The Challenge of Democracy

IN HIS BOOK *1984*, George Orwell predicted that the 1980s would be marked by the dehumanization of society and the implantation of authoritarian or totalitarian tendencies throughout the world. Orwell's "anti-utopia" was a powerful portrayal of an inhuman, oppressive system. But he was mistaken. It was exactly the 1980s that revealed a powerful tendency toward democratization in many countries and in the international community. The zone dominated by totalitarian regimes was substantially reduced. A decisive role in this trend was played both by perestroika in the Soviet Union and by the processes of change in Central and Eastern Europe. All these essentially revolutionary changes had a stimulating effect on democratic values in general, turning them into an effective factor for promoting mutual understanding among most countries and peoples. This was true almost everywhere, from Latin America to South Africa. Unfortunately, thus far we cannot say that overcoming totalitarianism in the Soviet Union has resulted in the genuine democratization of either Russian society or the other former republics of the Soviet Union. The freedom of choice provided by perestroika has by no means resulted in the choice of genuine freedom.

The regime in Russia today can be called democratic only in part. Outward forms and institutions characteristic of democracy do exist, but their content remains authoritarian in many respects. Moreover, in Russia and other countries of the former Soviet Union forces continue to exist that long for a return to the essentially totalitarian past (although a complete return to that past is simply not possible). All in all, it is highly significant for Europe and the world that Russia should take the road of deepening and expanding the basis for genuine democracy. Without exaggeration, the future development of both the European community and the world largely depends on this effort.

At the same time, a political crisis has arisen in most Western countries that have had democratic regimes for decades, if not centuries. The problem is that the traditional political systems that took shape in the West over the past few centuries (primarily during the nineteenth century)—based on parliamentary democracy and numerous political parties—are facing a crisis. The democratic institutions in these countries always were limited (especially in the first stages of their development) and have begun to wither noticeably under the new conditions. Is this a paradox? Not at all. In fact the contrary is true! This crisis, too, has essentially become an illustration and manifestation of the general worldwide tendency toward democratization.

Civil society in the Western countries has become stronger. Practically universal literacy, broader professionalism at all levels, an increased percentage of the population involved in intellectual labor both in production and services—all this has produced a natural desire among people for a fuller realization of their rights, for a more active part in resolving social problems, for self-rule and self-management.

Western society today increasingly rejects bureaucratic centralism in political systems, along with corruption and excessive formalism. Political parties proclaiming that they represent this or that stratum of society have in fact become, to a considerable extent, the unwitting tools of an elite; thus they have ceased to express the interests of their constituents and are losing ground. Existing electoral systems by no means guarantee genuine representation for the majority in government bodies. As a result of growing abstention from voting and fragmentation of the vote, many parties are unable to get a sufficient percentage of the vote to gain a seat in parliament; thus the current parliamentary forms of government have in fact come to represent only a minority of the population. This is also true for the top leaders—the presidents, for example.

One of the most striking examples of the antidemocratic nature of these existing political systems is that government bodies pay very little attention to social problems, even in what seem to be the most democratic countries. These problems primarily involve marginalized people, such as the elderly, the unemployed, the homeless, and the poor in general. Yet there is a growing population of these "superfluous" people and, with few exceptions, they are increasingly viewed as pariahs whom society can ignore.

Correspondingly, an ever widening discussion is taking place in many countries as well about the role of government in meeting social needs. So-called classical liberalism, which demands that government be "freed" from

social spending, in fact represents nothing but a refusal to be concerned with the have-nots in society. Evidently this kind of approach reflects a concept of democracy that has outlived its historical usefulness. But this concept is stubbornly promoted and in many cases applied. Russia is no exception to this view of the government's role in social problems.

Waves of social discontent, however, have forced governments—even those inclined to promote "absolute liberalism"—to concern themselves with social problems and, accordingly, make corrections in their domestic policies.

Added to all this is the incapacity of present political systems to find an optimal solution to the problem of nationalities and national minorities. In this sphere, antidemocratic principles and practices are increasingly evident in the present structure and functioning of political institutions.

