

Liberalism and the Preconditions of Democracy

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On May 25-28, 1992, a conference on liberalism and the preconditions of democracy was held in Moscow under the auspices of the Gorbachev Foundation. Co-chaired by Professors Boris Kapustin of the Gorbachev Foundation and Ian Shapiro of Yale University, the four-day working conference focused on the problems of the transition to democracy in Russia. The American participants were Professors Shapiro, Yitzhak Brudny, David Plotke, and Rogers Smith of Yale University; Richard Ashcraft, Miriam Golden, and Michael Wallerstein of the University of California at Los Angeles; Stephen Holmes of the University of Chicago; Jeffrey Isaac of Indiana University, Bloomington; and Peter Swenson of the University of Pennsylvania. Russian participants included Professors Kapustin, A. Galkin, Yuri Krasin, A. Salmin, G. Vodolazev, and Alexander Yakovlev, Gorbachev Foundation; Sergei Chizhkov, Institute of Philosophy; A. Ahiezer, Institute of Employment; V. Damje, Institute of World History; and V. Solovei, Institute of Russian History.

Among the topics discussed were the evolution and structure of liberal democratic values; tensions between liberalism and democracy; civil society and democratic politics; the role of trade unions and employer associations in democracy; and the importance of electoral and party institutions.

The Russian participants represented diverse points of view, ranging

from social democratic Marxism to libertarianism. Yet despite these differences a number of concerns were voiced by most of the participants: that privatization, marketization and liberal economic reforms would create mass discontent and might undermine political stability during the transition period; and that nationalism and irredentism could hinder the formation of a liberal political culture, and possibly fuel an authoritarian outcome. The most interesting and animated discussion took place on the third day of the conference, during a consideration of the timing of new parliamentary elections, which are not required by law until 1995. The Russian scholars were clearly divided, between those who opposed early elections, fearing that they would be manipulated by demagogic leaders (Yeltsin, among others, was named here) and nationalist forces, and believed that elections must follow a transition period of political stability; and those who argued that the lesson of the August 1991 coup was that democratization had not been taken far enough, and that the only way to support a democratic transition was through fair elections soon. For these scholars the only alternative to such elections would be forms of political constraint and repression that would only produce a stronger anti-democratic opposition and thus strengthen the authoritarian forces in the army and the government. The American scholars were virtually unanimous in supporting this latter position. While

sensitive to the dangers of electoral manipulation, and to the possibility that an Algerian-type situation might result, in which an anti-democratic majority was elected to the Parliament, the Americans emphasized that Unfortunately the Democratic Russia Party, the liberal democratic party that claims the mantle of Sakharov and that currently supports Yeltsin in the parliament, was not represented. However, among those parties that were represented a range of perspectives was aired, and some interesting disagreements were expressed. All of the representatives were responsive to questions from the audience.

The Gorbachev Foundation is interested in establishing regular ties with American social scientists. Scholars interested in such ties should contact Professor Boris Kapustin, The Gorbachev Foundation, 49 Leningradsky Prospekt, Moscow 125468, Russia.

in the Western experience democratic electoral institutions have proven themselves indispensable to the formation of a democratic political culture.

On the final day of the conference the Americans had the opportunity to meet the leaders of most of the main parties of the democratic center—Social Democratic Party of Russia, People's Party of Free Russia, Socialist Party of Workers, Republican Party of the Russian Federation, Party of the Constitutional Democrats (Kadets), Social-Liberal Party, and Russian People's Union.