An Interview with Galina Starovoytova

Matthew Evangelista[1]

This interview was conducted in Moscow with Galina Vasil'yevna Starovoytova on November 3, 1998. Seventeen days later she was murdered in the foyer of her apartment in St. Petersburg, the district she represented as a deputy to the Russian State Duma. The murder remains unsolved, but most observers suspect some kind of political motive. Certainly she had many enemies. When I met her in Moscow, she was just returning from a Duma session where, as she mentions in the interview, she had unsuccessfully promoted a motion to censure General Albert Makashov, the notoriously anti-Semitic communist deputy, for remarks inciting violence against Jews. She began receiving death threats from Makashov supporters. It is perhaps more likely, though, that her murder was a local affair. Her concern for her St. Petersburg constituents led Starovoytova to try to clean up corruption in the municipal elections there, by running a slate of like-minded candidates. Her efforts evidently ran afoul of local organized crime. According to the *St. Petersburg Times*, the current investigation, led by former KGB officials, has focused on digging up dirt on Starovoytova's democratic allies, rather than solving her murder. "We are going to solve this case in such a way that it buries your democratic movement," one of the investigators told a journalist who was close to Starovoytova.

This was not the last interview that Starovoytova gave before she died. On November 19, 1998, just before leaving Moscow for St. Petersburg, she met with a journalist from *Moskovskiy Komsomolets* to discuss foreign financing of Russian electoral campaigns. The newspaper published the interview on November 25, five days after her death. She also answered questions from local television reporters when she arrived in St. Petersburg. The interview that follows is, however, the last one Starovoytova gave on a topic of particular importance to her politically and personally: ethnic politics and center-regional relations in the Russian Federation.

[1] Professor of Political Science, Cornell University. He thanks Marat Umerov for arranging the interview; Yuliya Korshunova and Sandra Kisner for transcribing it; and the Smith Richardson Foundation for research support.

Post-Soviet Affairs, 1999, **15**, 3, pp. 281–290.

Galina Vasil'yevna was an ethnographer by training. Her dissertation research, conducted during the late 1970s, focused on the role of ethnic groups in Soviet cities—a sensitive topic at the time—with evidence drawn mainly from what was then called Leningrad. Later she carried out anthropological studies in the Caucasus. Her familiarity with the region and her defense of the Armenians of the Nagorno-Karabagh enclave in Azerbaijan helped launch her political career. In 1989, during the first competitive elections initiated as part of Mikhail Gorbachev's *perestroyka* reforms, Starovoytova was elected to the Congress of People's Deputies as a representative of Armenia. With the collapse of the Soviet Union at the end of 1991, Starovoytova became an adviser to Russian President Boris Yel'tsin. She left that position in 1992 under circumstances she describes in the interview. Starovoytova was elected to the Duma in December 1995, and, at the time of her death, was head of the Democratic Russia party.

The first half of this interview was conducted in Russian and the second half in English. Starovoytova spoke English rather fluently, especially for someone who had been speaking it for only four years—one of which she spent as a visiting fellow at Brown University. I translated the Russian part of the interview and have made some minor corrections to the transcript of the English part to improve the clarity of her responses.

At the start of the interview, I explained my interest in center-regional relations in the Russian Federation in the wake of the Chechen war and the August 1998 economic crisis. Starovoytova presented me a copy of her recent monograph, *National Self-Determination: Approaches and Case Studies* (Occasional Paper No. 27, Thomas J. Watson Jr. Institute for International Studies, Brown University, 1997).

GS: There is a little about relations between the center and the regions in the chapter on the Russian Federation in this book. It was finished around 1995–96, near the end of the Chechen War. Of course the war amplified centrifugal tendencies, particularly in the national republics. Not as much in the Russian [*russkikh*] oblasts of Russia as in the republics, in Tatarstan, Bashkortostan. In the Muslim republics there were demonstrations of solidarity with Chechnya, demonstrations of protest against the center's policy, and in the Northern Caucasus distrust of the center's policy also grew.

