

Interview with Nikolai Vasilyevich Aladin (NA) conducted by Svetlana Sergeyevna Puricel (SP) on February 23, 2024, from 11:30 a.m. to 12:12 p.m. Moscow time.

[...]

SP: Deliberation is the process of engaging the population in political decision-making, and it usually occurs in countries with a democratic regime. And deliberation can take place in public spaces where various issues are discussed, including those related to the environment, and opinions are expressed, thus decisions are formed from the bottom up. And my work is to show whether there is a role for photographic images taken by photojournalists or individuals in such processes of engaging both the population and local governance, as well as international organisations, in problem-solving.

NA: I want to support you. I can say that the Russian Veche is a classic example of deliberation.

SP: Yes, exactly. I totally agree.

NA: Yes, the Russian Veche is indeed a historical example, a classic example of deliberation.

SP: In modern society, it's coming to the forefront again as a solution to many problems.

NA: History moves in circles, or rather, in spirals, with the hope that we are moving upwards, not downwards.

[...]

SP: The problem is, of course, of global scale, and I want to know how it all started, to understand which way it will all move.

[...]

NA: It all started simply: the country needed cotton, and for the sake of cotton, the sea was ruined. Everything is very simple. There was a threat of running out of cotton, and they chose the threat of running out of water, but to keep the cotton. Absolutely simple. I'm sorry, I don't see any complexities.

SP: Yes, yes. Unfortunately, that is true. I have read your publications and Philip Micklin's too, his publications.

NA: Yes, I am saying that I have known Philip Micklin for a very long time, and he really understands this issue well. Try to contact him. I have not personally talked to him for a long time, but they say he is alive, although he rarely responds.

SP: His last publication was in 2021, so he is professionally active.

NA: He was made a professor emeritus a long time ago. And he mostly works from home. He rarely comes to the university. But if you find out anything, Svetlana Sergeyevna, about Mr. Micklin, please let me know, how he is doing, how healthy he is. My communication with him via email stopped a year and a half ago. And many friends from the United States are also trying to get a response from him, but they are not getting any.

SP: Yes, I will try too.

[...]

SP: Further regarding 1993 when the first Kokaral dam was built, literally by your hands and the hands of your colleagues and the local population.

NA: So, that's not entirely accurate. Mostly, we proposed the idea, shared the idea with the local leadership, primarily with the akim Kayupov Bigali. And Bigali just took me and my comrades, in this case, Valery Semenovitch Kogan, to Kyzylorda to an even higher-ranking official. We reported there. And based on our scientific developments, community efforts were mobilised, and through collective voluntary construction, the first sand dam was built. It was constantly being destroyed, but it was constantly repaired. It was like Sisyphus: the

stone was rolled up the hill, the stone fell down, but then the stone was rolled up the hill again, and the stone fell down again. But our efforts were noticed by comrades from the World Bank, and they provided financial support. I say, my wife criticised me for this: I refused to take my son to first grade. And I went to Geneva with a report that we needed to get a grant from the World Bank and build a proper dam, instead of constantly repairing it. This was heard, I spoke together with colleagues in Geneva, at the United Nations. Have you seen the Palais des Nations?

SP: Yes, yes. I have seen it, but have not been inside.

NA: Well, we were there, reported there, and it was decided there that the World Bank would provide funding and the dam would be built. So, our laboratory and our scientific team were presenting scientific ideas, and the local leadership in Kazakhstan, with the help of the hands of ordinary people, implemented all this. And then the Russian company "Zarubezhvodstroy" started working. And built what it built.

SP: What needs to be raised by another two meters now?

NA: You know, this should be decided by the government and the people of Kazakhstan, what they need. We can offer different options, and they should choose. You see, the situation changes, and if we impose some decision, it will be bad. They will then treat the matter irresponsibly. And if they decide themselves, there will be more responsibility.

SP: Were any photographic images used, whether taken by you or...

NA: Yes, yes, yes. [...] Why were we lucky? Because there was a very good person working in my laboratory, a talented scientist, a wonderful poet, a wonderful photographer who took pictures with his heart, not with a camera. And unfortunately, he was killed by neo-fascists. Skinheads. No one knows what sins he committed.

SP: Was it long ago?

NA: It was in 2007. But after his death, we published his doctoral dissertation, we published his poems, we published his photographs. Now, by the way, Svetlana Sergeyevna, I would even ask you to help us - we are currently planning to publish his doctoral dissertation, which was written in Russian and translated into English, and you can help us.

SP: In what way?

NA: Well, let's think about that.

SP: With pleasure.

NA: You know, for example, we funded the publication of his poetry and photographs ourselves. And then we found his childhood friend who moved to Israel. And she also got involved. And since you deal with this issue too, you can help. There is the concept of 'crowdfunding' [...] I will try to send you these materials soon, take a look. I will send you, his name was David Davidovich Piryulin, there is a lot of information about him on our website too. [...] And he worked on the Aral Sea. And he knew a lot about the Aral Sea. He also took good photographs of the Aral Sea. Everything is documented.

SP: So you used photographs in your work that only he took?

