

The Russian Democratic Movement: Past, Present, and Future

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In fall 1997, the democratic movement in Russia will celebrate its tenth anniversary. In November 1987, a group of young intelligentsia from Moscow (creators of the then unknown historical-educational organization Memorial) marched to Arbat to collect signatures. Those signatures were not calling for the dissolution of the Soviet system, but for the creation of a memorial to the victims of Stalinist repression. At that time, however, even this activity was treated as sacrilege by Soviet authorities, and the participants ended up in the custody of the militia. Memorial, the organization, supported by Bulat Okudzhava and Andrei Sakharov, soon became a symbol of democratic change in Russia and the “alma mater” of many democratic parties and politicians of the democratic wave of the 1990s.

I was at the birth of Memorial and of numerous other democratic organizations, and I would like to review the development of the democratic movement and to proffer perspectives of its future course. During those years, the democratic movement, together with the whole country, went through three principal stages.

First Stage: Revolutionary Romanticism and Westernism

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, only true proponents of democratic reform became involved in politics because it was not yet safe to do so. Then, we were all idealists, maximalists, romantics of democracy and the market. To us, it seemed that as soon as the CPSU’s monopoly on power could be liquidated, reforms based on Western patterns would bring us the same democracy and prosperity as in Western Europe and the United States.

Let us recall the movement Democratic Russia, the Movement for Democratic Reforms, the Congress of Citizens of Russia, and the Democratic Congress of Parties and Movements of Union Republics. The democratic movement accomplished the first, “destructive” part of its historical mission. The totalitarian regime was swept away and the CPSU’s monopoly on power liquidated; democratic freedoms were declared, and a new president of a free Russia was elected. It seemed that the cherished goal was quite near, especially when in November 1991, right after

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the defeat of the August junta, a new democratic-reformist government of Genady Burbulis and Yegor Gaidar was formed.

However, the implementation of a positive program turned out to be more difficult than the destruction of the former order. First, instead of an evolutionary transformation of the USSR into a confederate commonwealth of sovereign states (as offered by the Democratic Congress), the collapse and revolutionary breakdown of the huge state occurred after the August coup. As a result, along with a complicated socioeconomic transformation, the country went through a most difficult “divorce” among the fifteen former Soviet republics, with catastrophic consequences for the economy, culture, science, politics, and human rights. The democratic movement, likewise, split into fifteen parts. In the majority of the former Soviet republics, democrats quickly transformed themselves into national-democrats, and instead of democratic ideals, they have adopted national (and often nationalistic) ideas as their banner. This has become one of the main reasons for the present deep crisis in the democratic movement in Russia, which brought about the right of self-determination of nations, but did not withstand the breakdown of the monolithic state and the very separation of those nations.

Second, the democratic movement proved to be ill-prepared for assuming power in Russia and implementing positive democratic reforms in all spheres of civic life. In the provinces, as well as in the center, there was a critical shortage of people with managerial experience, capable of conducting critical reforms with due regard to the particularities of Russia. The Gaidar government was knowledgeable about Western experiences in conducting reforms; but they completely lacked experience in governing a giant state and were ignorant about the vast diversity of Russia. As a result, their mechanical application of Western and East European models on Russian soil led to serious complications in the economy and society, which in turn caused the resignation of the government after one year. Many democrats who had become heads of local administrations and were not able to cope with economic tasks suffered the same fate.

A romantic attempt to jump in one step from a socialist economy to a free market, and from a socialist democracy to a developed parliamentary democracy, failed. The democratic movement was severely discredited and set back. The romantic period came to an end.

Third, after the democratic movement succeeded in destroying the CPSU, it split into dozens of fratricidal splinters. All attempts to consolidate the democratic forces failed.

Second Stage: Evolutionary-Utilitarian

This stage is characterized by a fierce struggle for power in the ruling clique and absolute paralysis in the economic sector. Revolutionary romantics were gradually replaced by “new managers” who already had enjoyed market advantages and did not want to turn back, but still did not know how to move forward. For four years they, together with Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin, have been drifting with the flow of events, watching out for strong currents that might capsize the governmental boat.

Meanwhile, a tremendous redistribution of power and ownership took place. Key branches of the economy were divided and monopolized by corporate groups and clans represented in the government. The old political and economic bureaucracy has grown up alongside the promoters of democracy. This process has resembled a Latin American–style, criminal capitalism more than the universal prosperity of the developed Western countries.

At that time, the new parties and leaders of “utilitarian-pragmatic” direction were coming into politics and replacing the romantics. They did not participate in the democratic movement of early 1990s, did not go to the meetings, did not paste leaflets, and did not suffer severe Communist Party reprimands. In quiet scientific or ministerial rooms, or at Western universities, they have been studying experiences in conducting reforms and writing programs. Yeltsin’s invitation for them to participate in the first Russian governments brought them sufficient exposure and popularity. And they started their own “political business” with a vengeance—refusing to use the “old” democratic structures of the “romantic period.” Thus, in 1993, Russia’s Choice, Yabloko, the Party of Russian Unity and Concord (PRYeS), and other parties and movements emerged. They were staid, well-established, well-financed political organizations that immediately took a leading position in the democratic camp. They were and still are headed mostly by governmental “retirees” who did not blend with the “evolutionary strategy” of Chernomyrdin’s cabinet.

