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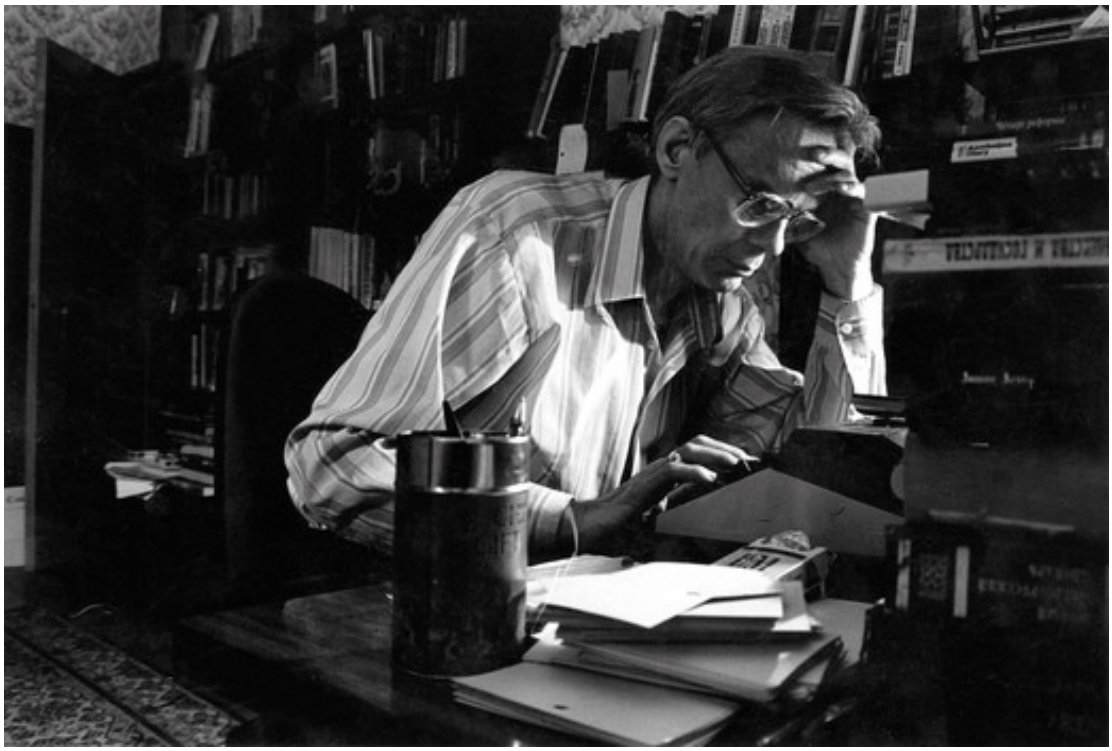
Imitation Democracy

Perry Anderson writes about Dmitri Furman's analysis of Russia's post-communism

The fall of Gorbachev brought Dmitri Furman's work as Russia's foremost student of religious systems to a reluctant end. Clear-sighted about what was coming under Yeltsin, Furman would henceforward be the best native analyst of Russia's post-communism. But that was not his only change of direction in 1991. Political commentary, punctual or long-range, was one thing, comparative inquiry of the kind that had driven his studies of religion was another. Where was that now best pursued? As nationalist ferment started to spread in the Baltic and Caucasian zones of the USSR, Furman told a member of the CPSU's Central Committee that nobody in Moscow knew what was going on in the outlying republics, and a research centre was urgently needed to study them. The proposal got nowhere. Instead, over the next twenty years, after the USSR had itself dissolved, Furman made himself into a one-man version of such an institute. Around Russia, 14 independent republics emerged, comprising virtually half of the population of the Soviet Union. By the time of his death in 2011 he had produced substantial work, typically though not invariably with local collaborators, on ten of them. Had he lived longer he would no doubt have completed the set.



Dmitri Furman

After 1991, there were two comparative frameworks in which the evolution of Russia would be conventionally situated. In the West, it was the former Soviet satellites of Eastern Europe that formed the obvious bank of reference. In Russia itself the intelligentsia, which did not appreciate such downsizing, compared developments in the country – for better or worse – with the West. In focusing instead on the ex-Soviet republics themselves, from Central Asia to the Baltic, Furman made not just an unusual hermeneutic decision. He selected a way to consider post-communist Russia that was not only deeply unfashionable but uncomfortable for his compatriots. What could Kyrgyzstan have to teach a Muscovite? Of his admiration for Gorbachev, Furman once wrote: 'I have never been a "patriot". I thought one doesn't choose one's country, though if one is born in it, one should try to improve it; I never wanted to leave for the West. But I was never proud of my country, although, unlike many of my acquaintances, I did not consider it an utterly dreadful and hopeless place. On the other hand, I didn't like associating with foreigners, for I always felt a little ashamed of being a Russian. It was only under Gorbachev that I started to experience a feeling hitherto unknown to me, pride in my country and its leader.' But just as he first spoke for Gorbachev when everyone else had abandoned him, so he turned to the fate of the other societies that had made up the USSR after it had disappeared from the map, and they had become mental cast-offs in the outlook of his countrymen. He had never felt any attachment to the state created by Lenin, yet in the disinterested commitment with which he threw himself into this enterprise, he became something like the last voice of Soviet internationalism. When he died a friend remarked that the union of republics that had gone was his true homeland.

As with his studies in comparative religion, so his work on comparative post-Communism

was not a mere taxonomy but a project at once of social science and political enlightenment, unified by a strong thematic intent. Russians needed to know far more than they did about their former fellow republics, and by doing so they would learn more about themselves, and the lessons they could draw from common experiences, and similar – or differing – patterns beyond them. The first republic he chose for his inquiry signalled that from the outset. Completed in August 1991, on the eve of the failed coup, and published soon afterwards, *The Emergence of Political Organisations in Contemporary Estonia* set what would become his agenda. At the turn of the 1990s, he wrote, the USSR offered a kind of controlled historical experiment for comparative research. Yet while there were in Moscow dozens of specialists on the United States, France or West Germany, there was not a single one on Georgia or Estonia. The Baltic republics, annexed by Stalin in 1940, formed a region of their own within the USSR. There political organisation under perestroika had first taken outspoken nationalist form. But unlike Russian nationalism, a self-destructive and anti-democratic force that could only lead to the end of the USSR, in Estonia there was no contradiction between the national and democratic movements. All three Baltic states would become democratic republics, but of the trio, elections had been most free in Estonia, the atmosphere calmest, and prospects for democracy best. That was in keeping with its past. If the interwar period had seen weak parties, rising fascist movements and a slide to authoritarian rule in all three, there were significant differences between them. In Lithuania, a Catholic society, political conflicts had been most violent, the regime of the local strongman – hailed by Mussolini – akin to models in the Mediterranean. Latvia had been pulled between Russian and Polish influences. Estonia, enjoying the benefits of a Lutheran church and Swedish connections, produced the mildest dictatorship of the three. The effects of this past were still visible: the region was like an ancient building, walls and ceiling decorated in intricate and variegated patterns, plastered over and daubed with a single colour (red), which when plaster and paint started to crumble could be discerned beneath them.

Returning to the Baltic states a decade later in a volume covering all three, Furman noticed how little interest they took in one another, resisting mutual comparison. That was natural enough, since comparison can lead to evaluation, and so a hierarchy potentially injurious either to neighbours or oneself. But, of course, if comparison along one social or cultural dimension can produce a given assessment, comparison along others may generate different judgments. None yields an all-purpose standard. The Baltic republics had enjoyed a number of past advantages under tsarism which in different ways had persisted after their reincorporation in the Soviet Union. Protestant and Catholic churches had spread literacy earlier. Both confessions were more favourable to independence of thought than Russian Orthodoxy. Moreover, the region had never known a native absolutism, while in the tsarist Russian empire, German and Polish nobles in the Ostland and Lithuania had possessed corporate privileges which their counterparts in Russia did not, rights on which they

continued to insist in the face of later policies of Russification, transmitting to the indigenous populations below them, who enjoyed no such rights, a sense of the law absent in Russian popular culture.

Independence came contingently with the defeat of both Russia and Germany in the First World War, and with barons and *szlachta* gone, the smallness of the three countries gave each a social cohesion the vast Russian spaces lacked. Had they not known twenty years of statehood between the wars, increasing assimilation and further immigration might have reconciled them to existence within a federal Russia. As it was, four decades of Soviet rule could not extinguish their memory of independence, and paradoxically prepared them the better for achieving it with a democratic stability they had never known between the wars, since it unified what had once been ideologically very divided and polarised communities, and economically developed them to higher levels of income and education than Russia itself. Once perestroika opened a political space for local nationalism, it was Lithuania that took the lead, both because the Russian population was far smaller – Catholic birth rates offering less room for immigration – and because the Catholic Church could give the movement an immediate international support that was not available in the same way in Latvia or Estonia. But after independence. the roles were reversed, Lithuania becoming by economic and cultural indicators the laggard of the trio, and Estonia the lead.

