

Introduction

The title of this volume, *Democracy in a Russian Mirror*, and the motivation behind it call for an explanation.

We are going through times when the value, the feasibility, and the prospects of democracy are under intense scrutiny in different parts of the world.

1. Several aspects of the functioning of democracies in the West are currently a source of intense dissatisfaction among their citizens. There is widespread dissatisfaction that democracy seems unable to generate equality in the socio-economic realm, to make people feel that their political participation is effective, to ensure that governments do what they are supposed to do and not what they are not mandated to do, and to balance public order and noninterference in private lives. Indeed, at one time, we thought that the title of the book should be “Really Existing Democracies.”

2. In turn, governments and their ideologues in many nondemocratic countries claim that although democracy is a universal value, it does not have to assume the same forms as democracies in the West. Different projects of “Non-Western democracy” claim that the “essence” of democracy is “the unity of the government and the governed” (a phrase coined by Carl Schmitt) and that the existence of political opposition and the institution of choosing governments through elections are not necessary for democracy. In such views, the form of democracy must depend on cultural traditions, or at least some countries are “not yet ready” for democracy in the Western sense.

These debates pose several general questions about democracy, the paths to it, and the paths away from it:

1. Must some “prerequisites,” cultural or material, be fulfilled for democracy to become possible?
2. If democracy can be established only under some conditions, are these conditions sufficient for democracy to emerge?

3. Is the “strong state” a prerequisite for democracy or an obstacle to it?
4. Are democratic reforms from above credible, or must the impetus come from below?
5. Is the experience of really existing democracies sufficiently appealing to compete with models of economically successful authoritarianism?
6. Is the normative appeal of democracy a teleological force propelling all societies toward this goal, or is the Western model of democracy a parochial one?

Although for many of us, these questions are mainly of scholarly interest, they are lived every day by the Russian people. Is the current situation in Russia a stage in a progression toward democracy; a path to something else, reflecting specifically Russian traditions and conditions; or just some amorphous but stable political arrangement? Are the conditions for democracy not yet “mature” in Russia, or are they already stale? How credible is the commitment of Russian leaders to introduce democratic reforms once the Russian state becomes strong internally and externally? Is the political apathy in Russia a result of satisfaction with its current economic success, of resignation due to the perception of futility of opposition, or of deliberate manipulation and repression by its rulers? Can one infer from it that there is no potential for change, including explosive political change?

This volume examines the current state and the prospects of democracy in Russia in the light of the experience of existing democracies, posing several challenges to our understanding of democracy and the paths to it. What can we learn about democracy when we view it from the perspective of contemporary Russia? What can we learn about Russia from the experience of democracy around the world? These two questions motivate our inquiry.

Juxtaposing these two perspectives – democracy in a Russian mirror and Russia in the democratic mirror – turns out to be both revealing and demanding. Our purpose is to confront the actual experience of democracies across the globe with both normative and positive conceptions of democracy. We are particularly interested in placing the current political situation in Russia – its origins, its present form, and its possible futures – in the context of general knowledge about the functioning and the evolution of different political regimes. We hope that this knowledge generates lessons from which all can learn, even if perhaps particular people will draw different conclusions. But it would be presumptuous to think that outsiders know better: the experience of American advisers to Russia during the Yeltsin period – “imitate us” – was disastrous not only for Russia but also for the good name of democracy in Russia. “Democracy” is a slogan containing a geopolitical agenda, and it has been used to prove the superiority of some countries over others. A book about Russia and the West cannot ignore this ideological legacy.

Perhaps most obviously, we should not be surprised that post-Communist Russia did not smoothly embrace institutions and practices that we recognize

Introduction

3

these days as “democracy.” The correct question is not “Why is there no democracy in Russia?” but “Why would one expect there would be?” “Democracy,” even in its minimalist understanding as systems in which elections are “free and fair” and their results are obeyed by the losers, is a historical miracle, a contingent result of circumstances and intentions, a speck in human history. The paths to it are convoluted, and as the experience of Russia manifests, it is easy to get stuck or even derailed onto a new form of authoritarianism (Makarenko and Melville, this volume).