After the end of the Chechen war the impact of economic forces probably grew. What do they consist of? Just a couple of years ago we had 13 members [*sub"yektov*] of the Federation that were donors to the federal budget; 13 out of 89 gave money to the federal budget. Altogether we have 89 members of the Federation including Chechnya. Two of them didn't sign the Federal Treaty: Tatarstan and Chechnya. They didn't sign. The rest signed. Chechnya today is *de facto* no longer under the control of the federal center. But Tatarstan, Yakutiya, Bashkortostan received greater tax privileges from the center, and in practice almost don't pay any. Tatarstan, in particular, as far as I remember, practically doesn't pay taxes to the federal

budget. Yakutiya received more privileges through direct, untaxed trade in gold and diamonds with de Beers and other firms. A part of the sales is given over to the budget, a part of the diamonds is put up for sale at the federal level, but a significant part is Yakutiya's own. Above all it is the national republics that enjoy such privileges.

But I repeat, there were 13 member-donors, and the rest, 76, were recipients, or lived on subsidies from the federal budget. It was these very poor republics, such as Dagestan, that could express solidarity with Chechnya by reason of religious and geographic proximity. But at the same time they could not survive without transfers from the federal budget. Tuva, almost 90 percent of the republic of Tuva—a Turkish-speaking republic, but Buddhists—is dependent on federal subsidies. And other regions too.

Now, in recent times, since the time of the [August financial] crisis, the number of donor-regions has decreased to nine. So the remaining 80 member-recipients are dependent on the federal center and they cannot loudly announce their separatism. There you have it. On the one hand this strengthens the federation. On the other hand, after August—after August 17—the opposition has really come to power, a moderate opposition, moderate communists. Well, the policy of the communists was always imperialist. And they try to restrain that. Primakov is [here Starovoytova switches from Russian to English] mostly a moderate communist, but he is a "state" kind. [Then back to Russian.] But the others, Maslyukov, Gerashchenko, of course are communists. Kalashnikov is a member of Zhirinovskiy's party, a nationalist and great-power chauvinist. They will try to carry out a policy of administrative restraint of separatism, and, I think, they will have a big temptation to reject democratic freedoms more in the near future. Or begin an attack on them, an attack on freedom of speech, free elections, on the multiparty system; an attack on the freedom, on the limited autonomy of the members of the federation. Perhaps an attack done as an attempt to replace the free election of governors, for example, of the federation members, in order to try to appoint them from the center. That will be very difficult to do. For that, it is necessary to change the Constitution, but I am sure that they will try to move in that direction. This is from an administrative standpoint and also from the standpoint of their communist ideology.

But in practice they are making the regions economically more independent of the center. Because of the economic problems, which they cannot resolve, there could follow a series of refusals from the members of the federation to pay into the federal budget. This could happen if the central government withholds wages, pensions, budgetary payments, payments to the military. As in Krasnoyarsk kray with Lebed, when they didn't pay the strategic rocket troops, he already understood the issue, so then he was ready to "privatize," to take the missiles himself, pay the rocket troops himself from the local budget. But then they would become the nuclear force of Krasnoyarsk *kray* rather than the Russian Federation. These are the kinds of attempts…

ME: Are there other attempts, in other regions?

GS: There are, I'm sure there are. But they didn't pose the problem to the center as boldly as Lebed did. But this was still really a populist move. There is a tendency to populism among the military to win our sympathy for their side. But the objective problem is still there.

This government will certainly issue paper money and increase its quantity. In fact it has already begun. In the first variant of the program they proposed to print 200 billion rubles, new ones, *nenominirovannykh* ones [i.e., calculated before the monetary reform that reduced the face value of the ruble by a factor of 1000: 200 billion *nenominirovannye* rubles is the equivalent of 200 million present-day rubles—**ME**]. Then they agreed that it was necessary to print not more than 60 billion rubles, because there was a very bad reaction from society. Society has already changed in these eight years. And the government took account of public opinion—that's the most important thing. For that reason they tried it, for them it was like a "trial balloon" [in English], to publish the first variant of a very reactionary, anti-market program. They saw the bad reaction from society, they saw the bad reaction to the possible prohibition on circulation of dollars, and they rejected that. And that was good.

