

Electoral Democracy or Electoral Clanism? Russian Democratization and Theories of Transition

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It seems clear that Russia's attempts at democratization and Westernization will not meet the expectations of Russia's democratic reformers. As happened in previous eras of Westernization, only some elements of Western liberal democracy have taken root in Russian soil, the most important of them being competitive elections. Other fundamental elements of liberalism have not only failed to flourish, but have degenerated since the late Soviet era. Compared with the late Gorbachev period of 1990–91, the mass media and courts in today's Russia are less independent, society's role is weaker, personal rights and freedoms are less secure, and even elections are less free and fair than they were in 1990. To understand this outcome of Russian democratization, the correlation between the electoral process and the development of liberalism should be examined.

Elections and Liberal Democracy

By the second half of the twentieth century, the belief that democracy is the ideal or at least the best possible organization of human society has become dominant among political scientists, and especially among the political elites of most countries of the world. There are virtually no discussions today of whether democracy is good or bad; opinions differ only on what kind of democracy is more democratic, or what kind of democracy is genuine. Some political scientists have pointed out that the desire of every leader and political movement in today's world to be seen as democratic led to such stretching of the term that it turned into "not so much a term of restricted and specific meaning as a vague endorsement of a popular idea."¹

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But the meaning of “democracy” has not withered away completely. Authors of its numerous modern definitions can be divided into two major groups. Those who belong to the first, following Joseph Schumpeter, maintain that elections are the only practical criterion of democracy.² The other group believes that democracy cannot be defined by elections alone. It can in turn be divided into two sub-groups. The first consists of those who include the fundamentals of political liberalism in their definition of democracy. They argue that a democratic society should be characterized not only by the freedom and fairness of elections but also by a broadly defined pluralism. Thus, they identify democracy with its liberal-democratic form.³ Others add social and economic democracy, guarantees of social equality, or at least of some level of social justice.⁴

Discussions about democracy are carried on almost exclusively among political theorists. In practical politics, however, Schumpeter’s definition has prevailed. In today’s world, governments and nongovernmental groups in the West, and their supporters from the opposition forces advocating democracy and liberalization in nondemocratic countries, call for immediate general elections according to the rules that exist in contemporary, developed liberal democracies. Regardless of whether it is Bosnia, Russia, Rwanda, China, or Nigeria, elections are promoted as the first and primary remedy for societal evils. In many cases, this approach has led to success, and using the criterion of elections alone, the number of democracies in the world is growing steadily. On these grounds, supporters of the electoral approach have begun to speak of the “third wave” of democratization, which even led to the emergence of such bizarre concepts as Francis Fukuyama’s “end of history.”

At the same time, several theorists have observed that in many countries elections did not produce liberal democracy, with its widely accepted traits: a high level of freedom, the rule of law, secure rights and freedoms of individuals and minorities, and so forth.⁵ In fact, in some cases they led to the reverse. Analysis of this phenomenon resulted in a new formulation that separated elections from liberalism and (when elections were still considered to be the essence of democracy) democracy from liberalism. The political systems that allow regular and relatively free elections but by all other dimensions do not meet the standards of liberal democracy were defined as “electoral,” “illiberal,” or “delegative” democracies.⁶

According to the supporters of these new definitions, although the number of illiberal democracies in the world is growing fast, very few of them evolve into liberal democracies of the Western type. They warn that the formal electoral method of evaluation does not allow understanding of the more fundamental dimensions of a political system.⁷ The experience of democratization in such a vast country as Russia can provide important material for this discussion.

Russian Democratization and Theories of Transition to Democracy

There are two main approaches to the attempt at democratization in Russia. One employs popular theories of “transition” and “rational choice” and rejects cultural explanations. The other uses the traditional stereotypical view of the Russian political culture, according to which Russia’s authoritarian cultural tradition re-

jects liberal democracy. The second approach is clearly simplistic and stunted, since it is static by definition and does not allow any significant change of political culture. The very fact that in some countries liberal democracy has finally stabilized suggests that preexisting culture is not an absolute and deterministic factor but can significantly change over time. This, however, does not mean that beliefs do not play a role in each specific period. As Larry Diamond put it, "Whether changing or enduring, political culture does shape and constrain the possibilities for democracy."⁸

Nevertheless, one often finds attempts to theorize about Russian democratization without employing the cultural factor. One of the most consistent attempts was undertaken by Michael McFaul. McFaul sees today's Russia as a country that has completed its transition to electoral democracy, where all major political actors have "acquiesced to a new, albeit minimal, set of rules of political competition in which popular elections were recognized as the only legitimate means to political power."⁹ In his analysis, McFaul combines two approaches. According to one, "the rational choice" theory, political process is determined by individuals who make rational decisions, pursuing their own interests and maximizing their own expected utility. Accordingly, political transition is seen as a struggle between the two groups: proponents of change and supporters of the *ancien regime*, the incumbents and the challengers. Sometimes these two groups come to an agreement on a new set of rules determining political behavior. In that case, the transition goes on smoothly and succeeds. In other cases, they do not agree and the transition fails. The second approach provided by the modern studies of transitions defines conditions under which a successful transition is possible: "the narrower the contested agenda of change, the more likely that agreement will emerge."¹⁰

McFaul divides the Russian transition into three periods. The first two attempts were unsuccessful: one ended in the putsch in August 1991 and the collapse of the Soviet Union; the next, in the armed conflict between the president and the Supreme Soviet in 1993. In both cases, "agreement over new rules was not reached, pacts were not negotiated, and actors went outside of the existing rules of the game to pursue their interests. Opposing, polarized camps pursued zero-sum strategies until one side won because the contested agenda of change was wide and the balance of power between opposing actors ambiguous." Thus, the reason for the failure is found in the excessive agenda of change, which included not only reform of political institutions, but also the introduction of new types of property relations, changes in sovereignty, and the need to redraw national and internal borders.

