eurozine

Mikhail Khodorkovsky, Lyudmila Ulitskaya

"The most important thing here is self–discipline..."

The Khodorkovsky–Ulitskaya correspondence

"Looking for loopholes in the law and exploiting them –– this was the most that we allowed ourselves. And we got our kicks from showing the government the mistakes it had made in legislation." Translated excerpts from the correspondence between Mikhail Khodorkovsky and novelist Lyudmila Ulitskaya, first published in 2009 in *Novaja Gazeta*.

Ulitskaya to Khodorkovsky 15.10.08.

Dear Mikhail Borisovich,

I've got the chance to write to you and I am very glad of it. My grandfathers were in prison for more than 20 years between them, and my friends of the 60s generation also suffered. This is a very important topic for Russian literature –– so much so that a month ago I even wrote a foreword to the book called *Through the Prisons* by Eduard Limonov[1] –– a man of many faces, and barely respectable.

I also happen to be supervising editor of a book for children called *Crimes and Punishments*, which is also about the history of prisons, types of punishment, etc. So if we really do get to meet –– which I would like very much indeed –– this is one of the things I would like to discuss.

There are, as you know, two points of view on the prison experience: Solzhenitsyn believed that it toughens a person, and is very valuable in itself, while another, less fortunate prisoner, Varlam Shalamov, believed that it had no benefit for normal human life and was irrelevant outside prison.

I became friends with (the dissident) Yuly Daniel in his last years. He didn't like talking about his time in prison, but I got the impression that for him it was a very important ordeal, one that was connected in his mind with his experience at the front. But however that may be, for you it's not yet something you can reminisce about. It's your actual life today.

How do you manage to cope? Don't you feel you're living through a nightmare? I'd like to know how your values have changed: what things that seemed important outside prison no longer seem to in the camp? Do you find yourself developing new inner resources, gaining unexpected experience?

Forgive me –– this letter is just a stab in the dark. You're a person who's always being discussed and remembered. For some you're a fighter and an important political figure, for others a monster. But whatever people think

about you, everyone's interested in you, talking about you.

Anna Akhmatova once said of Brodsky when he was sent into exile: "They're making a biography for our red–haired friend." A biography is indeed being "made" for you, and it would be good to be able to talk about this in the past tense. This is just one of the reasons why I'd like to meet you and talk.

Yours sincerely,

Lyudmila Ulitskaya.

Khodorkovsky to Ulitskaya 15.10.08.

Dear Lyudmila Yevgenevna,

Thank you very much for your support. I understand where your interest comes from. The experience of prison is not that unusual for a member of the intelligentsia in Russia. This is unfortunate, because it is not a great experience. I feel closer to Shalamov than Solzhenitsyn here. I think the difference between them goes back to the fact that Solzhenitsyn believed in authoritarian rule, and that included prison. But as a "humanist" he thought that he had to experience it for himself. I respect this viewpoint, but I don't agree with it.

Prison is a place of anti–culture and anti–civilization. Good is evil, and lies are the truth. Here the dregs educate the dregs, and decent people feel deeply unhappy, as they can do nothing inside this revolting system.

No, perhaps that's going too far, of course they can do something, but it's terrible to watch how a few people manage to survive each day, while dozens go under. And how changes go round in circles, moving ahead, but so slowly.

My own recipe for survival is to learn to understand and forgive. The better and the more deeply you understand and put yourself in someone else's place, the more difficult it is to condemn and the simpler to forgive.

As a result, sometimes a miracle happens: a broken man manages to stand up straight, in fact becomes a person. Prison officials are terribly afraid of this and don't understand how and why it happens. But these cases give me great happiness. My lawyers have witnessed it on more than one occasion.

Of course, unless you can be sure of your family, without their support, it would be very difficult. That's both the disadvantage and the advantage of going to jail at a mature age: you have a family, friends, and support systems. The most important thing here is self–discipline. You either work on yourself, or you go downhill. The environment tries to suck you in and dissolve you. Of course, you go through periods of depression, but you can break out of them.