Compared with Russia, however, all three countries were models of post-communist success, flourishing democracies with governments alternating in office and economies operating without system-wide corruption. Russians, Furman concluded, should not be discouraged but should take heart from their example. For what was striking was the force of attraction of the new Baltic republics for the Russians living in them. Although by no means always enjoying full citizenship, and inevitably the object of residual suspicion or prejudice, Russians in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, as every poll made clear, appreciated the kind of life they could lead there, not a few having voted for independence from the outset. This was a preference that expressed, in Furman's view, a deep dissatisfaction of Russians with themselves, at once a longing to be truly European and a disbelief that they would ever be so, often covered up with a swaggering chauvinism and xenophobic postures. In the Baltic states, however, Russians were showing that such dissatisfaction could, in the right conditions, be a spur to a spirit of enterprise and learning, a modern self-confidence based on new social habits and values. In due course, they might become like Chinese immigrants in the United States, all the more energetic and successful for the handicaps they had to overcome, and like them offering role models to compatriots at home.

These were later reflections. After his first study of Estonia, Furman turned his attention a year later to another neuralgic zone of nationalism in the last years of Gorbachev, where religion played a far more central role, and there was no such peaceful outcome. Fighting had

broken out between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh in 1988, with reciprocal ethnic cleansing escalating to full-scale war in late 1991. In the USSR, Armenia had not only produced a unitary national movement before any other republic; the scale and duration of the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh exceeded that of any other struggle in the former Soviet lands. Yet the oppression of the Armenian population by the Azerbaijani authorities in whose territory it lay was not great enough to account for this. What could explain the peculiar intensity of Armenian national investment in the enclave? In Furman's view, two fundamental historical experiences had shaped it. The first was the fateful choice of the Armenian clergy in the fifth century for a quasi-Arian version of Christianity, a primordial heresy for what would become the Orthodox and Catholic Churches. The option for a Miaphysite faith led to the creation of a sui generis script and liturgical language that cut Armenians off from the rest of Christendom, leaving them only with the weakest of links to Copts or Syriacs. The result was a fusion of ethnicity with religion not unlike that of the Jews, minus the conviction of being uniquely chosen by God. Armenia was also a perpetual buffer zone between Byzantium and Persia, and later the Ottoman and Safavid empires, criss-crossed by their armies, and subject to mass deportations, producing a worldwide diaspora of traders and financiers like that of the Jews, if without demographic loss of a homeland.

Then in the 20th century, the Armenians were victims of a Turkish genocide, as the Jews would be of a German. Since there was still a core Armenian territory, with the collapse of the tsarist and Ottoman empires in the First World War the goal of the Armenian national movement was an independent state *in situ*, rather than a colonisation in Palestine. But caught between the Russian Revolution and the threat from Turkey, the dominant Dashnak party opted for the safety of the Bolsheviks and integration into the Soviet Union – no match for the Zionist triumph in the creation of Israel. So the trauma of the genocide found no catharsis, its memory continuing to haunt a people and a diaspora possessed of a millennial cultural-historical identity. When perestroika came, Armenia had far the oldest continuous national movement in the USSR, going back to the last decade of the 19th century, and among the various republics could lead the way in the drive for independence. Once it was launched, however, the recovery of a virtually contiguous Armenian community under the rule of another Turkic oppressor became the nearest compensation within reach for the original trauma – the bid to retrieve it triggering Azeri pogroms against the Armenian minority in Azerbaijan proper, in a fatal reproduction of the trauma itself. The Moscow intelligentsia, Furman argued, had been thoroughly irresponsible in supporting Armenia down this road, which was bringing misery and dislocation, amid a flood of refugees in each direction, to both countries. The only path to peace was autonomy for Nagorno-Karabakh within Azerbaijan.[1]

Of Azerbaijan, writing a decade later, Furman – a frequent visitor to Baku, where he had many Azeri friends – was at pains to dwell on the positive side of the record. Contrary to the

expectations of prejudiced liberal opinion, it was not Islamic nationalism but a popular front that led the overthrow of the corrupt communist regime in place after the Soviet break-up, and won democratic elections in 1992. Its victory had not been durable, because of the strains of the war with Armenia, and the strength of clan ties in Azeri society. But there was a prehistory behind it that gave hope for the future. Azerbaijan was the Muslim society with the longest history of European colonisation in the world, which in the aftermath of the Great War had produced an advanced democratic movement, giving birth to a short-lived independent republic, with a flourishing cultural life – press, theatre, even opera. With the return of the Aliev clan to power in 1993, authoritarian rule had been restored. But the country's chances of democratisation, Furman thought, were greater than in any of the Central Asian republics. Russia had a great deal at stake in a peaceful and progressive modernisation of the world of Islam, both because of the length of its borders with it, and the number of its citizens who were Muslim. Islamic fundamentalism was an illness of the passage to modernity, but it was a more epidermic, less dangerous variety than those Christianity had produced – fascism, Stalinism – in the 20th century. It was wrong to exaggerate its menace. The memory of Azeri democracy would not go away.

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Writing in 1997-98 about the two Slav republics to break away from Russia, Furman viewed them with the same temperate optimism. Ukrainians and Russians were brother peoples, but sibling conflicts were normal. If the Russian empire survived the First World War as the Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian did not, that was because Bolshevik internationalism, which was genuine, held it together. Under Stalin, however the logic of an imperial space controlled from Moscow took over, and an earlier Ukrainian nationalism, never general but equally never extinguished, came to acquire a new intensity, becoming more anti-Russian than, say Estonian or Armenian nationalism, just because of the cultural closeness of the two communities. Here, less linguistically secure, nationalists needed to counterpose Ukrainian difference all the more strenuously. The result was the construction of a mythology of diuturnal Ukrainian national identity, and a countermyth denying that the Ukrainians were in any way distinct in Russia. Where the regional context was most hospitable to an ideology of Ukrainian nationalism, it was capable of inspiring prolonged guerrilla resistance – by their own lights, Bandera's fighters put up a heroic struggle against Stalin's rule in Galicia, lasting into the 1950s. Elsewhere, Soviet industrialisation and urbanisation led to much unforced Russification, even as official policies promoted the Ukrainian language.

When the Soviet Union broke up, the power of national ideologies was fading across much of the world, and in neither Russia nor Ukraine were they truly strong. A pragmatic de-ideologisation was visible on both sides. Russian attitudes to Ukraine shifted from denial of its existence as a separate nation to denial of its right to join Nato – milder than Spanish

attitudes to Catalonia or the Basque country, or France to Corsica. Tensions certainly persisted. Culturally, there was reluctance among many educated Ukrainians to study the language, since Russian was so much richer in literature and thought, a tendency resented by other Ukrainians. But if Russian culture was 'higher' than Ukrainian, and the Russian nation older, that was no more an intrinsic superiority than the difference in height between two individuals. Politically, on the other hand, Ukraine was more advanced than Russia. The parliament in Kiev had not been bombarded by tanks, or the constitution fabricated by and for one man. The country had no special authoritarian tradition, and no great power mindset. It was true, however, that the imperfect degree of democracy it had achieved rested on a balance in the country between sharply distinct regions: if all of Ukraine were like Galicia or all like the Donbass, it would be less democratic. Yet these divisions were also, of course, a source of destabilisation. The Crimea, a special case whose allocation to Ukraine by Khrushchev was so recent, was no doubt a wound to Russia. But there were grounds for hoping that one day its status might be as uncontroversial as a Euxine Alsace.

Belarus was an odder story, though in a sense less depressing than at first sight. No former Soviet republic was less ready for independence: to the vaguest, least national self-consciousness – a far cry from Scotland or Catalonia – independence came not as the fruit of a struggle, but as a shock from the outside, as too did the arrival of the market. Some republics – the Baltics – were well prepared for both; others in the Caucasus or Central Asia just for independence. Belarus was equipped for neither. Ironically, its first genuine act of self-determination was the election of Lukashenko in 1994, the product of a popular reaction that owed nothing to either Moscow or the West, the revolt of the countryside and the least well-off against a thin liberal elite in Minsk. No one's puppet, Lukashenko then entrenched himself in power by every available means. Paradoxically, however, his authoritarian rule awakened for the first time a real democratic tendency in Belarus, while Lukashenko himself could not operate altogether without the market. His regime could therefore be seen as a phase in the evolution of the people of Belarus from an ethnic group to a self-aware democratic nation, whose relations with Russia could and should in the long run resemble those between Canada and the United States.

