

# Dmitry Medvedev's Conservative Modernization

## REFLECTIONS ON THE YAROSLAVL SPEECH

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On September 11, 2010, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev addressed the Global Policy Forum in Yaroslavl. This speech took place almost exactly a year after his programmatic article, *Forward Russia!*, which launched his national project of gradual but far-reaching modernization. Developments over the past year have made the ideology of this project more clear, but there has also been a growing divide between cautious optimists and critics who see it as empty talk serving to legitimize the current regime. The Yaroslavl Forum was also interpreted along those lines, with many arguing that it was nothing but a propaganda event.

The starting point of this memo is different in the sense that it refrains from any attempt to evaluate the sincerity and resolve of the Kremlin's modernization effort. Instead, it treats Medvedev's Yaroslavl speech as symptomatic in regard to the political thinking behind the whole enterprise. In particular, the memo analyzes five "standards" of democracy that Medvedev put forward in his address, suggesting the ideal future that the current ruling elite envisions for Russia.<sup>1</sup>

### **Standard 1: Legalistic**

The first standard is the shortest one: it consists of only three sentences, but it nonetheless encapsulates the essence of the whole enterprise. The key idea of Medvedev's speech was to offer a set of rules that would enable us to clearly differentiate between democracies and non-democracies. According to Medvedev, this means putting "humanistic values and ideals" into law and endowing them with "the practical force of law," thus making it no longer possible to abuse democratic values as a pretext for interventions that cater to the "economic and geopolitical interests of some countries."

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<sup>1</sup> [Link to President Dmitry Medvedev's speech at the Plenary Session of the 2010 Yaroslavl Global Policy Forum.](#)

The background to these statements is clear: the painful experience of previous years when Russia felt itself sidelined during the formation of a new international order. The vulnerability of the former superpower in the face of ever more proactive Western policies of democracy promotion led to the defense of sovereignty becoming the top priority in the Russian foreign policy agenda. Presenting sovereignty as the key foundational principle of the international order, Moscow sought to protect itself from increasingly tough criticisms of its democratic record. It also wanted to make sure that there was no chance of Russia itself becoming the next object of Western military intervention (after Serbia and, later, Iraq).

Thus, the proposal is to have certain standards for democracy agreed to by all states, which effectively puts sovereignty above any other legal principle, such as respect for human rights. Viewed in this light, the proposal comes together with other recent initiatives, such as the proposed Treaty on European Security, which is aimed at strengthening the international order without simultaneously compromising the sovereignty of individual states. It also suggests that the 2008 “peace enforcement operation” in Georgia was an exception and that Moscow is not nurturing plans for new interventions in what it considers its legitimate sphere of interest.

### **Standard 2: Technocratic**

The fact that the first substantial norm defined in the speech is the “state’s ability to provide and maintain an advanced level of technological development” is revealing in itself. It indicates that Medvedev’s team tends to view democracy as resulting from a correct set of technological decisions, thereby treating it in an extremely de-politicized, technocratic fashion. The remaining part of the second thesis develops the neoliberal point that prosperity comes before democracy. At a meeting with political scientists earlier on the same day, however, the Russian president seemed to embrace a more complex approach, arguing that democracy is a necessary precondition for economic development. He even went as far as to say that “democracy is always a process, a political practice,” and that “there exist no completed social institutions... no end to development.”

Yet for reasons that I will further explicate while discussing Standard 4, I still tend to view Medvedev’s approach as predominantly technocratic and leaning toward de-politicization.

### **Standard 3: Paternalistic**

Ever since the *Forward Russia!* article, Medvedev has insisted that paternalistic attitudes constitute one of the main obstacles to modernization. The inability of many people to take their fate into their own hands is indeed a problem both for democratization and for economic development, and I agree with Medvedev’s diagnosis that this attitude was in fact promoted by the paternalism of the Soviet

system. I would nonetheless still describe his own approach as paternalistic when he highlights the state's efficient exercise of policing functions as a key criterion of democracy. Protecting citizens from crimes is a function of any state and it can be performed in many different ways, including using authoritarian measures. Therefore, it cannot be presented as a definitional component of a democratic society.

This emphasis on security in fact reflects the Kremlin's obsession with control, which was one of the distinctive traits of Vladimir Putin's presidency and which survives to this day. Russian authorities do not trust grassroots initiatives and would strongly prefer protecting citizens from all kinds of social evils – not just crime, but also drug addiction, alcohol abuse, television violence, and sometimes even propaganda concerning “unnatural sexual behavior” – rather than letting citizens protect themselves. This brings us to the fourth and central point of the Yaroslavl speech.

#### **Standard 4: Conservatism**

This section opens with two seemingly liberal statements. The president insisted that the twenty-first century belongs to “the educated, intelligent... ‘complex’ person who...does not need leaders, patrons or others to make decisions for him [or her].” Second, and in apparent contradiction to my interpretation in the previous paragraph, he maintained that “a democratic state...transfers to...society some of the functions of maintaining order and stability.” This, taken in isolation, can be read as a defense of autonomous civil society.

