

## ADDRESSING DEMOCRACY

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**D**mitry Medvedev's decision to have democracy as the subject of his speech at the Yaroslavl Conference was completely at odds with the existing traditions of the post-Soviet power. For some time now, democracy has not been talked about in Russia. Rather, it has been typically taken for granted in Russia as something indisputable but at the same time uninteresting. Moreover, the same indifference for the topic was shown by the Russian opposition, including the parts of it that dub itself as being 'democratic' since 1993. In fact, almost anything was the subject of discussion between the political forces in Russian society, from the relations between state and business, to the interaction with the outer world, or other national issues, but never democracy.

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There are several reasons for the lack of interest in democracy.

In my mind, the main reason is that **democracy was never a slogan of the political opposition during the Soviet Union**. Only in the late 1960s did the dissidents begin to call their movement 'democratic,' and shortly after, in the early 1970s, that they preferred to refer to themselves as 'dissidents.' 'Democracy' was not included in the political program of any leader of the Russian fronde. Solzhenitsyn called for a national authoritarian rule. Sakharov insisted that civil rights should be observed and intellectual freedom should be widened, but never included political changes. Nobody was seriously prepared for democratization as a conscious transfer to a political system based in electoral competition. 'Democracy' came to the Russians, almost out of the blue, from the government as a slogan that represented the gradual exodus of Russian society from the ideocracy of the communist regime.

In 1991-1992, the final collapse of this ideocracy immediately dulled the edge of all talks on 'democracy.' First, the ex-'democrats' started to call themselves 'liberals' and later, 'conservatives.' The imperative of 'market reforms' was later substituted by the priority of 'state strengthening;' while democracy was always present as an auxiliary plot during debates on these subjects, it usually played the role of an extra argument in disputes with the opposition, who were accused either of populism or authoritarianism.

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It takes historically determined aspects for democracy in itself to

become desirable to a society, or at least to its counter-elite circles. For instance, particularly eager people strive for the democratization of a society that is divided by strata, in case these strata have different political rights. To overcome this inequality, the society moves toward democracy naturally, slowly, and gradually. The question now is whether this process has come to its end; and this question is a crucial problem for the West, which has moved out of the remnants of racial, gender, and even property discrimination. When the problem of democratization is brought up in the Western, mostly liberal, circles, it is this problem that comes up the most, that is, to what extent has discrimination been eliminated today? Eminent American sociologist Immanuel Wallerstein talked about this subject at one of the Forum's sections. He pointed out the different meaning of the term 'demos' in different periods of European history.

However, if Russia was 'ahead of the whole planet' in anything in terms of politics, then it was through the fast and radical elimination of all kinds of discrimination. It happened in the early 1900s when in 1917 all adults without exception became citizens of Russia: Muslims, Jews, women, the poor. It is another matter that this breakthrough in universal political equality was by no means supported by the competitive political regime in Russia. But still the main obstacle for true democracy — as well as the primary reason to establish it as the **fight for recognition** — was thus removed.

Another impelling movement for democracy is the **national**

**independence requirement.** The main problem here is that any dependence on an external force is perceived from the onset as something virtually shameful, undue, and sinful. It is difficult to say what the anthropological nature of this feeling is, since a foreign ruler could be much more benevolent to its subjects than the local satraps. Still, something inside of us resists the very thought that we could depend on a foreign power. This reluctance can be explained in different ways, but without a doubt, a new regime can obtain the extra legitimacy required for stability amongst its populace through the breakthrough of democracy when coupled with national emancipation. This can be seen, for instance, in Central Europe, Ukraine, and Moldavia. Russia, on the contrary, is still unable to get rid of the ‘Weimar syndrome’ where democracy is identified with national defeat.

In the context of certain ruling class’ deafness to topics of democracy, Russian political science has lost its acuteness and topicality, and society is gradually losing interest in the idea that Western political science holds some sacred knowledge.

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The Yaroslavl Forum and the President’s talk quite unexpectedly returned the expert community to matters that many prefer to speak of as of something self-evident, without ever delving deeply into it. It turns out that the West is ready to join the same discussion and by addressing it the state leader has made a claim to a new political style.

Currently, Medvedev is stubbornly pushing Russia towards discussing democracy. This discussion is **about honesty** and the rules that need to be followed, if they are indeed recognized as rules. In my opinion, Russians are quite indifferent to democra-

cy as an abstract ideal but are very not a designation but the scientific-



sensitive to any kind of dishonesty, political cunning, and actions that do not match the words. The authorities need to be required to act according to their own slogans and rules unlike the democratic revolution of 1989-1991, which led to destructive consequences for the state. Likewise, last autumn I happened to hear from many of my acquaintances, who are not just indifferent but crucially hostile to the very idea of democracy, that they were shocked by the conduct of the Moscow authorities at the City Duma elections.

This idea of democracy as a system of rules that are universally acknowledged and need to be observed by any official at any level in Russia was the basis for the message delivered by the President at the event in Yaroslavl. According to Medvedev’s viewpoint, democracy *‘is a strictly fixed list of norms and rules. They are exactly norms and rules; and it is steadfast observation of them that makes democracy efficient.’* Strictly speaking, what Medvedev described was

ic definition of democracy. However, he pointed at a possible method to address democracy through using forces that are interested in the country’s modernization with the support of the people.

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In an almost Confucian manner, democracy as a subject for discussion has returned to Russia as a program that ‘rectifies names,’ by giving words their true exact meaning. ‘Parties’ must become parties; ‘elections’ elections, ‘bureaucrats’ bureaucrats and not economic entities; professional defenders of order should be called ‘policemen’ and not ‘militiamen.’ This trend is likely to go further, extending to new areas of life and power structures and the Forum in Yaroslavl can easily become the ground where all the ‘noble men’ of different countries and civilizations will join the efforts to find accurate definitions of the most important ‘names’ and ‘notions’ of society. ■