But why step onto this path at all? Put yourself in the place of someone who believes that peaceful political order cannot be maintained unless it is regulated by an authoritarian state, that democracy must be “guided,” “tutored,” or “led,” and examine the experience of the country that heralds itself as the cradle and the prototype of modern democracy. You will see a society in which almost half of citizens do not vote even in presidential elections, in which money unabashedly permeates politics, a society that has the highest income inequality in the developed world and the largest prison population in the entire world. This picture may be self-serving, but it cannot be easily dismissed. Most people around the world evaluate democracy by its outcomes and political freedom but also by material welfare and socioeconomic equality. To put forth a case for democracy, including democracy in Russia, one must confront the experience of democracies as they are, “really existing democracies.” It is not enough to urge, “Do as we say, not as we do.”

As one Russian colleague exclaimed during our discussions, “If democracy is flawed, what is the difference?” We think that there is a difference; indeed, there are differences. But pinning down the value of democracy, the value of competitive elections and of political freedom between elections, is not easy, and the answers cannot be facile. While several specific answers are proposed here, perhaps the most important feature of democracy is that it is unceasingly perfectible, that the democratic project is never completely accomplished, that democracy is a system that can and does adapt to changing circumstances, perpetually open to institutional innovation. And the force of democratic vitality comprises not only reforms from above but also voices from below. As the first democratically elected Spanish prime minister, Adolfo Suarez, announced in his opening speech to the parliament, “The future is not written, because only the people can write it.”

This is why the participants in this adventure – Russian and non-Russian – can share the same pursuit, a pursuit of freedom, welfare, and equality. This is why those of us who live in countries with well-entrenched democracies are not afraid that finding faults in our democratic systems will undermine the value of democracy: we can simultaneously criticize the way democracy functions in our countries and advocate its generic virtues.

It bears emphasis that it is not our intention to attach labels or award points to particular political regimes. The elephant in the room are the questions “Is Russia a Democracy?” or “Is it less of a democracy than the United States, Italy,

or Japan?” But any attempt to address such questions becomes inevitably mired in definitions, which perhaps please but do not enlighten. We need to escape the prison of polarities, especially the authoritarian-democratic dichotomy, which led many self-proclaimed victors of the Cold War to conclude that it is sufficient to get rid of the former to get the latter. Yet this approach does not imply that we see no standards by which all political regimes should be evaluated: political freedom, social and economic welfare, and civil peace are certainly among them.

As the chapters in this volume amply testify, these are controversial issues. The book exposes major disagreements about the present situation in Russia and its prospects. These are not differences that can be resolved by scientific methods: rival views are each logically coherent, and each finds facts in its support. Analysis of concrete historical situations is an art. It is constrained by science to the extent to which it must be consistent with general theories; it conforms to scientific criteria by relying on facts to rationalize beliefs. But in the end, some differences of opinion are not resolvable. They reflect the criteria by which political regimes are judged, they entail interpretations of the intentions or moral virtues of politicians, they follow intuitions. Indeed, we see it as a central aim to clarify the divergence of views, to admit the fallibility of the analyses, to highlight the uncertainty inextricably entailed in formulating judgments about any complex situation. The history of interpretations of the Soviet Union and post-Communist Russia is a cemetery of failed closures: from the myth of the immutability of “totalitarianism” to premature triumphs heralded in titles such as *How Russia Became a Market Economy* or *Democracy in Russia*. The Soviet Union has fallen, but we are far from certain what Russia has become or what it is becoming. This is as it should be: pretensions of certainty are a recipe for disaster.

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PART I

RUSSIA

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I

Peculiarities of Russian Politics

Andranik Migranyan

1.1 THE LAW OF THE PENDULUM

One of the peculiarities of Russian politics is that over the past two centuries, all the attempts to modernize Russia's political system have veered from one extreme to the other. The attempts to modernize the autocratic government in tsarist Russia ended in the chaos of February to October 1917, which gave rise to the totalitarian regime of Bolshevik Russia. Thus, the pendulum of Russian power traveled from the extreme right to the extreme left, lingering for a while in the center to see the chaotic disintegration of the old institutes and values.