During the third stage, the number of issues on the agenda for change significantly narrowed. The questions of state sovereignty, borders, and property redistribution had already been largely settled, and the only important remaining problem was to find a new balance of political power. That is why, in McFaul's view, this problem was solved much more easily: the strongest actor imposed an explicit set of new rules and codified them in the new constitution of 1993, the distribution of power between actors changed, the balance of power was recognized by all significant actors, and the author of the new rules, Boris Yeltsin, although

to a limited extent, “submitted to self-binding mechanisms built into the new institutional order.”¹¹

Explaining successful political change is in fact simply common sense: the less you change, the easier it is to achieve change. It does not, however, provide an answer to an important question: When the agenda of change is roughly the same, why in some cases does transition go much faster and easier and finally succeed, while in others it encounters great difficulties or even fails? Here one has to take into consideration the factor of culture and analyze the subjective understandings of goals, motives, and ideals of the actors. Let us compare, for example, former parts of one country: Estonia, Russia, Georgia, and Tadjikistan. In all of them, the agenda for change was relatively the same: new borders, new sovereignty, redistribution of property, reconsideration of the internal political balance. Nevertheless, the results were quite different. The same can be said about Slovakia and the Czech republic, Serbia and Slovenia, or India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. The failure of democratic institutions in some countries (especially in Asia and Africa where they were introduced by colonial powers) and their survival in others constituted a main reason for Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba’s introducing the concept of political culture in the first place.¹² Thus, a wider look at the Russian transition demands including the cultural factor into any theory of transition.

On the whole, one can agree with McFaul’s “rational choice” argument that “the greater the consensus concerning the perception of the balance of power between major actors, the more likely a new set of rules can be accepted by all,”¹³ but with one clarification: What exactly is considered rational (or irrational) behavior in a specific society at a specific time is determined by its culture. For example, a Japanese student who fails a university entrance exam may consider it rational to commit suicide by jumping out of a window because life without a university diploma in Japan might be widely believed to be disgraceful. A Russian student is likely to consider such an act irrational, even silly, and would rather drink a bottle of vodka to forget the failure and wait for another opportunity next year. That is not to say that no Russian student commits suicide under the given circumstances. However, statistics show that Japanese students commit suicide more often than students of any other nation. Cultural attitudes are not iron laws; individual behavior is determined by various factors. But knowledge of cultural attitudes allows one to speak of the most likely, typical behavior that is reflected by statistics. This is true of political behavior. A fighter for the rights of an ethnic group in the United States is likely to consider it rational to engage in political lobbying and trying to influence public opinion using the mass media. To achieve a similar aim, a Muslim fundamentalist who believes that his soul will go directly to Heaven after he sacrifices himself for the just cause may believe it rational to blow himself up in an Israeli bus full of innocent people. In one political culture, it is thought rational to fight until final victory and give one’s life for an idea; in another, it is thought rational to compromise in order to achieve what is practically possible.

Thus, explaining a choice of an individual or a political group is impossible

without understanding what the actors themselves believe to be rational. The probability of achieving a consensus about the balance of power between major actors during a transition period has much to do with the subjective orientation toward consensus in general, the presence (or absence) of a wish to achieve it, and an understanding of its necessity. A balance of power is impossible or very difficult to achieve if such an understanding is alien to a given political culture, which might lack the custom, tradition, or desire to share power.

Soviet Political Culture and the Collapse of the Soviet Union

Although many Russian political analysts and politicians, both in discourse and in theoretical writings, call for the separation of powers or a system of checks and balances, these democratic concepts have not yet penetrated Russian political culture in the post-Soviet era. These notions, borrowed from Western or pre-revolutionary Russian discourse, are usually seen in Russia today as instruments for achieving a higher political goal: an ideal and just society that would guarantee prosperity for all. If these instruments do not lead to a just society, they may be sacrificed and replaced by more effective ones. In this sense, the rule of law, rights of individuals and groups, and constitutional powers of different branches of government, although believed to be important and desirable, are valued less than other political goals.

The source of this instrumental approach to democratic procedures can be found in the political culture and political reality of the Soviet Union. There have been many attempts to theorize about post-Soviet Russian society. Most such attempts by political scientists, however, were superficial applications of Western political concepts to a very different Russian reality and, therefore, were inadequate. The most successful seems to be the anthropological approach of Janine Wedel, who sees the political process in today's Russia as a struggle between clans and cliques.¹⁴ She, however, does not show the sources of the new Russian clan political system and the history of its development. To understand these sources one should look carefully at the last period of the history of the Soviet Union.

The political system of the classic USSR was characterized by an extreme concentration of power. That is why it was often defined as "totalitarian." However, the concentration of power did not manifest in the total control of the central Communist Party authority in Moscow (as it is often presented). Governmental authorities at various levels based on territorial or branch principles exercised power within their area of responsibility. The essence of Soviet totalitarianism was that all persons and institutions were co-opted by the party structure. Every artist, writer, and actor, theoretically, was under a higher authority: a union of artists, writers, or actors. Those unions in turn had ministries above them, and the ministries had corresponding departments of the CPSU Central Committee. The structure went up to the Politburo of the CPSU Central Committee, which, in theory, had unlimited authority over everything. In practice, of course, the Politburo did not fire or employ every person in the country, it did not instruct every artist on what to paint, or every singer on what to sing, but it had the capability of doing so.

