

Is There Any Hope for Russian Political Parties?

VASILY I. ZLOBIN^{*}

The way this question is put could seem paradoxical and puzzling. In fact, there is no country in the Western world where there are no political parties. According to recent data, there are more 800 political parties internationally representing hundreds of millions of members. They actively participate in political life and parliamentary activities, they form governments, and they strongly influence the domestic and foreign policies of their states.

At present, different political movements and parties are rapidly forming in Russia. These newly forming parties and their leaders would be senseless if they did not take into account both the world experience and the past experience of Russia in this regard. This article attempts to address the formation of Russia's political parties, by first asking, What does the world experience teach? Then, What does the Russian experience teach?

Evolution of Political Parties: The World Experience

Society changes together with its political institutions. Nations generally produce the governments they deserve, like Aristotle once said. The political parties which were formed during the Enlightenment and during the first democratic revolutions in Europe and the United States played an outstanding role in establishing a democratic basis for their societies—civil rights, individual freedoms and democratic principles of government. Since a party by nature is a self-formed group of free citizens sharing political views and interests, given the proper framework, parties can be the conduit of progress and honest government.

However, once political parties formed, they did not remain unchanged—both with respect to their inner functioning and goals, and the way they handle the state power they may have captured. World public opinion, following a series of influential intellectuals and political commentators of the day, began to focus on several negative characteristics which led to a diminishing role of political parties in social life. This goes back to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. A “red thread” developed among some intellectuals and political analysts with their research works, including Moisei Ostrogorsky, Robert Michels, Max Weber, Moris Duverger and others.

* Vasily I. Zlobin is a professor of history at Moscow State University, and the author of a number of books on Russian history and on political parties and movements.

The Influence of the Intellectuals

In his research on the evolution of political parties in the United States and Great Britain, *Democracy and the Organization of Political Parties* (1902), Moisei Ostrogorsky came to the conclusion that as soon as they capture state power, the party becomes an obstacle to the further development of political democracy when the elites make the seizure of power an end in itself. Newly established political parties building or perpetuating a state regime became an instrument of tyranny and corruption. The growing isolation of the political parties from society gave birth to a phenomenon of “caucus,” meaning that a narrow section of leaders manages the party affairs. Ostrogorsky came to the conclusion that it was necessary to “reject a concept of a self-perpetuating political party aimed at capturing power as a goal.”¹

Robert Michels, in his research *Zur Soziologie des Parteiwesens in der Modernen Demokratie* (1911), watched the growth of oligarchical trends in the development of democratic parties, and concluded that as a leading group becomes more and more isolated, and begins to feel jeopardized by the rank-and-file membership of the party, it begins to reject inner-party democracy. Putting it mildly, Max Weber's appraisal of the role of political parties is far from complementary. In his article „Politik als Beruf“ (1918), he stated that the party oligarchy reached its goals by the bureaucratization of the party apparatus and demagoguery at elections when “many parties, like those in the U.S., have turned into real parties of hunters for offices, changing the content of their programs depending on the possible capture of votes.”² The monograph of Moris Duverger, «Les partis politiques» (1951), is also interesting. It is devoted to the “general evolution of parties” in the direction of a deepening gap “between them and democratic regimes.”³

Such evolution became apparent in recent Russian history. The powerful political “party” that was the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) was, in the final analysis, affected by the destructive force of the Ostrogorskian “caucus,” which is more widely known in Russia as the *nomenklatura*. As a result, the party lost the confidence of the masses, which at the first opportunity barred it from power and disintegrated it.

Completing his research, Duverger came to the remarkable conclusion that the further development of political parties “will lead to a reconsideration of many existing schemes.”⁴ So there is some room for optimism. In view of that, the young Russian political parties currently defining the direction of their activities should draw conclusions from the world experience: history must be studied and taken into account. Of no less importance is the native experience of political parties in pre-Soviet Russia.

The Country With No Party Tradition: The Russian Experience

The construction of Russian political parties today is not under any past

pressures or bad histories, since all parties today inherited a *tabula rasa*. But there are no party traditions in Russia to speak of. Some present-day parties, for instance, the Constitutional Democrats and Social Democrats, think it necessary to present themselves as the successors to the parties with identical names which existed in pre-revolutionary Russia. They attempt to focus on some mythical native roots, native grounds. But a succession of this kind is rather difficult, since the world has changed and so has Russia. And what could be more unnatural than the intention to go back? Social development cannot be stopped or, even more, turned back. It is impossible.