Where Belarus acquired independence without lifting a finger for it, Chechnya – which had autonomous, not republican status in the USSR – was denied it in a sea of blood. Writing in 1999, after the first Chechen war launched and lost by Yeltsin, and just before the second unleashed by Putin, Furman had no hesitation in comparing the struggle of the Chechens against Russia to the valour of the Greeks against the Persian Empire. What had made it possible, and was little understood, were the unique characteristics of Chechen society within the ethnic maze of the North Caucasus. Unlike the neighbouring peoples – Kabards, Ingush, Ossetians and the rest – the Chechens had no chiefs or lords of a quasi-feudal type. Chechen

society was made up instead of an egalitarian system of warrior-peasant clans, whose values of freedom and equality spelled at once a defiant refusal to obey others and a propensity to engage in destructive conflicts over goods or honour – epic solidarity and anarchic rivalry. The Russian empire required a huge effort to conquer the Chechens, because there were no elites to co-opt as elsewhere in the Caucasus. It took a struggle of 75 years, from 1785 to 1859, to crush Chechen resistance.

When tsarism collapsed in the First World War, the Chechens rose up for their independence, and when the Second World War came, Stalin deported them en masse to Central Asia, where one out of every three died. Against this background, there was no chance that Chechens would submit to the Russian Federation that Yeltsin carved out of the USSR in 1991, while every full-status republic was getting independence automatically. If Russians found it difficult to understand why – Furman, typically, told his compatriots – they would do well to imagine themselves colonised by China and deported to exile in the Gobi. However much they might come to appreciate the poetry of Li Bai and Du Fu, their deepest dream could only be liberation from Beijing.

After the successive catastrophes they had suffered at Russia's hands, every Chechen sought survival beyond the reach of Moscow. In the other autonomous republics, as elsewhere, there was a nomenklatura that had presided over the integration of local society into the Soviet system – intellectuals and bureaucrats who could now feather their nest within post-communist Russia. In Chechnya, deportation and repression had blocked this, preserving the tribal values and psychology of a clan system, and with it a warrior willingness to fight, kill and die that professors and functionaries would never have. After Yeltsin's consolidation of power in 1993, great power impulses in the Muscovite elite threw Russian troops into Chechnya. Completely unprepared for counter-insurgency and compensating for their lack of motivation with every kind of cruelty, they suffered a massive defeat at the hands of fighters scarcely more numerous than Russian generals.

But in a tragic dialectic, the extraordinary victory of the Chechens in war led to a terrible defeat in peace. All they gained in the battlefield was a devastated land and international isolation; and once the war was over, the anarchy of traditional Chechen society – its rejection of authority as such – reappeared. Order broke down as martial virtues became civil scourges. In a culture driven inwards, with little understanding of the outside world, Islam trumped secular nationalism but – itself divided between sufi sects and neo-Wahhabite rigorism – could not stabilise a community coming apart amid the postwar ruins. Furman was writing just as the second Russian invasion of Chechnya was in preparation. By the time his text was in press, war had broken out. He made just two predictions. If Chechnya was reconquered, avengers with bombs would arrive in Russian cities, and any normal democratic development in Russia would be crippled. Seven years of occupation later, Furman ignored

'the grimaces of international law' for which he had shown misplaced respect in Nagorno-Karabakh: it was now plain that in the longer run independence was the only workable solution.

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In his last years, the focus of Furman's comparative research tightened to the fate and future of democracy in the ex-Soviet republics. His two final studies, of republics at opposite ends of the former Russian empire, Moldova and Kyrgyzstan, were clearly chosen because each offered the spectacle of an unpredictable democratisation that intrigued him. Moldova was marked out, in his view, by the most contradictory ethnic self-consciousness of any post-Soviet state. Romanian-speaking when it was conquered by Russia in 1812 and became the tsarist province of Bessarabia, it knew twenty years of integration into Romania between the wars, before it was re-annexed by Stalin in 1940 and restored to the USSR in 1944. Under Stalin, contact of any kind with Romania was held to an absolute minimum, Latinisation of the alphabet forbidden, and a slither of adjacent Russophone territory beyond the Dniester added to dilute the predominance of a Romance language. When controls were loosened under perestroika, the local intelligentsia – whose longer-term aim was irredentist, a reunification with Romania – joined forces with agrarian bureaucrats in an alliance at the forefront of republican breakaways from the Soviet Union. But once Moldova became independent, Transdniestria riposted with a declaration of secession from it, the local nomenklatura did not want to give up its prebends to Bucharest, and Moldovan society as a whole – now two-thirds Romanian-speaking – had across a century and a half become so habituated to separation from Romania that irredentism could muster no more than about a sixth of the electorate.

In this situation, with the intelligentsia still hankering for reunion with Romania, the Moldovan elite targeting the recovery of Transdniestria, and the Transdniestrian nomenklatura playing up the dangers of absorption by Romania, the local Communist Party under its capable leader Voronin – a *kolkhoznik* from Transdniestria – unexpectedly proved the democratic joker in the pack, winning two elections in succession with close to 50 per cent of the vote. Not social-democratic, but unrepentantly Leninist in ideology, it nevertheless fought off Putin's attempt to foist on Moldova an authoritarian presidency modelled on the Russian system, and brought stability to the republic, showing it could work even with reunionists. Three-cornered conflicts of identity proved in the event to be not an obstacle to but a condition of democracy in Moldova. It was a 'democracy by default', but one where parliamentary rules of the game looked as if they were being increasingly internalised.

Alone among the Central Asian republics, Kyrgyzstan had seen authoritarian rulers twice unseated in popular revolts, each time with a major rising in Bishkek, its capital, crowds

storming the presidential palace: the first ousting the ludicrous Western pet and one-time physicist Akaev – the 'Jefferson' of his people for Strobe Talbott, the 'Kennedy of Central Asia' for the Clinton regime at large – on whose bald pate a drunken Yeltsin once tapped out a melody with wooden spoons; the second his brutish replacement, the former economic functionary Bakiev. As in Ukraine, but more turbulently, the regional division of the country, between a nomadic but earlier conquered and more Russified, as well as more cultured and prosperous north, and an earlier Islamised and poorer, sedentary south, created difficulties for the entrenchment of a strongman, inevitably from one part of the country or the other, in neither of which was there any tradition of Russian-style reverence for rulers; clan ties tending to weaken central power too. The result was a cycle of rebellions in a society where it was easier to make an urban revolution than to hold a fair election. But with the overthrow of its latest oppressor, the chances of a democratic evolution had improved: the Kyrgyz leaders to emerge from it had learned some political lessons from the past, and introduced a parliamentary constitution – the only one in the region – with a unique provision, a ceiling of 65 seats out of 120 for the winner of any election, no matter the size of their vote at the urns. The Kyrgyz example was to be respected.[2]

It was the largest of all the post-Soviet republics that produced the most pregnant analysis in Furman's studies of the 'Commonwealth of Independent States' created after break-up of the USSR. Culturally and historically, there were vast differences between Kazakhstan and Russia. But politically, Kazakhstan was much closer as a type of regime to Russia than was Ukraine, whose cultural and social contrasts with Russia were by comparison slight. It was a general lesson: structure could predominate over culture – it was enough to consider the similarity of the apotheosis of their rulers in two such dissimilar societies as North Korea and Turkmenistan. What Russia and Kazakhstan shared was that each society was quite unprepared for the dissolution of Soviet power, both lacking either democratic experience or any clear notions of a good society, and fearing too much freedom. Such was the originating matrix of the 'alternativeless presidencies' each acquired at the outset of their post-communist development, which path-dependency had since reinforced. In his road to power and his exercise of power, Nazarbayev combined the traits and trajectories of Yeltsin and Putin, showing that much which looked contingent or arbitrary in Russia was actually lawlike and predictable.

