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Reminiscences about Nikolai Shmelyov A Farewell to Yevgeny Primakov

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No matter how long life lasts, we will never get used to the events that it imposes upon us. Once we, researchers at the Institute of Europe (Russian Academy of Sciences, RAS), thought that Nikolai Shmelyov would be with us forever. Likewise, it was unimaginable to conceive that one day we would live without Yevgeny Primakov. This is especially true for the Department of Global Problems and International Relations of RAS and, indeed, for the Academy of Sciences as a whole. And now, with the release of "Reminiscences about Nikolai Shmelyov"¹, we once again remember the man who was equal to that whom we have recently bid a farewell – Yevgeny Primakov. Each in his own way has influenced significantly the way Russia has been developing and the life of many of us.

These two men had known each other for many decades, appreciated and respected each other, called each other friends. Their life paths crossed several times and they always held one another in their view. Although they were quite different personalities, in many ways they were similar in their world outlook, in their Russianness, affection for the country they lived in, in their flight of thought, their subtle demeanour match with strong character, in the respect and interest, which others paid to them.

¹ «Воспоминания о Николае Шмелёве». ИЕ РАН. Нестор-История. М.: 2015.

In both of these two men liberalism, conservatism and respect to the statehood were in organic combination. One and the other believed that Russia would be unable to solve its major problems without effective state regulation. They systematically, each from his own platform, criticized the Russian reckless pseudo-liberalism of the 1990s. Primakov continued to do so, after Shmelyov had left us, for example, in his book "Russia. Hope and Disquiet"² and in his last address to the Mercury Club in January 2015.³ At the same time, both championed freedom and emancipation of individual.

Both were talented in literary art: Shmelyov – in prose, Primakov – in poetry. Both were not only academic researchers but also skillful promoters of their ideas. Both were at ease with publicity and were able to lead people. Charisma was typical for both of them. That is why, I think, they saw each other as a twin soul.

A year and a half has passed since Nikolai Shmelyov left us in January 2014. Time is running relentlessly. And the more it runs, the clearer it becomes that we are greatly missing Shmelev. We can definitely say that the memory of him does not abate. Quite often, when dealing with this or that problem, one asks himself how would have Shmelyov reacted to this or that issue, what verdict he would have rendered, how would he have put the accents. But he left us a long time ago. And one has to imagine his reply and look for an answer on one's own. The book released is valuable among other things because the witnesses directly present the thoughts, words, attitudes and positions of Shmelyov, his ideas and arguments that will retain their actuality for a very long time.

He has predicted many events, such as a sharp and necessary, in his view, devaluation of the ruble, the cooling of relations with the West, the growing problems of the European Union, particularly immigration and the troubles of "peripheral" EU countries, the cleavages between the North and South of the EU. He predicted the discord in Ukraine, the rejoining of Crimea with Russia, the deterioration of the situation in the Middle East.

It is not easy to convey the contents of "Reminiscences about Nikolai Shmelyov". It is just that case when one needs to read the book. And then (I hope the authors have succeeded), our hero will clearly appear from the pages of the memories. The authors of the book are his colleagues and his friends, and in most cases, they are both in one person.

The recollections about Shmelev vividly present a citizen, a scholar and a writer. Several of his most outstanding works are reprinted. A large number of photographs depicting various stages of his life are published in the book. It is remarkable, that his literary and scientific heritage remains surprisingly acute today. I will bring here two short quotations and you can judge by yourself. The first is from the distant 1987:

² Е.М. Примаков. «Россия. Надежды и тревоги». М.: Центрполиграф, 2015.

³ <http://www.rg.ru/2015/01/13/primakov-site.html>

"The state of our economy satisfies no one. Two of its central, built-in ... defects – the monopoly of the producer ... and lack of interest of enterprises in scientific and technical progress – are obvious, perhaps, to everyone. But how to get rid of these defects, what to do not in theory, but in practice – I am sure that today there are no such wise men neither at the top nor at the bottom who would risk to claim that they know a recipe fully fit for life. Today we have much more questions than answers".

The second quote is from the closer to us 2003:

"Not only in terms of geography, but also in terms of civilization Russia is an integral, organic part of Europe. There can be no Europe without Russia, as there can be no Russia without Europe".

Death of any human being is a ruthless tragedy for his or her loved ones. But the passing away of such men as Nikolai Shmelyov and Evgeny Primakov is the loss for the whole country. Such a loss is felt by many as something very personal, even by those who never met them. But this very feeling is a proof of these two men's place in history; the history, which is not a thing of the past but the "living history", the one, which continues to influence deeds and thoughts of those who live on.