The Russian paradox is that the political parties which emerged in late-nineteenth century and early-twentieth century Russia, on the eve of the coming Revolution, failed to flourish and eventually shut down after 1917 to make way for the one-party monopoly. Thus, they existed not more than 10 to 15 years. This young Russian multi-party system could not consolidate its grip on the masses, for it was weak and provisional. Their main mistake was that they failed to utilize the real source of their power—the people they allegedly represented. They concentrated more on parliamentary strategies and on influencing government policy than on educating and energizing their constituencies. Party activities are very important for the political education of the masses: to help them understand the correlation between their vital needs and the party orientation, and the connection between their interests and “their” party which they would regard as their representative in the bodies of power. Party institutions are the most obvious indicator of the social and political maturity of a population. When Russia was beginning to give up tribal, clan, and patrimonial ties and was establishing other—class and party—connections, it was embracing the essentials for an emerging democratic society. But the population was only slightly moved by party differentiation, as a party consciousness never really developed. Contemporary political parties and their leaders would like to know the reasons of that and how to avoid it.

The activities of those parties, representing all kinds of interests (landlords, monarchists, bourgeoisie, liberal, socialist) emerged during a time of tsarist autocracy and feudal landlords ruling Russia. The latter's resolutely conservative opposition to any reforms contributed to social tensions and rising conflicts. This played a large role in causing the Revolution, which initially represented the combined efforts of many elements that were gradually eliminated by the machiavellian Communists. It is necessary to note that not only the left wing radical parties, but even loyal opposition parties such as the Constitutional Democrats were illegal and unregistered with the police and the bureaucracy.

Political parties were regularly deprived of such business arena as the parliament, depriving them of this important forum. In fact, the first State Duma of 1906 managed to hold only one session before being dismissed as objectionable by the tsar. About 200 leftist deputies, Constitutional Democrats

(Kadets) included, were convicted and imprisoned. The second State Duma of 1907 was dismissed also. The Social-Democratic faction was sent to Siberia. Only the third State Duma of 1907-1912 acted out its full term. The fourth was stopped several times, before being dissolved on the eve of the February Revolution. No new elections were announced.

It is necessary to add that the electoral law at the time excluded universal suffrage, restrained the interests of peasants and the working class by giving considerable election privileges to the ruling classes of feudal lords and the oligarchical bourgeoisie. So the Duma did not adequately represent Russia's social groups and political parties. One must agree with a tsarist minister, Vladimir Kokovtsov, who cried out once at the session of the third Duma: "Thank God we have no parliament yet!"

After the February revolution and the regrouping of political parties, the Kadets took the place of the landlord-monarchist parties. They managed to turn themselves, in Moisei Ostrogorsky's best tradition, into the party of the ruling government—absorbing many of the elements of the

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old landlord-monarchist and bourgeoisie parties. However, the Kadets failed to find vital ties with the masses and to complete the revolution—abandoning their original movement, program and political slogans. Thus they were destined to fail. In exile, the Kadet leader Pyotr Milyukov later wrote: "The parties which spoke in the name of the people lost in October 1917, when the people followed Lenin."⁵

The Crisis of the Democratic Russia Movement

We will now focus on more profound issues: Is the development towards a permanent political party evident in contemporary Russian party development? If so, will these parties dominate the political system? History will recognize the years 1986 to 1991 as the period of rapid formation of political parties and movements representing all political trends, from conservative to radical. This resulted from the political activity of leaders inspired by democratization. According to statistics, Russia now has more than 1,100 parties, political organizations, clubs, associations, fronts, and alliances.

Not surprisingly, at the beginning of the party formation process, some parties and political organizations came from the former ruling CPSU. Although they emerged with different platforms, including anticommunist, the majority of the newly formed parties advocated pushing aside the CPSU from power. One of the peculiarities of this process has been the phase of the proto-party (i.e., the archetype of ideologically and politically autonomous and well-organized

parties). This “under-formation” of the parties caused the appearance of the broad political movement Democratic Russia (DDR) in the election campaign of 1990-1991. The Movement united more than 50 organizations and movements having branches in almost 70 cities. DDR won a very important victory at the polls. DDR candidates prevailed in 50 cities including Moscow and St. Petersburg (winning more than 60 percent of the votes), and in half the regional centers (40 to 60 percent of the votes there). They got 40 percent of the vote as Russian people's deputies.