The highest authority sometimes allowed or in some cases even encouraged competition among various agencies (for example, between the KGB, the interior ministry, and the prosecutor's office, or between central ministries and local authorities), but there was always a higher level of authority above the competing ones that controlled all sides and was able to stop the rivalry if it had gone too far. Soviets were subordinate to their executive committees, and the executive committees to the CPSU committees of the corresponding level, and they all reported to the party committee of a higher level. On every building of the formally independent court one could read its official name: "The Ministry of Justice of the RSFSR, People's Court of X District." There were groups in the Soviet

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Union that promoted their interests and agenda. But until the very late years of Gorbachev's rule, any such groups had to act through official channels, recognizing a higher authority. They did not have a right simply to advertise their agenda, but could only submit it upward through the hierarchy.

This system naturally influenced beliefs of the population. And Russian democrats were no exception. They regarded the promotion of democratization as a tool that had to be used to destroy the system of absolute power of the corrupt, ineffective, brutal communist bureaucrats and to put in its place a similarly absolute power of democrats. They believed that only the absolute power of the "good guys" could secure the creation of an ideal democratic society. The most important features of this society were believed to be justice, prosperity, and the realization of wishes and creative potential for all. The communist power and the government in general (since the Communist Party and the Soviet government made up a unified system of power) were understood to be the main obstacles to achieving this ideal. To remove this obstacle, it was thought necessary to destroy the whole pyramid of power from the top to bottom.

In 1991, the core of this pyramid disappeared and the whole structure crashed. It left behind numerous fragments: soviets, ministries, various government agencies, industries, research institutes, and other institutions that lost their leaders. After a short period of confusion, they began consolidating their bureaucratic power over those who had previously been under their command. In the absence of control from above and lacking the concept of separating power, these clans began fighting for absolute authority in their areas of competence. Some of them called themselves "democratic," some "patriotic," and some were politically neutral. Some were consolidating within a specific territory (as regional and republican power elites), and some according to the branch principle (as Gazprom, Lukoil, Russian Public Television, and other "privatized" monopolies); some

were formed of former friends and colleagues (as the influential St. Petersburg clan led by Anatoliy Chubais), and others on the basis of former criminal connections. There were, of course, many mixed cases, and intermingling between new and old clans was also evident (or, to put it more precisely, those formed of formerly official and formerly unofficial structures). They had one thing in common: Both old and new clans aimed not at negotiating to share power and responsibility with others, but at grabbing as much power and property as possible. In this sense, they all supported privatization of property and power and demanded “sovereignty” over their resources.

Political differences played some role in this struggle, but they were not its determining factor. A vivid example is the struggle between Soviets and the executive branch that in 1992–93 paralyzed the government from district to federal level. This conflict was not as much over programs or ways of development, as between clan-type bureaucratic institutions whose former judge and boss, the CPSU, had left them to the mercy of fate. During that period, the supreme leader of the “Soviet” clan, Ruslan Khasbulatov, saw his institution not as a parliament of the Western type, but as a Soviet-style department, and he was building it accordingly. He tried to introduce strict bureaucratic discipline from top to bottom not only within the Supreme Soviet, but to subordinate all lower level Soviets to those of a higher level (district Soviets reporting to regional, and regional to Khasbulatov himself). Khasbulatov, whose constitutional job was to preside over meetings of the Supreme Soviet and the Congress of People’s Deputies, believed himself to be the head of the country’s entire system of Soviets. And because, according to the constitution, the Congress of People’s Deputies was the country’s supreme authority, Khasbulatov saw himself as the supreme leader of the entire country. Likewise, President Boris Yeltsin saw himself as the supreme leader both as head of the country’s executive branch, and as “guarantor of the constitution” standing above all branches of power.

The fact that Yeltsin, unlike Khasbulatov, was elected by direct popular vote, made him confident that his authority was unlimited, regardless of any legal and constitutional formalities. The chairman of the Constitutional Court, Valeriy Zor’kin, also saw himself as the highest authority in the country, towering above both representative and executive branches and not limited to the field of interpreting the constitution. He often gave directions to the president and the parliament on how they should solve economic and political problems. Even Vice President Aleksandr Rutskoy demanded equal powers with the president based on the fact that they both were popularly elected on the same ballot.

“Democrats” and communist supporters, who were bitter enemies during the election campaign, soon joined forces to fight their former brothers-in-arms, who found themselves working for various branches of the executive—a clear indication of the bureaucratic (not ideological) character of the struggle for power, which began at the bottom level and only subsequently reached the federal center. Its first battle took place in the Oktyabr’skiy district in Moscow between the overwhelmingly democratic district Soviet and its democratic chairman, Il’ya Zaslavskiy. The war ended in October 1993 with the shelling of the building of

the democratic Supreme Soviet by troops loyal to the democratic president. All sides accused the others of being totalitarian and nondemocratic, and of using old Soviet methods of suppressing opposition.

The proclamation of sovereignty by former Soviet and later Russian “ethnic” republics, and even by some regions and districts, can also be understood as a bureaucratic struggle among fragments of a totalitarian system. Nationalist slogans (especially in the regions where the title “nationality” did not constitute a majority and ethnic problems were not acute) were often mere pretexts. Every minor regional government wanted to be sovereign at least over its small territory, and to control all property of value that happened to be there. Some cases were quite bizarre, such as the claim by the democratically dominated Soviet of the Krasnopresnenskiy district in Moscow to sovereignty not only over all district property but also over the district air space. The fierce struggles for power among bureaucratic clans, even at the grassroots level, again argues against the theory that success of transition is determined exclusively by the scope of the agenda of change. The agenda at the district level was much narrower than at the national level, but the results were the same.

