Emotional Barriers to Democracy Are Daunting

Russia: Trust and goodwill must replace the self-hated and cynicism bred by communism.

By DMITRI N. SHALIN

While Russia's democracy has survived another coup and is heading for a free election, its long-term prospects remain uncertain. Boris Yeltsin's clumsy attempt to reinstate censorship is ominous enough, but this is not the biggest challenge. There is a deeper malaise plaguing the nation's psyche and blocking its passage to democracy—the rising cynicism about the democratic process.

Many Russians today openly profess their disgust for politics and have withdrawn from the public arena. There has also been a marked increase in emotional violence that people casually heap on each other in their political and daily lives. Experts blame economic and political instability, but this is hardly the whole story. Anger, self-hatred and disenchantment common among Russians are akin to post-traumatic syndrome—a delayed emotional response to a harrowing experience suffered in the past.

The Russians who survived the communist reign did their time in the emotional guag known as the Soviet Union. Whether or not they were humiliated personally, they knew someone abused or destroyed by the system. The Soviet people grew up surrounded by violence—political, intellectual, aesthetic—and this systematic coercion left an indelible mark.

If Russian intellectuals seem particularly susceptible to emotional excesses, it is because their egos suffered the most in past ideological purges. They were persecuted as "enemies of the people," "rootless cosmopolites," "abstract humanists," "abstractionist artists," and each new campaign underscored the intelligentsia's political powerlessness. You didn't have to be directly involved in political violence—witnessing the ideological blood bath was enough to damage your inner core. A courageous few stood up to the regime only to be crushed by it. Others repressed their moral feelings or sublimated their anger into black humor.

But ironic detachment also served to cover up the intelligentsia's moral impotence, to sublimate the rage its members felt when yielding to encroachment. Like the hero in Barbra Streisand's film, "The Prince of Tides," Russian intellectuals have learned to mask their pain with cynicism and sarcasm.

Commentators insist that the "anecdote culture" is dying in Russia. You don't hear many political jokes in Moscow and St. Petersburg these days. What you hear is a muffled cry from the people who no longer have to hide their feelings and deny abuse they had suffered in the past.

There is a lesson to be learned here, and not just by the fledgling democracies in Russia and East Europe.

Free speech, multi-party politics, constitutional checks and balances are necessary but not sufficient conditions for a viable democracy. For democracy is also an emotion or "experience," as philosopher John Dewey used to say. It thrives in the emotional culture that promotes trust, tolerance, prudence, compassion, humor, and it withers when overexposed to suspicion, hatred, vanity, cruelty and sarcasm. Emotional sanity is as central to democracy as discursive political rationality.

Mistaken are those who pin their hopes on correct political "signals" and dismiss emotional littering as mere "noise." The emotional medium is very much the message when it comes to politics. While emotions that concern dignity on the other are democracy's lifeblood, violent emotions that hold others in contempt subvert its sacred thrust. This is why public discourse must be guarded against political and emotional distortions.

But can it be done? It's hard enough to treat an individual who survived abuse. What are we to do when an entire nation needs rehabilitation, when violence is deeply rooted in the nation's history, when society's infrastructure has collapsed?

Now that the Second October Revolution (as the latest coup was dubbed in Moscow) has petered out, the country has a chance to break its constitutional deadlock and bring cynics back into the political process. Getting reforms back on track and restoring economic vitality will also give people something to cheer about. But we need to remember that the relationship between structural and spiritual changes is not a one-way street. Politics is fueled by emotions, economics feeds on moral feelings. Therefore, press for political/economic reforms and look for ways to dress emotional/moral wounds.

Anton Chekhov, the 19th-Century Russian writer, urged his countrymen to practice political sanity and cultivate emotional intelligence. His advice still rings true. Start with yourself, reach out to your neighbors, communicate to others your goodwill, give credit to your enemies wherever it is due, have courage to admit when the problem has no ready solution, avoid grandstanding and take small deeds. In sum, make sure your emotions are intelligent and your intellect is emotionally sane. That is one test a democracy can ill afford to fail.

Dmitri N. Shalin is an associate professor of sociology at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas.