

The Democratic Russia Movement: Myths and Reality

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It is common knowledge that the Democratic Russia Movement has become the first political organization able to unite the democratic forces in Russia, and thus challenge in an efficient way the political monopoly of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU). However, the political and economic crises in the country have affected the success of this large organization. Cracks in its unity have appeared, as well as threats of defection from many of its remaining constituent groups. These visible shortcomings have been taking place amid constructive and unifying processes which, though less apparent, are of great importance for the democratic process in Russia. Unfortunately, as is the case in most other countries, the sensationalist free press reports more readily on the foibles than on the merits, which is why a distorted, peculiar mythology towards Democratic Russia has been gradually developing in the population at large. This article will comment on some of these myths and clarify the position of the Movement in a number of key problems.

Myth One: Democratic Russia has split, disappeared, died.

Democratic Russia was legalized and received its name at its Constituent Congress in the autumn of 1990. The goal of this Congress was to unite all the democratic anticommunist organizations, groups and groupings which had appeared in 1988-89 in preparation for the elections to the Congresses of People's Deputies of the USSR and of the Russian Federated Republic (RSFSR). Among these groups it is worth mentioning the clubs and associations of voters (the Moscow Association of Voters, the club of voters at the USSR Academy of Sciences, and regional clubs of voters), regional people's fronts (Moscow, Ivanovo, the Moscow club "Perestroika"), as well support groups for individual people's deputies such as Boris Yeltsin, Andrei Sakharov, Telman Gdlyan—some of which became numerous enough to become real movements.

What about the program of the Movement? Does this one really exist and if so, does it accurately reflect the aspirations of the supporters of people like Sakharov, Yeltsin, or the procurator Gdlyan? Democratic Russia's program

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was not accepted until the third Constituent Congress in 1992. The lack of a concrete program at the birth of the Movement was quite natural, if we take into account the extremely diverse convictions of the participants in those gatherings. In the meantime, some of the articles in the Rules of the Movement acted as its program. Point 1.4 of the Rules, for example, says: "The main purpose of the Movement is the struggle against monopoly in the field of politics, economics, information and other spheres of activity; the creation of the conditions for the effective fulfillment and protection of the rights and freedoms of the citizens of the Russian Federation, and the absolute ratification of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of the United Nations."

Consequently, the program is against the monopoly of power by the CPSU. It was mainly this point which made it possible to unite such diverse elements as social-democrats, liberals, the center-Left and the center-Right.

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But as for the *constructive* part of the program—the creation of a state governed by law—the divergence of ideas and ideologies led to the creation within the Movement of several different parties: the Democratic (DPR), Social Democratic (SDPR), Free Democratic

(SvDPR), and a number of others. Most of these parties have left the Movement, but some of them, such as the Republican Party of Russia (RPR), have maintained their membership. Having united all the anticommunists at the beginning, it was to be expected that Democratic Russia would be doomed to collapse once the destruction of the Communists' monopoly on power had been accomplished. But it is very important to understand that, at its conception as well as now, the most important part of the Movement consists of individuals—those citizens who have joined the Movement on a personal level. There are only approximate figures for these, which range from 200 to 300 thousand people. Democratic Russia exists in all the regions of Russia, and not only in the big cities, but in many district centers and even in the countryside.

In the majority of the regional territorial and city soviets (councils) as well as in the Supreme Soviet of Russia there are Democratic Russia factions. The Movement is also well represented in the executive power of the country. Democratic Russia fulfills all the functions of a political party and may even be called such. If we are to compare it to another party in the world, close approximations would be the Republican and Democratic parties of the United States: these are loose associations, they respect their members' privacy, and they lack a rigid structure of subordination.

The latest two mass campaigns in Russia—the collection of signatures to

carry out a referendum on private property and the April 1993 referendum on the president, the Parliament and new elections—showed that Democratic Russia is the most influential political organization with Russia's voters.

Myth Two: Democratic Russia is a radical organization, a mirror reflection of its Communist and national-patriotic opposition.

