

Perestroika Versus the Command-Administrative System

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In the article published in the last issue of *Demokratizatsiya* we gave an analysis of the Russian political evolution—from ancient times to the start of Gorbachev's perestroika. The article discussed the most complicated and controversial episode of Soviet state history, which ended with the Union's disintegration and the emergence of an independent Russian state. However, it is difficult to speak about the basic elements of the political process which occurred during those years. First, any analysis of these events is limited by the length of the article. But mainly, these political factors are still in transition: their relevance as well as their importance is still changing, and the lack of reliable information is felt. As a famous Russian poet, Sergei Yesenin, wrote; "Nothing is noticed when you are face to face." Very little time has passed since the disintegration of the Soviet Union, and the emotional stigma of recent events is still very evident. It is difficult to evaluate current information as it is generated, and many researchers are influenced by their private sympathies and antipathies. But there is no shame in trying.

Centrism in Russia—a Rare Phenomenon

After Mikhail Gorbachev appeared on the political scene, political analysts, especially those from the West, realized quickly that he really had a very respectful and rather rare quality (even among politicians of classic democracies). He had the willingness and skill (albeit to a much lower degree) to pursue a logical centrist policy. In Russia, Gorbachev's centrist policies were misunderstood as being expedient and he was, therefore, labeled an opportunist.

During the entire Soviet period, it is impossible to find any substantial manifestations of centrist views. All of Gorbachev's predecessors were

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representative of either the political forces of the extreme left or of the extreme right. It was evident that the country's development was of a weak and unstable character. Reforms in the Soviet Union were traditionally started from the top down, and were pushed either by persons bred in the classic old ways or by those previously unknown.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the elements of a centrist political course were seen for the first time in our country's history in the Stolypin reforms. To do this, all of Pyotr Stolypin's policies were aimed at creating the basis for a democratic state and for establishing a middle class in the rural countryside based on agrarian strength.¹ "We need a great Russia," he stated as his credo in a speech at a Duma meeting. Stolypin waged a struggle simultaneously against the ultra-rightists and ultra-leftists. The right criticized him for undermining the basis of Russian life, the community, while the ultra-left protested his drastic measures to maintain public order in the country. Failing to understand the essence of Stolypin's reforms, those of the ultra-left also disputed his "wavering" ways and his "pro-landowner" agrarian reforms. Certainly, it is difficult not to notice that Stolypin acted as an authoritarian, never requesting advice from the Duma or the public.

The second short-lived attempt at centrism occurred in 1917 during the Provisional Government. Its efforts were doomed because it had to defend its policies against the right and the left while possessing only very weak democratic institutions. It struggled with the rightists who were seeking to restore a military monarchy in the country, and with the leftists who were attempting to overthrow the democracy and establish their party dictatorship. The Provisional Government was not strong enough in the face of these various factions to maintain a consistent centrist position, and thus wavered across the political spectrum. For instance, in July 1917, the government moved markedly right, but soon reversed course and turned sharply left. By August the government began to collaborate with the Bolsheviks. The inconsistent character of the Provisional Government was based on the fact that it failed to compromise, adopt socio-economic programs or mediate between the right and the left. Only once, in July 1917, was the idea of compromise suggested. However, this idea evoked such sharp criticism that the person who dared suggest it, Finance Minister A.I. Shingarev (a Constitutional Democrat), was forced to resign. His proposed policy included progressive taxation for the super-wealthy, coupled with a general wage freeze.

Stolypin needed to create conditions for the fulfillment of deep and long-term reforms; the Provisional Government needed to solve the

problem of social consolidation and to save the country from general catastrophe. Yet, both strategies were very short-lived and ended (this is very important for historical prophets) not only in failure, but produced the opposite results.

