

President Putin as Prince Hamlet

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An epoch of full-blown antidemocratic ideologies has become a thing of the past. Today, it is difficult to find people who would oppose democracy out of principle, like the monarchists or fascists did in the past. Everyone is in support of democracy and human rights today. Even the Soviet leadership did not oppose democracy – it opposed those moments when “anti-Socialist forces raise their heads under the cover of pro-democracy slogans.” Nor did it object to the freedom of speech – it only objected to using free speech for “spreading libel against Socialism.” So there can be no doubt that President Putin and his associates are advocates of democracy as well, to say nothing of Putin’s predecessor who stood at the helm of a democratic revolution.

And yet the distance between recognizing the benefits of democracy and the actual establishment of democracy per se may be greater than the distance between the recognition that smoking and drinking are unwholesome habits and the practical abstinence from them. Today’s Russian society does not have any feasible alternatives to democracy or any integral ideology that offers an alternative method of social organization. On the other hand, Russia lacks the specific culture or psychological capability for nurturing a democracy – a feature that is not at all uniquely Russian, since nations of this mold spread across approximately half of the globe. What we have instead is a habit of being subordinated, which formed over the course of many centuries, and a fear of independent decisions and being left without a strong guiding arm.

A society that lacks the ability to live in a democracy, as well as having no alternatives to it, produces the sort of political system that has taken shape in this country. This phenomenon has parallels in many other countries: it is a system of presidential power disguised in the vestments of democracy. Yet such a system does not stem from malevolent intent, but rather emerges on its own. Both Yeltsin and Putin were pushed into building this system both by society and the circumstances of history itself, and little actually depended on their personalities along the way. One may even say they did not have other options.

FRUITS OF SIMPLE DESIRES

The task of building democracy cannot be a task for the president as the head of state, since setting forth this objective would naturally create a political opposition, which would eventually replace him later. He would thus shackle his own hands and fuel criticism against himself. Thus, such an objective is unnatural and contradicts normal human instincts. Mikhail Gorbachev did something in that vein, but he is a bit of an anomaly. A man in power, even if he is totally committed to democracy, cannot help forcing others to obey him, and avoid meddling with his work or from putting spokes in his wheels. He will necessarily wish to prevent the rise of individuals who may spoil the fruits of his own efforts. He will want to see key positions filled by people whom he finds easy to work with, and he will want to see particular scoundrels get what they deserve. As he implements these normal human desires, he creates an authoritarian system, if society is unable to restrict his powers and ready to obey him.

Neither Yeltsin nor Putin had any plan for “undermining democratic freedoms;” these values vanished on their own as the two presidents were forced to solve specific problems.

Yeltsin, for example, did not fight against democracy by ordering tanks to open fire on the building of the rebellious parliament. Certainly, he thought at that moment that he was fighting for democracy. He simply did not want to give power over to the audacious parliament speaker Ruslan Khasbulatov, the ungrateful former vice-president Alexander Rutskoi, or the Communists and nationalists. As he created his Constitution, he had no wish of restricting democracy either. Yeltsin just sought to deny the oppositionists a chance to hamper the reforms that he believed were vital for this country.

Nor did Putin seek to curtail the freedom of speech as he liquidated independent television. In reality, he wanted to snatch it out of the hands of the oligarchs and prevent them from showing the Kukly puppet show, which he found personally insulting. Putin did not want to “de facto dismantle Russia’s federated structure,” but rather eliminate loopholes for electing incompetent – and sometime even criminal – regional governors, while he could not do anything about it as president. He did not purposefully create “a lawless environment and an unfriendly investment climate for business” – he merely wanted to remove the ambitious oligarchs, who overrated their importance and were always getting underfoot. So he placed a single individual, Mikhail Khodorkovsky, behind bars. Nor did Putin wish to “de facto liquidate parliamentary system,” rather, he sought to prevent parliament from obstructing him in his efforts to “revive Russia and redouble its Gross Domestic Product.” All of these are normal and legitimate human desires, since a president naturally has egotistic and private motives along with idealistic and businesslike ones.

The huge machinery that services Putin does not set itself the task of stifling democracy either. Very simply, each governor wants his region to look as good as the others; they want to prevent elections for the demagogues or foes of the respected president. Each prosecutor wants to be an outstanding and watchful “eye of the Caesar.” And naturally, each of them cares just as much for his career and well-being at the same time.

If a society is incapable of maintaining any sort of democratic self-organization, if the very idea that a new president can be elected from persons not chosen by the current president seems frightening and revolutionary, then trying to resolve each specific problem that Yeltsin, or Putin, or their appointees confront would only lead us away from democracy and introduce a system that replicates the contours of the old Soviet system. Yeltsin and Putin perhaps even believed that their course of actions was consistent with the construction of democracy under the very specific conditions that Russia found itself in, since Western standards cannot be applied here, at least for the time being. If a person walks along a path that is circular, he may get the illusion of moving forward, but after some time he will start to notice to his astonishment that he has returned almost to the exact point where he started.

In our present situation, we have traveled the greater part of the way, with only a small distance left to go.