Let us begin by analyzing the term “radical.” If we are to use the Western understanding of the word, then it would mean a political group which either appeals to violent actions to change the political system or uses such actions as a means to an end. Examples include the Red Brigades in Italy, neofascist groups in Germany, and so forth. It can be absolutely asserted that no Democratic Russia document has ever appealed to violent actions either with respect to the Communist system or with respect to individual Communists. It should be underlined that after the democrats came to power, no political prisoners appeared in Russia. The Movement has held dozens of demonstrations with tens of thousands of people, but not once has it advocated violence in the streets. This is not so of others, such as the Front for National Salvation, the group Labor Russia and other radical Communist and national-patriotic organizations, which provoke disorders regularly. The events of 1 May 1993 are still fresh in everyone's minds.

If we try to determine Democratic Russia's place in the political spectrum by using several measuring signs, it is possible to affirm that the Movement belongs in the democratic center in Russian politics. In the democratic camp there are other and more radical groups and movements, all of which enjoy less of a following than Democratic Russia. These include Democratic Union, Russian Constituent Union (RUS), the People's Party under the leadership of Telman Gdlyan, and some others.

So, why is the myth about the “radicalism” of Democratic Russia so persistent? Perhaps the main reason for this is that Democratic Russia has not abandoned rallies as a form of political struggle. The Movement keeps this option not because it has no other recourse, but because it absolutely cannot leave the streets of Moscow, St. Petersburg and other cities to the agitations of the extreme Left and Right groups. Coups and destabilization do nothing to contribute to social debate and reconciliation, and that is why Democratic Russia should do everything to avoid handing over the streets to the extremists.

Myth Three: Democratic Russia stands for the collapse of the Russian Federation and ignores the interests of the country abroad. In a word, Democratic Russia is an unpatriotic organization.

Before shoving all of these accusations aside, as they contain nothing but falsehood, let us now try to formulate Democratic Russia's attitude to the problem of the nation-state structure of Russia and that of the nation-state

restructuring in both Russia and in the rest of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS).

Democratic Russia formulated its attitude towards these problems not in declarations of theoretical treatises, but during dramatic events taking place as the USSR was collapsing, and during the process of reorganization in Russia. In so doing, the Movement attempted to influence the decisions taken by the presidents, the governments, and the Supreme Soviets of the Federation and of the Union. While formulating answers to these problems, the Movement proceeded from one main principle: avoidance of bloodshed and strong-arm methods in resolving conflicts. That is why Democratic Russia came out firmly against the actions of the Soviet leadership at the time of the crisis in Vilnius, Lithuania, and condemned the entire policy of Mikhail Gorbachev, who was gradually moving towards a position of preserving the Union by force. Let me make clear that this was the Movement's stance not because it was in favor of the breakup of the Union, but because it was clear that the preservation of the Union at any price would have led to bloodshed and only bloodshed. The events in Yugoslavia confirm this hypothesis.

The Movement was the first to condemn the decision to send troops to Chechnia, and condemned Boris Yeltsin for this decision despite the

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Movement's general loyalty to him. Also, during the development of the conflict in the Dniester region in Moldova, Democratic Russia did not follow the path of one-sided support for the separatist Slavic

leadership of Dniester, but rather emphasized the political as opposed to the ethnic nature of this conflict. Meanwhile, all kinds of "patriots" and "pro-Russian" elements were demanding the resolution of this conflict by force. The cessation of the bloodshed in Dniester is a rare example of stabilization in the background of many other ethnic conflicts which are only getting worse.

It is clear from the examples enumerated above that of the two key principles of the structure of a nation-state—the inviolability of borders and the right of nations to self-determination—Democratic Russia gives priority to the former. In a period of transition from one system to another, accompanied by economic and political upheavals, only the observance of the principle of the inviolability of borders can minimize the bloodshed and save Russia and the CIS from bloody internecine wars along the Yugoslav scenario.