ME: Was there a fear of inflation?

GS: Not very much yet. They [society] didn't understand, they didn't feel it yet. They were concerned about devaluation. About the fact that prices grew threefold in real terms while wages stayed at the old level due to the devaluation of the ruble relative to the dollar. They didn't feel any inflation yet. They felt the devaluation after August 17. There will be inflation, thanks to the printing of money. And for that reason the government hides the printing, it hides the emission, even though they've already begun it, they've already sent money to the military and pensioners in all the regions. They printed it—they didn't have any other source, since the international tranche did not arrive from the IMF—so of course they printed it. But they consider that it's necessary to hide it. That's good. It means that they're afraid to go on a direct attack against the recent achievements in the economy and in politics. So this will be the policy of the moderate communists.

But as soon as the regions understand that they won't receive anything except worthless paper money from the center, then I predict that within a few months there will be a new spiral of separatism—a kind of economic separatism of various regions. There is a contradiction between the administrative methods of holding together the republics and provinces of Russia—the typical policy of the communists—and at the same time the centrifugal tendency resulting from the economic policy of the same government.

In different regions this will play itself out in different ways. In the national republics the centrifugal tendency will be stronger than in the Russian ones. In the North they will also be stronger, because in the North the population is more democratic, the Northerners. And they are richer regions—as a rule they're the donors. The Khantomansiyskiy or Malonenetskiy *okrug*—they produce oil and gas for export, the basic sources of

hard-currency receipts in the budget. They would demand more rights for themselves, or they would refuse to pay.

On top of that now the government has introduced a measure that was supposed to go into effect from November 1 [1999] that 75 percent of the hard-currency proceeds of these exporters of oil and gas should be invested here inside the country on the domestic stock exchange. And out of this a significant part should go to the Central Bank, rather than be sold freely on the market, and should be handled by specified buyers. Even some of the "red directors" soon will feel this, and they'll begin to act against this government which they just days ago supported in the Hall of Columns [*v Kolonnom Zalye*].

ME: Was this a law from the Duma?

GS: No, from the Central Bank. It was a decision of the Bank. It is within their sphere of competence, without the Duma.

ME: How do you evaluate the proposals for consolidation of the regions?

GS: The large economic zones, yes?

ME: Yes.

GS: I don't know. This is, of course, a step towards the decentralization of the country. A certain decentralization is unavoidable in Russia, with its enormous area and very poor communications and roads. But who is going to carry this out, and how are they going to do it concretely? If this is going to be again by administrative rather than market methods, then that's bad. If it is on the basis of tight economic links, then for that there is no need for the center to give permission to the regions.

ME: [Mentions a conversation earlier that day with a representative of the government of Tatarstan, who expressed concern about proposals for consolidation of the regions and a draft bill in the Duma to resolve inconsistencies between the federal and republic constitutions within a specified time frame.] He's very much concerned about these, because he sees who is putting forward these proposals for eight economic regions or sixteen economic regions, and they seem to him to be very much associated with more central control and the ability to remove the governor, for example, even if he or she is elected. And that's why I'm curious to find out if more democratically inclined politicians are supportive of those kinds of moves or not. Because he sees it as an anti-democratic measure.