From a wide historical point of view, it is strangely illogical and abnormal that Gorbachev appeared in the USSR and within the Communist party. There were no centrist roots at all and it was difficult to find any possibilities for them to survive anyway (let me point out that Gorbachev did not speak either at the 1971, 1976, or 1981 Party Congresses even though he was a Politburo member). Nevertheless, as *Izvestiya* wrote on the day of his resignation, the fact that he had come was more important than that of his leaving. Besides, Gorbachev was leaving only after being removed by the forces which he himself launched.

The first reason which explains Gorbachev's ability to stay in power for more than six years is the astounding passivity of the population. The second was his own political talent. Gorbachev's survival was aided by his experience in cabinet struggles, and most importantly, his awareness of the absence of Communist impatience and intolerance. Frankly though, there were some omens as to his special talents. The former Politburo member in charge of foreign affairs, Andrei Gromyko, once said that "Gorbachev is a person with a nice smile, but with teeth of steel."

Gorbachev's Thankless Task

After watching Gorbachev's policies closely, one can instantly realize that to be a centrist in the USSR is a thankless task. Various factors contributed to ambiguous developments in society during the perestroika years. The predominant groups that have emerged are the "democrats" and the "conservatives," but still there is no center able to balance the political discord between the two ideologies. The contributing factors for this are (1) the ancient national habit of dividing people into adversaries ("them versus us"), (2) the black-and-white vision of the world bred by Communist ideology, (3) the hatred and even scorn for compromises, (4) the inability and unwillingness to listen to opponents' views, (5) and the lack of a critical political culture in society.

By 1989, it became clear that the vital task at hand was to save perestroika from the inherent dangers nurtured during previous decades as well as from major mistakes made by Gorbachev himself. The main threats to perestroika were the complete breakdown of the economy, political destabilization, paralysis of power, and large-scale inter-ethnic

conflicts. The dilemma was that no one solution could solve all these problems at any given time. Speaking to Henry Kissinger in late 1989 Gorbachev said: "Knowing what is wrong is rather easy, knowing what is right is extremely difficult." Under such circumstances, to be a centrist meant to deliberately pursue a policy that did not satisfy anyone in the short run, giving rise to legitimate disappointment. Gorbachev experienced this dilemma which, coupled with unsuccessful attempts to resolve it, irrevocably averted positive public opinion from him. "Mikhail Sergeevich! Find your position, whether you are with them or with us," some people demanded from the president. Others insisted that he "Stop sitting on two chairs!" But enough with people's opinion. At the meetings of both the USSR and Russian Supreme Soviets, he was constantly being reprimanded by politicians of both the left and the right: when the rightists thought that he seemed too left, and when the leftists claimed he leaned toward the right. A similar scenario took place at the Communist party (CPSU) Central Committee plenary meetings, where speakers criticized the General Secretary with often abusive language. They unintentionally but clearly demonstrated the realistic changes taking place inside the Communist party.

The lack of a "critical mass" of centrist-minded people both in society and in the Communist party was, in my opinion, one of the most dangerous elements of Russian history inherited by the new reformers. As a result, Gorbachev lacked the support of a constituency after 1988. Some of his policies were popular either for one or another stratum of the population, which provided him with an opportunity to balance opposing forces and very skillfully remain in power for over 3 years after that. Carrying out effective reforms, especially in a country like the USSR, is much more difficult and thankless (and it should be noted that the number of those willing to try is quite low nowadays) than launching sharp critiques on their shortcomings and errors, even from a historically progressive point of view.² Many people came to realize this after Gorbachev's resignation.

Will Yeltsin Repeat Gorbachev's Destiny?

Besides all these difficulties, we might add the fact that in Russia the sources of civil society as well as those of political pluralism are just now barely developing. There have not been strong local governments able to combine both presidential and popular will—able to consolidate public sentiments in order to alleviate the inevitable fallout from the reforms.

There is no precedent in establishing presidential powers and loyalties. There are no economically and, therefore, politically liberated individuals. When looking at the situation in the country during the time of Gorbachev, it becomes clear that there was little hope for his centrist policies to succeed. Impatience and bitterness were on the rise, especially against those in power. The generally intolerant culture, the conservatism of the masses, coupled with the wild and unbalanced market, frustrated early market reforms. But in the meantime, people gradually realized that there was no alternative to these reforms.