Supported by Democratic Russia, Boris Yeltsin was elected first as the chairman of the Russian Supreme Soviet and then after the creation of the presidency, he was elected president on the initiative of DDR. The Movement's role revealed its evolution into a political party. It worked to define the programs of the first Congresses of People's Deputies, influenced the preliminary consideration of several issues, gave backing to candidates, held congresses and elections for the leading DDR ideas, and emphasized inter-party discipline. After the August 1991 coup the president supported the Democratic Russia-

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proclaimed anticommunist course and initiated shock-therapy economic reforms aimed at obtaining a market economy and a democratic way of life. The reforms, however, led to unexpected results. Society fell into economic and political crisis. In 1992 alone industrial output decreased by 23 percent, agricultural production fell, consumer prices went up by a factor of 26.6, while wages rose only by a factor of 10. The figures for

1993 are even worse. As a result, a considerable section of the population has fallen below the poverty line. Sharp discontent has increased, and the forces advocating gradual economic and political reforms as an alternative course have become stronger. These forces seek reforms with strong social protection for the population and more state control over the economy.

The most inflexible elements within Democratic Russia refuse to listen to the opposition's demands. Their stubbornness has helped fuel the resultant social polarization, which is also reflected in politics. The press reacted to the legislative-executive struggle by launching sharp criticisms on the people's deputies using such expressions as “Communists Seek Revenge,” “The Empire Strikes Back,” “Coup,” “Uncompromising National-Communist Opposition Wins a Victory,” “The Congress Raises Cold War from the Grave,” and so forth. But let us recall that the deputies' corps has not been changed, and remains the same as the initial Congresses which supported Yeltsin against Gorbachev, voted

for him to lead Russia and approved the dissolution of the USSR. Rather, it is the people's attitude which has changed and, therefore, DDR has found itself outside of the center of opinion and in the radical fringe. As a result, DDR has entered an identity crisis and has splintered into several mutually hostile groupings.

The significance of this crisis from the perspective of the future of Russia's political parties is that however strong the party is, it is unable to solve all the fundamental social problems alone. Inevitably, multi-party blocs have started to emerge in the course of inter-party struggles. They have found wider platforms for unification instead of the narrow party frames. Reality has obliged parties to merge into multi-party political structures.

The history of the CPSU monopoly and the present lesson of DDR, despite their obvious differences, call for new political actions responsive to the present reality, particularly the growth of a mass consciousness. The people have begun actively participating in political life, thereby forcing political parties to constantly reflect changing popular moods. As noted above, Russian thinkers have already addressed this problem.

“Down With the Party!” and “Long Live the League!”

The above slogans are Moisei Ostrogorsky's conclusions from his analysis of the evolution of political parties. He predicted that the further evolution of contemporary provisional parties would lead to leagues that would replace the permanent political parties. The new leagues would spark new political initiatives. The essence of this transition from the system of parties bent on capturing state power and establishing party rule to an arrangement of political groups of citizens is aimed at the attainment of certain political goals. “A party that holds its members in its grip once they have joined would make way for groups that organize or reorganize depending on the problems at hand and popular opinion.”⁶

Russia's historical peculiarities leave it susceptible to experiencing such a development. It is reflected in the famous “Russian idea,” expressed by Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Nikolai Berdyaev, Vladimir Soloviev, Lev Tolstoy and others. The idea implies community, spiritual unity and general concord. The prominent thinker Berdyaev provides an appropriate example of this idea. He criticized democracy as a degenerating system obsessed with the formal principle of the will of the majority, but unable to satisfy the people's will. The will of the people, argues Berdyaev, cannot be expressed in the arithmetic compilation of votes obtained after elections, because parties focus precisely on obtaining votes in order to gain power. They do not reflect people's real lives or aims. Rather than focusing on formal, outward democracy, concludes Berdyaev, the future depends on a “great revolution,” in which the people “will turn inward towards a spiritual life . . . in the name of substance and purpose.” He adds “it is in the

tradition of Russian thinking to understand such things.”

Russia at the Crossroads

The ultimate meaning of the current historical stage will be defined by the way that Russia's fundamental problem, economic reform, is solved. What political and economic form will Russia take?

Economic reform is a central issue. Privatization, that is, the problem of property redistribution, is at the heart of the matter. This question alone caused the referendum of 25 April 1993. How the parties interacted in the preparation and during the referendum is worth noting. Then, none of the parties agitated alone. Wide coalitions were formed with an obvious multi-party character. These were:

1. *Democratic Choice*, which united dozens of parties and organized movements around Democratic Russia. These included the Russian Movement for Democratic Reforms, the Republican Party of Russia, the Party of Economic Freedom, the Russian Social-Democratic Party, the Peasant Party of Russia, the Constitutional Democrats, a number of trade unions, and other associations. This bloc came out for deeper economic reforms of the present type, for the establishment of private property in all the economic spheres, including land, and for the redistribution of public assets in order to hasten the creation of an entrepreneurial class.