The so-called “privatization” of state property also developed along the lines of bureaucratic-clan politics. Very rarely was state property transferred to genuinely private owners; as a rule, enterprises were grabbed by their former state managers, their families and friends, and groups otherwise connected to them, practically for free. The process was very different from examples of democratization in “classic” autocratic regimes in Latin America or Southern Europe where major elements of the market structure and liberal politics were already in place. In the Soviet Union, it was part of the fragmentation of a totalitarian system into equally totalitarian parts. Before, everything belonged to one boss. Now that the boss was dead, everyone hurried to grab whatever they could: power, property, even air.

The essence of this struggle was poorly understood by most Western analysts, who stereotyped Russian political actors into two groups: the conservatives and the reformers, the supporters of the old and the promoters of the new, the democrats and the Reds. The honor of being included among the “good guys” by influential forces in the West was often superficial. According to Wedel, the people of the St. Petersburg clan came to be seen in the West as the only genuine reformers of the Russian economy largely because they spoke good English, could use economic terminology familiar to Western politicians, had previously studied at Western universities, were ready to call themselves “reformers,” and had personal connections with influential Western economists. Granting full support to only one Gaidar-Chubais clan (which was not the only or even the most influential “democratic” and “reform-minded” group), the West committed a big mistake. Instead of promoting agreement, compromise, the separation of powers, and the division of authority, Western policy encouraged one clan to grab all of the power at the expense of others, to get around the official budget, to evade the constitutional control of the parliament and the government, and to disregard the existing law. The fallacy of this approach was, according to Wedel, based on “think-

ing that lasting institutions can be built by supporting particular people, instead of helping to facilitate processes and the rule of law.”¹⁵ There were, of course, supporters of the old and the new in Russia, but differences along those lines were disappearing fast. On one hand, all actors wanted a change: to redistribute power and property in their favor. On the other, all acted within the framework and under the influence of old beliefs.

Elections played a peculiar role in this situation. At first, in the last years of Gorbachev’s rule, they led to significant changes in the ruling elites. However, gradually, after the power was redistributed, the leadership of clans and groupings began to use elections to legitimize their claims to greater power at the expense of other clans. This stimulated the disintegration of the political system and led to dangerous conflicts that sometimes involved armed fighting. While the communist leaders were not elected and were not regarded as legitimate by the population, officials of every level in the new Russia were elected by popular vote and acquired legitimate status.

In this sense, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the following events should be compared not with the death of authoritarianism in countries that experienced relatively long periods of limited liberalization (such as Spain, Portugal, or some Latin American countries) but with the break-up of another highly centralized monolith: the Chinese empire. In China, as in the Soviet Union, disintegration of the traditional, centralized, hierarchical system of government as a result of the revolution of 1911 was speeded by popular elections in 1913, leading to the creation of territorial militarist clans headed by warlords and of powerful oligarchic cliques with close ties to the government. The country was plunged into a period of ethnic and regional conflicts and wars until the strongest clan (which happened to be communist) took full control.

Democracy and Collapse of Totalitarianism

Isaiah Berlin, in his classic *Two Concepts of Liberty*, pointed out that an enlightened and liberal autocracy could in theory secure more freedom than a democracy, where the majority brutally imposes its will on the minority. He stressed that “freedom in this sense, at any rate logically, is not connected with democracy or self-government.”¹⁶ But it is only recently that Western political scientists have begun to discuss the idea that democracy, if planted in unfertile soil, may fail to lead to greater freedom, and can even result in eliminating the small degree of liberalism already in place. Along with the classic cases of the democratic election of fascist regimes in Germany and Italy, several more recent examples are usually quoted in this respect: the near-victory of Muslim fundamentalists in Algeria, where a secular government had to cancel elections; elections in Yugoslavia that opened the way to power for nationalist extremists in each constituent republic and led to ethnic wars and the breakup of the federation, and so forth. Recently, in an intriguing article, Fareed Zakaria argued that in the contemporary world it is not liberalism, but illiberal democracy, where popularly elected leaders suppress civic liberties, that is on the rise. According to Zakaria, “constitutional liberalism has led to democracy, but democracy does not seem to bring constitutional liberalism.”

He pointed out that “during the last two decades in Latin America, Africa, and parts of Asia, dictatorships with little background in constitutional liberalism have given way to democracy. The results are not encouraging.”¹⁷

Unfortunately, the possibility of a negative impact from the immediate introduction of democratic procedures in the Soviet Union has not been discussed by Western political scientists, or by Russian democrats. Both maintained that free elections would inevitably end communist domination and bring to power democrats who would create a Western-style, liberal constitutional democracy. Neither the role of popular beliefs nor the peculiarities of the structure of Russian society was taken into account.

There were, however, Russian authors who foresaw the coming threat. One of them was an émigré philosopher and political thinker, Ivan Il'in, who was exiled from Russia in 1922 by the Bolshevik government. Il'in believed that the failure of the first Russian democratization attempt in 1917 and the coming to power of fascist regimes in Europe constituted important lessons for those who were elaborating a strategy for Russia's post-totalitarian development. In his opinion, these historic disasters resulted from the dogmatic belief of democratic political activists in the necessity of introducing full-fledged democracy to unprepared societies. He predicted that if such an attempt failed in Russia in 1917, after a relatively long period of “preparation,” the situation after the collapse of communism would be much less favorable. Writing in the late 1940s and early 1950s, Il'in argued that long years of totalitarianism changed the character of the people. In his view, “if there is something that can deliver new, heaviest blows to Russia after communism, it is the stubborn attempts to introduce there a democratic system after totalitarian tyranny, because this tyranny had enough time to undermine all the necessary prerequisites of democracy in Russia, without which only mob riots, universal corruption and venality, and the surfacing of new . . . tyrants are possible.” Il'in envisioned a real possibility of the disintegration of the country, its split into “a system of small and powerless communities,” as a result of which “the territory of Russia will be boiling with endless disputes, conflicts and *civil wars*”; a dismembered Russia will “turn into a gigantic ‘Balkans,’ an eternal source of wars, a great breeding-ground of disturbances” and become “an incurable plague for the entire world.”¹⁸ As a way out, he proposed to introduce a strong authoritarian power that would educate the population and manage a return to normality by increasing the level of freedom, enriching the political experience of the population through a gradual introduction of elections and broadening electoral rights, guaranteeing rights of private property, and stimulating the development of independent education and information.