It seemed at first (after the dissolution of the Russian Supreme Soviet in 1993) that they would be able to consolidate the democratic movement, and Russia’s Choice could become the “governmental party.” However, after a fairly successful outcome in the parliamentary elections in 1993, where they took second (Russia’s Choice), sixth (Yabloko), seventh (PRYeS), and eighth (DPR) places in party lists (and received about one-third of all deputy mandates); they suffered a severe defeat in the State Duma elections of 1995 and in the gubernatorial elections in the second half of 1996.

Against the background of the continuing deterioration of the economy in 1995, the democrats were presented in the elections by fifteen parties and blocs engaged in bitter disputes. As a result, only Yabloko entered the Duma, garnering 7 percent of the vote. The crisis in the democratic movement had reached its apogee. The Russian democrats have demonstrated their total inability to come to agreement and to forgo the personal ambitions of their political leaders.

A certain sobering occurred during the presidential elections in 1996 when the democrats faced the threat of losing everything, and despite several very serious reproaches, found the strength to support Boris Yeltsin and win the elections together with the “party of power.”

Third Stage: Pragmatic

This stage is characterized by a heavy presence of the Russian regions and regional leaders, who have found a compromise between democratic and patriotic ideas that reflect a deep, distinctive quality of Russia as a Eurasian power.

The democratic movement faces real alternatives: They either consolidate with the “party of power” and are able to transform the economic situation and attain an industrial upswing, and in so doing win the next parliamentary and presidential elections, or they need to prepare to go into opposition by the year 2000, when the representatives of the left-wing and/or national-patriotic forces come to power.

A third scenario is also possible: an attempt by the “party of power” or one of its factions to establish an authoritarian regime in the country to prevent the opposition from gaining power. In this case, the democratic movement would either have to go into rigid opposition to the “party of power” in order to thwart the authoritarian coup, or become an appendage of that party and abandon their democratic principles.

Obviously, the first scenario is the only acceptable alternative, but the worst of the possibilities has to be considered and even anticipated.

The Republican Party sees its crucial strategic task until the year 2000 as achieving a turning point in the implementation of reforms that would create an industrial revival and a real improvement in the well-being of a majority of the population. This is going to be the basis for overcoming the crisis in the democratic movement and for the creation of a unified democratic coalition able to participate successfully in the parliamentary elections in 1999 and bring a president of democratic orientation to power.

The Republican Party has an initiative to create a coalition of democratic and centrist forces in the regions of the Russian Federation during the local elections in 1997–1998, in order to consolidate the democratic movement on the basis of economic growth. On the basis of these coalitions and under pressure from party activists in the regions, the electoral bloc of democratic and centrist forces should be created in 1999 during the elections for the State Duma. There is one tactical goal for this bloc: to get more democrats of different orientations into the lower house of parliament.

For this bloc to be created truly on the basis of regional coalitions and accumulated experience, the party will be conducting civic primary elections in the regions in June 1999—a half-year before the Duma elections—for the first time in the history of Russia.

The first time elections of this type—“primaries”—were conducted was in the United States at the beginning of twentieth century. Later, the mechanism of primary elections was employed by a number of other countries. In Russia, the mechanism of primary elections was successfully tested in Nizhny Novgorod, the city of Moscow, and the Moscow oblast in the summer of 1996 before the presidential elections. Now, in a number of Siberian regions, the democrats are going to hold public primaries in a majority of the districts to choose candidates for local elections. The democratic candidate who collects a majority of votes will be the only one from the democratic bloc in the final elections; the runners-up will withdraw from the campaign.

Before the State Duma elections of 1999, democratic parties and movements will organize primary elections across the entire country. A ballot for these primaries could look like the following (in alphabetical order):

Yuri Chernichenko—Peasant Party
Boris Fyodorov—Forward Russia!
Yegor Gaidar—Russia's Democratic Choice
Irina Khakamada—Common Work (Obschee Delo)
Vladimir Lysenko—Republican Party of Russia
Boris Nemtsov—first deputy prime minister of Russia
Ella Pamfilova—"For a Healthy Russia" movement
Galina Starovoitova—Democratic Russia movement
Alexander Yakovlev—Social Democratic Party
Grigory Yavlinsky—Yabloko
(line open for fill-in candidates)

A politician who receives the most votes in the primary elections would lead the coalition slate, with the others listed on the central list according to their performance. Today, there is no better objective criterion than the opinion of a Russian voter. I have my own sympathies, but in the end it makes no difference for me who will be at the top of the democratic list: Yavlinsky, Pamfilova, Gaidar, or Nemtsov. The main thing is that a unified democratic bloc results. Otherwise the democrats will leave the political stage and become marginal to the future direction of reform in Russia.

If a unified democratic bloc were to be forged, according to estimates by various analysts, the democrats could win from 15 to 20 percent of all seats in the next Duma. That is, they would become a real force, and there would be a real chance that the next president of Russia would be from among their ranks.

Under similarly difficult economic conditions, the Bulgarian democratic forces were able to get their leader, Peter Stoyanov, elected as president using the procedure of primary elections (along with other factors), and in the 1997 preliminary parliamentary elections, a full 52 percent of the deputies elected to the People's Assembly were affiliated with the Coalition of Democratic Forces.

How long will the democrats of Russia argue about the idea of primary elections? It is time to turn the words and ideas into action.