2. *Russian National Alliance*, comprised of a nucleus of deputies gathered around the faction Yedinstvo (“Unity”). It consolidated about 50 parties and organizations of Communist and socialist orientation, such as the Russian Communist Workers Party, Socialist Party of the Working People, Agrarian Alliance, Front for National Salvation, Russian National Council, the Labor Russia movement, and others. This coalition advocated “reforms in the interests of the working people” and working collectives, strong social policies and collective ownership of property.

3. *Civic Union*, based on the People's Party of Free Russia, the Russian Democratic Party, the faction Renewal, as well as the Russian Christian Democratic Movement, the parliamentary faction Change-New Policy, and others, plus some trade unions and youth organizations. They support the continuation of economic reform, but oppose the excesses of Democratic Choice and of the Russian National Alliance. Civic Union occupies a more or less centrist position within the spectrum of political forces. It aims to take a constitutional path to solve the present conflicts and seeks to elect a new president and parliament in order to renew the country's leadership.

The April 1993 referendum, though it gave an affirmation to the steps taken by the president, did not solve the crisis. It did manage to reveal the opposition that was forming around the president's course. Yet, when it became clear that

the majority of the voters supported the reform measures, the adoption of a new constitution appeared on the agenda.

The new constitutional debate inspired new formations of political movements, parties, and blocs. The former Democratic Choice started to form a democratic electoral bloc expressing the interests of all those who supported the president in the April referendum, something like “the party of April 25.” At the same time, centrism is getting wider appeal as it now encompasses about 36 parties and organizations. A new organization, the Private Owners' Alliance, is entering politics. It has declared its intention to fight for power. Finally, the debates about the draft constitution have motivated the regions within the Federation to manifest their separatist moods. Though the chances to wage propaganda for the Communist and socialist parties have been strongly reduced and the anticommunist propaganda is working with all its might, we should still take these forces into account. Perhaps Berdyaev was right to conclude that “Communism is a Russian phenomenon despite Marxist ideology. Communism is Russia's destiny.”⁷

Whatever the details or outcomes of the present struggle, it is important to reveal party development trends for the future. As the reforms continue, the essence of these developments becomes clearer. The reform supporters prefer such terms as “privatization,” “market economy,” “civilization,” “entrepreneurship,” and seek the creation of the market economy and civil society. First Deputy Prime Minister Vladimir Shumeiko states that the reforms are intended for entrepreneurs, whose class “we do not have yet, but are going to create.”

New Philosophy of Power and Parties

At this time, when both domestic and global political organizations are in flux, perhaps the Russian perspective on party development carries importance. This perspective promotes the concept of social stratification, which groups people into strata. This concept of strata revolves around social position, which is defined by a wide arrange of factors and not simply economic. These include one's level of education, skills, social prestige and authority, opportunities, and level of comfort. Stratification overrides class divisions and makes society more mobile. The world community in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 raised the rights of an individual above the rights of any other social subjects. This means priority for the individual, with political parties coming later.

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The new philosophy does not regard a party as a class party, as the Bolsheviks did, but as a party movement—a free and autonomous organization of citizens joined in expression and representation of certain interests in different social situations. The party is actually a living body actively participating in collaboration with other democratic forces.

The term “party” goes back to the Latin *partio*, which means to divide, which is what parties have done. But the society has not stopped progressing. Since political parties continue to survive, the question remains: Is there a future for Russian political parties? Certainly. But only for the modernized parties willing to coalesce, to compromise and to evolve, and not for the outmoded ones. The German writer Heinrich Heine was absolutely right: “New times need new clothes for new conditions.”

Notes

¹ M. Ostrogorsky, *Democracy and Political Parties*, (Moscow-Leningrad, 1930), Vol. 2, p. 308.

² Max Weber, *Selected Works* (Moscow, 1990), p. 657

³ M. Duverger, *Les Partis Politiques* (Paris, 1956), p. 463

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 462.

⁵ P. Milykov, “Debates on the Russian Revolution,” *Latest News*, 17 February 1924.

⁶ Ostrogorsky, p. 308.

⁷ B. Chicherin, *On People's Representation* (Moscow, 1886), p. 61.