At the time, Il'in's ideas had very limited influence in the Soviet Union and among the émigré community. It was important, however, that among those echoing his views inside the country was the famous writer Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. Beginning in the late 1960s, in articles and public addresses, Solzhenitsyn called for a careful, slow, and smooth way out of totalitarianism because “if democracy is declared suddenly it would lead to an interethnic war in our country which would instantly wash away that very democracy.”¹⁹ In his open letter to Soviet

leaders, written in 1973 when he was still in the Soviet Union, Solzhenitsyn tried to persuade them that communist totalitarianism was doomed and therefore they should think about a reasonable way out. He suggested that they should reject the official ideology, allow religious and ideological pluralism, introduce the rule of law, cultivate the psychology of property owners in the population, and develop Siberia and Far Eastern regions of the country, while at the same time maintaining a monopoly on political power.²⁰ In 1990, in his analysis of Gorbachev's reforms, Solzhenitsyn again touched on the problems of democracy and transition from totalitarianism. After sharply criticizing the messy consequences of Gorbachev's perestroika, he explained that he did not mean "to suggest that the future Russian Union will have no need for democracy. *It will need it very much.* But given our people's total lack of preparation for the intricacies of democratic life, democracy must be built from bottom up, gradually, patiently, and in a way designed to last rather than being proclaimed thunderously from above in its full-fledged form."²¹

"The political predictions of Solzhenitsyn . . . turned out to be very realistic and practical."

If in and Solzhenitsyn were ostracized by both Soviet and Western democrats, who blamed them for advocating autocracy and even fascism. The belief that immediate elections were the remedy for all of Russia's problems dominated both the Western political establishment and Russian opposition. A similar kind of criticism was recently aimed at Zakaria, whose only fault was to point to a well-known fact that the authoritarian British colonial rule established the basis for the relatively stable democracy in some former colonies. Zakaria, was immediately blamed for advocating colonialism. Today, however, many experts acknowledge that one does not have to be an advocate of fascism or colonialism to doubt the role of premature elections, because "if the ultimate objective is to encourage continuous development toward a well-functioning democracy, the *prerequisites* of democratic elections must not be ignored."²²

Political developments in post-Soviet Russia show that the pessimists were generally right. It is unreasonable to argue that those who spoke against an immediate introduction of a full-fledged democracy in the USSR were enemies of freedom and democracy in general and brought the disaster of new authoritarianism upon Russia. They were right in their analysis: liberal democracy on an unprepared soil is impossible, and elections under such circumstances inevitably lead either to anarchy or to a new authoritarianism legitimized by popular vote. The political predictions of Solzhenitsyn, who was accused by many "professionals" of politics and political science of amateurism, idealism, and outdated traditionalism, turned out to be very realistic and practical. One should be glad that his darkest prophecies about a total ethnic war between the peoples of the Soviet

Union have not yet been realized. Hitherto not millions (as the writer thought), but “only” hundreds of thousands have died in such conflicts. But Solzhenitsyn’s main conclusion that without a transition period, the way of democracy for Russia is “false and premature” and that for the foreseeable future “whether we like it or not, whether we intend it or not, Russia is nevertheless destined to have an authoritarian order” was correct.²³

Already, the Russian political system is rather authoritarian. It is guarded from becoming an outright dictatorship not by its political culture or constitution, but by the weakness of the central authorities and by the personal respect of President Yeltsin for at least some democratic procedures and for the opinion of the West. At the same time, the weakness of central authority gives *carte blanche* to regional leaders. Those who care much less about democracy and the West have already created dictatorial regimes of various levels of repression (as in Primorskiy kray, republics of Bashkiria, Tatarstan, Kalmykia, and others).

After the presidential elections due in 2000, the situation is likely to develop according to one of two scenarios, neither of which is favorable for democracy: First: Yeltsin remains in power (which can happen if he finally decides to stand for election and manages to win). Considering the near-total failure of his economic policy, lack of dynamism, and loss of the ability to control the political process, it would almost certainly mean waiting for a serious outburst of public dissatisfaction and the resulting political chaos. A rehearsal for this scenario could be observed in May 1998, when unpaid miners paralyzed the country’s railway system. Since the government abandoned almost all state property and did not even manage to stop the economic decline, a significant growth of state revenues can hardly be expected in the foreseeable future. Under these circumstances, the spread of “payment” riots is only a matter of time. Huge Western bail-outs can only delay the inevitable

In the second scenario, a new president comes to power in 2000. There are presently two front-runners: the mayor of Moscow, Yuriy Luzhkov, and the governor of Krasnoyarskiy kray, Aleksandr Lebed. Moscow’s steady economic growth in recent years gives some hope that Luzhkov, if elected president, would be able to stabilize the economy of the whole country. But politically, a Luzhkov regime is more likely to be somewhat similar to South Korea under Park Chung Hee or Indonesia under Suharto. Luzhkov values personal devotion much more than legality. He controls the city’s press, courts, and elected representatives (if not administratively, as the communists did, then by providing financing and favors), and the city’s government is overwhelmed by nepotism and favoritism. General Lebed, who on many occasions publicly praised the former Chilean dictator General Pinochet, can hardly be seen as a prospective promoter of democracy either.