On the whole, for me the tougher the external situation, the easier it is. The best of all is work in the punishment cell, where you feel that you are directly up against a hostile force. In conditions that are normal by local standards, it's much harder to keep on making the effort.

Sorry that these are just "notes in the margin". I have to appear in court tomorrow. I'll be happy to continue this dialogue.

Your sincerely, M.

Ulitskaya to Khodorkovsky 16.10.08.
Dear Mikhail Borisovich,

Thank you for your reply. The court hearing is taking place at this very moment, and in the evening we'll hear the news on the radio. It will almost certainly be depressing.

I was very struck by your reply. It plunged me into a different reality, as if we were at different corners of the universe. But we have one important thing in common –– we're both aware of our own path in life. In your case the place where this understanding takes place is a prison squared. What else can you call a punishment cell in a prison? You can't sink any lower. At the same time, there is unexpected elation at an unbroken spirit and a mind which is working intensely. It's like the Tibetan monk sitting in an icy wasteland and heating the meadow around himself with his warm bottom, or some other method unknown to us, so that grass and flowers start appearing. In this meadow the rare fruits of self–knowledge, an understanding of the surrounding world, compassion and patience start growing. It's not only that the guys at the top (in both senses!) are making you famous, and giving you a certain type of renown –– whether good or bad is unimportant in this respect –– but that something is happening within you, something which could be guided by a guru, spiritual teacher, elder or whoever has been appointed to do this.

I have always been very interested in the stream in which a person moves from birth towards death. You're carried along and you swim with the current, guessing where it will turn, either bobbing up in the middle of the current or swimming hard to change direction. There's always the starting point, when you realise that your life is part of the general flow, then after that the moments of "re–orientation". Each human story is so fascinating. You've probably got more to say than most people, whose experience has been less extreme and diverse. You've been given time to think. Perforce. But you've proved to be a good pupil. This is what I want to talk about.

Let's take a starting point: childhood, family, attitudes and intentions. How did you see your life panning out, at the age when we have such thoughts? For me, it happened very early: my parents were scientists, more or less. They were ordinary junior research staff, but with degrees. I also concentrated on science –– biology. I thought this meant I'd be able to "serve humanity" and satisfy my ambition. I also, quite wrongly, thought scientists were freer. Of course, all these illusions were shattered over time.

Tell me, how did you see your future when you were a child? How did you plan your life as a young man? I know that you were in the Komsomol, of course, and that you were operating in a sphere I'd have deemed completely unacceptable (I'm 15 years older than you). You probably felt at home there, or least imitated "Komsomol activists" and later you ended up among the "oligarchs", whose life so fascinates and attracts the masses.

You clearly exceeded the boundaries of what was allowed (quite deliberately, as I understand). You broke an unwritten rule (deliberately or not), i.e. you overstepped the line of what was permissible in a higher circle that I've ever entered. To be quite honest, I've never wanted to. This is what I would like to talk about.

We all select our own lines which we will not step over. For example, my friend Natasha Gorbanevskaya went out into Red Square in 1968 with her three–month old child and was later locked up in a mental institution. She may not have been completely lacking in the instinct of self–preservation, but it was clearly not very well–developed. I wouldn't have done this even without a child. Simply out of animal fear. But I couldn't take part in a vote of censure at a general meeting in the Institute of Genetics, where I worked at the time. I stomped out of the hall accompanied by the envious stares of my colleagues at the moment when I should have been raising my hand. This was my boundary –– a very modest one. The price I had to pay was not high –– I was fired at the first opportunity. I ended up writing books.

Where were your ethical boundaries in your youth? How have they changed over time? I'm absolutely certain you thought about this. I've even read some of your statements on this subject. But for our conversation to be productive, we need to move step by step to the present day. By the way, I must tell you that today we heard on the radio that you hadn't been granted an early release on parole. The court knows what it has to do. We didn't expect anything else. So we have an unspecified amount of time to talk about this abstract but interesting subject, and we will be able to continue our dialogue.

Yours sincerely,

Lyudmila Ulitskaya

Khodorkovsky to Ulitskaya 22.10.08.

