

Critically evaluate scenarios for Russia's future: liberal democracy vs. authoritarianism

For seventy-four years of its history the Soviet Union used to be the main alternative system to the Western world. It was a social experiment in many ways because a socialist system of this kind has never been created before. Ronald Suny clearly describes that the Russian Communism used untried theoretical principles of social order that were tested by one group over the whole community (Suny 1998). The established authoritarian regime collapsed in 1991 but some of the old institutions and structures remained unaffected. Consequently, what became known as the Russian Federation combined in itself characteristics of its predecessor, on the one hand, and democratic features, on the other. This essay will try to determine what scenario is possible for Russia's future, through examining and exploring mainly the institutional developments in the country from the creation of the Soviet Union until the present day. Firstly, the institutions and developments occurring in the USSR would be examined. Secondly, the transformations from Gorbachev to Medvedev would be looked at and thirdly, the democratic developments and authoritarian characteristics would be examined and critiqued. Finally, a brief future scenario would be developed.

The early period after the October Revolution was characterized with decrees that granted land to peasants and the withdrawal of Russia from the First World War. During that time, the secret police known as Cheka was established, the precursor of all the Soviet repressive agencies. Both the big businesses and the free press were attacked and abolished. Various opposition groups emerged within the revolution and the independent movements like the worker's one were ruthlessly smashed. In order to centralize the authority, recourse and enterprises a Supreme Council of the Economy was established (Sakwa 2008: 5). A contradiction lied between the developmental goals and the emancipatory goals, where the former became the central Soviet objective (Sakwa 2010: 2).

During the Stalin's period peasants were forced to work into collective farms called kolkhozy, which made it easier for the extraction of grain from them, which was used to fund the industrialization. A state planning agency Gosplan was established that relied on five-year plans aiming to reach a modern industrial peak. This climax reached in 1940s but the cost was much greater. The command economy was distorted and most of the active people from the countryside were actually destroyed. The system was centralized in economic, social and personal aspects. The secret police possessed enormous powers that reached height in the purges and terror of 1930s. This dictatorial rule lacked any complexity and innovation which reflected on technological sophistication.

Afterwards, during the Khrushchev era an attempt was made to shift the producer goods to consumer ones. Establishment of new institutions like sovnarkhozy (regional economic councils) tried to improve the economic coordination and to stimulate popular participation. However, during the Brezhnev era the process was upset and a type of Stalinism was rehabilitated. The trivial bureaucracy lacked an ability to take any sort of initiative which led to a constant condition of stagnation (zastoi). Later, the unsuccessful

attempts of Andropov and Chernenko to modernize the authoritarian regime inaugurated a refreshing period characterized with radical change (Sakwa 2008: 7-9).

Gorbachev wanted to cope with the stagnation and embraced a restructuring policy called Perestroika. For a period of six years it went through five stages. First, from rationalization the system shifted to a stage of liberalization. Then demokratizatsiya (democratization) transformed the state and society but caused the dissolution of the communist base and ended with a final phase of disintegration of the Soviet Union itself (Sakwa 2010: 4). It imposed political, socioeconomic and foreign policy changes. Gorbachev attempted to modernize the bureaucratic structure by creating super-ministries such as Gosagroprom responsible for agriculture but actually that worsened the situation. The Soviet Union possessed a centrally planned economy with state ownership. It needed to adapt to the technological revolution occurring in the advanced capitalist countries at that time. The logical step of reforming this type of economy was decentralization, to a certain degree, of decision making away from the Gosplan. The problem was that Gorbachev expected a simultaneous democratization of everything without referring to the main foundation of the socialist system – the state ownership. However, a policy called glasnost (openness) was introduced within the arts and media to reveal the Soviet problems and to motivate people to participate in the process of restructuring or perestroika. During that period a civil society started to emerge, where some sections of the population started to enunciate their own interests and to follow their own agendas (Danks 2001: 30-35). A dissemination of an independent press and neformaly (informals) occurred. To some extent a political pluralism started to emerge with the establishment of the Democratic Union in 1988 which registered the renewal of the multiparty system. In the same year the constitutional changes established a two-tier parliament and the first elections took place the next year. Problems facing the country were discussed openly for the first time in decades. However, Gorbachev lacked popular support and he was knocked out by Boris Yeltsin who became the first Russian president in 1991. Gorbachev moved the country towards a market economy, transformed the union into sovereign states and made great efforts to put an end to the Cold War (Sakwa 2010: 5-7). Although, he was trying to reform the Soviet system, Mikhail Gorbachev was powerless against the claims for independence in some of the republics, the instability of the semi-market and the absence of support for socialism. His reformist attempt helped many inherited contradictions to come to the surface which by themselves sunk the old system.