Let us now pay attention to Yeltsin's evolution toward the same direction, which began after he had been elected Russian president. Although Gorbachev's opposition was centered around Yeltsin, they both shared a similar fate. Popular sentiment toward both leaders changed from adoration to full neglect. People have not been so bitter toward Yeltsin because they have begun to show some political tolerance. Furthermore, the separatist tendencies are unlikely to become as pronounced in Russia as in the former USSR, in spite of the fact that many regions attempt to limit the powers of the Russian presidency, government and Parliament. Yeltsin's continuing democratic image, of a legitimate leader with a broad liberal-revolutionary program, is a sign of improvement in the country's otherwise cruel political combats. Yeltsin has been fortunate to avoid some unpleasant episodes which befell Gorbachev during his reign. Although Russians are an ancient nation, perestroika revealed many immature disorders within them, disorders which could hardly be treated by a surgeon.³

Admittedly, Gorbachev was not an ideal centrist. Very often he showed unsustained intolerance, conceit, arrogance, personal susceptibility, and questionable impulses. Even worse, he overestimated his own logical potential to understand large-scale irregularities. Very often when facing a difficult situation, he stopped and retreated. His centrism often emerged from political situations rather than principles, maneuvering in order to preserve his personal power. For instance, when he discontinued his slogan of national reconciliation in February 1991. However, it appears that Gorbachev realized what Plato had known: the greatest politicians are therapists. But the essence of the polity, so well understood by Plato, was not mastered by Gorbachev. His political faith became another example of how a centrist politician struggling for self-preservation is doomed. The clichés of the past haunted him, but considerably less so than all of us. The political course of the first and last president of the USSR did not survive him. It is a common fate for a

Russian leader to be forgotten over time. But Gorbachev will remain in history due to the fact that he did eliminate the internal and external terror of the totalitarian system, thereby laying the cornerstone for a stable future.

Is Yeltsin a Centrist?

A genuine question often arises: whether, generally speaking, a fruitful centrist policy is possible under contemporary Russian conditions. It seems possible, but a number of factors are needed for centrism to succeed. In particular, we need a program aimed at forming new market relations, not at rearranging old structures. These steps include the expansion of the internal market, the growth of national purchasing power, the formation of a new "middle class," the education of the masses in the spirit of political compromise and social partnership, and, last but not least, the development of political forces able to solve these tasks.

It is obvious that under our present circumstances, the success of reforms depend on President Yeltsin himself. In the fall of 1991 he told *Izvestiya* that the only chance for Russia lies in quick reforms, a view directly opposite to the reform ideology put forth by Gorbachev and his prime minister, Nikolai Ryzhkov. Unlike previous leaders, Boris Yeltsin can rely only upon the popular confidence in him as a person. This confidence increases his personal responsibility to the masses. It therefore depends on him whether or not the democrats will be able to get rid of the "birth marks" of totalitarianism and communism. The most difficult task for the Russian government today is not only to restore control over Russia (and with that, law and order), but to somehow reconcile the demands of the rapidly rising class of entrepreneurs, who supported Yeltsin during the coup, and of the ten million pensioners in Russia who also voted for him, but which have suffered the most during these first steps of market reforms. In other words, Yeltsin's historical task is to become the president of the whole of Russia, not merely a portion of it. He should be the leader of all Russians and not represent only one particular idea or group. Gorbachev was successful in eliminating the almighty Communist party, which was the main obstacle to democracy in Russia. In this respect, Yeltsin inherited much more favorable conditions than what Gorbachev himself enjoyed at the beginning of his tenure.

Gorbachev Versus the *Apparat*

Russia's transition to civil society could not be commenced without solving the main task at hand: the resolute transformation of the CPSU's role and the adaptation of society to the changing conditions. The Communist party apparatus and the Party-state that developed after the Bolsheviks came to power must be dismantled. My belief is that Gorbachev and his accomplices gradually realized the importance of that task and took steps toward that direction.

