

THE YAROSLAVL FORUM AS AN EVENT AND AN INSTITUTION

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The Global Policy Forum in Yaroslavl can be regarded both as a social institution and as an annual political event. Both of these aspects imply their own independent issues.

1.

As a political platform, the Forum concentrates on those forms of public policy that Russian President Dmitry Medvedev is most familiar with. These formats allow him to discuss his own strategic agenda and avoid its absurd juxtaposition with the publicity escapades of Vladimir Putin. The Global Policy Forum (launched in Yaroslavl in 2009) is where Medvedev's agenda is now being presented to Russia. This so-called 'Davos of Russian policy' was conceived as a meeting ground for politicians and public intellectuals. However, the former group are

few in number in Russia, while the later are practically non-existent.

As an intellectual project, the Yaroslavl Forum clashes with a distorted scheme of intellectual debates in Russia. Public intellectuals tend to be called 'political scientists' here and these people are not truly independent. This is indeed one of the hindrances for the Forum: the incompatibility of the political analysts' communities in Russia and in the West. The objective of a political scientist in Russia is to try find balance between the ideological formulas that he 'promotes for the ruling power' and the vocabulary of political theory, which usually originates from the West and is poorly assimilated to the local situation. He livens up when confronted with TV cameras. This is why the Yaroslavl Forum is overrun by political media-stars, who turn it into a circus show with the participation of the country's President.

This summer for Russia was marked with an 'experts revolt'. Political intellectuals of different creeds — liberal, servile and even nationalistic — are, one by one, refusing to play the game of 'political scientists' (politologists) by providing discourse for the ruling power, which routinely buys a concept or a humanitarian project and then decides what to do with it. Perhaps, for the first time in 80 or 100 years, we are observing a process whereby the community of intellectuals is being restored in Russia, which actually scorns the mythology of being pro or

contra the ruling power. In due time we can expect western intellectuals to be able to talk to an independent Russian counterpart who plays a comparable role (but perhaps without quite as much influence).

2.

The contemporary state is an axis theme of the Yaroslavl Forum. At the very first meeting, it was decided that the dialogues to take place in Yaroslavl would be focused on the problematic of the state in the contemporary world. The phenomenon of the modern state was central in discussions that took place at the Global Policy Forum in Yaroslavl. In 2009, the very concept of the contemporary state was discussed and, in 2010, this discussion centred around democratic standards in accordance with which the state is supposed to function. In 2011, the main subject will be centred around the crucial concept of 'diversity'. Here it is very important to avoid the useless rituals that date back to the epoch of 'two systems rhetoric'.

However, mutual reproaches are not the worst thing that we can expect in Yaroslavl. What's worse is discrepancies in terms of language. For over twenty years, the political system of Russia was being formulated within the framework of a wider consensus on the democratic vector of its nation-building process. Even politicians belonging to different partisan and ideological camps were contending that there is no

alternative to democracy for Russia. Russian political lexicon is misleadingly recognisable for a western counterpart because it is imported from the Euro-Atlantic vocabulary.

By the way, a characteristic dialogue occurred between President Medvedev and a group of 'sinophiles' at the 2010 Global Policy Forum. John Naisbitt and his wife were trying to convince the other attendees that China's choice of 'vertical democracy', as they call it, is the best. President Medvedev firmly retorted that the experience of Russia's Chinese comrades is valuable but that it is not the right path for Russia.

What President Medvedev did was to turn the Global Policy Forum into a platform where his policy can be openly manifested in his own language. However, lately we have been observing fierce debates around this precise strategy of modernising Russia, which has been adopted by Medvedev. This is because a political program is indeed a powerful political weapon in the hands of the President and there are those who would like to bereave him of this unique resource on the eve of the 2012 presidential elections.

That is another reason why the 2011 Global Policy Forum in Yaroslavl is taking on exceptional importance. This event will be preceded by the 'United Russia' convention, with Vladimir Putin as its central figure. The Prime Minister of Russia has never before taken part in the Yaroslavl Forum. The convention promises to become an apotheosis of Putin in his new personalistic version of power and 'popular front', and hence, of the state. Meanwhile, the participants of the Forum are likely to find out to what extent Russia can be considered a modern state or actually has the desire to become one.

3.

These events in Yaroslavl tend to attract people who are skilled in debates and also enjoy them. They have been offered seats in such a way that they are able to launch their debates. But the intended debates did not fully emerge because there is such a large number of participants while the discussion panels were made too narrow, there were not enough of them, and anyone who was patient enough to be invited to speak is limited to just a short monologue. The number of subject platforms for discussion should be increased, which would allow people to focus on the issues that matter most to them.

The bureaucratic stranglehold at the Forum's organizational stage doesn't favour wider discussions. A kind of diplomatic shyness that is rooted in Soviet-style hospitality is dominant here, as they dare not offend the eminent guest.

For instance, this year the subject of one of the sessions is 'Democratic institutions in multi-ethnic societies'. It literally dictates the presence of Thilo Sarrazin, but since Germany's Chancellor Angela Merkel is expected to attend, he is unlikely to be invited. The same thing happened to David Ignatius, an intellectual who is well known in Russia and in the West, who was not invited to the Forum specifically because of his critical stance towards Turkey's state policy, while Turkey's president Abdullah Gül is expected to attend.

Obviously, the criteria being observed by the Russian Foreign Ministry are clear; however, they can hardly serve as a guideline in terms of intellectual reputation. In order for the Forum to succeed, it must involve the strongest public philosophers, whom politicians of any rank would inevitably find uncomfortable.

The directorship of the Forum should probably be enhanced with a programme committee comprised of experts who are otherwise

independent of the state, who would be in charge of inviting guests to the Forum and who would bear the responsibility for its composition in terms of invitees. Perhaps the Presidential Administration and the Foreign Ministry can reserve the right to add people to the list of invitees, but never to contend it.

There is another odd thing about the Forum in its present format: the glaring absence of intellectuals from the former Soviet republics. This disregard for the other CIS and Baltic countries testifies to the provincialism of the Russian worldview, which seems to be lacking interest in the building of modern states and political nations by Russia's former vassals. However, the experience of nation-building has nothing to do with the size of a country. It's not without reason that some small states are more successful in their nation-building experience than is the case for much greater nations. What is of real importance to us is not their propaganda but their real experience. Each of the countries that left the Soviet Union had to proceed to invent a nation that employed its own methods, which sometimes ended up being quite authoritarian. Russia routinely expresses its outrage at such methods without analysing them. The price of such an attitude for Russia is paid in its reactive policy.

In any case, there is growing interest in the Global Policy Forum around the world. Many of those who had not even heard of the Forum just one year ago are now hoping to attend this event. It seems that the Global Policy Forum in Yaroslavl has a bright future. If President Medvedev is eventually elected for a second term, he will surely carry on with his brainchild conference. Otherwise, whoever comes in Medvedev's stead can hardly disregard this rare Russian institution with its yet unspoiled international reputation. ■

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