

RUSSIA FULFILLS THE CRITERIA OF DEMOCRACY

Tatu Vanhanen



TATU VANHANEN

is a Finnish political scientist and a professor of political science at the Tampere University.

Professor Vanhanen is an acknowledged authority in the research of the standards of democracy and democratization processes. Vanhanen is also the author of the monograph 'Prospects of Democracy: A study of 172 countries' (2003)

RJ Dear Mr. Vanhanen, do you think there are specific characteristics of democracy in relation to which a significant consensus has been formed around the globe? What standards of democracy do you believe to be universally recognized and indisputable?

Let's start with the definition of democracy. Democracy is a political system in which different ideological and social groups are legally entitled to compete for political power, and one in which institutional power holders are elected by the people and are responsible to the people.

Indisputable standards of democracy require legal opportunities to compete for the highest institutional positions of political power

(chief executive and members of legislature) through elections and to change the power holders also through elections. **These standards may be universally recognized**, but in practice they are not universally implemented.

RJ Which of them, in their turn, are legitimate, and are not indisputable and different from country to country?

That is a good question! There is great variation both in the legal opportunities to compete for political power positions, in the nature and extent of competition, and in the extent of popular participation in elections. Not all practices fulfill the minimum standards of democracy. Therefore, it is important to define the minimum standards of democracy. According to my criteria of democracy, **a political system fulfills the minimum criteria of democracy if the largest party accounts for less than 70 percent (or the smaller parties account for more than 30 percent)** in the executive and/or legislative elections. Moreover, at least 20 percent of the country's total population must vote in those elections.

In the case of Russia, the present degree of competition (the percentage share of smaller parties) is 32.7 percent (the mean of presidential and parliamentary elections) and the degree of electoral participation is 50.7 percent. **Thus, according to my criteria, Russia fulfills the minimum criteria of democracy**, although the degree of competition is only slightly above the minimum limit of 30 percent.

RJ How do you understand the term 'indigenization of democracy' formulated by the famous Australian political scientist and historian John Keane? What does such 'indigenization' include at present?

I understand the indigenization of democracy to be the adaptation of political institutions to a country's historical traditions and social structures. It is an absolutely natural process and, **most likely, democratic institutions will not be able to operate well without this 'indigenization.'**

Democratic political institutions do not need to be, and cannot be, similar in all countries. Political systems may be presidential or parliamentary. Governmental systems may be unitary or federal. Parliaments may comprise one or two chambers. Electoral systems may be based on proportional or majority representation. Party systems may vary significantly. Party cleavages may be based on ideological, class, social, ethnic, or regional divisions and conflicts of interest. However, the standards of democracy should remain the same (competition and participation) for all political systems despite their institutional variations.

The diversification of democratic institutions continues, but it does not change the basic standards of democracy.

RJ What social and economic standards of democracy are needed for harmonious social development?

Democratization and the level and quality of democracy depend crucially on social and economic conditions. Democracy presupposes the distribution of intellectual and economic power resources among various social groups. Therefore, economic power resources should not be concentrated in the hands of the few (state or private corporations), but should be dispersed as far as possible because this makes it possible for people and their interest organizations to take part in politics independently. ■

Tatu Vanhanen was speaking with Yulia Netesova