From the beginning the Kazakh regime was more authoritarian than the Russian, and perhaps for that reason posted better economic growth in the 1990s. But it also faced, for a time, more robust opposition, since here – unlike in Russia – liberals and communists made common cause against it. In the background, too, lay rivalry between the three *juz* – 'hordes' – into which Kazakh society was divided, the Junior and Middle resenting the dominance of the Senior horde that formed Nazarbayev's political base; and the problem of succession,

which in these systems nearly always triggered conflict and a temptation among competing elites to appeal to the masses for support. What the Kazakh case made clear, however, was how post-Soviet regimes should essentially be classified. The key to a taxonomy was whether or not any rotation of power was possible in them. As of 2004 Furman thought Ukraine and Georgia might become countries where this could occur; in Russia, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan it had not, though legal oppositions were permitted; in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan neither was on the agenda. The dominant pattern was a distinctive type of rule, the shame-faced authoritarianism of societies that could not live democratically, but also could not confess the fact, generating systems that pretended otherwise. These were – the first time he used the term – 'imitation democracies'. They were not ready for the real thing. In a moment of candour, Nazarbayev once said: 'We cannot create democracy. We can only sweat it out.' But there could be no smooth evolution from what was simulated to what was genuine. Democracy required the fall of these regimes.

Their common origin, Furman argued, lay in a widespread fear of anarchy across the space of the former USSR, generating an anxious popular demand for the reimposition of order. That brought to power strongmen who, while preserving a façade of it, neutered democracy in similar style. The pattern was more or less invariant: conflicts between president and parliament, in which the former crushed the latter; proclamation of a new constitution to seal the victory of the winner; manipulation of electoral procedures and rigging of votes; then privatisation of public assets to consolidate autocratic power, distributing these not to the former nomenklatura but to outsiders dependent on the ruler (often enough Jewish, as in *Hofjuden* of old: the Berezovskys and Khodorkovskys), with little or no chance of creating a mass following. These were systems that emerged where conditions were not ripe for democracy, but no ideological alternative to it existed. Their stability was illusory, for they lacked any feedback mechanism to signal either social change or the erosion of their legitimacy by corruption and repression, moments of danger typically coming when electoral fraud became so blatant that it provoked mass demonstrations, as in the 'colour revolutions' of Ukraine, Georgia and Kyrgyzstan. But these were possible only in relatively mild variants of imitation democracy. In tougher – Uzbek or Turkmen – versions, real revolutions more like the Iranian would be necessary to overthrow the dictators in place.

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Where did Russia fit into this typology? In 2010, Furman set out his view of its long-run political development in a work whose title – *Dvizhenie po spirali*, 'A Spiral Movement' – is a semaphore of its argument. Across half a millennium, Russia had known three political systems: tsarism, communism and imitation democracy. Each had traced the same structural path, which could be modelled as a lawlike progression from infancy through maturity to senility. In a first phase, corresponding to the epoch of Ivan IV and the Time of Troubles in

the construction of the autocracy, and the Civil War to Collectivisation under communism, the system was still quite fragile, facing dangers that could have put an end to it; in a second, it had consolidated itself, and offered every outward sign of stability (say, from Poltava to the Holy Alliance, or High Stalinism); in the last, it declined into an enfeebled sclerosis – from Crimea to Father Gapon, or the twilight era of Brezhnevism. In a far briefer span of time, imitation democracy was repeating the same cycle: vulnerable infancy in the chaotic years of Yeltsin, stabilisation as a consolidated system with the arrival of Putin, and now symptoms of decay as society was starting to escape the regime.

Yeltsin's rule had been precarious because its social base was so limited: essentially younger political careerists for whom the change of regime offered rapid upward social mobility, elements of the former nomenklatura, bought off by the handing over of state assets to them, and the intelligentsia. As the most vocal prop of his system, however, the intelligentsia was not only numerically a weak force. Professing democratic values while clinging to a patently undemocratic regime, it was ideally and morally a broken reed. Casting off his early supporters and crushing his parliamentary opponents, Yeltsin entrenched his personal power, but the mass of the population remained anti-capitalist, and he could win even manipulated elections only as a known, rather than unknown, evil. Putin, on the other hand, acquired the support of all social strata in Russian society. In part, this was because of rapid economic growth fired by high oil prices after 2000; in part because he broke the oligarchs of the 1990s; in part because by the end of his reign, Yeltsin's odium was such that any successor was bound to be more popular.

Russian liberals found the concatenation that led from Yeltsin to Putin as difficult to acknowledge as Bolsheviks had the evolution from Lenin to Stalin. But Putin was not the creator of the Russian system of imitation democracy; he simply completed it. His second-term presidency was its golden age: Chechnya reconquered, parliament tamed, oligarchs become dependents, media under control, no serious opposition parties, fast economic growth, entry to the G8. No tsar or general secretary had ever enjoyed such power in society based so little on fear. But this apogee was not a function of any personal attribute of Putin, who was no more responsible for the Russian economic growth of the period than Aliev or Nazarbayev was for the still faster growth of the Azeri or Kazakh economies. Nor had it staying power. Already by 2008, the system was beginning to irritate people, and look less functional. Central Asian rulers could perpetuate their presidencies by invoking the menace of Islamic fundamentalism, claiming as their merit the newfound independence of their countries, and paying scant heed to Western opinion. But for Putin to do the same required a constitutional change that risked undoing the democratic façade of the system and abandoning its claim to belong to the comity of Europe. So instead Medvedev was put in the Kremlin as a placeholder. But his liberal gestures were few and inconsequential, merely

confirming the impression that the system had reached its limit and was starting to undermine itself.

Essential to its legitimacy was preservation of an illusion of electoral choice. But as the regime evolved, its elections became ever more fictive, even as society became increasingly aware of the fiction, emergent generations ever less deceived by its façade. Within the system itself, moreover, negative cadre selection set in. At its outset, strong characters and adventurers of every stripe – from Sakharov to Zhirinovsky, Lebed to Berezovsky – could emerge and make their mark. But once it stabilised, the career paths of its functionaries produced weak characters, Chernenko-like nullities of the lowest moral-intellectual level, as ever tighter control at the top eliminated potential rivals, yielding the crop of Putin's 'vegetables' below. This was a much quicker process than in the Soviet system, in part an extension of the final degeneration of the latter – though even late Soviet bureaucrats had often started out with some ideal motives that were now non-existent, the only glue holding the system together having become corruption. At the first sign of danger, this stratum would jump ship. So de-ideologised had the final levies of the Soviet elite become that they put up virtually no resistance to the anti-communist revolution of the 1990s. The same would be even truer of the post-Soviet elite, whose only drive was personal enrichment.

Ideologically, the early phase of the post-communist system possessed some semblance of coherence, in its claim to be 'returning to the civilised world', even as its actual movement was towards an alternativeless presidency. But once that was in place, it could posit no further goals. It could neither claim to be an ideal order for Russia, nor concede that it was merely a temporary makeshift. Self-preservation alone, in a pyramid of patron-client networks, supplied its motive force. Words and deeds no longer bore any relationship to each other. The ideology of the regime was a garbled mishmash of ersatz traditionalism (principally Orthodox Christian) and a cult of Soviet stability and might (not revolution or socialism), hailing tsarist and KGB gendarmes alike as statesmen, television channels depicting Komsomols as heroes in one programme and Lenin as a maniac in the next. So too, in the absence of any ideological coherence such as the Soviet system even in its decadence had possessed, the regime's foreign policy lacked any consistent vocabulary or motivation. There could hardly be a struggle for the global triumph of imitation democracies. The result was a diplomacy whose course could only be impulsive and irrational.

This brittle, ageing organism was bound to enter into crisis. The least painful exit from the regime of imitation democracy would be a self-dismantling of it from above, of the kind Gorbachev had attempted of the Soviet system. But whereas he could enhance his position and popularity by launching perestroika, any comparable initiative by Putin or his successors would involve weakening their personal power by permitting an opposition capable of ousting the regime, psychologically unthinkable for them. The best that could be hoped for in this

direction would be a split in the elite and swift surrender to the street, as Shevardnadze had capitulated in Georgia. But colour revolutions of that kind presupposed the existence of a strong legal opposition, which the Russian variant of imitation democracy excluded. The likelihood was that the very stability of Putin's rule would, on the contrary, precipitate some disaster for the country, as the stability of tsarism had in 1917, and Brezhnevism had in 1991.

The life cycle of the post-communist system was moving, Furman concluded, towards its inevitable end. Transition to a genuine democracy might follow it, with a society that had been further modernised, and the rise of a generation no longer fearful of power, but – much as the generation of the 1960s had taken the absence of terror for granted – one that took the freedoms gained since 1990s for granted, and wanted more. In such a scenario, the spiral would move upwards, Russia's third attempt at democracy at last succeeding. But deep psychic traits of traditional Russian society – fright at disorder, submission to power – persisted alongside more modern ones, and there was a danger that its elites could turn their coats with a sudden switch to the new order, as in 1991. Rather than a successful exit, there might be yet another democratic failure, as so often in the past in Latin America. But, in the long run, an exit would come.

