

# Democracy Is Not Dead in Russia

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**D**emocracy is not dead in Russia. Despite the war in Chechnya, the people are expressing democratic values that are not presently being exercised by President Yeltsin. Yeltsin has surrounded himself with non-democrats, hardliners who are out of step with almost all sectors of the society. His advisors consist of conservative members of the security apparatus, the ministry of interior and the military-industrial complex. His government has alienated almost the entire population. A recent Moscow opinion poll shows that only 8 percent of the citizenry supports the war and there is similar dissatisfaction outside the capital.

The justice apparatus is ready to prosecute the military personnel who acted with honor and refused to carry out what they perceived as unjust orders. The television news, viewed by millions nightly, questions the morality and veracity of the government and calls for foreign criticism of this inhumane war.

If Russia were a parliamentary democracy, the government would have fallen months ago because the president has lost the credibility of all sectors of the society. To be in Russia today; is to be in a country with an overwhelming anger at its leader. Yet the newly established Constitution does not provide for a true balance of power, the preponderance of power is given to the president. Therefore, the Parliament has expressed its dissatisfaction with the president but lacks the authority to stop the war.

The level of opposition to the war is startling because the Chechens have been vilified within Russia. They visibly dominate organized crime and their role in this activity was given as a primary justification for the assault. Yet despite the Russian contempt for this Muslim non-Slavic nationality, the slaughter of innocent civilians is not acceptable to much of the citizenry.

Citizens oppose the war for diverse reasons apart from the senseless destruction of Chechnya. Young unprepared Russian soldiers are being slaughtered, the war is humiliating to the military and is senseless when other tactics could and should have been used initially. The war is costly when Russia cannot provide for its citizens' basic needs. The war is being fought without the consent of Parliament and in disregard of public opinion. The principal justification for the war (that the Chechens are criminal bandits) is not acceptable to most of the population. As one acquaintance close to the Russian leadership explained, the Chechens could not commit their crimes (embezzlement from Russian banks and diversion of their great natural resource, oil) without the complicity of the top Russian leadership. Therefore, "this war is like bombing all the witnesses to the crime to eliminate the evidence."

There are strong democratic tendencies in Russian society, in the military, and in the press opposing Yeltsin's authoritarianism. The media's criticism of its leader and his advisors is almost unprecedented. News broadcasts report the "official line" whose truth they publicly question and then, as if to verify their suspicions, they air CNN footage. The

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Russian human rights ombudsman, Sergei Kovalev, a member of what our press keeps calling the hardline Parliament, went to Chechnya with a tripartite delegation including representatives of the Parliament's democratic and former Communist factions. His findings report the atrocities in Chechnya, denounce the lies of Yeltsin's government and have propelled Kovalev to the level of a national hero. An OMON unit, the fighting division of the Ministry of Interior, from Yeltsin's hometown of Yekaterinburg, refused to fight in Chechnya and returned home. The military prosecutor is investigating at least four generals who refused to carry out orders they considered to be immoral: to fire on civilians. Several more generals who criticized the war have been dismissed by Yeltsin.

The United States' desperate search for the "democratic Yeltsin" is a hopeless endeavor when the population and many in the military and the Parliament have proved themselves more principled than the president. While we may hope that Yeltsin can turn away from his present advisors and reassert himself as a democrat, he has irreparably lost the credibility of the citizenry as a reformer and a democratic leader. The population believes that the slaughter of the Chechens and the sacrifice of young untrained Russian soldiers cannot stop the endemic corruption at top government levels or ensure the solvency of the Russian state.

The U.S. government, by tying the future of democracy in Russia to Yeltsin, is in fact jeopardizing the future development of democracy in that country. American support for a president whose military effort is supported only by the extravagant nationalist Zhirinovsky, the Russian population reads as the American abandonment of democracy in Russia. By supporting the present government, we may be contributing to the rise of the military influence in the government, as the leading members of the military have been the voices of integrity in the Chechen crisis. Washington needs to explain more forcibly to Yeltsin that the slaughter of innocents is not solely a domestic affair. And we need to realize very quickly that democracy does not solely depend on Yeltsin. There are other democratic forces at work in Russian society.