

A New Chance for a Hopeless Cause

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Tsarist Russia, Europe's last monarchy that vehemently rejected the introduction of a Constitution, gave birth naturally to revolutionaries. The latter drew their inspiration – and partial support – from the West. But Western democracies, which were not completely developed and marred by social problems at the time, were not the ideal. The revolutionaries copied their guidelines from the critical and utopian social ideologies produced in the West rather than from the Western reality of the day. They had faith in the “creative powers of the Russian nation” that would certainly build a freer and more progressive society than Western society once it was liberated. The Russians did not envy the West back then. On the contrary, they expected that the West would envy them.

The principles of organizing and building a refined new society were subject to endless and bitter debates among the revolutionaries, but the much-cherished goal fostered in them a readiness to die and, more importantly, to kill. Then the revolution came at last (and although the revolutionaries fought for its earliest arrival, in many ways it came out of the blue). One of the revolutionary factions managed to grab all the power and started implementing its ideas. What it produced was a totalitarian Soviet system that initially annihilated millions of Russians, then sank into a senile degeneracy and slumber.

THE CRUSHING OF THE MONOLITH

Although Tsarist rule gave birth to revolutionaries, Soviet power brought to life the dissidents who, with certain reservations, can be discussed in terms of being the functional equivalents of the revolutionaries. Both forces resolutely denied the repressive undemocratic government and even went farther than mere denial as they translated it into action. But along with it, the dissidents had as many differences with the revolutionaries as the Soviet system had with the Tsarist one.

Soviet rule was harsher and more repressive than Tsarist rule, especially in the first half of its history, but it still marked a step forward compared with Tsarist traditionalism. It supported some modern values, like development, equality and democracy, albeit in a distorted form. The dissident ideology also signaled a positive movement versus revolutionary ideology, but it was as painful and contorted as the Soviet system was against the Tsarist system.

The dissidents were free of the revolutionary utopianism and dogmatism that underlaid the bloody history of the early Soviet government. They did not think that Russia should display a kind of especially beautiful state rule to the world. They simply dreamt of restructuring Russia into a “normal” contemporary society. They found their ideal not so much in the future than in the geographic space, i.e. in the West, which had built stable democratic societies by that time and had stopped emanating utopian ideologies, which were inspirational for revolutionaries. The dissidents lived in a totalitarian system that had arisen out of a popular revolution and they could not dream of another revolution of this kind. They felt rather apprehensive about the “people’s creative power,” which had shown its worth in 1917.

Yet this smaller utopianism of dissident mentality had a reverse side of its own. While the dissidents did not seek revolution, they did not have any distinguishable ideas (right or wrong) of their own about how Soviet society could attain freedom or whether it could become free at all. They hated Soviet power, but they thought it to be a monolith. About ten years before the downfall of Communism, Alexander Solzhenitsyn scared the West by saying that the Soviet Union and the Communists would grab it “with bare hands.” The dissident writer Andrei Amalrik pinned vague hopes tainted with fear only on a war between Russia and China. The dissidents fought against Soviet power by living “outside the realm of lies,” but they did not fight for power. They were free of the utopianism of their predecessors, but their protest was much more passive, individualistic and unpromising than that of the revolutionaries.

The dissidents’ pro-Western orientation also had negative aspects from the point of view of the transformation of Soviet society. They treated the West better than the revolutionaries did and likewise the West treated them much better. The West lured the dissident quarters that did not see any encouraging social prospects in their home country, but saw fair prospects for themselves in the West. Thus they weakened Soviet society’s ability to transform. I personally try to imagine sometimes what would have happened to Russia if Lenin, when he was in exile, had gotten a prestigious lecturing job in the West with a good salary and had introduced academic courses under titles echoing his two fundamental works – “Materialism and Empirio-Criticism” and “The Development of Capitalism in Russia.”

