

The Fork in the Road in 2008

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The history of a country, like the life of an individual, goes through long periods when there are very few or no chances at all to overhaul the foundations of its existence. Such periods alternate with shorter phases when an accidental combination of circumstances offers opportunities for making a choice that would predestine the nation's development for dozens of years in the future. Mikhail Gorbachev's perestroika was a time when Russia's future depended heavily on haphazard and personal factors. 1991 was a year especially rich in alternatives. It was the year of Boris Yeltsin's election as Russian President, the abortive coup attempt, the failure to sign a new Union Treaty and the signing of the Belavezha Accords, which formally dissolved the Soviet Union. I strongly believe that the year 1991 offered practically no chances for a return to Soviet power and socialism or for a rapid rise of a genuine democracy in Russia. Yet there were a huge number of options ranging from maintaining the Union in some form or another for many years to come to a Yugoslav-type bloody war between Union republics, and from an almost democratic system dominated by a single party to a military dictatorship. The Belavezha Accords slashed the array of choices abruptly.

An unpredictable situation "rich in alternatives" (even though less in scope) has emerged once again in Russia in 2008.

THE EMERGENCE OF IMITATIONAL DEMOCRACY IN RUSSIA

The Belavezha Accords were a pivotal point in Russian history as they marked the inception of the current Russian political system of 'imitational democracy.' They rounded off the shaky period of Russia/Union – Yeltsin/Gorbachev dual power and transferred full authority to Boris Yeltsin, the leader of the democratic anti-Communist movement, who had become president of Russia (still as part of the Soviet Union) earlier in 1991. Russian society was not prepared either culturally or psychologically for genuine democracy and this created an opportunity for turning the declared democracy into a form that was authoritarian in content. The use of the Belavezha Accords as a tool for Yeltsin's ascent to power made any other option for the country's development highly improbable.

As a matter of fact, Yeltsin dissolved the Soviet Union without any popular mandate for it (only Ukrainian President Leonid Kravchuk had a mandate after a referendum). Moreover, the dissecting of the Soviet Union stood in outright contradiction to the results of the March 1991 all-Union referendum regarding the destiny of the Union State. This meant that the opposition got a trump card for accusing Yeltsin and his democratic associates of an ill-conceived policy and, on top of that, of destroying the country and of national betrayal. So for Yeltsin, keeping power (or ceding it in a way that would guarantee handing down power to a successor he would appoint) and the warding-off of the political opposition became a "categorical imperative." The case in hand now was not Yeltsin's willingness to translate his political course into life or to indulge in power, but putting his personal freedom and even life at stake.

Yeltsin's team was unable to discard the principles of democracy it had proclaimed – and it was equally unable to follow these principles either. There were no alternatives to building a Third-World-type imitational democracy. Furthermore, as the creation of a system of that kind implies incessant encroachments on the principles of democracy, i.e. unlawful and unconstitutional acts, every new step makes it more problematic to abandon this course. While it would be still possible – although very difficult – to imagine that after the Belavezha Accords Yeltsin could have ceded power to an opponent rather than to an appointed successor, the forceful destruction of the national parliament in the fall of 1993 made this prospect completely unimaginable.

Winners cannot go back on their victories, they can only move forward toward a further consolidation of power. The specific mass mentality among Russians makes this approach a convenient and handy one. Russian society does not have a very strong ability for self-organization and is apprehensive about freedom; and so at the initial stage an imitational democratic system – embodied in the personal power of a president to whom there is no alternative – suited the country perfectly. Russia's political maturing was eventually subjected to a tough logic that stems from the very nature of the imitational system and admits that there is a limited choice of options. From that moment on, little depended on Yeltsin or his successor.

THE LOGIC OF RUSSIA'S DEVELOPMENT AFTER 1991

A detailed analysis of all aspects of the logic of imitational democracy would take too much space, therefore I will only provide a brief summary here.

Expansion of the sphere of non-alternativeness. The need to maintain a non-alternative system of presidential power presumes a persistent widening of control over political life and the elimination of threats on "the approaches that are even further away to find."

First and foremost, the establishment of the system of a non-alternative presidency means that there will be a conflict with other branches of power leading to their subordination, or an actual elimination of the distinctions between them. This happened in 1993, when Yeltsin forcefully disbanded the parliament (amid very weak resistance in society) and ensured the adoption of a Constitution that thoroughly suited his rule. A president cannot do without a Constitution in today's world, although any Constitution can be inconvenient for his or her personal rule.

