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Dissecting Russian Democracy

Dissecting Russian "Democracy"

Along the tenuous road towards democracy, Russia has been plagued by the chronic inability of the country's democratic forces to forge a unified political movement or a single broad-based party. Many in the West question not only Russia's commitment to democracy, but its very understanding of this political concept. In his recent publication, *The Political Culture of Russian 'Democrats'*, Alexander Lukin seeks to elucidate the enigma of Russian democracy and its perplexing dynamics. The author takes a qualitative approach to the study of the democratic movement during the period 1985-91, analyzing its core beliefs and the major factors that shaped it. In so doing he reveals both its achievements and its failures. Although the book's emphasis upon political culture may make it controversial among political scientists, it offers valuable insight not only into the evolution of the Russian democratic movement, but also into the mindset and behavior of those who composed its ranks.

Lukin, the Oxford-trained Director of the Institute for Political and Legal Studies in Moscow and Senior Lecturer in Political Science for the Moscow State Institute of International Relations of the Russian Foreign Ministry, brings a unique personal perspective into this work. He gained experience in the democratic movement when he won election to the Moscow City Soviet in 1990 as a "democrat" and he combines this insight with rigorous scholarly analysis. According to Lukin, the problematic nature of Russian democracy stems from its particular belief system and the forces that shaped it. He argues that

Russian conceptions of democracy tended to be overly idealistic and ambiguous, with only a weak commitment to democratic procedures and laws, and that this has contributed to the uncertainties and contradictions of post-Soviet Russian democracy.

Lukin criticizes previous studies which have sought to explain the democratic movement in Russia either as a Western hybrid or a direct reincarnation of Soviet totalitarianism. In his view, Russian democracy has often appeared alien to outsiders because its origins lie not so much in the Western theories of Locke and Rousseau, as in Soviet ideology and political culture. Yet Russian democracy was not simply a regurgitation of Soviet values. Indeed, the movement was remarkably diverse, with varied beliefs, values, and experiences shaping its particular interpretation of democracy. Some Russians perceived democracy through the lens of European social democracy while others had a base in anarchism or Western liberalism. Yet, Lukin argues, unity did exist, not only through a common opposition to the Soviet order but also through social and moral beliefs. There was a "relatively consistent system of meanings and interpretations" which allowed individuals to feel they were indeed part of a single movement (p. 65). It was these commonly-shared beliefs, not organizational structures, which created a united political force. Hence, Lukin shows that analyzing the beliefs that motivated people to seek change in state and society can deepen an understanding of the reasons for social and political conflict in the Soviet Union (p. 111), and for the emergence of a democratic movement.

Before examining specific democratic beliefs, Lukin traces the evolution of the democratic movement and identifies the different groups involved. In his discussion of recruitment, he finds that most individuals joined on the basis of "broad 'democratic' beliefs" rather than personal bonds (p. 98). Instead of poverty or oppression, it was heightened expectations and exposure to new ideas that drove the democratic movement. Many people, particularly those with higher levels of education, were increasingly dissatisfied and disillusioned. The most dynamic forces were what Lukin calls "truth-seekers," those possessing a fervent desire to seek social justice. On the basis of data from several surveys conducted between 1985 and 1991, he concludes that the majority of participants came from the intelligentsia, though he acknowledges that involvement was quite fluid and membership lists were often not maintained (pp. 104-106).

Next, Lukin identifies the basic principles of Russian democracy and compares them to different theoretical models. In tracing the evolution of these beliefs, Lukin examines a variety of factors, such as Soviet ideology, family tradition and family education, personal life experiences, and glasnost era literature. According to Lukin, the evolution of democratic consciousness and activism was a long process primarily shaped by two factors: Soviet ideology and the onset of Gorbachev's glasnost. He shows how most democrats had once been "true believers" in Soviet communism, and many of them were former Komsomol members. What turned them from loyal supporters to radical opponents was the fervency of their own beliefs, for they were particularly sensitive to the discrepancies between official values and Soviet reality. These future democrats had taken the ideology seriously and they sought to make the system conform to official rhetoric. Yet, despite the disillusionment spawned by such attempts at reform, it took glasnost and the liberalization of the media to move them from simply criticizing the regime to fighting against it. "Few future 'democrats' turned from the criticism of shortages and isolated injustices to broader generalization before *glasnost*'" (p. 137). Most supported Gorbachev and shared his belief that the system could be reformed and rejuvenated. They became radicalized only after being exposed to new sources of information.

In Lukin's analysis, the difficulties faced by Russian democracy stem chiefly from the fact that Russian democrats have been profoundly influenced by the very values and ideology they tried to reject. Even while repudiating Marxism, many retained core Marxist beliefs, but now used them to condemn the Soviet system rather

than to glorify it. Democrats still looked at the world in Marxist terms-class-based, divided into two conflicting systems, moving towards an ideal future society based on social justice and equality. Now, however, it was the democratic West, not the communist Soviet Union, which represented the desired goal. They critiqued the Soviet system as a bureaucratic dictatorship divided into two classes-exploiter (the party-state bureaucracy) and exploited (the people). For some, a democratic program meant struggling to eliminate the Communist Party's monopoly on power and to break down state control over the economy and society. For other democrats, the problem lay in mentality, a certain pattern of thought that predisposed society to authoritarianism. Therefore, the focus of struggle had to be altering human consciousness. As the author points out, this approach also hearkened back to the Soviet notion of creating a "new man" who, under socialism, would act differently from someone raised in a capitalist society. Russian democrats also seemed more interested in democracy as an ideal than as a set of practical institutions. They tended to project a rather utopian vision of what society would be like under democracy, one that was not dissimilar to the former vision of a future communist society. According to Lukin, their conception of democracy was based, not so much on the Western model, but on what the totalitarian Soviet system was not. Democracy essentially represented a fulfillment of the original Marxist-Leninist vision of social equality, justice, and moral and spiritual perfection, but without collectivism. This trend towards utopianism, Lukin asserts, set Russian democrats up for disillusionment. Rather than concentrating on the functional procedures, laws, and mechanisms of political democracy, they sought a perfect society, and when it did not materialize, they quickly lost faith.

