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A New Democratic Agenda

By Mikhail Gorbachev

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Russia is on the eve of a pre-presidential election year. What happens in 2011 will, in my opinion, be even more important than the presidential election itself. Indeed, the evolution of Russian society could transform the country's politics, despite those domestic opponents who deny change or those who unqualifiedly classify Russia as "incorrigibly authoritarian." But for that to happen, a new agenda for Russia must be developed this year.

A decade ago, defense of Russia's territorial integrity and restoration of governability topped the list of priorities. People supported President Vladimir Putin, who was devoted to this "stabilization" agenda. We may debate the means by which it was pursued, and how successfully, but Russia's "existential" challenges were largely overcome.

But progress on stabilization only highlighted Russia's unresolved problems, which the global financial crisis exacerbated, but did not cause. After all, the country's resource-based, de-industrializing, expenditure-driven economy is the result of purely domestic choices. Nor was it the crisis that gave rise to corruption at all levels of the government or that caused Russia to lose its democratic dynamic.

Russia rode along on oil and gas windfalls, forgetting that these natural resources will not last forever. But even with favorable world market conditions, we did not manage to solve the problem of poverty, which still affects tens of millions of Russians.

I am convinced that Russia's troubles all come down to politics. We need a democratic and competitive environment, initiative at all levels, an active civil society and real public control. Only under such conditions will difficult problems lend themselves to solution.

But starting in 2005-06, the authorities implemented measures that made responsiveness to acute problems practically impossible. The decisions to cancel direct elections of governors, to introduce party-list voting, to raise the electoral threshold for parties to enter the State Duma and to repeal the minimum-turnout requirement — all accompanied by rampant manipulation of elections and the mass media — created a political system closed to feedback from society. Not surprisingly, the political elite became self-absorbed and served only its own narrow interests.

Last summer, with wildfires raging outside Moscow, the elite's isolation took on a menacing nature. But something else happened: Society became more demanding.

Although the traditions of self-organization in Russian society are neither deep nor strong, real movement in this direction became visible for all to see. Activists from public movements, journalists, environmentalists, businessmen and ordinary people who had suffered the tyranny and corruption of public officials began to join in.

One disturbing tendency is that the struggle between democratic and anti-democratic tendencies is becoming acute. If the anti-democratic tendencies win out, all that we have accomplished in previous years will be jeopardized — including stability itself.

This threat evidently motivated President Dmitry Medvedev in November to say: "It is no secret," Medvedev wrote in his blog, "that starting from a certain period, symptoms of stagnation have begun to appear in our political life, and the threat of turning stability into a factor of stagnation has appeared."

The president's statement was unexpected. Medvedev's assessment attested to his understanding that Russia's problems are rooted in its politics — in the degradation of the ruling party, in the absence of a real opposition and in the lack of respect for the rights for political minorities.

Improving education must be a top priority. We have approached the point when the constitutional requirement of universal, free education may become a fiction. People are asking: How is it that, after World War II, the government had enough money to provide free education, whereas today it doesn't?

The new agenda must include a strong economic component. Russia needs a breakthrough toward an up-to-date, knowledge-based and environmentally sustainable economy. Here, I see a direct connection with the problem of education.

I am convinced that Medvedev must become the leader in the process of formulating the new Russian agenda, and he must act in the coming year. Society will support him.

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