Dear Lyudmila Yevgenevna,

Thank you for the interest you have shown. My memories are of a very fragmented (emotional) nature, by which I mean that I can remember things that are emotionally charged, but almost nothing else.

Sometimes a memory substitution takes place, when I remember something that was actually told me by my parents. I was clear that I wanted to become a factory director when I was a child. This is not surprising: my parents worked at a factory all their lives, the kindergarten was part of the factory, and so was the pioneer camp, and the factory director was the most important person everywhere.

My mother and father, as I now realise, had no love for the Soviet regime at all. But they protected me from their views, believing that they would ruin my life. I grew up a "faithful" Komsomol member, with no doubt as to who were friends and who were enemies.

In choosing my path in life, I focused not just on the chemical industry, but on defence, as I thought that the most important thing was protection from "foreign enemies". The Komsomol work at the institute was not a sign of a political calling, of course, but a desire to lead.

In fact, I was never involved in ideology, I was responsible for organisational work. Construction groups, factory work experience –– I liked all of this because it was an opportunity to realize myself as a production worker, as a manager. When I graduated, I was assigned to a ministry, the State Mining and Safety Organisation. I was extremely upset, because I wanted to work in a

factory. I went to work at the Komsomol district committee to avoid working in the ministry for three years. Then came Young People's Centres for Scientific Creativity (set up during *perestroika* for the commercialization of science), business and the defence of the parliament building, the White House.

As it happens the secretary of the party committee at the institute, offered me a chance to continue my "Komsomol" career in 1987, and was very surprised when I chose "economic accounting and all that stuff".

As to "barriers", for me they came down to one thing –– never to be made to change my position by force, rather than reasoning. G.A. Yagodin was a wonderful rector. He called me "my most disobedient secretary" (I was a secretary of the Komsomol faculty committee). It was clear that he could very easily have broken me, but he didn't, thus giving me the opportunity to toughen up. Unfortunately, in 1985 he was promoted and left the institute.

I was lucky a second time. The secretary of our Sverdlovsk district party committee was Kislova, and Boris Yeltsin was the bureau member and Central Committee secretary for construction issues. They were a real lesson in courage for me when they were "given the cold shoulder", and they didn't give in. And Kislova didn't betray Yeltsin. I can imagine what this must have cost her.

Incidentally, the deputy for the Tomsk Oblast, where I worked in 1999, was Yegor Ligachev, who tried to freeze me out. I forbade our team to attack him in return, as he was already very elderly, although there was a lot we could have said to him.

I considered myself a member of Yeltsin's team. One of very many. This is why I went to defend the parliament building (White House) in 1991, and the town hall in 1993, and why I joined the informal election campaign team in 1995–1996. This was perhaps the most dangerous moment in my life (almost). It was because of Boris Yeltsin that I did not speak out against Putin, although I had my own opinion about him.

As for the "oligarch in–crowd", I've never liked this term. We were utterly unlike one another. Gusinsky and Berezovsky, Bendukidze and Potanin, Prokhorov and I. We had completely different goals and views on life. We were oilmen and metal workers, mass media magnates and bankers. And even this is probably not quite correct.

Dear Lyudmila Yevgenevna, I think of myself as a Voltairean, i.e. a supporter of free thinking, of freedom of speech. Yeltsin was my ideal in this sense, as G.A. Yagodin was before him. Working with them did not inspire any feelings of inner protest in me. The destruction of NTV in 2001 (I tried to help them with cash, which was used to incriminate me at my first trial) became my "Rubicon". You must understand that for me it was the destruction of the team, rather than the transfer of property.

I will break off for now. I hope we can continue our discussion.

Yours sincerely, M.

Ulitskaya to Khodorkovsky 18.11.08.

Dear Mikhail Borisovich,

I was surprised by your reply, which was quite unexpected. We spend half our lives building up stereotypes, labels and clichés, but then they start suffocating us. Years later, when these stereotypes begin to collapse, we're delighted to be liberated from them. So far I've been talking about my own ideas. In time, I hope, I'll get to yours.