The lack of culture of democratic self-organization, the inability to achieve compromise through negotiation and mutual concessions, the absence of stable institutions of civil society, and the existence of deep demarcation lines based on social, economic, ethnic, cultural, and confessional principles predetermined both the collapse of old tsarist Russia and the rise of the new despotic power in place of it.

What happened in Russia in 1917 closely resembled Tocqueville's description of the revolutionary transformations in France after the fall of the old regime. He pointed out that one should be very cautious with democratization of the political system in a country that has no strong democratic traditions or culture. The people cannot keep up with the fast changes, the situation escapes the reformers' control, and the process assumes a life of its own, which more often than not results in chaos and in the disintegration of the old institutions and values and gives rise to a new form of tyranny, sometimes even more terrifying than the one of which reformers wanted to rid themselves.

It was this realization of the threat of new chaos and collapse in the Soviet Union as a result of Gorbachev's radical reforms during the years of perestroika that motivated me to write a number of articles in 1988–90 warning of the impossibility for the USSR to make a direct transition from bureaucratic

totalitarianism to democracy because such a transition in a society with no infrastructure for establishing democratic institutions and values would inevitably end in chaos and pose a threat of civil war in a country stuffed with tens of thousands of nuclear warheads.

For a number of objective and subjective reasons, Gorbachev's perestroika ended in chaos and the disintegration of the Soviet Union. From underneath the wreckage emerged Russia, which was destined to transform the Soviet state machinery and retune it for the performance of new functions for the new state. Right after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the new regime in Russia was similar to what G. O'Donnell (1994) described in his concept of "delegative democracy." The weakness of the institutions, the lack of influence of the electorate on the authorities, was compensated by the excessive presence of Boris Yeltsin – a charismatic leader who had been elected president of Russia in a general election. At that point in history, it was he who embodied the Russian state, which had neither defined borders nor functioning institutions. I gave my analysis of the Yeltsin regime in several publications, so I will not dwell on it any longer (Migranyan 2004). I will just point out that the Russian authorities should have expected that, sooner or later, this chaos would result in the process of consolidation of power, and the state would go on to claim almost all the political space, leaving very few opportunities for other political actors to influence the political and economic decisions of the state power.

However, after achieving consolidation of power vertically (limiting the mandates and potential of regional leaders who, under Yeltsin, turned Russia into a de facto confederation) and horizontally (banishing the oligarchs from politics and depriving them of influence over the bodies of state power), after establishing the political party of the authorities, United Russia, which gained dominance in parliament and in the regions, after abolishing the majority system, holding the elections based entirely on party nomination lists and doing away with the direct gubernatorial elections, the new Russian powers headed by Putin came to face a new serious challenge. How do you preserve the openness of society and power when it has no formal opposition, when there is no intrainstitutional or interinstitutional conflict that, according to Weber (1978), can impart dynamism on the political system? After the acquisition of the lost statehood, the Russian leaders are faced again with the complicated task of creating institutions of conflict and competition in the political area as well as independent – not controlled by the state – organized interests in the economic, social, cultural, and religious areas of society. One has to bear in mind that a threat of disintegration of the state, which Russia experienced firsthand twice in the process of democratic modernization, is a serious restraining factor for the Russian leadership in their decision-making process with regard to creating a competitive environment in the country's political life. It is all too recent that Russia experienced a painful falling apart of the country, and the devastating consequences of the 1990s chaos that are often referred to as the outcome of radical liberal reforms in Russia's economic, political, and social lives.

1.2 ON ELECTIONS

In political science, one of the most quotable statements on elections is Przeworski's (1991, 1996) assertion to the effect that the essence of democracy and alternative elections consists in the uncertainty of results. This statement is indisputable for the evaluation of the level of democratic advancement of a given country.

However, in my view, this statement cannot be automatically transposed onto the countries in transition to democracy and, on this basis, come up with the assessment of their level of democratic advancement. The point is that participation in the election process and competition between parties in modern democracies have their own history of evolution. This is why we cannot give a correct evaluation of an emerging institutional system, especially with regard to elections, without putting it into a historical context.