TWO STEPS TOWARD THE GOAL

So what is all that is needed now? First, we could always lift the constitutional restriction that prohibits an individual from occupying the presidential office for more than two terms in succession. This goal is natural for Russia's current system and is not necessarily linked to a craving for power on the part of the president. Indeed, why on earth should a popular president, who has managed to achieve so much, search for a successor (and will he find a worthy one?) while he is in the full bloom of life? Why should he look for some obscure future job just because his predecessor composed the Constitution, thinking that eight years would be long enough a term and it would be an accomplishment just to survive through to its end? Why should the president interrupt work on his various plans and hand them over to some other person? Moreover, Russian society does not want Putin to depart from power and cannot even imagine the president stepping down from his position.

Second, we could declare the United Russia party the pro-presidential party once and for all, and rule out any alternative to it as much as to the president himself. This seems to be a natural and necessary thing to do considering Russia's very special conditions. If this step is achieved, the authorities will get extra levers of power, be able to define the circle of loyal people committed to the common cause, and pool together a reserve of human resources. It will save us a lot of energy formerly wasted for projects like setting up the leftwing Rodina party, then splitting it and, finally, utilizing its fragments. Thus, elections will cease driving society into frenzy. There are no obstacles in the way of implementing this project; actually, it is almost realized already.

Of course, Putin's hypothetical decision to amend the Constitution will produce uproar in the West, but should this bother us, after all? Our reserves of oil and gas and the Western demand for fuel makes the West depend on us – not vice versa. Even pushing us out of the Group of Eight is scarcely a feasible task. And do we even need the G8?

A PROTRACTED PAUSE

In the meantime, something strange is happening. The building of a new Russian state, made up entirely of the decrees of our presidents, is almost complete. Just a bit more effort is required, but the authorities suddenly appear apprehensive. More than that, they are beginning to do strange things, threatening the stability of the entire construction.

Putin says he has no plans for amending the Constitution and will quit the scene in 2008. He said this on one occasion and then repeated it; such statements are normal in terms of respect for etiquette. You must make a pause and wait until someone repeats the question, and that is what everyone expected to happen (some are still expecting). But the pause becomes protracted over time and the impression that Putin is really set to leave the scene is growing. No one can tell why.

It has been said that the United Russia party would stay in power for three dozen years or so, but all of a sudden the president issues a new order, forcing the very same people who made their predictions to start hastily conjuring up a second party. Of course, no real party can be set up this way, yet the format of "managed democracy" enables one to create a second or even a ninth party in that manner. Recall the former East Germany that had about ten parties. Uzbekistan has four, and each of them is more dedicated to President Karimov than the other three.

We are heading into an anxious period now that Putin said that he would leave office, we start thinking hard about whom the successor will be. Will this individual be a real master or will Putin retain that function while the new president drops out after four years? And what is to be done with Putin's portraits decorating virtually every office? Take them away or keep them together with the new ones? And should the new portraits be larger than Putin's, or should they be the same size? The president's decision to quit and the appointment of a successor will create much confusion in the public mindset. And do we need more confusion at a time when there is so much anxiety? Do we need more confusion over which party to vote into power?

The third symptom of indecision is smaller in scale by equally fitting to the picture. Putin's Administration staff boss, Vladislav Surkov, has invented the notion of "sovereign democracy" that brings to mind the "people's democracy" and "socialist democracy" of the Communist era. The terms are devoid of meaning but they perfectly match today's situation ("The West is no model for us, we're sovereign, and let our presidents have ten terms of office if we want them to"). But

all of a sudden, First Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev disclaims the term in public, saying democracy has universal principles.

WHAT IS THE IMPORT OF IT ALL?

It looks like the following explanation may be valid. Both Yeltsin and Putin made great efforts to build a new Russia without giving much thought to how the general plan and façade of this state would look. They built it by parts as new needs emerged, and now it is almost finished. It has a clear shape, contour and image, which are plainly visible – as plainly as the fact that they do not resemble the democracy proclaimed in 1991. But they certainly resemble the old Soviet system. “Whatever party we build here, we always get a CPSU,” former prime minister Chernomyrdin once said.

Only a few final touches and steps are left, and they cannot be made as unconsciously as before. We can see with our own eyes what we have arrived at. We must either admit that we wanted a different destination (and this is almost impossible psychologically) or that we have found the place we need, although everything contrasts with the West in a typically Russian manner (frankly speaking, not so much Russian but equally Uzbek, Kazakh or Egyptian). The latter realization, however, will require an ideological grounding of some sort, and where can we take it? It is no accident that Putin has so much interest in the conservative émigré philosopher Ivan Ilyin, who wrote that Russia would need “a Christian dictator after the overthrow of Communism.”

The leaders must summon their courage and take the last steps, but they are frightened. This is not a fear in the face of the West, the people or the opposition. The fear stems from the necessity of reappraising the path we have gone – a circular path – and the necessity of summing up. It seems that the president is standing motionless before these last steps and cannot venture to take them, while society is waiting for a decision, since it has long stopped making decisions on its own. And the clock is ticking and time is running out. Next year, the decision will become unavoidable.