shoe-banging' incident at the UN.

There ensued a lively tit-for-tat with delegates from the former Soviet bloc (Georgia, Lithuania and Poland) complaining that I was being too 'soft' on the Russians and Zhirinovsky and his equally oversensitive colleagues bitterly resenting the tone of my deliberately even-handed contribution. Dmitry Rogozin, Russia's hawkish NATO ambassador, took particular exception to my warning to those in the West who thought that, compared to Stalin's Caucasian grizzly, Medvedev (*medved* is Russian for bear) seemed more like Winnie-the-Pooh, growling that 'any hunter knows that it's dangerous to enter the bear's lair'. To be fair to Zhirinovsky, however, at the end of the debate he came up, shook my hand, gave me a copy of his 2006 pamphlet ('The Cruel War in the Middle East') and invited me to his dacha outside Moscow—a truly Russian response.

Paradoxically, the varied responses from Western, East European and Russian delegations demonstrated the very dilemmas which I sought to highlight in my paper. Waiting for the lift to exit the building, a young German intern graciously thanked me for saying 'what needed to be said'. For me, at that moment, her heartfelt words generated more light and humanity than did all the fireworks of the Reichstag's 'heated debate'.

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