During the first two years of perestroika they pursued a clear reform campaign, reconstructing the Party from the top. They used a rather wide range of popular methods, including the reduction of the Party apparatus and cuts in their privileges—which irritated them tremendously even though they often found ways to evade the new restrictions. The CPSU plenary meeting of January 1987 was a serious manifestation of intentions, where Gorbachev used the term "perestroika" so routinely that its meaning came to determine both the course of democratization and of openness (*glasnost*). *Glasnost* was making it plain that the Party needed reforms. There, Gorbachev claimed that the Party was impeding basic executive functions and he therefore stopped appointing individuals to its representative bodies.

However, all the reform measures brought only a few positive results. Moreover, the situation was getting increasingly tense and the first nationalist conflicts began to erupt. It became clear that the present approach was not a solution, and a new strategy was sought. Gorbachev sharply changed his tactics. This became evident at the XIX Communist Party Conference, which played a key role at beginning to reconstruct the institutions of Party power in the country. Overriding the tribune of the Party, the general secretary appealed to the rank-and-file Communists: "Take the power of the Party into your own hands. We have failed to reform the Party from the top, the resistance of the Party apparatus turned out to be too strong. Let us now try to do it from the bottom. You, not the *nomenklatura*, are the masters of the Party."

It was one of the rarest moments of Russian political history: the leader recognizing that his efforts had been futile, and appealing directly to the people. Gorbachev began to understand that public opinion was instrumental in reaching some solution. Rank-and-file Communists, which had now at long last been taken seriously, revived and became active. New trends and movements, with different views, came into being within the Party. The exodus from the CPSU decreased, and even new members began to arrive—mostly younger people. Many democrats-to-be joined the Party, such as Anatoly Sobchak. The CPSU no longer spoke

with one voice, and there was even a distinction as to whom—among the Party apparatus, the Party leaders, and the rank-and-file members—was responsible for the previous crimes. The latter had been regarded as merely a source of money, a milking cow for the Party's financial structures. To some extent we could say that, except for the Party Conference and subsequent Party gatherings, the election to the Congress of People's Deputies in 1989 was going on under absolutely new political principles, giving opportunities to many democratically oriented political leaders that would otherwise have never gotten involved. And though those principles were far from being free elections, for the first time in the history of the USSR there were not 1,500 candidates for 1,500 seats, but 7,500.

The first attempts also brought the first failures, of course, but the contributions were immense. The first Congress of People's Deputies opened on 26 May 1989, and was shown on TV in its entirety. It became the small stone that provoked the avalanche. The most important contributions of the Congress were the de-mystification and decentralization of power. As Andrei Sakharov said in his autobiography *Moscow and Beyond*, "The Congress burned all bridges behind us. It became clear that either we move forward, or we will be destroyed." For the first time, the legislators refused to approve the government candidates recommended by the CPSU. These included the proposed chairmen to the Constitutional Compliance Committee (Vladimir Lomakin), the People's Control Committee (Sergei Manyakin), and the Supreme Court (Vladimir Lebedev)—all of which had been recommended by the CPSU plenary meeting and agreed to by Nikolai Ryzhkov. The CPSU was forced to hold a new and humiliating extraordinary plenum in between Congressional sessions.

The new representative organs were replacing the Party ones. The new Supreme Soviet, first formed by the Congress in the summer of 1989, reproduced the structure of the CPSU Central Committee branch departments and adopted almost all of their functions, at which time such departments were being liquidated in the Central Committee on Gorbachev's initiative. Soon after the Congress, the Inter-Regional Group of People's Deputies came into being—the starting point for the future parliamentary opposition to Gorbachev. But it did not produce any serious results, and the situation within the Party did not get better. On the contrary, Party members left feeling frustrated, failing to see any potential possibilities of reforming the CPSU from below. It became clear that the new course was in itself not enough: another new and unexpected decision

was needed, and I think Gorbachev managed to find it. In March 1990 during the third Congress of People's Deputies, Article 6 of the Constitution, which proclaimed the Communist party's "leading and guiding role" of Soviet society, was abolished. Seventy percent of the deputies voted for the abolition. Thus, better late than never, the basis for the civilized development of a multi-party system was laid in the country which had thus far only one political party. "Democratic Union" was proclaimed in May 1988, with other groups preparing their own platforms. All this meant the beginning of the end for the CPSU.