In affirming this principle, the leadership of Democratic Russia is aware that perhaps the majority of interstate borders within the CIS, borders laid out in Soviet times, are unjust, and in particular it recognizes the injustice

and unlawfulness of the transfer of the Crimea to Ukraine in the days of Nikita Khrushchev. But it also regards as criminal the actions of certain “patriotic” people’s deputies of the Russian Federation who went to agitate in the Crimea in favor of secession from Ukraine, provoking armed conflict there.

There is already some evidence that as soon as the economic problems begin to settle, the integrational tendencies will be strengthened and the separatist ones minimized. While pronouncing passionately the words “state,” “national interests of Russia,” “Great Russia” and so on, Russia’s home-bred “patriots” by their actions devalue all these concepts. Their colleagues in Bosnia, Croatia and Serbia have already clearly demonstrated what these actions and these slogans can lead to. The peaceful and evolutionary development of Russia without armed conflicts corresponds to her interests.

Myth Four: Democratic Russia is a “pro-Yeltsin” organization which always automatically supports the Russian president.

In order to comment on this statement it is necessary to briefly analyze the development of the relations between Democratic Russia and Boris Yeltsin. Certainly, Democratic Russia supported Yeltsin in his election as chairman of the RSFSR Supreme Soviet and in the presidential elections. But it is not hard to recall instances of difficulties in the development of relations between the Russian president and the Movement. First, Democratic Russia did not trust that part of the president’s entourage that was recruited mainly from amongst the people who had worked with Yeltsin before in the Communist Party structures. Democratic Russia insisted on amendments to the cadre policy—both with respect to people in the president’s immediate entourage (such as Yuri Petrov and Yuri Skokov) and with regard to many appointments to ministerial and regional positions. Second, Democratic Russia protested firmly against the president’s concessions to the Supreme Soviet and has repeatedly declared that its support for his policy is conditional. This was evident particularly after the sixth Congress of People’s Deputies, when the government was “reinforced” with representatives from among the captains of industry and again after the seventh Congress, when the president refused to appoint Yegor Gaidar to the post of prime minister.

The nature of Democratic Russia’s complex relationship with Boris Yeltsin can be expressed in this formula: The president did not deem it possible to be a “party president” nominated by Democratic Russia, and the Movement, for its part, does not deem itself bound to support steps by the president which are contrary to its strategic and tactical objectives.

Myth Five: Democratic Russia monopolizes the right to speak in the name of Russia’s democratically oriented public and squeezes out other smaller democratic parties and groups. Structurally the movement is ossified, and

does not allow new political structures to develop.

In fact, upon encountering conflicts within the Movement between the “radicals” and the “constructivists,” it became clear a long time ago that when new tasks arise, methods of working also have to evolve. Thus, following Yeltsin’s proclamation of the transition to radical economic reforms at the fifth Congress of People’s Deputies, the Democratic Russia Coordinating Council adopted a resolution and wrote a message to regional organizations that very day, proposing the creation of Public Committees for Russian Reforms (OKRR), enlisting professional economists and legal experts. The committees are now in action in the majority of regions of Russia. They advise the local population on privatization and support private farmers. By obtaining information from the OKRRs it is possible to trace the progress of economic and political reform in the regions.

Take also Democratic Russia’s recent actions to widen its base. It was on the initiative of Democratic Russia that a statement on the creation of the electoral bloc of reform-minded forces, “Russia’s Choice,” was signed, both by representatives of many social organizations and by state and political leaders—from Deputy Prime Ministers Yegor Gaidar and Vladimir Shumeiko to former Politburo member Alexander Yakovlev to the radical democrat Mikhail Poltoranin. This was a substantial step toward the unification of the reform-minded forces on the eve of early parliamentary elections.

Of course, Democratic Russia, like the entire democratic process in Russia, is developing unevenly, experiencing internal conflicts and crises. Of course, even within the Movement we are constantly coming up against echoes of Russia’s totalitarian past—both in the minds of Democratic Russia members and in their practical actions. However, the last two mass campaigns by democratic forces—the collection of signatures in favor of a referendum on private ownership of land and a referendum of confidence in the president—showed quite clearly that Democratic Russia remains a major democratic organization, retaining its influence on the voters.