As Zakaria rightly pointed out, for a transition to democracy to be successful the development of liberalism should precede the introduction of elections. The transitions in the countries of the former Soviet bloc provide proof for this conclusion. In countries with old, deep traditions of liberal politics, for example, the Czech Republic, the transition was peaceful and smooth. A comparison of the

transition experiences in Hungary and Romania is revealing in this respect. Before entering the Soviet bloc, neither country had lived under democracy for any significant period of time, and their liberal traditions were equally weak. But the Hungarian communist leadership, already in the late 1950s, had begun liberalizing the regime, first in the sphere of economics and then in ideology and politics. By the time of the collapse of the Soviet bloc, Hungary was arguably the freest of all its members, while Romania was ruled by the harshest dictatorship in the whole of Eastern Europe (with the possible exception of Albania). As a result, the transition to democracy in Hungary was entirely bloodless and much more successful than in Romania, which experienced a bloody popular revolt and a long period of instability. I would even express a seditious hypothesis: Hungary benefited not only from the readiness of its communist leadership under Janos Kadar to go ahead with serious reforms, but also from the fact that the threat of a new Soviet invasion contained democratization at the top level. As a result, the liberalization of the economy, ideology, and legislation and grass-roots democratization preceded free national elections. Full-fledged democracy came later to fertilized soil. The contrast with the situation of 1956 is only too evident. At that time, democratization was introduced quickly and without preparation, resulting in chaos, factional armed fighting, and lynchings (which events of course by no means justify the Soviet invasion).

In the Soviet Union, Hungarian-style liberal reforms under the guidance of a strong authoritarian power could have been undertaken by President Gorbachev. Several well-known Soviet political scientists, such as Andronik Migranyan and Igor Klyamkin, recommended such a policy to the Soviet leader in the late 1980s.²⁴ But such proposals were met with hostility by the majority of reformers, who demanded full-fledged democracy here and now. Gorbachev lacked the political wisdom, caution, and experience of such communist reformers as Kadar or Deng Xiaoping. There was also no threat from the outside that would contain democratization. For internal political reasons, influenced by his advisors who were excessively good students of Western political thought but lacked a clear knowledge of their own country, Gorbachev tried to use free elections as a tool of liberalization to undermine the authority of the Communist Party apparatus (and was still criticized for being too slow by democratic dogmatists). At the same time, he did virtually nothing to reform the economy or to create a legal basis for liberalization. It soon became evident that the communist power structure, however stubborn and outdated it was, in fact constituted the only mechanism that governed the country. By destroying it and failing to substitute a new one, Gorbachev lost control over the political process, caused chaos in the system of government, and finally had to resign.

Despite this lesson, Yeltsin, who had even more confidence in Western-oriented advisors, committed the same mistake. Instead of consolidating his authority, legitimized by popular vote, and using his popularity for pushing forward a serious structural reform, he stressed elections and approved the kind of economic reform that would distribute the enormous resources under state ownership to a dozen clans of *nouveaux riches* without any significant benefit to the society.

Yeltsin's political style matches well some elements of Guillermo O'Donnell's "delegative democracy." The Russian president believed that the people's trust, recorded in the verdict of the voters, gave him the right to unlimited power, while various formalities of liberalism, such as independent courts, were a nuisance (sometimes unavoidable in a democracy) that prevented him from doing what he was chosen to do: create the Great Democracy (as he saw it). This was a common belief among most democratic leaders in Russia on every level of authority. Not only president Yeltsin, but the mayors of Moscow and St. Petersburg, Gavril Popov and Anatoly Sobchak, the chairman of the Oktyabr'skiy district Soviet in Moscow, Il'ya Zaslavsky, and many of their supporters maintained: "You elected us, now let us do whatever we think is right." However, unlike leaders of "delegative democracies," Russian democratic leaders never stood above the struggle (although Yeltsin tried to create such an impression). In the public perception and in reality, they were leaders of one clan or an alliance of clans, and supported them against the others.

From the point of view of Russian democrats, the goal of building democracy justified the disregard of specific democratic procedures. One of the co-chairs of the Democratic Russia movement, Lev Ponomarev, for example, argued: "Yes, a number of his [President Boris Yeltsin's] decrees, signed in a critical situation, were unconstitutional. But I would call them genius. They perfectly met political necessity."²⁵ Moreover, at a certain stage Russian democrats, especially those who sided with the executive power, began to think that the enemies of reform used democratic procedures to the detriment of reform. The democrats who were elected to representative bodies thought the same of their former colleagues from the executive. As a result, in 1993 the country slid into chaos while power and property were divided among old and new clans and cliques. The power of the president remained strong only on paper, and his ability and will to promote liberal reforms almost came to naught.

The Russian Experience

Despite a lengthy new attempt at democratization, today's Russia is still far from liberal democracy, perhaps farther even than in the last years of the Soviet Union. The new Russian experience shows that in a society where liberalization did not precede democratization and free elections were introduced hastily and spontaneously, a constitutional liberal-democratic system has few chances for survival. This does not mean that countries that lost stability as a result of excessively rapid democratization should be advised to reject all democratic achievements, forget about elections, and introduce an authoritarian dictatorship or invite the colonial rulers back. Such a recommendation is impossible in the contemporary world for both practical and ethical reasons. Obviously, there is no guarantee that an authoritarian or colonial regime is going to promote liberal democracy according to theoretical recommendations. Too many such regimes are preoccupied with maintaining power by any means, including severe repression, and such practice creates even more problems. In addition, the struggle for freedom and democracy, and sympathy for those who fall in this struggle, make it impossible for any

person capable of humane feelings to recommend putting innocent people in jail and abolishing freedoms achieved by them in order to secure a theoretically superior path of transition. Nevertheless, Russia's experience, combined with failed or not extremely successful transitions to democracy in countries where hasty democratization led to anarchy or a new dictatorship (the Philippines, Algeria, Kazakhstan, Tadjikistan, Georgia, Armenia, Croatia, Bosnia, and so forth), provides enough evidence to make different recommendations.