The delivery of a Constitution that slashed the powers of the legislative branch was the first important step. Other measures naturally came in its wake. Since even a weak parliament is a threat if it falls into the hands of the opposition, it was necessary to gain control over the entire election process so that it would produce a priori acceptable results. This implies the "accountability" of regional and local agencies of power, which must guarantee the desired results of voting. The system of political parties, too, must be accountable. The latter thesis admits the existence of a fictitious and listless opposition, and of a pet party that echoes the presidential power-wielding camp and which becomes the dominant party. Presidential control spreads over to the mass media, and the judiciary turns into a de facto liege of the executive branch. Privatization is used as a tool for creating owners dependent on presidential power and who are interested in preserving that power. Oligarchs desiring independent political roles are nipped in the bud.

Yeltsin resolved major problems that emerged in the course of the evolution and strengthening of this non-alternative presidential power, and yet his successor Vladimir Putin inherited some of them. These problems logically follow one another. Had Yeltsin not been ill, had he not faced a tough choice between dying as president or giving up power, and had he continued ruling, he himself would have had to resolve the problems that Putin faced later. The evolution of other post-Soviet countries, like Belarus and Kazakhstan, testifies to the natural logic of these processes. They all had to cope with the same types of problems and had to do so in much the same way and order. The differences in the models of post-Soviet development largely stem from objective factors, such as specific national cultures or available resources, while subjective factors play a relatively small role.

Yeltsin and Putin had very different personalities, yet they were building the same system. Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev and Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko have little in common, yet the Belarusian and Kazakh systems have much in common. It is true that both Yeltsin's and Putin's personal traits could determine the style of resolving the tasks they faced, but not the essence of the tasks. For instance, Yeltsin's impulsive and rough manner influenced his choice of the bloody form in which he suppressed the disobedient Supreme Soviet (parliament) in 1993. Other CIS presidents, who disbanded their parliaments, did so without bloodshed. Still, Yeltsin could do nothing else than dissolve parliament. The practice of drawing contrasts between Yeltsin and Putin, so popular with Russian liberals, grows out of a misunderstanding that the difference between the Yeltsin and Putin eras is essentially the difference between various stages of the system's development (like the Leninist and Stalinist stages of the Soviet government) and the personal traits of the two leaders had but a minor role in this. (Their personal differences are linked to the laws of the system, too, and it was quite natural for Yeltsin to choose a person with qualities different from his own to resolve the tasks of the next phase of development.)

Social/economic development and its pace. In the post-Soviet social and economic development, natural logic also prevailed over subjective and personal factors. There was a natural logic in a privatization that boiled down to the de facto handing out of lumps of state property. This created a class of owners dependent on the powers that be. There was a natural logic in the use of semi-lawful methods of control over the owners, when the ones who were politically loyal got more incentives while the disloyal ones were driven into bankruptcy. And it was naturally logical to grab control over the most profitable key branches of the economy.

The cyclic nature of Russia's economic development also reveals internal logic. The transition from socialism to a market-based economy could not but entail a downhill industrial recession and plummeting living standards, and this was the case with all post-Communist nations. In all of these countries, economic recession was eventually followed by economic growth. It was based on how individuals and all of society adapted to new forms of economic life and on how new skills and habits developed. In Russia, this process was made easier by the presence of huge oil and gas resources and a jump in world energy prices – an accidental factor that is not part of the logic of development.

In this context, contrasting the "democratic" Yeltsin and the "authoritarian KGB" Putin is incorrect in the same way that associating the ruinous economy of the early 1990s with Yeltsin and the ensuing economic growth is with Putin. Had Yeltsin been alive and healthy now or had he nominated, say, former railway chief Nikolai Aksyonenko instead of Putin as his successor, economic growth would have begun all the same. The people would have either admired Yeltsin's wisdom or would have compared Aksyonenko's wise policies to Yeltsin's vicious ones.

Evolution of foreign policy. One more fallacy related to the personification of natural stages in the country's development is the conviction that under Yeltsin the West forced Russia to its knees and that Putin made the country stand up again.

In reality, although there is a difference in Russia's relations with the West under Yeltsin and Putin, it is much less significant than it is generally believed. During Putin's presidency, Russia began standing up against the West on diverse issues and in various regions, above all in the territory of the former Soviet Union where this opposition has often

resembled a local Cold War. But here, too, the changes are only slightly related to the personalities of the first Russian president and his successor.