Lukin also contends that the movement suffered from the fact that in the end, unity stemmed primarily from opposition to the old system. Fighting against the Soviet regime in support of an idealized conception of democracy initially brought many democrats together, but they paid little attention to internal contradictions and to the potential incompatibility of such moral ideals as justice, freedom, equality, and prosperity. But once the victory was obtained and the old system had collapsed, the real fissures began to appear. Democrats found themselves disagreeing over the relative importance of various principles, and most were not fundamentally committed to democratic institutions or procedures. In Lukin's view, Gorbachev's Russia lacked the cultural preconditions for successful political democracy, and instead of working

to create these preconditions, the democratic movement sought a virtual “great leap” to an idealized democracy. The result was infighting among cliques and clans who tried to impose abstract ideals on people. Democratic activists did not understand democracy as a “system of compromises among various groups and interests, or as the separation of powers, but as the unlimited power of the ‘democrats’ replacing the unlimited power of the Communists” (p. 298).

This book is the culmination of considerable research and meticulous analysis. Lukin has utilized a broad range of sources: interviews with sixty-seven individuals involved in the democratic movement, including leaders as well as rank-and-file participants; memoirs; television and newspapers; quantitative survey results; and official programs, statements, and records of the different parties and groups. The material is exceptionally well-organized. The chapters flow directly into each other with clear connections between them. Those unfamiliar with political theory and analysis benefit from the author’s efforts to make his arguments both accessible and substantive. Each chapter is subtitled with introductory outlines and concise summaries at the end. These help to clarify the main thesis and maintain continuity, particularly given the extensive length of the chapters. Readers will appreciate the numerous personal anecdotes which offer intriguing glimpses into the lives and motives of individual democrats, and how their experiences and ideological influences informed their involvement in the democratic movement. Lukin’s study is perhaps too detailed and theoretical for most undergraduate courses, but it would make excellent reading for graduate history and political science courses, particularly the first two chapters, which offer an exhaustive survey and critique of existing Russian and Western literature on political culture and on the democratic movement.

In addition, Lukin provides a lucid discussion of his own theoretical framework and methodology. He makes a compelling argument in favor of political culture as the best method for studying the democratic movement, its human dimension and its dynamics. According to Lukin, the concept of political culture enables and legitimates the study of belief systems, which, in his opinion, influence human behavior more than do abstract structures or institutions. He defines political culture as “an integrated system” of interrelated beliefs, attitudes and values “subject to constant evolution and change.” These determine and influence human behavior first at the individual, then at the group level. Thus, for Lukin, analysis of individual beliefs and establishment of their commonality with oth-

ers in the same sub-culture can create a model for the political culture of the whole group.

Lukin’s conclusions will no doubt be challenged by those who are critical of qualitative methods of political analysis, or who reject the notion that a specific “political culture” can be determined without engaging in problematic speculation and supposition. Certainly it is difficult to substantiate with any precision the conclusions Lukin draws about the origins of particular ideas or behavior patterns. Nor is it easy to tell without interview transcripts how he determined the relative importance of different factors in shaping the actions of individuals. Lukin’s methods are subject to the same limitations as those of oral history, with their heavy reliance upon the uncertain veracity and credibility of human testimony. It is difficult for any individual to trace definitively where his or her ideals originated, to remember every book and every conversation from the past. Moreover, his analysis of the democratic movement at times seems inconsistent. While he stresses the idealistic nature of Russian democracy, he also describes the approach to democracy as primarily functional. Russian democrats understood democracy in ideal terms, as a perfect society, yet they also, according to Lukin, viewed democracy as purely a mechanism for fighting against the regime. The relationship between these seemingly contradictory conclusions is not made entirely clear. Furthermore, Lukin does not develop all of his arguments equally. In the beginning he states that Russian democracy was not just the reconstitution of Soviet totalitarian ideology, but that there were diverse factors offsetting its powerful influence. Yet the reader is left with the impression that Soviet ideology had the most profound impact of all possible factors, and without a clear sense of how other sources affected the final outcome.

Despite such problems, Lukin has written one of the most significant works to date on Russian democracy. He shows convincingly that it is important to analyze political beliefs when trying to understand how and why Russian democrats acted in the way that they did. Even if the sampling of people and documents used in this study cannot possibly represent the whole of the movement, their individual experiences can nonetheless illuminate larger motivations and influences. Lukin reveals a critical feature of the democratic movement, the core beliefs, and whether one accepts the concept of political culture or not, his findings do shed light on why Russian democracy has faltered in the post-Soviet era. He offers thought-provoking analysis of the connections existing between the democratic movement and the preex-

isting Soviet ideology. His conclusions are certainly consistent with those drawn from the historiography of the Gorbachev period. The controversial “re-thinking” and reassessment of the Soviet past during this time also reflected Marxist patterns of thought. Thus, although his methods may be contentious, Lukin has nonetheless produced a thoroughly researched, thought-provoking study that will provide specialists and non-specialists alike a deeper understanding of Russian democracy, its origins,

evolution, and future.

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