According to Dahl (2000), the involvement of masses in the political process in Great Britain took place gradually over the centuries, and this was in a country that set an example in forming a liberal democratic system of institutions and values. The participants in the political process had property, education, and so on. They had self-organization skills and the culture of horizontal relations; in case of conflict, they did not resort to violence but were ready for a compromise and mutual concessions. Over a long period of time, they also learned to cope with the complex state machine and its institutions. In Great Britain, the political struggle occurred between the parties whose members did not question the existing system of institutions and values. Further on, even the emergence of mass parties and the replacement of the Liberals by the Labor Party did not result in a significant destabilization of the political party system. In essence, there was a consensus between the Liberal, Tory, and Labor with regard to the institutional and value systems. That is why Spengler (1922) remarked after the First World War that the British political system could not be mechanistically transferred to the German land. If in England a conflict emerges in the political area or in the interparty struggle, it is usually a conflict over how to resolve certain social and economic issues and does not put in question the foundations of the system itself. However, if a conflict like this emerges in the German political sphere, it will not be confined merely to argument on finding ways to solve specific problems; it will go in depth and raise the very issue of the foundation on which the system is based, which will inevitably result in the death of the system itself, as well as the state. Spengler's warning turned out to be prophetic. The Weimar system gave rise to a national-socialist totalitarian regime in Germany. Therefore, both in the British and in the American political systems, the opposition parties and the party struggle with an uncertain election result came into being only when there was confidence that such uncertainty only manifested itself in the context of greater certainty, when, regardless of who wins the election, the foundations of the system will not be questioned. In this connection, of particular significance is

the book by Hofstadter (1969), in which the author, based on extensive materials, shows that the emergence of the party system in the United States had to overcome the ideas of the Founding Fathers, who perceived party struggle as a threat to the Republic.

The idea of an opposition party in the United States became viable when it was possible to say that, for the Republicans, the Federalists stopped being a party of radical disruption and allies to the monarchy and when Jefferson was able to say that a difference in opinion did not mean a difference in principle; therefore he was able to say, “We are all Republicans, we are all Federalists” (Hofstadter 1969, 152). Jefferson was prepared to accept the existence of parties only on one condition: when “whatever names the parties might bear the real division would be into moderate and ardent republicanism. In this division there is no great evil, not even if the minority obtains the ascendancy by the accession of federal votes to their candidate; because this gives us one shade only, instead of another, of republicanism” (Hofstadter 1969, 168). This is why Jefferson accepted the idea of practical division and the reality that the opposition would be embodied in the form of parties; but concretely he could never see the legitimacy of any particular opposition in his own country.

However, over the decades, this attitude to opposition changed, and during the time of Van Buren, Michael Wallace (quoted in Hofstadter 1969, 248) writes, “They were able, therefore, to realize that the continued existence of an opposition was necessary, from the perspective of perpetuating their own party; opposition was highly useful, a constant spur to their own party’s discipline.” Expanding on this approach to the role of the opposition, Holmes (1995) justly points out that the existence of opposition helps the authorities, to a great extent, not to make blunders, which would be possible in the case of absolute lack of control.

Going back to the election situation in Russia and the attitude of the authorities to the opposition, we have to point out that although today there is no threat that a coming to power of opposition in Russia would change the institutional and value foundations of the current authorities – a threat that was real in 1996 if the Communists scored a victory – nowadays the authorities have to face a totally different set of issues.

The policy of the new Russian authorities, aimed at marginalization and co-optation of the opposition parties, a policy launched in the late 1990s to early 2000s, resulted in the fact that the party in power, United Russia, became the dominant party in the Federal Assembly and the legislative bodies of the constituent entities of the Russian Federation. An overwhelming majority of governors are also members of United Russia. Besides the marginalization and co-optation actions on the part of the authorities taken against the left and right opposition, there were also objective reasons for abruptly weakening the positions of the Communists and the so-called liberal parties, Yabloko and SPS. Here I would like to point out that the existing situation causes serious