So. Your parents were fine upstanding members of the 60s generation –– engineers, production workers, honest and decent: your father with a guitar in one hand and a glass in the other, happy and cheerful; your mother, always prepared to have guests, and help friends in difficult situation. Their attitude to the Soviet regime is understandable: it can go to hell...

The children of the 60s generation read typewritten copies of Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago* and Orwell's *1984* at the age of 16. They kept their distance from the authorities and, at best, wrote their dissertations, worked as doctors or lift operators, or took part in a social movement which later came to be called "dissident". Some of the children of this generation went through the prisons and camps in the 1970s–1980s when they grew up, and some emigrated to the West. But you somehow avoided this. You successfully slotted into the system of the time, found your place in it and worked there effectively. The innocence of a young man prepared to work for the defence industry, because the homeland needs to be defended is particularly affecting.

The almost twenty–year difference in our ages rules out a situation which would be easy to imagine if we were the same age. When I appeared before the Komsomol faculty committee, because I needed a character reference, it was with a feeling of revulsion and a travel permit in my pocket. I was confronted either by hard–boiled party hacks or idiots –– but I did manage to answer the question about who the secretary of the Communist party in Bulgaria was. That was in the 1960s, and you were there, or in the neighbouring office, in the early 1980s. You were undoubtedly a member of a circle of people with whom I was, to put it mildly, not on friendly terms. But it turns out –– and this is what surprised me in your letter –– that some of these people in the 1980s did have "positive" motivation.

You were there, a talented young man, dreaming of becoming a "factory director", of manufacturing something meaningful, and doing it well, perhaps even weapons to defend the country. In that environment you encountered "progressive" people like Yeltsin, and retrogrades like Ligachev. You were inside the system, you found your place there and created a team. You say you weren't interested in ideology, that your "desire to lead" was what mattered. But this aspiration is a pretty good definition of the concept of "careerism".

I don't mean that as a swear word, but a definition. A career, an occupation is an important part of a normal man's life. And a woman's too, these days. But to me it seemed that the system's rules of the game were such that a decent person couldn't accept them. You were a boy from a good family. How was it possible to grow up a "faithful" Komsomol member with no doubts about who were friends, and who were enemies? You say it was possible. I have no reason not to trust your analysis. I must have been biased by my complete hostility to everyone who was in the party and involved with the party.

In the 1980s at all levels of government (down to bathhouses and kindergartens) social ideology was a spent force and there was only an empty

skeleton left. I see now that the picture I had was incomplete. Perhaps I was even completely wrong. Such was my revulsion for the Soviet system that I couldn't imagine that at that time of late Communism one could rely on, or trust anyone. Or even find anyone to look up to. For me, Yeltsin was just a party worker, and I was very upset when all my friends went rushing off to the White House. I sat sadly at home and wondered why I didn't want to go to the demonstration with everyone else.

Several days later I said that if there were a purge, as there was in Germany after the defeat of the Nazi regime, then it would restore my faith. There was a lot of enthusiasm around, and I couldn't help sharing it. But there was no purge: almost all the bosses stayed the same. They changed places and a few were thrown out.

I understand that Yeltsin had charm, flair and good intentions. But it ended badly –– he handed the country over to the KGB. Those were the "clean hands" he found. I think you too recognise this, although you express it differently.

How do you assess the figure of Yeltsin today, a decade later? If there has been a re–assessment, then when was it? At one time I believed Gaidar's reforms could create an effective economy, but he didn't pull it off. His book about the fall of the empire is very interesting, and explains a lot, but with hindsight.

Did you have any ideas about reorganization at that time, or were you quite happy with the major opportunities that had opened up for businessmen? There is no doubt that you proved a very good director of a very large factory indeed –– the size of almost half the country, in fact.

Finally, the most painful of all possible questions. It's so painful that I am prepared not to get an answer. We can forget about it altogether. There was a time when people close to Yeltsin got control, or ownership, of enormous chunks of property –– of plants, factories, newspapers and ships. There was one distribution, then a series of subsequent "re–distributions". These were often very brutal. By then you were already a factory director. Where did your barriers of what was permissible stand then?