First, as Zakaria rightly argued, both scholars and politicians in the West should shift the focus of their support from those forces in countries with dictatorial regimes that call for immediate elections, to those which may be capable of promoting consistent liberal reforms while maintaining a certain level of stability and consolidation of state power. These reforms should not cover only the economy. The unique role of economic modernization as a basis for political democratization is often exaggerated. In fact, a market economy, which is impossible without a certain level of independence of economic actors, can stimulate the liberalization of politics only to a certain extent, by creating a system of new contractual relationships. However, recent studies show that new classes of entrepreneurs in some cultures may very well coexist with authoritarian power without demanding more independence or rights.²⁶ The development of a legal system and legal way of thinking is much more important. This should include the independence of the courts, the rule of law, separation of powers, development of independent civic organizations (not necessarily political, such as ecological or human rights groups), independence of mass media, and religious and ideological freedoms. These new phenomena are more important for creating the basis for liberal democracy. Equally important is maintaining effective government in the new, freer conditions, which implies a gradual reform of the work of police, courts, tax and customs agencies, ministries and departments of the central government, and local governments. Only in the process of these reforms of the political culture, of the ruling elites, and then of the entire population can respect for law and the concept of divided power become acceptable.

Second, it is necessary to recognize that the hasty introduction of free elections without previous political and economic liberalization is not only useless, but dangerous, having brought about near-anarchy on the vast territory of the former Soviet Union. Many in the West are beginning to understand how dangerous the anarchy is in Russia, a country with a huge arsenal of weapons of mass destruction that cannot secure proper storage of its nuclear materials. Recently worries have been expressed about free elections in Indonesia—another huge country with various complicated problems—where elections may destabilize the fragile ethnic and religious balance and bring to power ultranationalist leaders.²⁷ One can only imagine what chaos free elections might bring to China—a country with a population of over one billion, with a significant nuclear arsenal and numerous economic, regional, ethnic, and ecological problems—if introduced before serious reforms of the legal system and of the entire mechanism of power.

Disregard for such reforms and overestimation of the role of elections are among the main reasons for Russia's condition today. Elections at various levels are held

in Russia practically every month, but its political culture remains posttotalitarian. The elections do not create a new, effective system of government based on law and separation of powers, but are used by various clans in their struggle for power and even by criminal groups to evade justice. Therefore, unlike McFaul, I do not consider the situation in Russia an irreversible triumph of democracy. The country's political culture has not fundamentally changed, and the absence of real liberal reforms does not augur such a change. The temporary balance of power, which came as result of forceful imposition of the will of one of the groups over others, is not based on new, stable rules of the game that are accepted by all. A new Russian president can easily ignore some provisions of the Yeltsin constitution or abolish it altogether. (Such an action would have solid legal grounds because the referendum on the adoption of the constitution was obviously fraudulent.)²⁸ Therefore, Steven Fish's argument that many institutions in Russian politics, including democracy itself, survive by default, "less because they function effectively than because no feasible alternatives seem to be at hand, or because the available alternatives do not enjoy the backing of forces that have sufficient power and resolve to alter the status quo,"²⁹ seems to be a more adequate description of the situation. With the aggravation of the economic crisis, alternatives will inevitably become more popular and the desire to alter the temporary balance will become stronger.

Under these circumstances, defining the current Russian political system as "electoral democracy" is misleading. It manifests a common misperception that calls any country in which elections have been held without too many obvious irregularities a "democracy."³⁰ The term "electoral clanism" describes Russia's reality more accurately. It is a political system where elections are not a means of selecting public officials according to law, within a framework of checks and balances (liberal democracy), or of directly selecting powerful charismatic authority that would occupy a position above the factional struggle and rule in the name of the majority (delegative or electoral democracy); rather they are merely the means of settling disputes among posttotalitarian clans that generally operate outside the law or in a situation of legal confusion.

All of this is not to say that liberal democracy can never take root in Russia. It is true that the liberal-democratic system was first formed in Europe under unique historic circumstances. But its later spread to many countries with different cultural traditions proves that the political culture of polyarchy can develop not only within a civilization based on Western Christianity. Nevertheless, a relatively long transition period is needed; in Europe itself the development of liberalism preceded the coming of the modern form of democracy by hundreds of years. Some think that in India, for example, this development occurred during the British colonial rule, when the British respect for law was combined with indigenous Indian traditions of religious tolerance and peaceful coexistence of different cultural and ethnic groups and castes. In Greece, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Turkey, Poland, and Hungary, the consolidation of democratic regimes was preceded by lengthy periods when pluralistic elements of local traditions merged with the cultural and political influence of Western liberalism, creating a breeding ground for stable democracy with a unique national flavor.

