



The sixth issue of the Yaroslavl Initiative, devoted to the problems of human rights protection and upholding standards of democracy, prompted considerable discussion within the intellectual community. We return to the discussion once again, and give the floor to Gerhard Mangott, a prominent Austrian professor of Political Science at the University of Innsbruck, and an expert in the modern political history of Eastern Europe and Russia. Professor Mangott is one of several world renowned intellectuals who have agreed to participate in this year's Yaroslavl International Forum in September.

BASIC LIST OF HUMAN RIGHTS IS COMMON FOR ALL

Gerhard Mangott

Constitutionally guaranteed and protected human rights and civil liberties are an indispensable precondition for democratic rule. However, there is much debate as to whether these fundamental rights also include social rights – social equity and legal conditions that provide every citizen with a fair chance to live a decent life.

In consolidated democracies, the protection of civil and human rights is the principle task of the judiciary, which ought to be truly independent and devoid of arbitrary decision making and corruption. However, this is often not the case, so it is also the task of both the political society (parties) and the civil society (NGO's, human rights activists) to serve as watchdogs for the protection of civil rights. Furthermore, these efforts should be promoted by a truly independent and responsible media. Human rights activists, who by themselves rarely constitute a coherent and united group, stimulate debate about extending civil rights to disenfranchised minority groups.

In transitional democracies, civil society is much more important, as the courts in most cases are not yet capable of fulfilling their role as protectors of human rights. In addition, the political elite in young democracies tend not to be sufficiently mature to understand the unalienable status of human rights.

Human rights activism is extremely relevant in authoritarian systems or in transitional democracies. In such countries, NGO's have to work under very difficult circumstances (for



example, lack of finances, insufficient media access, harassment by state bodies, and so on).

In mature democracies, there are many societal and political actors that can act to protect civil liberties. In this case, human rights activists no longer have the crucial role that they are faced with in authoritarian systems and transitional democracies.

Overall, human rights activists are not very capable of defining or regulating common standards of democracy. They have a comprehensive understanding of consolidated liberal democracy, but in many transitional democracies the majority of NGO's lack a thorough knowledge of democratic rule. Nevertheless, at this transitional stage of democratization, aspects of courage, dedication, and organization are often much more important than any lack in democratic knowledge.

The difficulty of accounting for national and cultural particularities in

the development of some set of common democratic standards is a highly contested subject. But regardless of cultural differences, there is always an indispensable and inviolable corpus of civil rights that must be guaranteed and protected: the right to free speech, free association, and fair elections; the provision of accountable authorities, independent courts, and a public administration devoid of corruption and arbitrary decision making; and above all, the protection of human life, regardless of race, religion, or sex. The majority of human rights can never be justifiably sidelined by certain cultural or historical peculiarities.

The greatest threat to human rights activism is a lack of awareness in the face of subtle and covert state encroachment upon basic civil rights. A recent threat is the gradual effort of the state to expand the power of law enforcing bodies in their struggle against international terrorism. In such a case, individual human rights are infringed upon all too often for the sake of providing public safety and security for the society at large.

It is not fair to say that the majority of populations, for example those in Russia, America, or China, flat out reject human rights activists as representatives of their own ideals. On the contrary, it is more often the case that people tend to trade their individual rights for stronger social equality and public safety.■

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Issue Editor
Nikita Kurkin

Executive Editor
Valentina Bykova

Design
Sergey Ilnitsov

Page proofs
Gleb Shuklin

Additional contributors
Boris Volkhonsky, Anna Lebedeva, Yulia Netesova, Elena Penskaya, Liubov Ulianova

Project director: Alexander Shpunt