“Genuine dissidents” were few in number – even fewer than “genuine revolutionaries,” but hundreds of thousands of people had a revolutionary consciousness complex and, as the perestroika era revealed, millions had a dissident mentality. Moreover, people who shared the dissidents’ vision of the world, but who preferred to live their lives in peace, found their material well-being and careers everywhere, including in the Central Committee of the Soviet Communist Party and even with the KGB. Naturally, dissident quarters were not aware of this. The fall of the Soviet system was much more unexpected for believers of the dissident ideological complex than the downfall of the Tsar was for the revolutionaries. These quarters could also not imagine the form of that fall. The situation in 1991, when a struggle developed between the General Secretary of the CPSU, an advocate of a gradual drift toward democracy and the market, and the allies of a recent

secessionist from the Politburo, who called for an immediate breakaway from the Communist past and a rapid transition to a Western-style society, would not have been conceivable to any dissident even a couple of years before that.

THE POST-SOVIET AS THE SOVIET

People with a dissident mindset, if not dissidents themselves (they were too few, and many of them had settled in the West by the time), came to power in 1991. While the victory of the revolutionaries brought Soviet power to life, the victory of the dissident democrats eventually gave rise to Vladimir Putin's Russia. The slogans of freedom and democracy in 1917 accompanied the start of the construction of a system, which in many respects was more repressive than Tsarism. Similarly, Russia began to build a political system in 1991 that is acquiring increasingly more Soviet-like traits.

Once again, the specific mentality of the revolutionaries had an imprint of Tsarist power and was an important medium in transmitting the traits of Tsarism into Soviet rule. The specificity of the dissident mentality was in the same measure rooted in the Soviet system and it, too, facilitated the transmission of Soviet traits into post-Soviet reality.

First of all, there was a natural but overly swift and smooth transition from a feeling of total impasse, borne out by the totalitarian system but absolutely unjustified as one could see later, to unbridled and equally unjustified expectations. This transition was coupled with the fear that one might miss a windfall opportunity and miss it forever, as if the Soviet Union might continue to exist infinitely if it were not crushed in 1991. This feeling instigated a rush to destroy the old system without any thought to the aftermath the destruction would have for the people or to what kind of a new system would replace it. That was a compensation (not on the part of "genuine dissidents" of course, but millions of passive believers of the dissident complex) for a previous passivity and time served. This gave way to hectic activity, ideological rigor and dogmatism. All of this was seen in ardent calls on the part of former members of the Communist Party to ban the party and in the fact that the former chief of the Central Committee's ideology department had turned into the main anti-Communist. It is noteworthy that the fight against totalitarianism was replaced by a fight against the much-hated symbols of the totalitarian past. The trick was that the situation allowed, quite invisibly for the fighters, the restoration of the very same past under the cover of new vestments. One should remember that the struggle against the Communists was carried out using purely Communist methods. Furthermore, there were many other reflections of the Soviet totalitarian system in the mentality of people who rejected the Soviets in an overtly totalitarian way. As a consequence, the more radically the symbols changed, the faster the previous content returned.

For many democrats who have been pushed to the sidelines of political life and who cast fearful glances at the end product of their doing, Putin has taken on the role of a carrier of evil who has sprung out of nowhere. This is largely the same role that Stalin was assigned in the reflections of many revolutionaries who were stunned to see what the Soviet system had grown into. Yet Putin is a legitimate successor to the events of 1991. He succeeded the chieftain of the dissident revolution and he himself was an aide to one of its leaders, St. Petersburg Governor Anatoly Sobchak. It was not Putin who founded the existing system; it was those who emerged victorious in 1991, 1993 and 1996.

The post-Soviet system has acquired its finishing touches now and it replicates the Soviet one in minute details. We have come to the point where distinguished textile workers praise Putin at "history-making" congresses of the party, a point where people hailing from the security services, including the former persecutors of dissidents in the KGB, dominate the national leadership, and where the Ministry of Culture fights with a new form of art "alien to the masses of people."

But a return to the past means a rebirth of intellectual dissent as an element immanent for the past. If "distinguished textile workers" are back in place, then we cannot but get new "renegades" and "neo-dissidents."

PSYCHOLOGY OF DESPAIR

Still, everything is much milder "at the new turn of the spiral," and it looks like many of the achievements of perestroika will remain forever. The democrats – the representatives of the dissident mentality – can gather openly now instead of crowding into tiny Soviet-era kitchens. They can travel abroad, take part in political life, and join legal, although powerless, political parties. Nonetheless, many traits of the dissident ideological and psychological complexes come into light quickly in all of that activity, including the operation of political parties.