What ideas have you held on to from those days when you dreamt of becoming a factory director? What ideas have you lost? I'm talking about your values, of course.

Your name stood out for me among the other oligarchs when I went to a children's prison settlement with psychologist friends and saw a computer class funded by you. Later I kept hearing about Open Russia, which was your creation. Several years after that, when you had already been arrested, I went to the Koralovo Lyceum, where I met your parents and saw the unimaginably beautiful sanctuary for orphans and semi–orphans. I have never seen anything like it in Europe. This was your initiative too.

You say that the turning point for you in your relations with the government was the crackdown on NTV. Each person does indeed have their own "Rubicon". But before that you had somehow managed to go on working closely with a government which was increasingly losing any sense of decency. I have another harsh question: Did you feel that you this could be changed? If NTV had been preserved do you think you could have re–established your spoiled relations with the Kremlin?

All over the world the press can be bought off and is obedient to the authorities. But in every country the size of the pipeline for getting rid of negative emotions differs. Was your conflict really to do with the diameter of the information (rather than the oil) pipeline? For me this would mean that you, a pragmatist and practical man, have not lost your romantic illusions.

Please forgive me, perhaps I am being too harsh. But the "golden age" is over. Illusions have been shattered. There is little time to think. I also have a strong feeling that time is "shrinking" catastrophically. I'd really like to get to the bottom of this business. Though no one has ever managed to do so before. But at least I'd like to get as close as possible.

There is another problem, too, that I'd like to discuss: man, his personal life and the pressure of society. How to preserve one's dignity and values... How do these values change? Do they change? Experience in camp is unique and totally different from experience in the world outside. I'm giving you advance warning of what I'd like to talk to you about in future, if we have the chance.

I wish you health, fortitude and calm.

Yours sincerely,

Ludmila Ulitskaya

Khodorkovsky to Ulitskaya, 05.06.09.
Dear Lyudmila Yevgenevna,

I was very glad to receive your reply, which I took to be a deserved "clip round the ear".

My parents were careful to make sure that I did not become a "black sheep" in that society. I understand that now, but I didn't back then. What's more, there weren't any "black sheep" at school or at the institute. The school was in the proletarian suburbs, and the institute was also extremely "proletarian" –– 70 per cent of people were factory workers given time off from work. There were no dissidents at all. Especially at the institute –– it was the defence faculty, and if you were expelled from the Komsomol, you were automatically kicked out of the institute. We thought that this was quite fair.

As the secretary of the faculty committee, I refused to expel people from the Komsomol who were expelled from the institute, as I believed that not every Komsomol member was capable of studying. But the reverse situation at the defence faculty seemed entirely fair to me. After all, if it came to it, we would have to lay down our lives for our country, even in peacetime. How could you demand this from a non–Komsomol member or a non–Communist? I'm not joking or exaggerating. This was exactly what I thought.

I read *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, and was staggered. I hated Stalin for besmirching the work of the Party in the interests of the cult of his own personality. My attitude to Brezhnev and Chernenko was both scornful and amused –– they were gerontocrats and harmful to the Party. I respected Andropov, despite "some excesses at the local level". Do you find this funny? I'd like to laugh, but I can't.

When I was doing practical work, I wasn't sitting in some factory library. I was heaving explosives by the spadeful, working at the pressing machine (my friend and I were almost killed because of an error we made). I used to attend training camps and was given the rank of sergeant. I was appointed deputy commander for political affairs, but I asked to go back to the factory again –– to dismantle old shells. We were Komsomol members, we were supposed to go to the most dangerous areas. So there I was, dismantling shells, to the bewilderment of our commanding officers.

You're going to laugh again: I didn't understand their bewilderment, and they didn't say anything.

Incidentally, I was quite bold and fearless in my arguments with the secretary of the party bureau. He would come to a Komsomol committee meeting, where there were 20 women from factories and two or three men: I would take him on, and the committee would vote for me, almost 100 per cent. The Party organiser complained to the rector, Yagodin. The girls still write to me, actually. One of them is my first wife, and the other has been my wife for 20 years now. They're not the only ones who write to me either. I even got a letter from the party organizer (the head of the party bureau secretary), Lyuba Strelnikova.