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There remained a large further question, however. The chances for Russian democracy as a political system were one thing, its framework as a territorial state another, though they were certainly interconnected. Furman's prospecting across the long arc of ex-Soviet republics around Russia had given him the conceptual tools for understanding the character of the post-communist regime in Moscow. But beyond their affinity at the level of structure, how should their relations at the level of power be viewed? Five years before *Dvizhenie po spirali*, Furman had devoted a long essay to the history and future of the Russian empire, a subject to which he returned in his last major article before his death. These two reflections form the necessary pendant to his account of the spiral of political development within Russia itself.

Here Furman's starting point was also comparative, this time with Europe. There, in the 19th and early 20th centuries, the creation of a nation-state had been the normal pattern of historical development. It could be called an entelechy of the time. The rise of democracy and of the nation had gone together, the right to self-determination taking its place alongside the right to freedom of expression and association and the expansion of the suffrage, as common dimensions of popular sovereignty. The unification of Germany and Italy as nation-states, followed by the break-up of the dynastic empires of the Habsburgs and the Ottomans, were characteristic examples of this process. Nothing like this, however, occurred in Russia. There the entelechy of the nation went missing, and even today the link between democracy and nationality had not crystallised. Russian self-consciousness remained caught in an imperial

cocoon. Viewed historically, Russia was a multi-ethnic empire long before it acquired even a proto-national identity – the very term *Rossiya* being a late Petrine invention. Its elites were defined first and foremost by their ties to the dynasty, not ethnicity, and among its subjects Russians enjoyed no special rights, indeed could have lesser privileges than others.

So when a Russian nationalism eventually emerged, unlike the national movements of 19th-century Europe or those of other ethnicities within the tsarist empire, its hallmark was the pursuit of two incompatible goals, the creation of a purely Russian government and the preservation of the empire. That stamped it as reactionary from the start. For it could never appeal to democratic principles, as every other nationalism under tsarism could, since these spelled the dissolution of the empire. On its side, the tsarist regime could only view Russian nationalism with reserve, since its appeal was not to dynastic loyalty but ethnic identity, and its claims were a provocation to other subjects of the empire, fanning their own national feelings. But though the tsars and their ministers saw the dangers of Russian nationalism subverting unconditional loyalty to the house of Romanov, once confronted with the still greater danger of revolutionary socialism they found some use for it, and gradually accommodated to its expression in the Black Hundreds. Still, a basic tension between the two persisted down to the end of the autocracy.

If, unlike its Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman counterparts, the Russian empire survived the First World War, it was paradoxically the committed internationalism of the Bolsheviks – in the Civil War, Reds were a lesser evil than Whites for non-Russian nationalities – that preserved it. Lenin's detestation of Great Russian chauvinism was well advertised. Deliberately, the state the Bolsheviks went on to build – the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics – lacked any territorial or ethnic markers. Beneath the designation, of course, the reality was constitutively ambiguous throughout. Alone among the Soviet republics, the RSFSR had no party or academy of its own, yet its demographic weight ensured Russian dominance of the union as a whole, in a hierarchy that was always unequal. In the 1930s, script and teaching in sister republics were Russified; yet at the same time, local languages were fostered, and a panoply of institutions created local elites and built cultural identities in them. This was still an imperial system, expanded by Stalin from the Baltic to the mouth of the Danube after the Second World War, and padded by control of Soviet satellites in Eastern Europe. But over time, as the 'socialist camp' divided and contracted – Yugoslavia, Romania and Albania in Europe, China and North Korea in Asia, peeling away from Moscow – and ideological energy drained from the CPSU itself, the pattern of late tsarist ambivalence re-emerged. In the Brezhnev period, Russian nationalism was once again both politically suspect and an ideological resort as the legitimacy of communism frayed, even as – this was the difference with tsarism – indigenous bureaucratic and intellectual elites were strengthening their positions in the outlying republics, over which the centre was insensibly losing control.

Perestroika struck this decreasingly coherent order a sudden sideways blow, unintended and to the end uncomprehended by its author. Gorbachev was acutely aware that the Soviet Union was ill, but the totalitarian system he inherited blinded him to the nature of its infirmities, like a doctor trying to cure a patient without knowing anything of his body. Revival of Leninism proving impossible, the vacuum left by Brezhnev's 'period of stagnation' could only be filled by the two ideologies closest to hand – democracy and nationalism. Welcoming after his fashion the first, Gorbachev was disconcerted by the second, which caught him completely by surprise, as it should not have done, since in the non-Russian republics the one was a natural concomitant – as it had been in 1905-6 – of the other. Confronted with national movements whose aims he rejected, he drew back from repressing them by force, as in contradiction with democratic values he accepted. Hamstrung by the ensuing tension in his attitude towards the new wave of nationalisms, Gorbachev failed to develop any responsible policy towards them at all.

Into the gap he left, Yeltsin moved without scruple, using Russian nationalism as a battering-ram to bring him down. Without playing on the resentment against the all-union structures of the USSR that had never given Russia the pride of place to which its primacy entitled it, Yeltsin and his supporters could not have gained the mass support they needed to capture power in the RSFSR, as the trampoline for overthrowing Gorbachev. Though their use of Russian nationalism was purely instrumental, it had the consequence which the monarchy of old had always feared: it undermined the Russian empire. That too became in turn a means for finishing off Gorbachev, with the deal in the Belovezhskaya Forest that brought the USSR to an end, and his presidency with it. In Russia, liquidation of the union without any popular mandate for it had two disastrous authoritarian effects. Yeltsin and his group could fear that they might be prosecuted for treason should they ever lose power, and so fortified themselves all the more rigidly in it. At the same time, popular fears that disintegration of a familiar world might go still further justified a ruler with an iron hand, if the country was not to fall into complete chaos. The road from the hunting lodge in Belarus led to the butchery in Grozny.

Humiliation in the first Chechen War was avenged by Putin in the second, and his regime could acquire a real mass base as a government saving Russia not only by crushing separatism and bringing order and prosperity to society at home, but restoring the country to its rank as a great power in the world at large. Russian nationalism could now for the first time become, overtly, the leading ideology of the state in a way it never could before. What were the implications for the imperial projection of the country? Though there was now a considerable Russian diaspora in ex-Soviet republics, Putin's government was careful not to fan irredentism, for fear of a backlash among the non-Russian minorities of what was officially proclaimed not a multicultural, but a multinational federation – in reality, a unitary

rather than a federal state; not to speak of the risk of counter-reactions in the peripheral republics themselves. The drive of the regime was towards not territorial expansion, but the re-creation of an imperial space in the shape of a zone of influence, sweeping across the 'Commonwealth of Independent States' nominally linking most of the former Soviet republics.

In this design, Russia was not without some resources. Its economy was much larger than that of any other member of the CIS; it possessed a long-standing military and bureaucratic apparatus, where other states had to create these from scratch; the culture of the post-communist elites in these republics often remained quite Russified; among local audiences, Russian television continued to be popular. There was also a natural affinity between the rulers of the various imitation democracies, who in a domestic crisis would tend to look to Moscow for support. All this gave Russia a number of levers for meddling in the affairs of its neighbours. But none of them wanted to be dominated by Russia, and though the CIS might at times have looked like a Holy Alliance of authoritarian presidents for their mutual protection, any inter-authoritarian integration of these regimes was no more practicable than schemes of Arab unity had been in the Middle East. For Russia itself, moreover, the CIS – whose running costs it paid – yielded no material advantages: its importance was essentially psycho-symbolic, as an after-image of empire.

Thus although, Furman commented in 2005, Putin's regime looked stable and in command of its environment, the 'rise' of Russia it trumpeted would be a very limited one, in time and space. The population of the country was declining; its mineral resources were finite; its cultural development was stunted; its control of rebellious regions was often nominal; it lacked any ideological power of attraction. The Orange Revolution in Ukraine had just broken the cordon sanitaire of imitation democracies around the regime in Moscow. A new Russian crisis lay ahead. Writing five years later, Furman was yet more pointed. The lesson of 1917 and 1991 was that any move towards democracy in Russia brought separatism to the surface as an inevitable by-product of free elections. In the 21st century, that meant the prospects were either disintegration of the 'mini-empire' of the Russian Federation, with a further shrinkage of its territory, or another rejection of democracy and suppression of separatism, driving its explosive charges deeper underground.