The proclamation of a new independent, democratic and market-oriented Russia in 1991 could not but produce euphoria in relations with the West, and this thesis does not even need to be proved. But the subsequent evolution of the Russian state could not but entail a worsening of Russian-Western relations and a revival of elements of the Cold War. As the Russian system continued to develop, it kept distancing itself from the Western model. While at the initial stage some may have considered the discrepancy between Russia and the West as the aftermath of the “underdevelopment” of Russian society, eventually it became obvious that it had nothing to do with “underdevelopment,” but lay in a different vector chosen for the Russian political system’s evolution. Russia’s course essentially precludes a possibility of the country’s full-fledged integration into Western institutions, which cannot invite a hearty response with the West. Moscow, on its part, shows natural discontent with Russia’s low rankings in the West, as well as with sermonizing by the United States and Europe.

Given this situation, the discord in Russian-Western relations can only keep growing and Russia’s willingness to stand up to the West looks only natural. Add to this Russia’s “Great Power” disposition and traditional active geopolitical role, its legacy of a great power (nuclear weapons and a permanent seat on the UN Security Council), less financial dependence on the West as a result of the end of the transformation crisis and high energy prices, and the accumulation of huge financial reserves, and you will see that Putin’s personality plays but a small role in how Russia’s foreign policy has changed. The re-emergence of the Cold War in Russian-Western relations – albeit in a milder and non-ideological form – after the period of euphoria was as natural as the emergence of imitational democracy after 1991 and the economic rise that followed the economic recession during the transition period. Foreign policy just proved to fall in line with the overall natural course of post-Soviet transformation.

The above analysis explains that the events in 1991 carried the germ of today’s Russia. In 2008, Putin broke the internal logic of the country’s evolution when he decided to step aside after his second term (as the Constitution requires) and to become prime minister under his successor Dmitry Medvedev.

GETTING TO A FORK IN THE ROAD

In a genuine democracy, the Constitution is stable and state power regularly shifts from person to person and from party to party. In an imitational democracy, the power of a certain person (or a quasi-dynasty in which each ruler appoints a successor) does not change, while the Constitution can be changed based on a calculation of the here and now. This game does not have permanent rules, but it does have permanent winners capable of changing the rules. A number of post-Soviet presidents – Nursultan Nazarbayev, Islam Karimov, Imomali Rakhmon, Alexander Lukashenko and Askar Akayev – have on many occasions changed new Constitutions or “fixed” old ones with amendments that are always targeted at consolidating presidential power, lifting restrictions on presidential terms, etc. Kazakhstan, for example, has lived under three different Constitutions during Nazarbayev’s rule, and amendments to them were passed on more than ten occasions. Kazakhstan’s basic law is being violated all the time. Yeltsin ruled under two Constitutions, the second of which he custom-made for himself to get maximum levers of power. This allowed him to make radical changes in the system of governance without formally encroaching on the law. Yet the Constitution limited the president to two terms, since the end of those two terms was very far away when the Constitution was approved. Being in poor health, Yeltsin did not try to revise this restriction and resigned even before his second term expired. Putin is young, energetic and extremely popular, and he enjoys a much greater control over society than his predecessor did. A constitutional amendment enabling him to stay in office would have posed no problem for him, yet he vowed to follow the Constitution and leave office – something that obviously goes against the wishes of bureaucracy and the people. This is the first time in post-Soviet and all of Russian history when a ruler has voluntarily given up power.

There is no use in discussing the reasons for Putin’s move as another man’s mind is a closed book. It is the aftereffects and not the motives of this decision that are of the most concern for us.

In the first place, Putin’s decision marks a step toward the modernization of Russian mentality that was fashioned by centuries of Tsarist autocracy, which suggested that “once a Tsar, always a Tsar.” Second, it implies divesting supreme power of the sacral and personified properties. Third, it sets a precedent whereby a ruler submits himself to “a piece of paper” – the Constitution. His action raises the significance of law and makes it practically impossible for future presidents to extend their powers beyond two terms. Term restrictions for the highest office of power are something that Russian history has never seen before. More than that, the powers of the new president will from now on be limited by the presence of an active predecessor, who is in good health and who will take away with him part of the awe that he inspired in his fellow citizens while at the helm of government. Putin’s decision leads Russia away from the path typical of other imitational democracies, such as Kazakhstan and Belarus.

On the other hand, the system becomes less certain and less stable as it lacks full power and even shows signs of the emergence of a real division of powers. Putin’s decision to become prime minister under President Dmitry Medvedev –

seemingly meant to help the latter at the start, but which de facto weakens his “undivided” authority and even creates elements of dual power – only magnifies this instability.

This means that once again – the first time since 1991– Russia has come to a fork in the road; that is, at the opportunity to choose between different options. What are these options?