GS: I think so. We've had several bills connected with consistency of the local constitutions with the federal constitution. I myself was the initiator of one amendment to the constitution of Bashkortostan. This document required that the president of Bashkortostan be fluent in both the Bashkir and Russian languages. But there are many more Tatars who live in Bashkortostan than Bashkirs, at least according to the last census, and a sizable Russian minority, about 30 percent. And that means none of them, none of the representatives of these minorities, could be nominated for the presidency of Bashkortostan. Actually, it concerned the preliminary selection of the candidates. Of course the Tatar and Russian candidates did not know the Bashkir language. It was in the constitutional court, this case,

and we won it, and they were forced to change their constitution, but they're still resisting. Murtaza Rakhimov, their president, definitely falsified the results of his elections. And he arranged the disqualification of one Tatar and all the Russian candidates. But he himself was registered as a candidate. In Ufa, the capital of Bashkortostan, more than 35 percent of all those who came to the polling stations voted against all the candidates. As far as I remember, besides Rakhimov there was only one other candidate allowed, a very uninfluential, unattractive one—and that means the results definitely were falsified. It was announced publicly that 35 percent did not vote for the suggested candidates. But probably the figure was much more, and in the rural areas, of course, the results were fudged.

There was a very similar problem in Mariy El, a republic with its capital in Yoshkar-Ola. Their constitution demands that the candidate for presidency should know three languages: Russian and two dialects of the Mariy language—*Mariyskiy lugovoy* and *Mariyskiy gornyy*. These are two different languages and very few candidates know them both even among the indigenous population and their direct descendants. This limited artificially the nomination of a wide range of candidates. And it was a case in the constitutional court and probably it could be spread to similar situations, but I don't remember the special legislation from the side of the State Duma.

ME: But in the case of those kinds of conflicts between the constitutions, is your first recourse to bring it to the constitutional court?

GS: Yes, it was. We had already such examples, but not such big gaps, between these two constitutions, the federal and the local, but they never were brought to the constitutional court. Now we've started, we've launched this procedure, and it may be that some special legislation was adopted, I don't remember. I was so involved in my own legislation devoted to the rights of ethnic minorities, which was not adopted by the Duma a couple of weeks ago. And today we had very interesting hearings about the General Makashov, his statement, anti-Semitic statement.

ME: I didn't see it. It was just…

GS: Today, it was today. And the Duma didn't vote for the special statement blaming General Makashov. The majority didn't support this statement.

ME: So some legislators put forward a statement condemning his remarks and it was voted down?

GS: Yes. I'm preparing now a leaflet brochure about recent cases of consideration of the nationalities issue in the State Duma. I will bring together all of these cases, about the ethnic minorities bill, democratic minorities bill, religious minorities (I mean the bill on religion, which definitely discriminates against religious minorities), this statement on Makashov, and probably this legislation about coordination of the constitutions also.

ME: I've heard some proposals for completely redesigning the federation, making it based more on traditional *gubernii* or something like that,

with no provision for national republics. Is that something that has much support? What do you think about that?

GS: It was originally the initiative of Mr. Zhirinovskiy five or six years ago, and to say honestly, I agreed. But I understood it is impossible, the process is irreversible. It's too late. Now lots of communists are ready to support Zhirinovskiy in his proposal, but of course the Council of the Federation, I think, will vote against it.

ME: And there is a real risk, presumably, that minority rights would not be protected under such a system.

GS: Minority rights could be protected in another way, because in this way it is a sort of discrimination in accordance with ethnic belonging. I mean, look, I represent St. Petersburg, the second capital of Russia, with a population of five million. They are mostly Russians, ethnically Russian, more than 80 percent; 89, maybe 90, percent of the population in St. Petersburg are Russians. And this is a big cultural, industrial center and so on. On the other hand we have such a republic as Kalmykiya with a population of 350,000. Less than half of them, about half of them are ethnically Kalmyks from the region's indigenous population. The rest are Russians and a mixture of other peoples of this area. And it's mostly agricultural, not a developed area, but they have their own constitution, their own banner, flag, coat of arms, anthem, unlike St. Petersburg. Why? Because they're the Kalmyk Republic, and St. Petersburg is one of the Russian districts, just one member of the Russian Federation. And of course it is discrimination in favor of ethnic minorities who have their own statehoods within the Russian Federation.