The independence of Chechnya and other allogenous communities, however, would not be a loss but a gain for the people of Russia. For what the country needed was a synthesis, long overdue, of national and democratic consciousness. Russia lagged behind Europe, entering its phase of modern national construction just as Europe was exiting it for another entelechy, of supranational development. Russia could not skip this stage, but it should be a short one, leading to entry into the EU. That might seem a fantastic notion today, but so did a peaceful dissolution of the USSR and adhesion of several of its republics to Nato yesterday. The

Russian empire would then finally come to an end, and Russians would simply live in their national home as the French or the Swedes in theirs.

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How, finally, should the particular trajectory of Russia be situated in a wider perspective? It was plain, Furman thought, that some logic or order existed in world history – it was not mere Brownian motion, but a patterned development. There was no way back from agricultural or pastoral to hunter-gatherer societies, just as literacy and the state could only come from the former, and contemporary forces of production emerge from their predecessors. However, not only the Marxist model of five successive modes of production but any such schema was untenable, because, as Popper had shown, human creativity is such that we cannot know in advance what we will know in the future, so the very basis of our evolution is in principle unpredictable. In 1900 who could have guessed the course of the 20th century?

Today, scientific and technical knowledge is accelerating at an ever faster pace. Paradoxically, however, the resulting acceleration of unpredictable changes in our world is something we can predict. The increase in our knowledge since the scientific discoveries of the 16th and 17th centuries makes that certain. Historically, one such advance was on a broader scale than any particular breakthrough. That was the discovery of the conditions necessary for the constant achievement of ever new discoveries – a form of society that not just contingently allowed for creativity, but was structured to give it room. The name of that society was democracy, and it would give birth to a second paradox. Politically speaking, Confucian China was a highly stable society. So too, from its birth to the present, has been US society. Unlike imperial China, however, the US was an open society from the start, programmed for continual, unpredictable economic and social change as knowledge evolved. Yet for an indefinite future nothing could be more strikingly predictable – David Runciman would arrive at the same observation in these pages some years later – than the regularity of American elections (*LRB*, 21 March 2013). So, Furman concluded, though the 21st century would be more unpredictable than the 20th in every other sphere of life, in the constitutional sphere it would be more predictable, as the growth of knowledge diffused the political forms conducive to it. There was no way of knowing how Russians would dress, eat, live, work or fear in the future, but it could be predicted with some confidence that they would choose their rulers at the ballot box, take decisions by a majority and guarantee the rights of the minority.

The growth of scientific and technical knowledge, widening our possibilities of living, was an objective process. But for social forms to emerge corresponding to it, changes in consciousness were required, accustoming people to the continual appearance of the new. When alterations of knowledge were minimal, dogmatic religion had prevailed. In more

dynamic conditions, dogmatic religion softened into weaker, more ephemeral ideologies promising earthly happiness. But by the end of the 20th century, these had faded – their remnants in North Korea, Iran or Afghanistan were like the survival of Stone Age tribes in New Guinea. So in Russia by 1991 there was no serious ideology left – only a vague market-romanticism, a noisy but insubstantial chauvinism, an eclectic traditionalism, all equally incapable of arousing the passion and dedication of socialist, anarchist or proto-fascist sects of old. De-ideologisation, a product of the tempestuous growth of knowledge, transformations of family life, de-dogmatisation of morality, continuous novelties in art, had set in. The revolution to come in Russia would be more sober than that of 1991, as that of 1991 was more sober than that of 1917. It would promise neither communism nor consumer prosperity in a trice, just the simple idea that rulers should depend on voters.

Was this merely a Western perspective? All discoveries, Furman observed, have a singular – individual or social – origin, but if they are significant advances, they become all-human. Inuit could not invent agriculture, but they now watch TV and sit in a parliament in Greenland. Societies that make important discoveries enjoy an initial advantage, but that is no grounds for conceit, since diffusion eliminates it. Literacy, mathematics and the state came first in the Near East, India and China, not in Europe. The principles of democracy originated in Western Europe, but in their appropriation lay a kind of entelechy in the development of any human society, which could only achieve political stability, even if a long and violent transition was typically necessary to attain it, by rooting them in its own soil. That passage was always particular to the society concerned, each of which had its own legacies to adapt or surmount. If China was at home with social mobility, but not political or ideological pluralism, and India the reverse, Russia had to contend with the opposing burdens of Orthodox obscurantism and Petrine reformism, driving a lasting wedge between elites and masses.

These were real difficulties, but it was wrong to exaggerate Russian exceptionalism. The October Revolution had been original, but the country's current lack of success in creating a democracy was entirely unoriginal. Russians needed to take a more matter-of-fact, less neurotic look at themselves. Compared, not unrealistically to England or France, but to other societies at a similar level of development, the position of Russia appeared rather average. In the coming century, it could not avoid the passage to democracy. That would not occur overnight, but by 2050 it was more likely that Russia would have ceased to exist than its imitation democracy would still exist. Ahead lay a third, inevitable attempt to create a real one.

The advent of democracy would not make people happier. Any human achievement, Furman observed, brings temporary satisfaction, but that soon passes and the balance of happiness and unhappiness typically remains unchanged. After years of sharing cramped and

inconvenient quarters on the outskirts of Moscow, he was delighted when he finally got a comfortable modern flat in the city. But the euphoria soon passed, and in time nostalgia for the woods, the neighbours and his youth began to colour memories of his earlier accommodation. So it would be when democracy was achieved in Russia. There would be pride and elation at the first free elections, but it would not last long. For future generations, the Soviet system would be as remote as tsarist autocracy and serfdom were for his own, a past they might look back on with a certain romantic nostalgia, as a time when people believed in something, had strong characters, and didn't have to worry about Aids or global warming. For them democracy would lose its glow, becoming a dry routine, as no doubt more difficult tasks confronted them. If it was the only adult way of living, adults are not necessarily happier than children. They may often look back with regret on childhood, but they can never revert to it.

Furman's last two books, *Dvizhenie po spirali* and *Kirgizskie Tsikly*, were written when he was dying. In 2008, he was diagnosed with motor neurone disease. After learning he had not long to live, he scarcely talked of it even to friends, until by 2010 he could hardly move, a solitary finger tapping the keyboard slowly to the end. His final months were lived as political speculation in Moscow turned to the presidential succession: would Medvedev achieve a second term or would Putin return to the Kremlin? Furman had little time for Medvedev's slogan of 'modernisation', the pursuit of which, he remarked, was as old as Russian backwardness itself, and inseparable from it – typically, the country's modernisers had merely reinforced its backwardness. To live in freedom required no special modernisation campaigns.

Still, a continuation of Medvedev and his weak talk of the rule of law and a place for the opposition was preferable to the re-enthronement of Putin, which would seal the decadence of the Russian system created in 1991. Should Putin decide to take the presidency once again, the regime would be heading for a Kyrgyz, Tunisian or Egyptian outcome, and Putin the fate of a Bakiev or Ben Ali, at the hands of a real – not a colour – revolution. Furman wrote this in February 2011. He was dead by July. Within six months, the scenario he had predicted as the most dangerous for any imitation democracy, the explosion of protests over too blatant a rigging of elections, had come to pass in Moscow. The reaction of the regime, escalating nationalist rhetoric and police repression, was what he would have expected. So too its fall-back to less educated and poorer layers of the population, on the outskirts of big cities and in the provinces, as its reserves of support – the mobilisation of periphery against centre that had once brought Lukashenko to power, and might preserve Putin's rule for a time. Nor would he have been surprised by the subsequent *fuite en avant* in Ukraine, yet without full throttle for irredentism in the Donbass. They accorded with the logic of preserving an imperial space, to which Russian nationalism had always been committed.

Furman's last two texts were valedictions. In the roll-call of Russian rulers, Gorbachev had been unique. Ordinary moral rules had no bearing on traditional conceptions of power: Catherine II and Alexander I were accounted great rulers, though one killed her husband and the other his father. To try to judge Gorbachev by these standards was like complaining Malevich lacked verisimilitude. He was the only Russian ruler who voluntarily limited his own power, and in six years freed a multitude of peoples whose conquest had taken centuries and countless lives. Future generations would understand, as his contemporaries did not yet, that he was the best thing in Russian history. Sakharov, whom he freed, had shown another kind of greatness, not of ideas, but of integrity. Psychologically too far from the masses – the nomenklatura was closer to them – and too idealist and doctrinaire to be a political leader, he was a voice of conscience, a figure who in 1989 was still calling for land to be distributed to peasants, factories to be handed to workers, and all power to be returned to the soviets. Could he ever have supported Yeltsin's privatisations and the shelling of the Duma, as his widow, Elena Bonner, did? He was lucky enough to die before having to witness them.