Now don't go getting funny ideas about me and girls. I was a very decent young man in this respect. I'm joking.

But the feeling of pitting ourselves against a Cold War enemy was very strong. So too was my involvement in the "9" –– the group of defence industries. In fact, when I was an advisor to Silayev, I took part in the last congress of the Military and Industrial Commission –– the "9" plus the Defence Ministry. But that's another conversation.

I never knew the communist party secretary for defence, Baklanov, but later, after 1991, I took him on to my team out of corporate solidarity. Yeltsin knew about this, but didn't say anything to me.

But in 1996 the defence workers directly refused to give Yeltsin money (to lend money to the government, that was possible at the time!). I asked them –– and they gave it to me on the strength of my word. Although they were taking a huge risk. I used part of this money to buy YUKOS, then gave it back. They knew what I was borrowing it for. Some of my acquaintances, whom I now consider to be good friends, were members of the Communist party, and some supported the state emergency situation committee (such as Baklanov and Lukyanov, whose daughter is now my lawyer).

I say this, Ludmila Yevgenevna, because I want you to understand that from that side of the barricades people were not at all one–dimensional. There weren't hard–liners in one side and completely respectable individuals on the other. Like them, I was a soldier in a virtual war that was not my making. But we were honest soldiers. We defended what we believed to be the truth.

I'm going to tell you something even more risky. We were very serious about working with the KGB. We were defence workers. They worked for us and at the same time supervised us, not on "political literacy", but on matters like physical protection, counter–espionage, etc. They were very serious and highly qualified specialists. Some of them had been involved in clandestine operations in the Great Patriotic War. Their lessons have been very useful for

me in prison, as they'd been through prisons, concentration camps, and zindans (traditional Central Asian prison –– ed.). They would have been very pleased that their experience could be useful to someone. It has indeed been!

There was another sort of KGB officer too –– the NKVD ones. They were not respected, and we avoided them, as did the specialists I talked about.

Incidentally, none of them (the specialists) ever asked me for money. Although I helped some of them find work after 1991. And their colleagues saved our lives, when they refused to storm the house of parliament. I knew some of them personally, and others indirectly.

That's fate for you. That's civil war for you. But after that everything got all mixed up...

Now let's talk about leadership and careerism. I don't agree with you –– they're different. A career, in the bad sense, is climbing up the bureaucratic ladder, toadying and grovelling. Yes, this is the path which most successful people take. You could become a second secretary, deputy director of a factory, head of department or even deputy minister. But not a line manager –– the head of a workshop or factory director. Different kind of people get these jobs. Leaders. And people put up with them, because if careerists got these jobs the whole thing would collapse. And they wanted things to work.

Both Yagodin and Yeltsin put up with me as a line manager, absolutely "in the spirit of party traditions".

There was room for a different sort of person, just as there was in science. Only they were "different" in another sense: they were political believers, but they did not "bend easily".

As for Boris Yeltsin, I'm not impartial here. I understand all his shortcomings. What's more, in 1999 I thought it was time for him to go. Though I did not welcome Putin's candidacy, and Putin knows this.

But Boris Yeltsin was a great man. A monolith. A true Russian Tsar, with all the pros and cons that go with that. He did a lot of good things, and a lot of bad ones too. It's not for me to judge which of the two won out.

Would it have been possible to pull off a greater, or a better, transformation of Russia than he did? Could it have been done without a "Thermidor" and a new stagnation, without a return of "comrades from the KGB"? Without the Chechen war, without the storming of parliament? Almost certainly. But we couldn't. And I don't mean him –– I mean all of us. And anyway, what right have I got to stand in judgment?

When we met, I was 23. And I want to preserve these memories of mine. He's dead now, and I'd rather hold onto those memories.