Constructing a New Base

The third Congress also introduced the presidency of the country and set up two new bodies, the Federation Council and the Presidential Council. The latter adopted all the functions and powers previously reserved for the Politburo. Gorbachev was elected the president of the USSR with 59.2 percent of the deputies' votes. Those who had voted against the abolition of Article 6 of the Constitution also voted against him at that time. The once almighty Politburo stopped being the center of power of the country, slowly withering away and then ceasing to function altogether. The twenty-eighth Party Congress deprived it of almost all the top state officials (except Gorbachev), such as the prime minister, defense minister, interior minister, foreign minister, chairman of the KGB, etc. On Gorbachev's initiative, it also elected people originally unable to obtain the respect of the Party. Generally speaking, the Party Congress produced a strange impression. They discussed petty ideological questions while the country was bleeding, the wars did not end, and the strikes continued. But the Kremlin argued about the future of Communist thought, and about the country and the world after 200-300 years. What to name the country was also of no less importance in the opinion of many delegates.

After the twenty-eighth CPSU Congress, the struggle between the CPSU and liberal elements in society decreased, and the enthusiasm of public accusations launched by anticommunist forces diminished. Everything became clear to everyone. Against the morose background, a "calm" and unique process began—the Party was unwittingly but irrevocably moving aside, to the rear of the political life of the country, gradually vanishing from the political process. It was a time when everything seemed like before: local Party leaders were sitting late at night with the light on, holding regular meetings. But the real influence of their work was quickly diminishing. Just a few weeks before, the Central Committee and, of

course, the Politburo were the nucleus of the country's political life. Their decisions and resolutions had the force of law. Previously, Soviet schoolchildren could immediately name alphabetically all the Politburo members and the secretaries of the CPSU Central Committee. After the twenty-eighth Congress, none of the journalists or researchers were able to identify them and, perhaps, even Party officers could not name the top people of these organizations—let alone the leadership of the newly created Russian Federation Communist party.

The resolutions of the CPSU Central Committee, even when published in *Pravda*, were criticized and contradicted. Ryzhkov recently told the Constitutional Court that by this time the Council of Ministers collaborated with the USSR Supreme Soviet and the Presidential Council rather than with the CPSU Central Committee. Such matters as the approval of government leaders, plans for economic development, control over their implementation, the course of foreign policy, defence, improvements in the sphere of legislature, mass media and others, became the responsibility of the USSR's highest representative body—the Congress of People's Deputies. In April 1990, yet another unprecedented state body was created by Gorbachev, the Constitutional Compliance Committee. It even canceled several of Gorbachev's orders which it determined to be contrary to the Constitution. The same was going on underneath. The million-strong Party *apparatus* worked but its efficiency came to zero. I am prone to think that the removal of the CPSU from the center of political and economic life was the most important Soviet accomplishment in its 70-year history, alongside with glasnost, the disappearance of fear and the rejection of the class approach—all despite tremendous errors. But the process was not of a consistent character (in Moscow, for instance, the city committee was removed from real power quickly while in the provinces the situation remained unchanged), and came with a price. Let us recall the events of January 1991 in the Baltic republics, which were caused by the unconstitutional attempts of their Communist parties to return to the position of power which they had recently and suddenly lost (let me note that it took Russian Communists seven more months to face the same predicament). It can be derived that Party officials of all ranks had a serious pretext for coldness to the president-general secretary, though the majority of the population still believed that there was a "cordial alliance" between them (whom they were convinced by is another question).