While he was alive, Furman could – after perestroika – publish as he wished: if few of his compatriots shared his outlook, no text of his was ever refused. But there was no engagement with his ideas either; they were too unconventional. The major statement of his account of Russian political development in the 20th century, *Dvizhenie po spirali*, met with complete silence. He received scarcely a telephone call after it came out. Knowing how little time he had left, he was discouraged, but felt no real surprise. Since he died, there has been a change, as friends have written of their memories of him, and with his family have created a website where most of his writing has become available. But his output was prodigious, with many still uncollected pieces. Any systematic consideration of his work has yet to come – no easy task, given the exceptional shape it took, unifying in a single compass the structure of most of the major religions, the broad sweep of Russian history since late tsarism, detailed tracking of the politics of post-communism across the whole space of the former USSR, and macro-sociological reflection on directionalities in world history. Few are qualified to pronounce on all four.

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Confronted with a body of work of this scope, some observations can be ventured at its edges. Furman's comparative analysis of world religions was broken off before he could arrive at Buddhism, as he doubtless otherwise would have done. But a more significant gap may be the absence of any sustained treatment of Catholicism, determined perhaps less by lack of time than tilt of interpretation. Unlike Weber, who contrary to his popular image was active in Protestant circles in Germany, Furman had no religious connections. His attitude to faith in the supernatural was detached, free from either apology or hostility; he would have agreed with the simple definition of it by Martin Riesebrodt, the most level-headed recent sociologist

in the field, that religion is essentially an appeal to superhuman powers to avert misfortune, overcome crises and furnish salvation.[3] That did not preclude admiration for the Reformers and their legacy. For Furman – an emphasis he shared with Weber, though his construction of it differed – Protestantism was the advance guard of Christianity in modern times, as it gradually shed its doctrinal integument. Sensing a temperamental affinity, a friend once termed him a secular protestant. That may have deterred him from proportionate attention to the Church of Rome, whose ductility in modern times would have presented another kind of analytic challenge.

More generally, Furman could be taxed with overestimating the significance of Protestantism, not so much in the spiritual genesis of capitalism, as in the particular combination of political stability and economic dynamism he attributed to the United States, neglecting the material endowments of American society, in the size and resources of a continent cleansed of its native inhabitants and protected by two oceans. Likewise, when looking at the former Soviet republics around Russia, he tended to pick out religious-cultural backgrounds as the most important factors differentiating less from more authoritarian systems, the Lutheran and Catholic Baltic states at one end of the spectrum, Orthodox and Muslim at the other, though in this case he was careful to add that these could not be separated from other, geographical and socio-economic legacies. What is clear, however, is that it was the enabling framework of his studies of religion that supplied the heuristic impetus for his subsequent writing on lay affairs, in two senses.

For Weber, the critical connection between them lay in the emergence of capitalism in the West, at a time when only Japan had reproduced it. By the time Furman was writing, in an all but pan-capitalist world stretching across the zones of every major confession – all, from Shanghai to Delhi, Bangkok to Dubai, Tel Aviv to Lima, happily paddling in the waters of capital – this was a problematic that had ceased to be actual: another reason Weber's legacy has fallen into abeyance. For Furman, with a much clearer sense of the impetus of diffusion in any significant discovery, the more significant question was now the differential relationship of religion to the eventual gestation of democracy, and the conditions of its spread across the world. That was not an issue for Weber, a liberal whose ruling political passion was an imperial nationalism. But if the optic through which Furman chose to view religion was a preparation for his shift to modern politics in general, it also gave him a quite particular purchase on Russia. For there he could project his vision of the immanent logic in the trajectory of any religion onto the development of communism, and map its sequel in the light of it.

In the hands of its customary users, treatment of communism as another religion, the worst imaginable, was a standard trope of the Cold War. In Furman the analogy had none of this ideological freight. Its direction was, if anything, the opposite. Because from the beginning,

even at school, he viewed the Soviet system matter-of-factly as one more faith in a world composed of several, and went on to study these with a calm curiosity, without either devotion or rancour, once he applied the same instruments of understanding to it, he did so in the same cool, unillusioned but not unsympathetic spirit. He was aware that he was himself in some measure formed within this system of ideas, whose lessons were one of the reasons he never made of the analogy a simple identity. Marxism had its scientific side too, and could explain the demise of the order which its conversion into a doctrine of state had created, as the outcome of a structural transformation of society to which no literal religion had ever given rise.

The parabola of Russian communism had also, of course, to be set in the longer *durée* of the country's history. In the West, the two exemplary ways of dealing with the relation between the short Soviet century and what preceded and succeeded it have been either to stress the permanence of Russian incomprehension of liberty or property, fear of disorder and attachment to autocracy, extending unbroken from tsarist through to post-communist times; or, on the contrary, to treat the October Revolution and the regime it founded as a disastrous fruit of the contingent outbreak of the First World War, cutting short what would otherwise have been the country's natural evolution – already under way – to a liberal democracy whose unfolding was happily resumed at the turn of the century: Richard Pipes and Martin Malia the emblematic spokesmen of each. Furman's construction avoided these alternatives. The strength of his conception of a 'spiral' peculiar to Russia was to link repetition and innovation in a single historical movement that was still open-ended. The result was a view of the end of the Soviet Union, and what has emerged since it dissolved, distant equally from Pipes's bleak diagnosis and Malia's eupeptic assurance.

In the day-to-day articles he wrote after 1991, Furman could like any commentator make misjudgments, sometimes of over-optimism; that, he was ruefully aware, was the price of analyses on the run. But overall, what stands out are the acuity and balance of his assessment of political developments across the next twenty years. He rarely personalised them. His portrait of Gorbachev is an exception, the more affecting because he so clearly saw the weaknesses of the politician he most admired, if he did not dwell on them; but it was written after Gorbachev fell. Similarly, his disgust with Yeltsin as a figure was expressed with all bluntness only after he had left the stage. Furman's verdict on Yeltsin's regime, however, was clinical from the start – a world away from the shameless hagiographies of Harvard and the American Enterprise Institute. Putin it was pointless to demonise; he had essentially developed a political system his predecessor had designed, and could be expected to go down with it. But if that system was Russian, it was not only Russian. The imitation democracy of the 1990s stretched from Minsk to Bishkek. It was a sui generis product of the period.

There was one obvious limitation at the beginning of this analytic of the time, and less

conspicuous, an oscillation towards the end of it. In Furman's account of the failure of perestroika, he identified both an underlying absence of social carriers for it as a project and a number of political shortcomings in Gorbachev as a leader of it. Missing, however, is any due sense of the economic collapse of the USSR after 1987, which was in no way inevitable, but the result of Gorbachev's haste and incompetence as a ruler, dismantling the party that held the Soviet economy together as an interconnected system without any idea of what to put in its place, and so pitchforking society into the disastrous shortages and inflation that led to the disintegration of 1991. The extent to which mutations in power – changes in representation and repression – would in succeeding years continue to be affected by graphs of production is underplayed in Furman's depiction of them.

The oscillation lay in his estimate of the readiness of the peoples of the former Soviet Union for democracy. The Russians submitted to Yeltsin, whom they mostly disliked or despised, because they feared chaos more than they wanted freedom. That was a judgment very close to the opinion of Pipes, and it was not just confined to the 1990s. Furman expressed much the same sense of the deep psychic traits of Russian society towards the end of his life. On the other hand, he never altogether recanted the view that there had been a moment of opportunity for a path to a genuine, rather than imitation democracy during perestroika, before the fan of possibilities closed, and often observed that those who had grown up with the fake version were not going to settle for it, wanting nothing better. But a certain distrust of his fellow countrymen never left him; he was not a patriot, as he pointed out. When he considered the former Soviet republics around Russia, on the other hand, the generous impulse behind his engagement with them could lead him, conversely, to an unduly optimist reckoning of their degree of readiness for democratic life – Moldova, Kyrgyzstan, Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, all falling short of hopeful prognostications he offered at one time or another. There, too, bracketing the economic conditions of political systems came at a certain cost.

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More significant, however, was a wider ellipsis. Missing from Furman's vision of his country was one fundamental dimension of its landscape. There was little or no sense of the pressures and ambiguities of Russia's geopolitical setting. This was not a simple blindness on his part. Rather, it was a resistance. 'He did not like the word "geopolitics", lowering the world to the level of a chess game played by its sovereigns,' his Azeri friend Togrul Dzuvarly wrote after his death. In part, no doubt, this was a reaction against appropriation of the term in the neo-imperial fantasies of Russian conservatives like Dugin or Prokhanov. But it also came from the difficulty of squaring a problematic so single-mindedly centred on the requirements and hopes of democracy as an internal regime, with the implications for them of the external coexistence of states of vastly differing magnitudes and interests. Weber, hailing German

participation in the Great War, invoked the objective geopolitical position of his country in a world where 'the mere existence of a great power, such as we have become, is an obstacle in the path of other great powers,' as rendering it inevitable:

> The fact that we are a people now of seventy millions – *that* was our fate. It founded an inexorable responsibility before history that we could not evade even if we had wished. We must make this clear again and again, when the question of the "meaning" of this endless war is now raised. The magnetic force of this fate drew the nation upwards, past the perilous abyss of decline, onto the steep path of honour and fame, from which there could be no turning back.

