

MEDVEDEV PERCEIVES DEMOCRACY FROM A WESTERN STANDPOINT

Andrey Kolesnikov



Andrey Kolesnikov

is a Russian political scientist, publicist, reviewer of 'Novaya Gazeta,' and a columnist for the newspapers 'Vedomosti' and 'Gazeta.ru.'

He was recently a participant at the 2010 Global Policy Forum in Yaroslavl

It is my belief that president Medvedev tends to personally view democracy from a western standpoint. Nevertheless, as the president of Russia, above any personal concerns, he should rather demonstrate his commitment to the 'Russian understanding' of democracy. This is often not a problem, as he is usually very constrained in what he says and what he does.

When talking about political reform, Medvedev has often been forced to voice his ideas with certain restriction. And in his public addresses to political scientists and the wider audience of the forum, which were received as rather radical and liberal, he constantly reminded everyone that the movement forward should not be rapid, that changes should not be radical, and that it is important to maintain stability and sustainability of the system. These comments became somewhat of a refrain over the course of the forum.

I arrived at these conclusions following the meeting with the president of Russia: **Medvedev will not introduce any serious changes into the political system, but he is ready to expand its 'offshoot,' which has suddenly emerged during recent years and has encouraged such new forms of direct democracy as the Internet democracy, and has allowed the authorities to receive direct signals from the civil society.**

Dmitry Medvedev has always placed an interesting emphasis on reacting to signals coming from society. If there is a strong signal (as in the case of the Khimki forest), then he will likely react to it in a certain way. Of course, this is not a new form of communication with the population, as even during the Soviet times there was a certain reaction to 'the letters from working people.' From the whole flow of letters, complaints and appeals to the Central Committee or to the government, a publicly beneficial or real fact about some big problem would be singled out and responded to, and sometimes the problem would even be resolved. There was also a similar tradition with the former president and incumbent prime-minister, albeit with some differences, as Medvedev's style implies the resolution of certain social issues in a rather populist fashion.

Here we are talking about a reaction to real signals from the real civil society. The skyscraper building project in Saint Petersburg, sponsored by Gazprom and hence nicknamed the 'Gazscraper,' is just one example of the government altering its decisions, and the Khimki forest issue is yet another one. Of course, there have been times when a strong reaction was lacking; nevertheless, the prosecutor's office reacted to the notorious case of Barkov, the vice-president of Lukoil – and they are still looking into whether the termination of the criminal case was justified. **Reacting to these signals really**

seems to be a new form of immediate, direct democracy, and is fast becoming Medvedev's tool, as he selects appropriate civil signals that appear to be the most advantageous in the eyes of his sympathizers.

The current state of Russian democracy is a curious one, in which the parliament no longer fulfills its traditional functions and no longer acts as the sole representative authority in the country. Neither the communists, 'Spravedlivaya Rossiya,' 'Edinaya Rossiya,' nor the LDPR represent the interests of a significant or majority number of voters. As a result, the function of representation in the current parliament has been narrowed considerably, and it no longer complies with internationally established norms. Of course, the Russian parliament still fulfills the function of law enactment, but the functions of parliament should be wider and more representative, and above all the elections must be fair. In this regard, **it seems that Medvedev has a slightly more complicated relationship with this part of democracy,** if we compare it with his attitude towards the inspiring new forms of direct democracy. The truth of the matter is that he is still firmly against the election of governors or mayors, and adheres to the view that 'managers' should be assigned instead.

Regarding the Forum in general, I believe that in order to develop its format further, efforts should be made to invite a wider spectrum of specialists and politicians, particularly those who hold opposing views and opinions. No major breakthrough was achieved at the Yaroslavl Forum, though the keynote speeches were really quite good. Overall, the Forum seems to have gone rather well, yet there still remains a lingering feeling that this event stands detached from reality, and primarily from that of Russia. ■

Exclusively for RJ