NA: Yes, yes, yes. And there, the dam was being built by popular means. I am telling you, this is a priceless treasure trove of information. You see, Svetlana Sergeyevna, we have already published so much, but, unfortunately, journalists, historians of science, people who are interested in the Aral Sea, there is such a concept, they don't have the time to read everything we have done. They skim the surface, like water meters, without delving deep. Or like surfers. They ride the wave, according to their interests.

SP: [...] Have you noticed that when someone from the leadership, from decision-makers, looks through a report, for example, yours, it quickly passes through the material because

there is no time or something else. Is it true that seeing photographs in this material can catch a person's attention?

NA: Absolutely true, absolutely true. I will answer straight away: it is better to see once than hear a hundred times. And it is even better if there is a video. And that is why, when my son asked what he should do to help me in my work, I told him, "Become a cameraman, you will document our work." So my son became a cameraman. And a photographer, and a cameraman. My son documents our work on the Aral Sea and other water bodies in his spare time.

SP: I see. And in your opinion, what can visual means of information convey that words cannot?

NA: Well, you know, words appeal more to the mind. And a photograph appeals more to the heart. Do you understand what I mean?

SP: Yes, yes.

NA: So it is like that. Moreover, I can tell you, we have such a concept: 'Hardware', there is 'software', and there is 'heartware', from the word heart. And something can be done with software, with hardware, computer equipment, any hardware. But for this, you need to have heartware in your heart. That is, software, hardware, and heartware. [...]

SP: Interesting. And one more question. How do you think photographic images can be more effectively used to communicate various issues?

NA: You see, here, well, you know, there are 'headlines', catchy slogans. There are posters. You need a slogan and you need a poster. You remember, Uncle Sam says: "I want you." And we have: "Have you enlisted as a volunteer?" That is it. This can be done with a photograph, or with a collage. So you need a slogan and you need a visual image. We have a lot of good posters, including those dedicated to the Aral Sea [...] So besides the slogan, you also need a poster or a collage, and you can also use photography. Do you remember that famous photograph of poor Vietnamese naked children running away from Americans?

SP: Yes, yes.

NA: National Geographic holds competitions, our APN organizes them, other mass media as well. Photography competitions on political topics. There are plenty of them.

SP: I see. Well, I think that is all then. Very important information, very valuable information from your expertise.

NA: I want to add something for you to remember. There is indeed a lot of trouble, a lot of sorrow on the Aral Sea, but there is also this. Remember this, it is very important. The less water remains in the Aral Sea, the more scoundrels come to save it in order to steal that money. It is all very clear. My botany teacher, who worked on the Aral Sea before me and whom I met on the Aral Sea in the desert, and whose ideas I continue to follow, said this well, didn't he?

SP: Yes.

NA: In science, in politics, in journalism, and in art, those who do not save the Aral Sea, but lean on money to grab a bigger piece for themselves.

SP: Unfortunately, this is the case in many places.

NA: Understand, we still need to address very serious religious issues, including those on the Aral Sea. Because for Orthodox, Catholics, Lutherans, Baptists, atheists, and people who believe in other religions such as Buddhism, Shintoism, and so on, all this sounds different, and our task is to find religious unity. So that religious differences do not lead to strife, but to cooperation. So there are also huge religious issues at stake. Like you, I am an Orthodox Christian and received a wonderful religious education because my grandfather was a

clergyman, a protodeacon. And he gave me a colossal education, specifically in church matters. So I know all the advantages, well, and also the disadvantages of religious education. And now I have to deal [with] Muslims, Jews, and Buddhists. Well, sorry, you know that in Islam you can't depict living beings, only ornaments. This is also a very interesting thing that imposes its restrictions.

[...]

SP: A lot of useful, very important information.

NA: Visit our website, we have thousands of photographs, we have dozens of videos. [...]

Currently, we are collaborating with Russia Today. Currently, Russia Today is making a colossal film about the Aral Sea. At my own expense, in December of last year, I went to Moscow to give an interview. My son studied under Razovsky. "White Sun in the Desert," "Chief of Chukotka," "Aquaman." My son is a student of this person. And he makes fantastic films. But no one wants to pay him for it. But he is smart enough to work for free. You see, money often goes to parasites, and good people get a few pennies. But this only leaves them better.

[...]

NA: By the way, Pink Floyd made a good music video about the Aral Sea at one time. Have you seen it?

SP: No, no, actually. Yes, I will watch it. That sounds very interesting.

NA: "Louder than words." It caused quite a stir. Kazakhs helped Pink Floyd shoot this video in the steppe on the Aral Sea in Kazakhstan. This music video turned out to be like a bomb. We reached out to Pink Floyd, I personally wrote to Pink Floyd. Then I wrote to many other musicians asking them to do something about the Aral Sea. You understand, there is need for a slogan, need for a poster, need for a musical hit. You see, for a European, it is one thing, for an Asian, it is another.

[...]

SP: Thank you very much. And I will send you, as soon as I make the transcription and the translation, both of them I will send to your email.

[...]

NA: By the way, you can see how we bury our David Davidovich on the Aral Sea, on Barsakelmes Island. He [son] taught me to use a handy cam. He edits everything himself. Honestly, many who watch us bury David Davidovich on the Aral Sea, on Barsakelmes Island, start crying. Why do they cry? Well, people are sensitive. But it is also very important who filmed and who edited it. Okay, may God help you. Goodbye.