Deadlocks of the President-General Secretary

However, the twenty-eighth Congress of the CPSU did not solve many problems, as it was not able to. It did, however, manage to demonstrate that Gorbachev's position in the Party was rather complicated. In 1985, he had become both the leader of the CPSU and, later, of its opposition as well. On the one hand, he was the head of the *apparat*, its protégé, even its hostage. On the other hand, he actively tried to change its role, to deprive it of political might, to limit its functions to simple administrative ones, and, just perhaps, to destroy it all. At the CPSU Central Committee plenary meeting of April 1991, more than 70 percent of the speakers at the podium demanded the resignation of the general secretary. But when Gorbachev angrily handed in his resignation after chastising them, only 13 delegates voted to accept it. The gains could have been lost had it not been for his previous reforms. Only when Gorbachev was elected USSR president were the Soviet people saved from reading one morning in *Pravda* a repetition of the extraordinary plenary meeting of the CPSU Central Committee of 1964.⁴

During his construction of the presidency, Gorbachev gradually began to rely not on the Politburo, but on the Supreme Soviet; not on the decisions of Central Committee delegates, but on those of people's deputies. After his inauguration, Gorbachev became the first in the history of communism to cross the ideological threshold—since for the Communists, the Party rules and program are sacred. He even managed to begin the operation aimed at separating a pair of siamese twins—the CPSU and the state—and did it from the top. The operation was rather complicated because the aged twins were far from being young and docile. The process of merging had gone so deep that the separation was rather painful. But some duality remained until the end, and listening to his numerous speeches, one could easily notice when he spoke as the president or as the CPSU general secretary. It should be noted that Gorbachev's efforts to lean on the CPSU led to a deeper fall in his authority and in his representative character as president. This was seen especially after he obtained extraordinary and semi-dictatorial powers, having failed to stabilize the country from a position of left-of-center. But at the same time, only a few people kept believing in communism. In such a situation, it was difficult to justify the overwhelming power of the CPSU and the fact that its leader was at the same time the country's increasingly powerful president.

Yet, seeking a centrist consolidation of society—as he understood it—Gorbachev unintentionally (here is another paradox) was turning the Party

toward more liberal reforms, orienting it to himself and cutting its remaining options. This was seen from the spring of 1990, and especially in the period starting from November 1991 until April 1992, when Gorbachev tried to use the presidential powers as an instrument of authoritarian policy more efficiently within the framework of a right-of-center course. But his goal, which was never reached, was to maintain a single political space. Moreover, his presidency did not permit him to extend his influence over the processes going on in other political parties and movements, including opposition groups such as Democratic Russia, all the while it was increasingly clear that in the new political context it was important for him to participate personally in the whole political spectrum in order to give it a constructive character. And in the final analysis, the law defending the "honor and dignity" of the president, which was being extended to the general secretary as well, was inexcusable.

But to give Gorbachev credit, we must remember that the efforts to reconstruct the Party were proceeding slowly and painfully, and met strong resistance along the way. Not all the Party members or its leaders were ready for the reforms. On the contrary, the state authorities, victimized by the totalitarian regime long enough, were not prepared either juridically, psychologically or functionally to undertake the governing of the state, having played a decorative role thus far. The same was happening to the local state councils (Soviets) of all levels. It took time to build a new administrative system, a legislative base, and basic social awareness. But there was a lack of time. One system was quickly degrading while the other was emerging at a snail's pace. The consequences appeared quickly. Control over the country was quickly eroding, the economy was in crisis, national wars were being waged, and the Union was splitting. The young power bodies, both state and local, could not (or sometimes did not want to) withstand it. Besides, Gorbachev for too long defended the idea of *perfecting* the existing economic relations, and only in the fifth year of perestroika did he begin to speak of their radical *changes*. Also for too long, the course aimed at building three independent branches of power (executive, legislative and judicial) was not carried out, though the "fourth power"—the press—was freed by Gorbachev in a quick and resolute way.