Like Soviet dissidents, the democratic neo-dissidents have a super-strong sense of protest and, simultaneously, a strong sense of hopelessness. And, similarly, they do not have any strategy for a transition to democracy. Their actions are far more expressive than cleverly thought out. The best the democrats can dream of is to get a tiny and powerless minority in the powerless State Duma (and the way that the democrats nominate the top three candidates for their electoral lists suggests that they do not even think seriously about that). The inability to unite also stems from this. Entering blocs and finding compromises makes sense only if you have a goal that can be reached through compromise, but when there is no goal in sight, compromises are not needed, in which case it is much more reasonable to search for a compromise with the authorities and thus get some functional dividends.

The neo-dissidents' psychological status is even worse in some aspects than that of Soviet-era dissidents. The problem is that the dissidents could attribute all evils to the "1917 disaster," which could be explained by circumstantial factors and

Russia's huge "misfortune." No one knew how to get rid of Communism. Then Communism fell, and now everything has come back full circle. This means that the root causes do not lie either in Communism or in a concurrence of circumstances but, rather, in the country as such, in society and in the people. A nation and a country like this are hopeless, and that is why the democrats' position is hopeless, and the prospects for democracy are hopeless too.

There are many more people now who share one form or another of the dissident mentality than those who attend democratic meetings and vote for democratic parties (and why on earth should one vote for parties that simply cannot do anything?) – the same way that "semi-dissidents" or "dissidents at the bottom of their hearts" prevailed numerically over "genuine dissidents" in the past. One can also find neo-dissidents everywhere. And the more the government's degeneracy grows, the bigger their army will be.

THE NEXT ATTEMPT

A resurgence of the dissident feeling of powerlessness after the euphoria of perestroika and the early years of Boris Yeltsin's presidency is a natural process and a necessary element of the lessons that should be drawn from Russia's recent experience. It is true that the root cause does not lie in Communism, or at least in Communism alone, but in the country as such and the nation. Russia is moving toward democracy along a bumpy and curvy road and the things that are so simple for others (like electing their own governments) come painfully and slowly to Russians. However, the experience Russia gained in the 1980s and 1990s has a reverse side, which Russians are only somewhat aware of now.

First, perestroika and the events of 1991 showed that the seemingly invincible Soviet power was a Colossus on clay feet, and I am not at all sure that we have developed a deeper and better understanding of this country than we had at the end of the Soviet epoch and during perestroika. It cannot be ruled out that a chance to move over to democracy is much closer and will turn up unexpectedly and in an unexpected form, quite like the chance for perestroika sprang up. Generally speaking, sudden finales seem to be immanent for the systems with "no-alternative" rule and blocked feedback from the nation.

Second, past experience shows that although people were not prepared by and large for democracy, democratic ideas were not at all alien to them. The majority of voters supported perestroika and, more than that, they voted for Yeltsin's pro-dissident ideology in 1991. The fact that the population started voting for the Communists and then developed a passion for Putin after the horrors which the country suffered in the 1990s seems to be natural.

Third, the special features of dissident mentality that make up an essential element of the entire cyclic process Russia has lived through played as much a crucial role in the defeat of democracy as the specificity of revolutionaries' consciousness played in the replication of the worst aspects of Tsarism in Soviet power. But since the specialty of democratic mentality was a vital determining element of development that has paved the way to the current system, changes in it will mean that the next phase of transition to democracy will have results different from the previous two attempts.

No one can tell when a new chance for this will emerge or what form the transition will take, but there is hardly any doubt that this chance will appear and that this might happen in the short term (whatever the self-identical nature of Russia's path, it cannot be self-identical in the twenty-first century to the degree that would see an endless chain of presidents handing over state power to one another). But an early transition is not the most important factor. It is essential that a new chance should not unleash a new cycle similar to the previous ones. In a non-democratic system its rejection cannot but contain the painful features of the latter. One cannot discard them altogether anyway and they will continue to surface in some form. And yet, knowing these cycles means that one has come to terms with one's own past and can now be vigilant and control oneself.