Russian tradition also has some elements that may evolve into a liberal political culture. Russia's political system was already quite liberal in the nineteenth century, especially after the reforms of Alexander II, and after 1905 it became practically pluralist. Although the communist regime interrupted this development, some remnants of former liberalism survived. Some elements of real electoral practices (for example, in academic and professional organizations) and the tradition of moral independence were maintained during the Soviet period. Finally, at least one of the interpretations of the doctrine of the Orthodox Church, which is gaining more and more influence in today's Russia, stresses the importance of spiritual freedom. But these elements alone are an insufficient basis for a stable liberal-democratic regime. The most needed component—the belief in the necessity to divide power—is still weak. Its further development is possible only if the Russian reforms fundamentally change their direction.

To become a democracy, Russia must develop the fundamentals of liberalism, market economy, and the rule of law. Instead of an emphasis on elections and discussions of abstract monetarist schemes, it is important to develop respect for law and order, create a working system of separated and mutually controlling powers, and guarantee real independence of the courts and the mass media. At the same time, the system of government should be strengthened, so that decisions of all branches and levels of government are respected both by individual citizens and various groups. This can be achieved by a strong reform-oriented authority that would encourage necessary changes in the political culture. Alternatively, the country can slide into another circle of anarchy or produce a new totalitarian regime. This should be taken into consideration by those politicians whose goal is creating a liberal-democratic constitutional system in Russia.

NOTES

1. Robert A. Dahl, *Democracy and Its Critics* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989), 2.

2. Joseph A. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy* (New York: Harper, 1942), 269. Among contemporary theorists this point of view is clearly shared by Samuel Huntington and Adam Przeworski with his colleagues. See Samuel P. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1995), 7–10; Adam Przeworski, Michael Alvarez, Jose Antonio Cheibub, and Fernando Limongi, "What Makes Democracies Endure?" *Journal of Democracy* 1 (January 1996): 50–51.

3. See Robert A. Dahl, *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971), 2–3.

4. For example, John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971), 75–83; Anthony Arblaster, *Democracy* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1994), 98–99.

5. For a comprehensive list of components of liberal democracy, see Larry Diamond, *The End of the Third Wave and the Global Future of Democracy* (Vienna: Institute for Advanced Studies, 1997) 8–10.

6. Diamond, *The End of the Third Wave and the Global Future of Democracy*, 7; Daniel A. Bell, David Brown, Kanishka Jayasuriya, and David Martin Jones, *Towards Illiberal Democracy in Pacific Asia* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995); Fareed Zakaria, "The Rise of Illiberal Democracy," *Foreign Affairs* 76 (November/December 1997): 22–43;

Guillermo O'Donnell, "Delegative Democracy," *Journal of Democracy* 1, (January 1994): 55–69.

7. On the "fallacy of electoralism" see, for example, Diamond, *The End of the Third Wave and the Global Future of Democracy*, 5.

8. Larry Diamond, "Introduction: Political Culture and Democracy," in *Political Culture and Democracy in Developing Countries*, Larry Diamond, ed. (Boulder and London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1993), 27.

9. Michael McFaul, "Democracy Unfolds in Russia," *Current History* (October 1997): 319.

10. Michael McFaul, "There Is a Charm? Explaining Success and Failure on Russia's Transition Road," unpublished manuscript, September 1997, 33. Courtesy of the author.

11. *Ibid.*, 34.

12. Gabriel A. Almond and Sidney Verba, *The Civic Culture, Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963).

13. McFaul, "There Is a Charm?" 33.

14. Janine R. Wedel, "Clique-Run Organization and U.S. Economic Aid: An Institutional Analysis," *Demokratizatsiya* 4 (Fall 1996): 571–97.

15. *Ibid.*, 595.

16. Isaiah Berlin, *Two Concepts of Liberty* (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1958), 14.

17. Fareed Zakaria, "The Rise of Illiberal Democracy," 28.

18. Ivan Il'in, *O gryadushchey Rossii (Of Future Russia)* (Moscow: Voenizdat, 1993), 158, 26 è 172.

19. A. Solzhenitsyn, "Presskonferentsiya v Stokgol'me" (Press conference in Stockholm), 12 December 1974. In A. Solzhenitsyn. *Publitsistika. Obshchestvennye zayavleniya, interv'yū, presskonferentsii* (Paris: YMCA-Press, 1989), 130.

20. Aleksandr I. Solzhenitsyn, *Letter to Soviet Leaders* (New York, Evanston, San Francisco, London: Index on Censorship, 1974).

21. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *Rebuilding Russia: Reflections and Tentative Proposals* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1991), 82.

22. Jorgen Elklit and Palle Svensson, "What Makes Elections Free and Fair?" *Journal of Democracy* 8 (July 1997): 34.

23. Solzhenitsyn, *Letter to Soviet Leaders*, 53.

24. For example, Andranik Migranyan, "Dolgiy put' k yevropeyskomu domu" (The Long Road to the European Home), *Novyy Mir* 7 (1989): 166–84; Igor Klyamkin, Interview in *Moskovskiy komsomolets*, 7 June 1990.

25. Quoted in V. Sogrin, *Politicheskaya istoriya sovremennoy Rossii* (Political History of Contemporary Russia) (Moscow: Progress-Akademia, 1994), 113.

26. See Bell, Brown, Jayasuriya, and Jones, *Towards Illiberal Democracy in Pacific Asia*.

27. See, for example, Nicholas D. Kristof, "In Indonesia, Democracy's Dark Side," *International Herald Tribune*, 26 May 1998, 1.

28. Elsewhere McFaul recognizes that at least one of the potential presidents, Luzhkov, is capable of fundamentally changing the rules of the game. Michael McFaul, "Perils of Yeltsin's Passion," *Moscow Times*, 2 April 1998.

29. M. Steven Fish, "The Pitfalls of Russian Superpresidentialism," *Current History* (October 1997): 329.

30. Elklit and Palle, "What Makes Elections Free and Fair?" 34.