However, it is clear from the entire fragment that Medvedev is only prepared to grant autonomy to “good” civil society. The distinction between “good” and “bad” here is introduced with reference to culture as a value-laden concept. It is imperative to promote high culture, including “political and legal culture,” the culture of “social interactions,” and the culture of “civil dialogue.” The “low level of culture,” on the other hand, goes together with “intolerance, irresponsibility, and aggressiveness,” which “destroy democracy.”

This whole passage is indicative of a conservative attitude that proceeds from the assumption that certain forms of culture are “better” than others, in the sense of directly expressing the essence of humanity rather than the whims of particular individuals. However, it is used here even in a potentially more sinister way to legitimize the need to control social, cultural, and political development by promoting certain practices and oppressing others. Individuals of high culture, according to Medvedev, will use freedoms of speech and assembly in a wise way; abuse of these freedoms would be a sign of barbarism. The implication, of course, is that it is up to the state to differentiate between civilized and non-civilized forms of political activity, and thus to decide which of them are to be supported and which suppressed. Moreover, “citizens who benefit from a range of opportunities and freedom must take on more responsibilities.” People of high culture are those who

behave according to the rules, while all those who, for instance, stage unauthorized protests are classified as barbarians.

We can now return to the seemingly liberal statements in the speech. Medvedev's praise of "complex people" is directed toward those who are capable of independent thinking, within the limits defined from above. Such individuals can take care of themselves, in the sense of not bothering authorities with unwelcome demands (such as for greater social security), while at the same time relying on their leaders to make significant political decisions for them. Finally, coming back to our discussion of Standard 2, the essential incompleteness of democracy must be understood in the sense that there is no end to cultural improvement. There are always aspects of barbarism to be eliminated; people can always be taught to be even better citizens, even happier with their lives, and even less irritating with their concerns and anxieties. Understood in this way, it is indeed not important which comes first, prosperity or democracy, since the latter is reduced to a de-politicized, technocratic system of making correct administrative decisions.

#### **Standard 5: "Do-It-Yourself"**

The final "democratic standard" Medvedev presented is probably the most amusing of all. According to the Russian president, a precondition for democracy is the "citizens' [own] conviction that they live in a democratic state." Developing this ostensibly contradictory point, Medvedev once again points to the danger presented by still widespread paternalistic attitudes, which leads to a situation where "many [people] still like to say that they are not free, belittled, that things 'do not depend on them'." He goes on to reference philosopher Karl Popper's conviction that "democratic institutions cannot improve themselves, their improvement depends on us."

On the surface, this is another fairly liberal argument, pointing in the direction of civil society and grassroots initiatives. Weighed against the conservative position of Standard 4, however, this argument acquires a different meaning: it can be read as a reply to opponents within the country. As such, it is a rather frequently used defense. The message is: it is easy to criticize others if you do nothing yourself. Instead of engaging in empty talk about freedoms and values, one must work hard to ensure a better future for one's country. Once again, it suggests a technocratic image of politics as management: all important choices are self-evident and to question this is mere demagoguery (or to put it more bluntly: *Stop messing around and get back to work*).

#### **Medvedev as the Mirror of a Global Predicament**

Each of the speech's themes is subject to different and sometimes diametrically opposite interpretations. A political text, in particular, is always tuned to the expectations of the audience (or even multiple audiences) and as such seldom expresses the true beliefs and convictions of its author as an individual human being

(not to mention the fact that it is usually collectively written). It is precisely for this reason that I find Medvedev's statements so useful to explore. The conservative emphasis on control in this sense is not (or not just) Medvedev's fault. In effect, it reflects the conservative bias of the entire Russian society – a longing for stability and a belief that there are certain true values that do not change over time, allowing people to differentiate between good and evil, culture and barbarism.

In the end, this conservative bias is a general characteristic of our time. Not only in Russia are people in search of solid ground to anchor their seemingly insecure existence. It is for this reason that I do not recommend merely dismissing Medvedev's remarks as irrelevant or as mere propaganda. What the speech reveals is not just individual idiosyncrasies or yet another set of oddities within the enigmatic Russian culture. It is symptomatic of the global state of affairs, in which a normative and legalistic turn in the evolution of the international order is accompanied by repeated recourse to voluntaristic decision making in which norms are twisted and turned to fit the demands of the day. Against this backdrop, Medvedev's attempts to initiate a debate on the future world order must be treated seriously and respectfully. Acting otherwise would mean falling into the same technocratic trap by declaring that the answers to all of the important political questions of our time are already known.

*This is a supplementary memo by Viatcheslav Morozov, a conference panelist and the contributor of Policy Memo No. 130, "Modernizing Sovereign Democracy? Russian Political Thinking and the Future of the Reset."*

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