ME: But there are practical advantages to having their own statehood, to having the status of a republic. I mean, it's not just the flag and the anthem. There are some advantages.

GS: Most of these advantages are symbolic, of course, but symbolism is important for the ethnic consciousness as well, and that's why other members of the Russian Federation, mostly Russian members, adopted their own charters. A lot of them adopted their own coat of arms. St. Petersburg did this with the anchor, because it's a seaport and so on. And even some sort of anthem, some traditional song that is typical and popular in this area. But anyway, they cannot insist on their rights. The governor of St. Petersburg or of Leningradskaya *oblast'*, both governors cannot insist so decisively, so seriously, so actively in the Council of the Federation on their rights, on protecting the rights of their population, their constituencies, like the leaders of national republics. Because in some aspects these republics are like sovereign states, especially ones such as Tatarstan or Bashkortostan or Sakha/Yakutiya; they're really rich and they have a very, how to say, awakened ethnic consciousness. They have some rights. These are the so-called titular nations, and it gives them in the end even some economic advantages in presenting their demands before the federal budget and federal government.

ME: In that case, would you expect that Russians living in places like Tatarstan would also support the autonomous status, sovereign status, of the republic?

GS: It is disputable, very disputable, that they definitely are to some extent oppressed, because in some places—I don't remember in which definitely—but in some republics the status of the national language is introduced as the official state language, and Russian is a language of the ethnic minority, and then in some schools Russian children are being forced to learn this language, but Russian itself is disappearing gradually from the teaching process in some places. And the language of official appeals in some areas is more often the national language of the indigenous population than Russian. It's a very gradual process, but there is some concern of Russians in these republics who feel like ethnic minorities without any kind of legal protection.

ME: One thing that I found very interesting about the changes since August is that earlier proposals, for example, for joining Tatarstan and Bashkortostan, were considered to pose a threat of breaking up the Russian Federation, that those two republics together could be very powerful economically with their industry and resources and so forth. But now such proposals seem to be a way of saving the federation, or perhaps turning it into a confederation. I wonder if that's realistic.

GS: I didn't notice such changes. Where did they come from?

ME: It's partly a matter of changes in Western assessments, but also here, it seems to me, views have changed. Tatarstan's autonomy for example, used to be considered a threat to the Russian Federation, but now there are discussions of having a Far Eastern District and a Central Volga District, and that kind of thing.

GS: It started in 1992, with Yekaterinburgskaya *oblast'*. It was an attempt to announce that it is a Ural Republic, a special Ural Republic. Vologda, Ul'yanovsk, to some extent St. Petersburg, were looking for the special economic status of a free trade zone and some particular political and administrative features. That was happening, but the process began to calm down after the Chechen war. And everybody understood the danger of separatism and the possible consequences.

ME: It's interesting that there were two possible interpretations. One is that Chechnya succeeded in gaining de facto independence, but the other view is that it was at such a cost that no other region would ever want to do that. And you think it's the second one.

GS: That's correct. Actually, they are an independent state now, but the price, the death toll, was incredibly high.

ME: So you think that has really been a force for both the center and the regions to seek compromise solutions rather than provoke a violent conflict?

GS: Yes. I think if there is at least one good consequence of this war, it is this one—understanding the necessity to find some compromise. But on the other hand I am sure that the federal government may well repeat such a kind of war.

ME: But what about the use of military forces in general, even in Chechnya again, or in Dagestan. Do you think there would be a real effort to stop that, to prevent doing that?

