

# The New Liberalism: A Scenario with Variations

Transition to democracy is up to society, not government

*Dmitry Furman*

There is no doubt that Russian President Dmitry Medvedev wants Russia to become a free country ruled by law. One would be a naïve cynic – and cynics are often naïve – to think that a person could say “Freedom is better than not being free,” while actually thinking “Isn’t it clever of me to deceive these fools?”

It is something else that people always want many different things; their desires may run counter to each another and freedom may be far from the strongest among them. However, let us imagine that the president is indeed full of resolve to put the country on the track towards greater freedom. This is easy to imagine; all the more so because his pro-democratic, legitimacy-related aspirations may stand in accordance with his other natural desires, such as independent actions, real rather than formal personal power, respect and popularity. Many people now dream of a thaw after “Putin’s freeze.”

This is an ideal, liberal scenario, so let us analyze it in more detail.

## FROM PERIODS TO COMMAS

The whole story begins with certain phrases (which have already been spoken) and symbolic gestures that place Medvedev, the president, some distance away from his predecessor Vladimir Putin, who left Russia somewhat frost-bitten before he became prime minister. The economic crisis deepens and Medvedev mildly criticizes the government for

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bureaucratic methods and insufficiently energetic steps amid extreme conditions (this has already happened). Polls show a flagging trust in the prime minister (which has happened as well). Medvedev makes a number of statements, saying that the scale of this crisis stems in some measure from previous mistakes, uttering phrases like “the mistakes we made earlier.” Yet everyone understands who is actually meant by “we.” The president’s rating begins to climb above that of the prime minister, who suddenly turns up “in charge of crisis management” (this has not happened yet, although it is quite likely).

This is not all that important in itself, but it has a symbolic significance. Everyone is waiting for the climax of the story. As a man of good morals, the president understands he owes much to the prime minister, who was his predecessor, but he also understands the government’s flaws, his personal responsibility to the people and the interests of the state, which prevail over his personal feelings. Time passes and Putin steps down as prime minister with honors (what he will do next is a big headache for Russia, but we can think up something). And then it turns out that the people really do not care, the top bureaucracy has been longing to see this, and the liberals are walking on air. The West is also satisfied and it hopes that the thaw will bring about a *détente*. After meeting with Medvedev, U.S. President Barack Obama says that he looked into the Russian president’s eyes and realized that he was a genuine democrat seeking an all-round modernization of his great country. And as for Abkhazia and South Ossetia, we will sort it out somehow...

The next event is the resignation of the most odious and anecdotal figures of the outgoing era (“Putin’s vegetables”) and people “with up-to-date thinking and perfect knowledge of the economy” are appointed to a number of top positions. And if there are any signs that the country is emerging from the crisis (because any crisis comes to an end sooner or later), public opinion will naturally link these signs to Putin’s resignation and to the new appointments. Russian television (its top executives may be replaced or left where they are – they know how to trim the sails) starts churning out shows deriding the system of the recent past. It may even show the best of the satirical *Kukly (Puppets)* program, including the notorious scene that portrayed Putin as Little Zaches, which destroyed the old NTV channel. A movie based on Vladimir Sorokin’s

novel, *The Day of the Oprichnik*, is tremendously successful. Then Medvedev is overwhelmingly re-elected – for a six-year term this time – in 2012. And the rank-and-file say things like “Thank God we’re past Putin’s era now,” or “we didn’t know much, did we?” or “I never voted for Putin.”

Does this scenario seem realistic? No doubt it will require hard work for it to become possible and involve quite a number of psychological and political difficulties, and yet I think it is quite feasible. It intertwines two storylines and both of them are quite “normal” – they have been replayed in history numerous times.

The first storyline implies that the ruler discards the people who propelled him or her to the throne, and who may think that the ruler should be grateful and obedient for ages. For instance, Empress Anne got rid of her top supporters immediately. All Soviet leaders from Josef Stalin to Mikhail Gorbachev acted in much the same way. And Putin got rid of Boris Berezovsky as early as he could do so.

The second storyline depicts a liberalization that comes about after the ruler, whose rigidity (or toughness) everyone eventually grew tired of, has exited the scene – like when Alexander I ascended to the throne after Paul I, and Alexander II after Nicholas I. The two storylines often merge into one. A ruler gets rid of the people who propelled him to power and becomes popular by introducing liberalization measures (Khrushchev, Gorbachev). Chances abound to watch one more movie contrived along this scenario.

When you develop a script, though, it is easy to put a period, write “The End” and bring the story to a satisfying conclusion – the victory of democratic forces over reactionaries. But in actual history, periods turn into commas and storylines smoothly continue to develop or gradually evolve into something different. So let us look at how they could develop.