When Gaidar was in power (ed –– Russia's acting prime minister, 1991–2), I never imagined we should be reorganising the whole country. But I did have an idea how we should be restructuring the economy. It wasn't individual enterprises, but the major scientific and industrial complexes like Gazprom (not always this large, but equivalent in structure) that I thought needed splitting up and then privatising. This is what we in the government thought of as an active industrial policy (not just the initiation, but the management of the

process, setting goals, determining tasks and priorities).

When I got no support for my ideas I left. I warned them that I would use the idiotic laws that they were planning to pass. Including vouchers which could be cashed in. I must say I told them all along that it would end badly, that the Czech model was better (they had "closed funds"), but I was told –– as always –– that I clearly had a selfish interest. Although it wasn't clear what this interest was. I didn't argue with them. If they didn't want to listen, that was their problem.

But later –– and here we can talk of permissible boundaries –– I made use of every loophole in the legislation, and always personally told members of government what the loophole was, and how I would use it, or was using it.

Yes, this was my little revenge. Call it the sin of vanity. But I must admit that they behaved decently: they took me to court, covered the holes with new laws and instructions, and got angry, but never accused me of playing dishonestly. We had this sort of ongoing duel.

Was I right, at the end of the day? I'm not sure. On the one hand, objectively speaking I did succeed in reviving industry. But on the other, I was running rings round a government that wasn't really that bad. On the one hand, of course, I did invest all the money I could in industry. I invested it effectively. I didn't show off and I didn't let those around me do so. But at the same time, I didn't really think about people, about my wider social responsibility, beyond the limits of my team –– and it was a very large team.

As for your question about the "brutality" with which we seized and redistributed enterprises –– well it's funny, really. There were at most 20 players in the "major league". No more than that. As for the number of enterprises involved in the "loans for shares auction" –– there were 800. Altogether, we had enough money to buy 70, I would say.

I personally had to give up everything else to deal with YUKOS. I was forever on business trips. I had to drop the bank, resell and give away practically all the enterprises I'd bought before. For example, I'd owned the entire construction materials industry for Moscow, and a number of metal factories, and the infamous Apatit.

This was no joke –– it was really hard work. And I wasn't remotely interested in any one else's businesses. We were very rarely in competition with one another. What we were up against was the chaos, the collapse of everything. The criminal gangs left us pretty much alone, as they had no idea what that vast machine consisted of, or how they could get their hands on it. There were thugs, of course. There were risks too. But the time of the "major league" was positively vegetarian compared to today's "raiders".

For example, when the late Volodya Vinogradov (Inkombank) got in my way in the fight for the oil company VNK, I offered him a payoff, and when he refused, I just pushed up the price at the auction. Which of course cost me dear.

We used PR campaigns, we lobbied, we threw money around. But the police weren't involved, nor was the criminal underworld. If anyone had been, people would have stopped dealing with him, for their own safety. And they'd very soon have been shopped to the police.

That's why, for all its efforts over recent years, the General Prosecutor's Office hasn't been able to make a case against us.

In the "major league", until citizens with a "law–enforcement past" joined it, at least, the barrier lay where it could be defended in a court of arbitration. While that court may not have been completely independent, it wasn't totally controlled, like today's Basmanny courts. Officials could exercise a degree of support. They might take your side for their own selfish reasons. But they knew that they would have to defend their position seriously before the Prime Minister and President –– and worst of all, before the media!

The level of "thuggery" you see today, where if people are in a political position to do something, they feel no sense of responsibility at all –– no, that was unimaginable.

This man called Fazlutdinov who was working for me as head of an oil and gas department got fired. He insisted he'd been fired illegally. That reached the supreme court, and he won. He got over $40,000 from me in compensation (a lot of money at the time). And my legal department, knowing what losing the case would mean, couldn't do anything. When he tried it on at Rosneft, which replaced us, they simply threw him out of court. He went crying to my lawyer, who took on his case at the company.

No. Looking for loopholes in the law and exploiting them –– this was the most that we allowed ourselves. And we got our kicks from showing the government the mistakes it had made in legislation.

I have to say that it was chiefly the 1998 crisis that brought about the change in my attitudes to society and business. Before then I saw business as a game, and only that. You need to win, you want to win, but losing is not a problem either. Hundreds of thousands of people came to work every morning to play the game too and in the evening they went home to their own lives and concerns that were nothing to do with me.

This is very simplified, of course. I had also encountered problems before 1998, but they were problems that I was not personally responsible for: it was how things were when I arrived on the scene. But then came 1998. At first it was fine –– we thought we'd get through. Then August. It was a catastrophe. The price of oil was $8 a barrel, and the production cost was $12. There was no money to pay off debts or for salaries. People really had nothing to eat and I was personally responsible. No one was buying oil inside the country and exports were blocked. No one was paying. Banks we owed money to threatened to block accounts abroad. In Russia banks were not making any payments. Berezovsky gave me a loan at 80% interest in hard currency!

You arrive at the reception desk –– no one is shouting or striking, they understand. They're simply collapsing from lack of food. Especially young people who didn't have their own household, or had small children. And the hospitals... We had been buying medicine and sending our workers for treatment, but now there was no money. The main thing was the understanding faces. People who simply said: "We didn't expect anything good anyway. Thanks for coming and talking to us. We'll put up with it..." There were no strikes after August 1998 at all.

The result of this was that after the crisis my criteria started changing. I couldn't simply be a "director" any more. In 2000, we set up "Open Russia".

One more thing about my attitude to the law. I have never considered, and still don't consider, that "everyone was breaking the law" is a justification. If you broke the law, then answer for it. My position is quite different: our legislation (like the legislation of any other country, in fact) has many "blank spots", areas open to various interpretations, which are dealt with by the courts (especially the Supreme Court). The excesses, or to put it politely, the "selective application of the law", that we saw in the YUKOS case, were due to the separate, special interpretation of the law which was used for us. An interpretation which is not, and cannot be, applied for any other litigants.

On the whole our laws are fine, no worse and no better than in other countries, but the application of the law and the courts are a catastrophe.

Now about the ideas and values of youth.

"The country is a besieged fortress, so everything must go towards strengthening our defences, we are surrounded by enemies." This has gone, of course, and been replaced by an understanding of the interests of nations and peoples, which don't always (to put it mildly) coincide with the interests of the state and the elite. At the same time –– you'll laugh –– Russian patriotism is still alive. I have these feelings in me, for example: they stop me saying nasty things about Russia, even when I really want to.

The idea of communism as a "bright future" for all has disappeared, leaving a bitter aftertaste at the deceit which has been exposed. The beautiful dream concealed brazen bureaucratic totalitarianism. The socialist state, which ensures that society cares for its outsiders (willing or unwilling), that every child has a fair chance in life –– this idea survives. But it was only after the 1998 crisis that it became an additional part of our make–up. Before that there was resentment, and the wish to prove that I "can"...

I took a long time to understand the importance of human values. It was when I did, that I rebelled. This was in 2001 –– the NTV affair and the uprising was "on its knees". But then the question arose at the Russian Union of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs: what comes first –– property or freedom of speech? NTV's debts to Gazprom were real. At that point I came to the conclusion that the one can't exist without the other, and I gave NTV $200 million. Which was then used in the charges against me.

I am not a revolutionary. If NTV had been preserved, perhaps I would have paid less attention to the other events. In general, I would not have wanted to "stand out", and I would have left "politics" to more active "comrades". Just as I always had. But this time I couldn't do it. I felt as if I were being strangled.

From this point of view prison is something more definite, less oppressive. Although of course, in every other sense, there's nothing good about it. And this was naturally not the outcome I planned. But I was forced into a corner from which I couldn't find a decent way out. A wise person would probably have avoided this alternative.

These letters were first published in Russian Novaya Gazeta *and published in English translation*

1

Ed. –– Limonov, notorious for being filmed by the BBC firing a rifle in the direction of Sarajevo while in the company of Radovan Karadzic, is leader of the oppositional National Bolshevik party. See Andrew Meier, "Putin's Pariah", *The New York Times*, 2 March 2008, http://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/02/magazine/02limonov–t.html?_r=2

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