GS: You mean in the future? Yes, I think so. I think we have a very reasonable defense minister now, Mr. Sergeyev, who never will behave like [former defense minister] Pavel Grachev. I don't approve of this government. I didn't vote for Mr. Primakov, even despite the fact that he's a moderate communist. But I can say we have very reasonable, moderate, and clever, well-educated ministers within this cabinet who are responsible for the power structures, even the KGB. The chief of the FSB, Mr. Putin, is a pretty reasonable guy. I know him. He was, you know, a spy in Germany. He failed, and [she laughs] but it was a special division within the KGB of people who were responsible for counter-intelligence abroad. They have wide views; they know foreign languages; they lived in [Western] industrial societies; they adopted the ways of the society, and they are civilized persons. They were not those who were pursuing our dissidents. That's another breed of human being. This is the first time I'm satisfied with the nomination of the FSB chief. And Sergeyev is good. Shoygu is good. And Stepashin is more or less good. He was involved in the Chechen war. He is not a man of strong will, but he himself is a moderate person.

ME: Do you blame the outbreak of the Chechen war mainly on personalities, that if someone other than Dudayev were in power, if other people were in power, if Korzhakov was not so influential…

GS: Yes.

ME: I mean, that really is the main explanation, do you think?

GS: I think so, yes, because it was an impulsive decision of Yel'tsin. But due to bad information which can confuse the inner circle—and Dudayev was not flexible enough, as well—and Grachev, Dudayev, Korzhakov, yes, they all are responsible for that, and even Dudayev to some extent, but his guilt is less because finally he was ready to meet with Yel'tsin. But due to information provided by Shakhray, Yel'tsin and the federal center never recognized the fair character of Dudayev's election, unlike other elections of presidents of the national republics within Russia.

ME: In other words, the Chechen election was no worse than the other ones, but Yel'tsin chose not to recognize the Chechen election?

GS: It was possible to recognize it. It was more or less a legal election, on the 27th of October 1991, probably with some violations, because elections are a very new phenomenon for the Northern Caucusus and for Russia as a whole. But of course he was the recognized leader of Chechnya, but from the very beginning they were not, the federal center was not, flexible enough to start a dialogue with him. At that time I was an adviser to President Yel'tsin.

ME: On nationalities issues.

GS: Yes. And actually I helped convince Yel'tsin to refrain from using force in the very beginning of the conflict. The troops were introduced into Grozny on the 7th of November in 1991, two weeks after, 10 days after Dudayev's election, due to efforts of Shakhray and Rutskoy, Vice President

Rutskoy. They stayed in the airport less than two days, without any violence, without any shooting. I insisted on withdrawing these troops. I came specially from England, I interrupted an official visit to the Finnish president and came to Moscow to convince Yel'tsin to withdraw the troops, and the next day the Supreme Soviet adopted the same position and the war was postponed at least. Then I was fired due to the efforts of generals and complicated intrigues. After one and a half years I was fired, finally, from this position. And after that came the wars: first was a conflict between Ossetians and Ingush in the Prigorodnyy district of Vladikavkaz; and second was the Chechen war.

ME: Do you think the Chechen case is really unique: the level of homogeneity, the large proportion of Chechens relative to other groups, and the tradition, the national feeling, the tradition of conflict with Russia, or do you think other republics might be close enough to worry about?

GS: No, I think it is really unique, really unique. They survived, they overcame three genocides: during the Caucasian war, then in the time of Stalin's deportation in 1943, and this last war. And in accordance with the last census—we had the last census only in January of 1989, and we have no money to conduct another census even when we need one due to the large migration of population after the breakup of Soviet Union—in accordance with these data, 98 percent of Chechens recognized the Chechen language as their native language, despite the fact that they lived more than ten years in the diaspora, being deported to Kazakhstan and Siberia and other places, but they were not assimilated. Only Russians had the same figure, the same coincidence of their nationality and their native language. The rest had much less. Ukrainians, Belarusians were pretty assimilated. And it's a big nation, Chechnya. They have more than one million in total population, about one million within the Chechen republic and about one million in the diaspora still in Russia, and a very high level of ethnic consolidation. I think this uniqueness probably stems from their national character. They still have this vendetta custom [*krovnaya mest'*].

Moscow, 3 November 1998