THE UNFOLDING OPPORTUNITIES

Imitational democracies are highly controversial (their form stands in a dramatic contrast with their content) and are thereby unstable and not durable enough. The more formal and predictable elections are, the less legitimate the government is (since only genuinely democratic elections can make the regime legitimate). Furthermore, tightening control over society only weakens the feedback from society to the authorities. Such regimes are inevitably doomed – sooner or later, with some kind of consequences. And I don’t think there are any alternatives here – few people would imagine that a chain of presidents handing the reins of power down to one another will last until the end of the 21st century. But if such regimes have an inescapable end, then there should be important alternatives regarding the form, term and aftershocks of their collapse.

The “post-Soviet experience” shows that liberal imitational democracies are less durable than more rigid “democratic” regimes which completely suppress the legal opposition. Leonid Kuchma’s regime in Ukraine was weaker than Lukashenko’s regime in Belarus. The former tumbled, while the latter is flourishing. Askar Akayev’s regime in Kyrgyzstan also collapsed, while Islam Karimov’s regime in Uzbekistan is in its prime. These facts lead us to the conclusion that the tougher you are, the more stability you have. The problem is that this conclusion, which most post-Soviet presidents seem to have arrived at after a series of ‘colored revolutions,’ is valid only in part, since a stabilization of this type implies great risks.

Imitational democratic regimes fell quite peacefully as the result of ‘colored revolutions’ timed for various elections. In the case of “soft” regimes, the opposition acted as an organized legal force capable of controlling masses of people and conducting negotiations. The parties to the political process recognized the Constitution, claims by the opposition that the authorities rigged the elections were easy to verify, and the election results could even be annulled. Manifestations of spontaneous and forcible events in such revolutions are minimal.

In case of more rigid regimes, like those in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, this option for development can be practically ruled out. A legal opposition is practically non-existent, elections have fully turned into a rite and no one has any hope in them. A regime thus prolongs its life, but its collapse will be catastrophic. The CIS has seen only one instance of a revolution in a country with a rigid regime – in Uzbekistan, which involved disturbances in the city of Andijan in 2005. It was a spontaneous explosion among masses of people who organized protests and put forth radical slogans. However, countries outside the CIS abound in instances of rigid regimes collapsing in disarray (the difference in the forms of collapse of more and less rigid regimes can be easily seen from the examples of the Somoza dictatorship in Nicaragua and the Institutional Revolutionary Party in Mexico).

A more significant alternative relates to the aftermaths rather than the forms and dates of a regime’s downfall. There are two options here – either the country changes over to a genuine democracy after the collapse of the imitational democratic regime or it gets another imitation, although of a different type, after a certain period of anarchy (something that happened in Indonesia after the fall of its first president, Soekarno and the ascent of his successor, Suharto, or what is evidently taking place in Kyrgyzstan now).

Naturally, the chances for changing over to genuine democracy are greater if society has assimilated more democratic values. A shift toward genuine democracy depends on the general process of development or modernization. It is clear, for instance, that in spite of the totalitarian nature of Communist rule, people in the former Soviet republics stood much closer to democracy on the cultural, social and psychological plane in 1991 than in 1917; they continue to assimilate democratic values under post-Soviet imitational democratic regimes. Any imitational democratic regime alludes to democratic values and thereby facilitates their taking hold in the mass consciousness. There is hardly any doubt that today’s Russia, with its experience of a market economy, ideological pluralism and practical political struggle, albeit restricted by the authorities, is much better prepared for democracy than the Russia of 1991, whose experience was confined to the Soviet government and tsarist autocracy. The more liberal an imitational democratic regime is, the greater its allusions to legitimacy are; and the broader the space of freedom it leaves, the more it lubricates the adoption of democratic freedoms. This means that it naturally rebounds to changing over to a genuine stable democracy and avoiding anarchy, from which there would be only one way – through a new totalitarianism.

It is worthwhile to look at the alternatives that sprang up after Putin’s move in precisely this light. If developments had continued in the same way as before 2008, the existing system would have broken apart and the series of presidents handing power down to one another would have fallen apart and there would have been a disastrous aftermath in Russia.

Of course this does not mean that Putin's decision to abide by the Constitution, which will most likely be reinforced by the clearly visible "legal orientation" of his successor, will secure a non-crisis transition to democracy in the future. The first ascent to power of a person who is not a designated successor is a crisis in itself. Yet in any event Putin's decision helps minimize the risks of an inevitable crisis and makes sure that this will be the last crisis before Russia becomes a genuine democracy.

Naturally, the unstable situation that Putin has created by his decision may have other outcomes, too. The system may see a further strengthening of legitimate foundations and experience a distancing from the mainstream trends of imitational democracies; a "personality reaction" cannot be ruled out either. The unfolding opportunity for the smooth development of democracy is just an opportunity and whether it materializes or not will depend on the steps taken by Medvedev, Putin and many others.

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