Russia’s Democratic Movement: Guilt by Association

By Irina Khakamada

The democratic movement in Russia has ceased to exist, at least in the form we have known since the early 1990s. This is a regrettable fact, but it must be acknowledged in order to begin the revival of democracy in Russia.

In a very general sense, the reasons for this defeat are as follows:

Objective Reasons: The collapse of the USSR and the inevitable economic reforms that followed, led to a declining standard of living for both citizens and the state. This process coincided with the introduction of democratic values and processes into the lives of the populace. Democracy, therefore, became linked in the Russian psyche to the negative impact of the times: the decrease in material well-being, the destruction of the familiar routine and lifestyle, collapse of the “great power” state, etc. Given these associations, the public’s esteem for democracy naturally suffered setbacks, but, in principle, not insurmountable blows. The complications that arose for the democratic movement were not the results of objective circumstances, but rather of subjective factors, notably the specific manner in which these reforms were implemented.

In the beginning of the 1990s, the authorities made a strategic error. Reforms, which were heralded as liberal and democratic, in fact were enacted at the expense of social support for the individual, actually, at the expense of democracy. At a certain moment, the decision was made to adopt a strategic course toward a “comprehensive market,” which, it was hoped, would regulate and repair every glitch by itself. Some thought that market forces have managed this task well: After all, the Great Depression in the USA was the result of the achievement of a market equilibrium. What we forgot, when we
pinned our hopes on the market, was that market mechanisms have no moral dimension; they are indifferent to the needs of people. Markets cannot be fair or unfair, they can only be either effective or ineffective. We looked to western examples for our model, but there was no abstract market in the West, they have developed a social market economy, which is a very complex and delicate mechanism; this economy does not spring forth from pure market forces on its own. Our course of reforms (and in particular the method of carrying out privatization and the instant devaluation of the savings deposits of the population) actually blocked the creation of a social market economy, which, consequently, hampered the construction of a developed liberal-democratic political system.

The third set of factors in the decline of the democratic movement involves personalities, and the personal ambitions of leaders of the movement, multiplied by the ideological differences among them. Aside from the fact that Yavlinsky and Chubais had difficulties agreeing on a personal level, they also had different understandings of democracy: For Chubais, democracy is an instrument for supporting a market economy, whereas for Yavlinsky (as well as for me) democracy is, by itself, an absolute value, which protects individual freedom.

All of the abovementioned factors undoubtedly weakened the democratic movement. In this situation, forces, which considered themselves democratic, yielded to the temptation of “political technologies,” which are those elements that constitute the veneer of democracy (often including elections), rather than concerning themselves with the real problems of civil society. Such an approach produced results for a while: Democrats managed to imitate the appearance of influencing society, which, as a result, allowed them (for a time) to receive the necessary percentages during elections.

However, with Vladimir Putin’s coming to power, the essence of their attitudes toward political technologies changed. The people had been offered these technologies, these surface replications of democracy, for such a long time that, instead of real politics (and by real politics I mean real communication among citizens regarding their government –
not with the government, but more precisely, about the government), they simply made a technological, not a political choice. That is why voters selected the most effective technology — the administrative resource, which incorporates familiar patterns of communication, such as personal contacts, status, money, and even the efficiency of the security services, to regulate social and political interaction. With that choice, the whole weakness of the democratic movement, enervated by the burden of past mistakes, “suddenly” was revealed. As a result, an “electoral default” and a political market crash took place. This default, first and foremost, “devaluated the deposits” of the democrats and the communists, but it would have ramifications for a large army of political analysts. The latter can simply be left without jobs: Why pay money for exquisite “technological lace,” when primitive “administrative sackcloth” solves everything.

There is only one way out of this situation: finally to face civil society, and stop the constant complaining about it being weak and underdeveloped. Let us begin with the fact that civil society exists, and that it lives its own life, trying somehow to adjust to modern conditions. It is a real society with real problems to the extent that it is a collection of individuals confronting similar problems within the same environment. Do not attempt to fence yourself off from society through the use of political technologies because this is not only dishonorable, it is ineffective. Thus far, the technologies of democracy have failed to reflect or to assist Russian civil society and therefore have been discredited. If politics is the art of the possible, then democratic politicians in modern Russia are possible only when they express the real interests of genuine civil society. In order to represent these interests, politicians must have institutions that have the legitimacy and authority to both hear and enact real change, so that citizens might see results; those who have become disillusioned must be engaged and convinced, again, that politics is not the market: one does not buy, but chooses in politics. This task is extremely difficult, but without attempting to solve it, real democracy in Russia has no future.
**About the Author:** Irina Khakamada is a member of the democratic opposition in Russia. She was a Duma deputy and co-chair of the Union of Right Forces (SPS). In the 2004 presidential elections, she ran against Putin (placing 4th) and recently established a new political party, Our Choice (Nash Vybor).

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