The administration of Yeltsin had three main goals: democratization, international integration and marketisation. In 1993 a constitution was adopted which gave a certain degree of stability for Russian system. In its origin, every constitution is a liberal document which declares a set of freedoms and rules that must be followed by the state. In the Russian example, the separation of powers and the balance between the president and the parliament are contestable mainly because of the extremely strong executive. In historical context, there were few features of Yeltsin's presidency that put obstacles to his objectives. First, there was an interweaving between the economic interests and the decision making process. More generally, the unbalanced privatization of 1990s paved the way for economic magnates such as Berezovsky, Khodorkovsky, Abramovich, Potanin and Gusinsky, known as oligarchs, to emerge in the core of the political process. Second, the power and freedom of the presidential institution was magnified. Third, there was no sign for a popular accountability. For example, the decision for launching the first Chechen war was in many ways a product of unaccountable individuals that were close

with the president and possessed a huge influence. The lower house of the legislature, called State Duma, lacked the ability to balance the executive, partly because of the underdeveloped party system.

On the other hand, Yeltsin's authoritarian trends were successfully restricted by several factors. First, his authority was checked and balanced by the fairly developed legislative branch that functioned as an opposition. The Constitutional Court, the judicial branch, also claimed certain independence. Second, the heads of the Russian regions started to use the benefits of the federal system and upheld their interests in the Federation Council, the upper house of parliament. Thus, they were able to counterbalance the power of the state capital. Third, the state was trying to counterbalance some of the oligarchic lobbies that were looking for their own interests and influence. Fourthly, there were some rival fractions such as the 'liberals' and the siloviki. Lastly, the emerging Russian civil society used to put pressure on the government on occasions (Malfliet 2007: 74). The results of all these were that violence ceased to be the main tool of state policy, an opposition with increasing cohesion started to emerge and the intervention in public life by the state decreased. However, the government was not able to cope with the economic liberalization and the system led by Yeltsin fell into consecutive stagnation.

After Putin took the presidential post the system was characterized with strengthened presidential authority and languishing legislative and judiciary institutions. Putin built a hierarchy in which the presidential institution subordinated all the other branches. He made a number of reforms, in spite of the decentralized character of federalism, which maximized the power concentration (Malfliet 2007: 76). With systematic centralization he also made efforts to reach a deinstitutionalization. First, by removing the powers of regional governors and secondly, by diminishing and limiting the independence of the media. He also fought some of the oligarchs through confiscating and jailing operations. However, Putin must be recognized for his execution of the important market reforms that strengthened the economy (Aslund 2007: 288). Russia is pliable to an authoritarian reverse and Putin showed that by increasing its popularity. His image is distinctive and he enjoys a grand popularity amongst the Russians, unlike his two predecessors. At the core of Putin's reforms lies kind of promotion and restriction of democratization. Putin himself stated that 'Russia was created as a super centralized state' which is 'laid down in its genetic code, its traditions, and the mentality of its people' (Putin 2000: 182- 183, cited in Ross 2002: 18). Cameron Ross concludes that Putin faced the same problem as Gorbachev and Yeltsin which was the maintenance of unity without sacrificing democracy. Since Yeltsin, the presidents feared a possible radical change of the system and they were seeking for a guarantee in the face of favourable successors (Sakwa 2010: 7-9). Such are the cases with the appointment of Vladimir Putin in 1999 as a prime minister, his presidential election in 2000, re-election in 2004, his assuming of prime-ministerial position in 2008 and choosing Dmitri Medvedev as his successor. In addition, an interchange of the latter in next presidential election, planned for March 2012, is very likely.

After selecting Medvedev as his successor, Putin gave him the task to lead a modernization scheme including the development of so called four 'I's' – innovation, investment, infrastructure and institutions. Russian society, civil society and the individual were all targets of this scheme. Modernization was also directed at housing, medical, agricultural and educational sectors (Hahn 2010: 230). Actually, Medvedev is the first Russian leader who possesses a competent knowledge of law, free market and liberal democracy. Under Medvedev's presidency the leadership and policies has gone

through important changes in the direction of more pluralistic and democratic state. The successes were not significant but obviously there is a step forward. At the end of 2011 Medvedev made an address to the Federal Assembly and proposed a set of initiatives that would transform the system. First, he suggested to return the direct gubernatorial elections and second, to simplify the registration process for political parties. He openly stated that 'Russia needs democracy, not chaos' (Kulikov 2011).