#### EVERYTHING IS PREDICTABLE

Initially, liberalization may be accompanied by a growth in both the president’s popularity and his personal (not formal) power, but later inevitable problems will spring up since no kind of liberalization can be kept at a level where it would be completely harmless. Just press your finger against a liberal’s mouth and he will start gnawing your arm. You are

sure to hear claims about “slandorous concoctions,” “irresponsible demagogy” and “attempts to speak ill of all our achievements.” Others will say it is necessary to sort out the Yukos case (although Yukos has already been taken apart and it would do no good to stir around in old ashes). And others may even bring up the beginning of the second Chechen war, and this is something totally out of place.

Liberals are not the only social force; society has elements of every description. There are Tatars, Chechens and Ingushes; communists, patriots and even National Bolsheviks. Someone will eventually start claiming that “there was much more order during Putin’s rein.” And the president will have to say to them: “You don’t want a return of the recent past, do you?” And then to others: “You surely don’t want a return to the 1990s, do you?” This in itself is an unpleasant and dangerous thing if you consider that 2018 is looming on the far-distant horizon. The president has immeasurable opportunities. He can stop rocking the boat and see to it that a person he trusts completely is elected in 2018. (Moreover, he could even amend the Constitution and stand for re-election several more times.) But for this to become possible, he would have to tighten control over society again and to “freeze” it a little. He would be pushed to do so by natural human and political instincts – any man tries to win the game he is involved in and to keep control over the situation. And, as it always happens, ideal considerations would fully coincide with these measures – one cannot allow “irresponsible demagogues” to dictate politics, or moreover to grab control of the country.

Yet this would mean that nothing has changed in the country; that we continue to live under an authoritarian regime that shoots through all the periods of “thawing” and “freezing” – in the Tsarist and Soviet eras alike. All of this was splendidly described by the 19th century satirical writer Mikhail Saltykov-Shchedrin.

#### UNCONVENTIONAL CASES

The first step, insufficient but absolutely necessary, towards resolving the pressing problem of society’s transition to democracy is to defeat the supreme power through elections. However, you cannot demand that the president prepare his own defeat. The best one can expect of a president who craves democracy and lawfulness is that he will not overstep certain

barriers in the struggle with his opponents; for instance, he will not forge the results of the vote, not cut off his opponents from the mass media or accuse them of tax evasion at the first signs of opposition on their part.

Such was Gorbachev – a normal man who did not want to be defeated. He fought to the end and clutched at the illusion of possible victory. But even when faced with the threat of losing power and the collapse of the state, he did not do the things that his instincts and common sense called for, but ran counter to his ideal objectives or the norms he had set for himself. This is a very rare occurrence and, as shown by Gorbachev's own experience and the experience of post-Gorbachev developments, this is not nearly enough for a successful transition to democracy.

The whole story is bigger than electing someone other than the person who is already in power or someone handpicked by the state helmsman in 2012, 2018 or 2024. The crux of the matter is that the winner should not affirm his rights to power the way Boris Yeltsin and Vladimir Putin did. We must ensure that the road is open for a fair contest for power under unified rules, make sure that the victors and losers change places at the steering wheel, and must see to it that the process is not blocked immediately. This is what happened in Belarus, where Alexander Lukashenko came to power through a fair democratic election. He decided right away, however, that he would never let anything like that happen again. To prevent this, the winner must have at least some commitment to legal and democratic values in the first place, and there has to be a strong opposition that can prevent his illegitimate grasp on power if his commitment proves insufficient. It is much better when a person like this does not win overwhelmingly and the supporters of the old powers do not vanish by immediately going over to serve the victor. Meanwhile, it is precisely this situation that is even more difficult to imagine in Russia than a triumphant victory of a new Yeltsin of some kind.

#### BETTER LATER, BUT STILL BETTER

It is not all that difficult to understand all of this. Still, understanding something when you are sitting quietly in your office is one thing, but it is something else all together when you find yourself in the vortex of political struggle. While it is extremely difficult to demand of a ruler that

he not step over the legal boundaries in struggling with the enemy, even at moments when defeat is breathing down his neck, it is far more difficult to demand that he know in advance that he must lose in the end and that he foster the enemy with own hands – an enemy who will win, although in a way not conducive to staying afloat... The latter is totally inconceivable. A politician who realizes this objective and tries to solve it in earnest would be the greatest personality. As for the president, there are no grounds whatsoever to rank him among the greatest people, provided all the respect he commands.

That is why we must realize with full clarity that a liberal scenario is fairly realistic, yet it is not the one that will help Russia resolve its main task of the day – the transition to democracy. One can even say this scenario is not directly related to it. Transition to democracy cannot be the main business or task of the government. It is a huge task for society and it can only be settled through a crisis (a profound political crisis, not the current economic one) and by a swooping leap across an abyss. The president's liberal aspirations and steps can facilitate the resolution of this task in the future, but can do nothing more than that. Perhaps it is best not to try to solve it at once. We have done this twice and both times to no avail. A third attempt should be made at a later time, but it should be successful so that we could avoid another demoralizing fiasco. Yet we must develop an understanding of the importance of resolving this task now; an understanding of its essence and of the huge difficulty it poses.