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## Democracy as I See It Exercised in Russia

### Essay

Life has changed entirely in Russia since the beginning of the nineties, when democracy as the state’s policy was introduced. Not only lifestyles, fashions and technologies were changed but also there was a turnover in people’s mentality.

We, the generation, which was born in the 70ies – early 80ies, witnessed a great fracture in the whole system of life. We experienced the break in our minds, viewpoints and attitudes, but we are the generation to build up new Russia from its cornerstone.

Russia today is a materialistic society. Sociologists say that a materialistic society is one in which material possessions are important. People are concerned about financial well-being and security or even physical survival. Various hardships, first of all economic, coerced Russians into fighting for survival, caring only about most essential things for life. Such democratic values as, say, inalienable rights are not relevant for discussion among those who do not have money to buy some bread. If someone takes advantage of the right of speech and enjoys it to the full, if this person states his or her disagreement with the boss’s point of view on some subject, he or she will be fired immediately and join the army of the unemployed. The unemployed in Russia differ from those in the USA who can live off welfare and sometimes be quite satisfied with their actual status. In Russia unemployment is synonymous with poverty and hopelessness.

As soon as the new state policy was introduced it began to cause a shift in values. Not much changed in universal values such as family, work or leisure, whereas the newly borrowed democratic ideas were somewhat perverted. Due to the cultural factor, peculiarities of Russia’s historical development and current economic situation people adopted democratic principles and customized every item on the list to their needs and cultural level.

One can sometimes hear an opinion that we live in a democracy so we are free to do whatever we want, meaning that democracy entitles people to unlimited liberties. This erroneous proposition finds its root in political ignorance. Sovereigns have always governed the Russian people; first they were czars then communist tyrants. Most of them were charismatic personalities able to keep the whole country under their iron hand. Totalitarian regime implied regimentation of every aspect of life. Ideology, economy and even people’s everyday routine were supervised. Russians were deprived of the opportunity to judge, make personal decisions and express their grievances. It resulted in political passiveness and lack of any interest in political procedures.

In early nineties census data displays a great leap of interest and involvement among Russians. It was normal that people spent leisure time watching TV programs about politicians or live broadcasts from rallies and conventions. But then without tangible benefits from the new government their enthusiasm soon ceased. Irrespective of the time spent at the TV sets Russians didn’t grasp the principles of democracy. Having been brought up and educated in a totalitarian society, which rejected the culture of democracy, they only acquired the concept of freedom. Unfortunately they were unaware of what accompanies freedom - competence and responsibility.

We may ask why Russians are discouraged from participating in political procedures and asserting their rights as citizens of a democracy. All plausible answers are interconnected and knitted into a seemingly perpetual cycle.

One of the most essential concepts of democracy is the idea of rights and duties. For instance, no state, no law should impinge upon the right of speech and the right to assemble. But in fact in Russia there are no special mechanisms that would help its citizens form initiative groups and alliances in order to be heard by the government. That’s where passiveness and incompetence begins.

A diversity of all possible political parties should represent the needs of the population, both majorities and minorities. As we plunge into Russian reality we can find out that all the variety is a mere illusion. Political arena in Russia reminds of a theater with a single actor who appears on the stage under different names.

It is necessary to regulate normal functioning of democratic institutions, but the question is what to begin with. Probably it should be democratic culture or loyal but competitive opposition or mechanisms that would help people stand upon their rights.

Russia is not yet ready for democracy. A country should have certain cultural, political and economic background as prerequisites for democracy. Culturally Russians are influenced by the doctrine of Orthodox Church and long-term pressure of authoritarian regime. Tradition is inculcated in the Russian mind, which makes the nation almost unsusceptible to changes. Political and civic consciousness is not well developed. So this country should be ruled in a different way. It doesn’t mean that Russia is behind the time or democracy is too far ahead to be exercised in such a country. This nation unlike any other in the world is so very special, contradictory, so contrary to logic that we have to find very special means to manage it.