The year 1999, with its scheduled parliamentary election and the possibility of an early presidential vote, may be regarded as a crucial test for what remains of both democracy and the Democratic Movement in Russia.

Few will deny that 1999 was a test of Russia's overall viability as a state. General Nikolai Bordiuzha, a former KGB officer appointed at the start of the year to the joint position of head of the presidential administration and secretary of the national security council, stated on January 24 that Russia was on the verge of a territorial breakup.

In addition to the question of its continued territorial integrity, Russia is facing the challenge of maintaining a functioning economy and a political and social regime capable of sustaining both stability and the measure of liberties that has already been achieved. These include, for example, the degree of press freedom that has not been limited by the oligarchic ownership of the media or by renewed government intervention. For example, a dressing-down of chief editors by Prime Minister Evgenii Primakov resulted immediately in less so-called “negative news.”

The Boris Yeltsin era was identified – at least in simplistic Western descriptions – as a democratic revolution against Soviet totalitarianism. It ended, in theory, at the moment of Yeltsin's re-election to the presidency, and, in practice, with the financial meltdown of August 17, 1998. The president's illness in the winter of 1998-99 caused some ferment in Russian politics, although it did not have any constitutional significance. Despite several appeals, the President did not officially delegate any authority to Prime Minister Primakov, who adamantly denied any interest in inheriting the presidency or running for it in an election.
Primakov, however, moved to consolidate the de facto power he already wielded as acting president in all but name, making it increasingly evident that he was not inclined to relinquish this authority. Among other things, he nominated to senior government positions several former KGB figures, whom he knows and trusts either from his longstanding association with the Soviet agency or from his more recent tenure as head of the SVR, the Russian Federation’s foreign intelligence arm. One such nomination was that of General Yuri Kovaladze as deputy director of the semi-official ITAR-TASS news agency. Kovaladze was a former spokesman of the FSB and earlier, like Primakov himself, worked overseas as a KGB operative disguised as a journalist.

Primakov recently called for a year’s “cease-fire” among the various branches of power – that is, primarily between the executive and legislative. However, this could have been merely a plea for the Communist-dominated Duma to stop inciting protests and strikes in connection with the worsening payment crisis and shortage of supplies, which were already eroding his initially high popularity rating. It could, however, also have been a warning to stop any attempt to limit the prime minister’s authority. This was the interpretation of Sergei Yushenkov, a veteran democratic member of the Duma; on January 27 he decried Primakov’s initiative as an unconstitutional move to reapportion power away from both the elected presidency and parliament in favor of the appointed prime minister. Even the main democratic faction, Yabloko, which gingerly supported – in fact, had actually proposed – Primakov’s appointment as prime minister as the only option with any prospect of restoring stability, threatened to repudiate him if his new initiative was not withdrawn.

The public seemed to feel that, given Primakov’s undisputed experience, abilities, and connections, it was advisable for Russia to leave him in the driver’s seat. In the winter of 1998-99, polls showed that if he declared his candidacy, he would be the odds-on winner of an election. However, it is questionable whether the continued stewardship of this relic from the Soviet apparatus (who never before ran in, let alone won, any open election) would have represented progress for democratization in Russia. Only ten years earlier, this ostensibly sophisticated foreign affairs specialist returned from a mission to beg for financial assistance in Washington with the astonishing discovery that the president of the United States enjoys less than unfettered power and must obtain congressional approval for any spending.

It is also questionable whether another two contenders for the presidency, Yuri Luzhkov and Aleksandr Lebed, would contribute to the progress of democracy in Russia despite their success in local elections and some noteworthy achievements. Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov has proven himself a capable manager, but his shady business links and his espousal of some extreme chauvinist demands raise serious doubt as to the direction of his leadership.

Krasnoiarsk governor and former general, Aleksandr Lebed, is nearly the opposite. His honesty has yet to be challenged, and his main attraction for many is an iron-fist approach to law and order; his strategic realism was demonstrated by the peace he negotiated in Chechnya. But Lebed has never claimed to be much of a