The alienation of citizens from government power—which is the quintessence of the present crisis of democracy—is a dangerous trend. It strengthens antidemocratic forces and opens the way for authoritarian trends.

The twentieth century has provided irrefutable evidence of the dangers of authoritarian and especially dictatorial systems of government. The seeming efficiency of such governments and their high level of organization ultimately leads society into a blind alley, producing chaos and confronting people with insoluble problems. It is not accidental that the end of our present century has been marked by powerful antiauthoritarian, antidictatorial movements and by the downfall of many regimes of that nature. Authoritarian trends still exist, however, and play a role in quite a few countries.

All this generally aggravates the problems involved in implementing democracy, making it one of the most important challenges for the coming decades.

This challenge is not just a domestic political challenge. The nature and direction of domestic policy also determines the nature and direction of foreign policy—this truth has long been known. Democratic political systems make a government more openly visible to the outside world and thus create preconditions for mutual trust and understanding with other equally democratic societies. On the other hand—and this has been shown by numerous examples—an authoritarian or totalitarian system results in closed, secretive behavior relative to the outside world. For such regimes, confrontation turns out to be the most comfortable foreign policy, allowing the regime to tighten the reins on its own population and use any form of coercion it desires. An

invariable attribute of the foreign policy of any totalitarian system is to support analogous regimes in other countries.

We in the Soviet Union knew this very well from our own experience. The so-called Brezhnev doctrine, whose most glaring expression was the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, had domestic political as well as foreign policy aims. Among the motives for suppression of the Prague Spring was the desire to strengthen a domestic policy line aimed at preserving the existing authoritarian system in the USSR. It is no accident that as a consequence of that action, repression was intensified against loyal critics of the existing defects and shortcomings of the Soviet Union's policies.

To promote democracy throughout the world it is necessary to overcome the present crisis of democracy in the Western countries as well as work for true democratization of life in Russia and the other former Soviet countries. Political power must spread down to the people by means of decentralization of power and enhancement of the role of local self-government. Here, of course, it is important not to cross over the boundary beyond which decentralization becomes disintegration. And naturally in each country this process will have its own variations corresponding to the particular features of that society.

The democratization of international relations implies first of all recognition of and unconditional respect for the rights and interests of all countries and peoples, for genuine equality among them, ruling out any form of *diktat* in the day-to-day practice of international politics.

At the same time all countries must respect existing international organizations, starting with the UN, and must strictly fulfill all obligations to these institutions on an equal basis as well as to the world community as a whole. The role of international organizations must be recognized as a direct expression of the equality of all entities active in international relations.

In this connection, it must be noted that the United States' declared desire to establish democratic governments throughout the world (which by itself can only be welcomed) is by no means compatible with its attempts to impose on other governments its own forms of democracy. Even worse is the United States' declared intention to assert American leadership over the whole world. Support for democracy is necessary, yes, but only in genuine democratic forms. Otherwise the very desire to promote the spread of democracy is called into question.

Similarly, Washington's disregard for the UN and its decisions, which has been demonstrated many times, is out of keeping with its proclaimed

adherence to democracy. The same is true of U.S. attempts to bypass the UN in resolving problems that come directly under UN jurisdiction, and of course Washington's failure to meet its financial obligations to the UN. The United States is not alone as far as the violation of democratic principles in world affairs is concerned. Unfortunately the world in general is still a long way from genuine equality among governments, and some countries do not in practice abide by the principle of nonintervention, a principle that also forbids covert interference in the internal affairs of other countries. Examples of such violations can be found on every continent.

It is understandable that the larger, more powerful states can make a larger contribution to the solving of international problems. But this can only be done if the rights of all nations are recognized and respected. The major powers do not essentially have greater rights than other countries. They have a greater responsibility to the world in general. And that includes the establishment of genuinely democratic principles in international relations.

The major powers have a duty to make sure that small and medium-sized countries, no matter where they are located, should have the real possibility of making their contribution to the world community.

During the years of Cold War confrontation the major powers used small and medium-sized countries as pieces on the chessboard of world politics. After the Cold War ended the situation ought to have changed. Although some manifestations of change are observable, on the whole the situation has remained the same.

Perhaps, considering both the increased need for democratization of world relations and the complications arising on the road toward such democratization, it may be desirable to develop a special code of rights and responsibilities for governments within the framework of the world community as a whole. This might prove to be a very difficult task. Not all governments (including those that declare democracy to be their fundamental principle) are ready or willing to acknowledge in an international document certain rules of behavior that all must observe. Such rules could prove to be awkward and restrictive—especially for those who are used to operating unilaterally, doing as they please. It is difficult to state with assurance that these rules would be observed even were they signed and ratified (but that would be a necessary condition for their effectiveness). Nonetheless, such rules could have a certain restraining effect on potential violators of the democratic norms of the world community.

Another important aspect of the democratization of international relations to which all governments must adhere without deviation is respect for human rights in their domestic policies; they must also support respect for such rights by other members of the world community. Governments must consider both the principle of respect for human rights (UN documents contain sufficiently clear substantiation of those rights) and the specific ways in which governments or nations perceive this principle.

The problem is that although international treaties on human rights have been signed and ratified by most governments in the world, evident nuances emerge in the way they are interpreted or implemented. A fairly large number of cases are known in which certain governments have not recognized obvious violations of human rights as such. Usually national traditions are cited in these cases.

An even greater lack of agreement arises when other countries demand that a country charged with violating UN-specified human rights take measures to correct the situation. Such demands are often viewed as violations of the sovereignty of the state involved.

Of course a major problem is the absence of internationally recognized legal definitions of the limits of international jurisdiction and the right of the world community to insist on observance of the principle of inviolable human rights. But that is not the only problem.

The concept of human rights—especially the possibility of outside intervention to ensure that these rights are observed—is a relatively new phenomenon. It is the result of a gradual development in political culture that included the awareness of these rights, which arose primarily in Europe and North America. In Europe, for example, the universality of human rights is recognized by all governments. This implies acceptance of international intervention in the name of preserving human rights. However, a special tribunal concerned with these problems exists only within the framework of the European Union and the Council of Europe, which have special conventions ratified by all the members.

A number of other governments that have recognized the universality of human rights do not by any means adhere to the appropriate rules in all cases. We do not have to go far to find examples. A commission on the observance of human rights in Russia every year records numerous, flagrant violations of those rights, ranging from restrictions on journalists to torture by agencies within the Ministry of Internal Affairs. But this has not put an end to such violations.

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Nations that only recently obtained independence are suspicious about international demands for respect for human rights. For them sovereignty is of such overriding importance that they are ready to interpret any action by foreign powers as a violation of sovereignty even when that is not intended. Their attitude is fully understandable, however. The history of these countries has seen so many forms of overt and covert intervention in their internal affairs (sometimes under seemingly plausible pretexts) that today they have the right to question and be hesitant.

Countries where authoritarian regimes exist, or where holdovers from an authoritarian past persist, also are quite often reluctant to implement human rights on their territory. The very history of the Soviet Union is a reminder. For many long years the Soviet Union considered human rights as some sort of false issue that had been manufactured artificially (even the phrase *human rights* was published in our country only in quotation marks preceded by the word *so-called*). For a totalitarian system, the very posing of the question of human rights is a challenge, a vicious assault on the very essence of its policies. And only perestroika brought this to an end. I believe, that the democratization of international relations will not fully develop unless some way is found to guarantee human rights on a global scale.

It is possible that ultimately the UN, along with regional organizations for security and cooperation, will create special structures empowered not only to monitor the observance of human rights but also to impose sanctions and use other enforcement measures, especially in cases of flagrant violation of human rights. This would include violations of the rights of national minorities or other groups subjected to violence, discrimination, or denial of legal rights.

In any case, the democratization of international relations has become a pressing need. It is a preventive measure to ensure that world peace is not violated and that no government engages in arbitrary actions in the world arena; it would also be important for the democratization of life in all the countries of the world. Finally, without democratization of international relations we cannot arrive at a new, genuinely peaceful world order.