Such intoxication, common on all sides in that period, was unthinkable for Furman. But in turning away from attention to the inter-state system of his own time, he risked an opposite form of myopia, in which realities of power bearing on the questions that most concerned him could not be adequately registered.

There was a further reason for that. What is absent from Furman's account of the trajectory from Gorbachev to Putin – held outside the frame – is the part of the West in shaping it. Politically, he was reluctant to look steadily at this. He described himself as in Soviet times an unconditional *zapadnik*, and to the end the United States and Western Europe remained a positive reference point as liberal democracies. Did that mean they played a constructive role in helping towards the growth of democracy in Russia? Furman never directly confronted the question. Gorbachev, it was true, had become too taken with his trips to the West, and the flattery and not always intelligent advice he received there, to the neglect of the mounting crisis at home; and Yeltsin had received more support from the West than he deserved. But these are asides in Furman's writing, which fails to take due measure of the destructive impact of Western arrogance and meddling in Russia.

From Washington's expansion of Nato to Russian borders in violation of promises not to do so, US involvement in shock therapy and corrupt privatisation, fulsome diplomatic backing for Yeltsin's bombardment of the Duma and faking of the constitutional referendum, injection of IMF funds to secure his re-election, endorsement of Putin's obliteration of Grozny, down to the latest round of Western sanctions and America's bid to retain nuclear superiority, the attitude has been consistent: Russia is a defeated power, whose rulers are to be sustained if they comply with Western requirements, and punished if they do not. Before he died, Furman saw that a weak version of the Cold War was coming, but took it as the last gasp of an empire he knew, rather than the collision of more than one, from which he looked away. The future of Russia lay elsewhere: one day it would find its place in the European Union without much more difficulty than Poland today. There, his realism deserted him. The

vastness of the country – its size and location alone – preclude such an analogy. Such factors are not to be mystified, in a Weberian idolatry; but nor can they just be ignored, Furman-style. Disliking the notion of geopolitics does not make its bearings go away.

Furman remained unwilling to register the imperial drives of the US or the EU, out of a continuing, if unaccented, *zapadnichestvo*. But if the West was an ideal horizon for him, it was also a rather remote one. The fixation of so many Eastern European intellectuals of his generation on the West, a passionate longing for the embrace of Brussels or Washington, shared by Russian liberals, was foreign to him. He was not prepared to stare too long at what the White House or the Charlemagne Building might be up to abroad because they presided over democracies at home. But he was not greatly interested in them as models for Russia, which was socially too distant from them. The country which commanded his admiration as an example for his own was India. This was a consistent thread in his writing, from the time of perestroika onwards, when he hoped the CPSU under Gorbachev would lead the USSR towards a stable democracy as Congress had done in India – ruling benignly for at least another decade or so with a popular mandate, won in an open parliamentary system yielding the rule of a dominant single party. In due course he came to the conclusion that such a prospect was illusory for Russia, without seeing the element of illusion in its image of India. He had an acute understanding of the confessional foundations of Indian democracy, and Congress hegemony within it, but that did not exempt him from idealising them. Had he been an Indian, he would have written of Kashmir or Nagaland as he did of Chechnya. From afar a veil of indulgence fell over Delhi and its dealings, that at closer range never, and with good reason, protected Moscow.

These were foibles. The real difficulty with Furman's prospectus lies in the electoral minimalism of its conception of democracy. His analysis of the nature and logic of the imitation democracy that emerged from the ruins of the USSR remains exemplary. But the stark clarity of his definition of it implies a misleading antonym. How automatically real is a democracy that is simply its negation – a system where elections bring alternative rulers to power? By the end of Furman's lifetime, the corruption and involution of the political order in Europe and in America had become obvious. Yet since polls continued to be held, and governments to vary, there was no place for these in his scheme of things, let alone for any idea of a democracy deeper than quadrennial, or still less frequent, visitations of the ballot box. Furman had no great affection for capitalism; in Russian terms he was 'slightly leftist'. But in putting it aside, to all intents and purposes, in his concern with democracy, he failed to consider what might become of the one in the grip of the other, or to wonder what other kinds of democracy a society of equals in more than a vote would involve.

The sign of this blind spot is the matter-of-fact analogy to which he again and again recurred. Democracy was no recipe for human felicity, it was just an arrival at maturity. But to cast

political systems as social equivalents of individual growth, even if only for persuasive purposes, as he was fond of doing, is to invite the obvious question: what then of the next stage of the organism – senescence? That there must be degeneration at the end of a life cycle follows from the image, but is suppressed by it. Metaphors are not on oath, and there is no sense in pressing them too closely. In less figurative mode, Furman used two other terms to convey his vision of the spread of democracy, and directionality of world history. One was Aristotelian, the other Soviet Marxist. There was an entelechy in the first, and a *zakonomernost'* – 'lawfulness' – in the second. For conventional opinion in the West, where teleophobia – Sanjay Subrahmanyam's caustic coinage – has become a sine qua non of intellectual respectability, there could scarcely be a greater scandal than reversion to the former. The prejudice can be ignored, but the usage does not quite serve its purpose. For if, as Furman also contended, the emergence of the nation-state in 19th and early 20th-century Europe had every sign of an entelechy, which had since given way to another, supranational one, democracy in the form he understood it could presumably be overtaken in its turn as well. *Zakonomernost'* is less stringent, and Furman's conviction of it as the existence of a set of delimited historical regularities, more acceptable at large. What is clear, in any case, is that this heirloom of Soviet culture was a productive spur to the systematically comparative cast of his life's work, which would have been less overarching and imaginative without it.

It is difficult to think of any contemporary intellectual figure comparable to Furman. In Russia there was no one like him. After his death one of his friends, taxing him with an excessive faith in progress, described him as a Soviet Victorian. But, he added, in holding that Russians were closer to a self-standing democracy than their forebears eighty years ago, Furman was disproof of his own optimism. At the beginning of that century, the friend said, Russia possessed an outstanding constellation of liberals and democrats, for whom the words democracy and freedom really meant something. Now we had just Furman, practically alone. It is a judgment that could be extended. Originality of mind, purity of spirit, consistency of principle, and not least, lack of any hint of political conformity: in the West, now enlarged to Russia's borders, how often are they to be found together? It is enough to think of leading candidates for the term 'liberal' – take any long list of those bedizened with official or commercial honours: political, literary, academic – to realise how vanishingly small is the number who merit the critical respect it could once inspire; as for 'democrat', let alone besmirched with a capital letter, it is better not mentioned. Furman, who never swam with any tide, preserved the dignity of both.

[1] Furman's writing on the conflict at the time, influenced by his apprehension that its impact could only create difficulties for Gorbachev's position in Moscow, and his dislike of anti-Muslim prejudice in the Russian intelligentsia, largely ignored its historical origins. In a later and fuller account, he would make some correction for this, admitting that the 'relatively

illegitimate and randomly drawn border between Armenia and Azeria' gave Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh 'every reason to consider the embodiment of Nagorno-Karabakh in Azerbaijan to be an error liable to amendment'. The allocation of the enclave to Azerbaijan in 1923, violating Bolshevik promises that it would go to Armenia in keeping with the natural preferences of its population, was not random, however. It was a calculated move by Stalin to gratify the Kemalist regime in Turkey, whose diplomatic benevolence he sought.

[2] Furman wrote *Kirgizskie Tsikly* with Sanobar Shermatova, a courageous Kazakh journalist who died before the book was fully finished. It is no doubt to her that we owe the scathing portrait of Akaev, complete with the kinds of piquant detail that Furman generally eschewed.

[3] From *The Promise of Salvation* (2010). This calm work is genuinely comparative, though the aim of its comparisons is to demonstrate this definitional commonality of all religions rather than to determine the differences between them. Typical of Riesebrodt was his judgment that religion is not a necessary component of human culture and existence, but its disappearance was improbable, since natural misfortunes and economic crises, not to speak of mortality, were unlikely to vanish in the century to come. But there could be no doubt of its fading grip in Europe, where the *Leitkultur* was 'no longer Christian but capitalist'.

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