

A critic speaks: LPHS students get insight into world affairs from former Russian official

Posted: Thursday, September 23, 2010 12:00 am | Updated: 3:08 pm, Wed Sep 22, 2010.

JOLENE KELLER Lone Peak Lookout |

In the United States it can be easy to take the indelible freedoms assured to us by the Constitution for granted- especially for high school students in Big Sky. Sometimes it takes a glimpse of just how different things can be to really appreciate our rights.

That opportunity was given to the students of Cameron Johnson's Problems with Democracy class on Friday, Sept. 18. Russian President Vladimir Putin's former economic advisor, Andrei Illarionov, sat down with the class for a talk about political corruption, voting fraud and the reason he resigned as Putin's personal representative, known as a Sherpa, in 2004, and economic advisor in 2005.

Earlier the class was discussing the Yukos scandal - getting their heads around the idea that the government could step in and take over the country's energy supply and even the freedom of speech.

Illarionov had long been the highest profile critic of the Putin administration, in particular slamming the government initiated break-up of the billion-dollar oil company Yukos and the eight-year imprisonment of its founder Mikhail Khodorkovsky on what he saw as baseless charges.

"It was absolutely without any ground," Illarionov said to the class. "This was a clear case of political prosecution. In some cases he's (Khodorkovsky's) lucky - he's in jail but he's alive."

Illarionov, known as an outspoken liberal, said he resigned in 2005 from the Russian government to protest what he called an end to political freedom in Russia.

In his resignation comments, Illarionov said that Russia had become unrecognizable from the country he knew when joining the Kremlin as then acting-president Putin's economic adviser in 2000.

He cited a massacre in the northern Caucasus as the impetus for his resignation -- as Putin's Sherpa in 2004. The massacre, now known as the Beslan school hostage crisis, opened his eyes to what the government he was advising of was truly capable of.

On Sept. 1, 2004, the school was taken over by a terrorist group that Illarionov believes was acting on behalf of Russian Security Services. For three days the school was under siege - over 1,000 were taken as hostages - "kids like you," he told the class.

Illarionov said that as soon as the Russian government learned that negotiations were taking place to release hostages, an order was given to attack the school. Russian security forces opened indiscriminate fire with tanks and flamethrowers - burning 336 people alive, mostly kids, teachers and parents, he said.

"As not only an observer to the situation, I said to myself, 'I will not work for these people any more.' I immediately resigned as Sherpa. I could not physically be a representative for this person (Putin)," he said.

It took several months for that resignation to become official because the government didn't want him to go, he said. Then, early the next year, Illarionov resigned from the government altogether.

"With the situation with voting fraud, it was unfortunate and painful. But I stayed with it. But when people are killing people it's a different

situation. It's a moral principle," he said.

A student asked Illarionov if he feels safe talking about these things so freely.

He quickly replied, "Nobody can ever feel safe over there. You never know what the logic of these people is. It's not logic of nobility; it's logic of bandits. But for them, at least for the moment, they don't want to do anything with me because it would be very clear who was in charge of that. But they always move the border of what's possible."

He cited the 2004 killing of a former Chechen President Zelimkhan and his 15-year-old son in Qatar and a presidential candidate in Ukraine that was killed by several groups of security services in 2006.

"They do this outside the country - there are no moral limits for them. Each year they're moving the frontier of what's possible and impossible. Until 2008 I didn't think they could attack Georgia, but then they did it in front of the whole world. Nobody is safe in Russia, neither in or outside the country."

Another student wanted to know, in Illarionov's opinion, why Yeltsin chose Putin as his successor, seeing as how the country gathering from Illarionov's earlier presentation that the country has been in steady decline after years of growth under Yeltsin's reign.

Illarionov said that in 1998, when support evaporated for Yeltsin, a huge crisis was created, to which the community reacted.

"Impeachment is the end of life in Russia," he said. "Yeltsin, seeing he had no political resources and an expiring term, was forced by circumstance to pick someone in Special Services instead of a civilian. Others would not be able to defend him and his family. Putin guaranteed security - but the price for that is what he has done with the rest of the country."

Illarionov also served as chief economic adviser to the prime minister of the Russian Federation, Viktor Chernomyrdin. He resigned in February 1994 to protest changes in the government's economic policy. In July 1994 Illarionov founded the Institute of Economic Analysis and became its director. Illarionov has coauthored several economic programs for Russian governments and has written three books and more than 300 articles on Russian economic and social policies. He is now a senior fellow for the CATO Institute's Center for Global Liberty and Prosperity.

© Copyright 2010, Big Sky - Lone Peak Lookout , Big Sky, MT. Powered by Blox Content Management System from TownNews.com.