Until 1989 the Soviet Union had been governed mainly by the members of the Communist Party. This party was arranged hierarchically with a Politburo (same as the Cabinet in Western democracies) and general secretary at the top. Soviets, which were the main representative bodies, were subordinate to the top party official in their local area and their function was less powerful. The Supreme Soviet was some sort of a parliament but its meeting occurred only for a few days each year. Gorbachev, the last general secretary of CPSU ran through a set of reforms to the structure of the Soviet institutions. Representative organs were established and allowed space for a competitive elections. In 1989 the Congress of People's Deputies was created and it was filled on the basis of election. It elected an inner body called as the previous legislative body the Supreme Soviet. That was the first main break with the past experience of the Soviet system, by accepting and legitimizing the political debate in a new established legislature. The creation of a presidency was another leap forward in changing the face of the institutional structure. Consequently, Gorbachev was elected in 1990 as a president of the Soviet Union. This first election was indirect for practical reasons but later when Yeltsin ran for the presidential position the elections became direct. Another institutional innovation was the creation of a dual executive including a prime minister with subordinate role to the president (Brown 2001: 9-13). After the adoption of the 1993 constitution, Russia started to establish modern institutions, typical for a representative democracy, and to struggle for development of liberal principles. However, there are some problems with the establishment of straight strategy for the accomplishment of that objective. Critiques and researchers characterize the Russian system in many different ways. Timothy Colton describes Russia as proto-democracy which is a state in a progress, towards a full-grown democracy. Its population, which in many ways describes the character of the society, is a transitional citizenry in his words (Colton 2000: 1).

Russia today is a hybrid between democracy and authoritarian state. Democratic institutions are already established and they appear to grow mature. However, it would take much longer for the democratic culture and economy to harden the power of the constitution. Russia suffers lack of democratic experience and it possesses more than an authoritarian legacy. Yitzhak Brundy very clearly says that Russia could not 'turn overnight into a Madisonian democracy' (Brundy 2004: 14). Richard Sakwa gave two scenarios for Russia, such as illiberal democracy or delegative democracy, relying on the fact that competition is limited in reference to the power system (Sakwa 2010: 13). Lilia Shevtsova describes the Russian system as a bureaucratic authoritarian regime. She supports this with five components: personified power above society; leader relying on bureaucracy and military; depoliticized society; reforms carried out by technocrats; and participation in the economy by western monopolies (Shevtsova 2005, cited in Malfliet 2007: 77). Thus, the President still remains the only figure that guarantees fair stability of the state. The paradox is that Russians blame democracy for their difficulties without recognizing that communism is the reason for their situation. Steven Fish mentioned three causes for the Russian failure of democratization. First, Russia's raw materials wealth has undercut the process of democratization by feeding up corruption and by

stimulating an economic statism. Second, the 'predatory regulatory environment has slowed the growth of [...] the middle class' and left society unable to hold the ruling elite accountable. Third, he argued that the enormous presidential power and the powerless legislature prohibit the party development. Thus, the capacity of the state is subverted and corruption is stimulated (Fish 2005: 247-250). In this way of thoughts, the authoritarianism and corruption both benefit and favour each other. Corruption, lawlessness, financial instability and insecurity are some of the many obstacles staying before Russian liberal democracy.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, at least in theory, Russia is in a process of alteration towards a liberal democratic system. Such type of system was first established in Europe, in its own unique way. It's spreading to other countries with different political cultures and traditions demonstrate that liberal democracy could be developed anywhere else. But this liberal process takes a long period of time in order to be fully implemented. The division of power is the basic element needed. Russia needs to reform itself gradually in this direction. Another component is the will of the Russian people and their governors. Usually, states develop into democratic pluralism when their society is sophisticated enough and when their economies become wealthier. In this respect, Russia has a huge potential and a chance to prove this, when the Eurasian Union become a truly active trade bloc in 2015 (BBC 2011). Some commentators argue that this project between Belarus, Russia and Kazakhstan would lead to a re-creation of the Soviet Union. On the contrary, the agreement clearly shows that the European Union will be used as a model. In this case, a single economic body like that may attract other post-Soviet countries. This union may become an alternative to the European Union, which I personally think, and it may stimulate the global economy.

As seen above, Russia has gone through a long period of modernization. There is no single agreement about the type of democracy which is established in the Russian Federation. Some of the types include managed, sovereign, delegative, controlled, illiberal and liberal democracies. This plenty of descriptions arises mainly because of the fact that Russian democracy is one of a kind. It combines in itself an authoritarian system with democratic features. Chubarov argues that both 'old regimes', including the Tsarist and the Soviet, can not be observed as future options. They must rather be accepted as two steps that paved the way for the further modernization (Chubarov 2001: 17). In my opinion, Russia will keep its authoritarian character, while at the same time, it will become more democratic. In the next decades the liberalizing process in the country would remain obscure.

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