Power After the Coup

August 1991 sharply changed the course, temper and substance of the political reconstruction of the country. Before the coup, the conflict

between the three main opposing political forces—neo-Stalinists, headed by the Communist party of Russia, reform Communists with Gorbachev at the head and the liberal-democratic group led by Yeltsin—was at its zenith. The neo-Stalinists made a crucial error by attacking the reform Communists and Gorbachev, regarding them as the main obstacle to the realization of their plans, thus underestimating Yeltsin's potential and his mass support. They did not know the country well and had to pay for it. The first two forces were mutually eliminated within three days of fighting, and the third captured the battlefield. The August events witnessed the end of the Communist monopoly of power and its swift exit from the political arena. Its many organizations, representing the vestiges of a Communist and socialist empire that had long stopped to be constructive and which served only to thwart new initiatives, were divided and outlawed. But the vacuum created difficulties for the new managers. After the suppression of the coup, the parties and politicians that came to power did so unexpectedly, and had no detailed plans, no primary missions, since their experience as the opposition limited them to criticism of the government for not carrying out reforms. But history thinks differently. When the old Party-state structures collapsed, the victorious democrats proved to be unprepared for the situation. So rapid were the political changes that the democrats, being carried high by a wave of popular support, lost their sense of reality. Moreover, the victory over the junta, contrary to popular belief, did not yield all the power to the democrats. It is important to realize that the victory also decimated the one part of the old apparatus backing reforms, thereby forfeiting the opportunity to reach a compromise with the inexperienced democrats to finally begin instituting serious reforms.

The political situation sixteen months after the coup shows a number of constant political trends, which are developing on the background of a declining popular interest in politics. Different organizations keep on meeting but now gather less and less people, party newspapers lay unsold, TV broadcasts of the Congress of People's Deputies and other events cannot compete with Mexican and Brazilian soap operas. The strategy of "going to the people" ventured by some Russian politicians no longer has any effect. Even the activity of the experienced administrator Nikolai Travkin, who decided to leave big politics for awhile to lead the government of the Shakhovskoi area near Moscow, has not brought any result either to him or to his Democratic party of Russia. Moreover, as Travkin stated himself, the necessity to solve burning problems forced him to reject democratic formalities and use administrative methods. But

besides their understandable inexperience, the most serious mistake made by the democratic forces, in my opinion, was closing their eyes to the uncontrolled disintegration of the country. They failed to even attempt to create the political and administrative conditions to cushion the inter-republican economy from the complete destruction of the USSR. And the process of liquidating the USSR, as Moscow Mayor Gavriil Popov truly noted, was dominated not by the democrats, but by Russian bureaucrats who used it as a pretext for moving into a more prestigious building, larger offices, and better clinics. Popov himself was one of the most active engineers of the project. Of course, only he would know....

At that time, it would have been necessary to hold an extraordinary USSR Congress of People's Deputies and thank Gorbachev for his services, but deprive him of his title and give the USSR presidency to Yeltsin. And though the latter said that he did not want this position, the democrats should have insisted, giving simultaneously the post of executive chairman of the USSR provisional government to some republican president, to Leonid Kravchuk perhaps, in order to prevent the convergency of the Union apparatus with the Russian one and allay the remaining republic leaders. In that case, the divorce could have led to minimum damages, traumas and bloodshed, while providing for ethnic and minority rights, preserving political succession in foreign affairs and preventing a *nomenklatura* invasion of the feeble Russian institutions.

Political Problems in the New Russia

Unfortunately, the practice was different. And though Russia is in a more favorable state than other parts of the former USSR, the situation is still rather complicated. Besides the large-scale economic crisis, Russia faces a number of serious political problems which cannot be solved easily. The country will not emerge from the crisis if it does not address these problems soon.

First, none of the key political issues—the land problem, de-monopolization and privatization, the new constitution—have seen any progress for awhile now. As a result, Russia has missed many opportunities to act swiftly given to it by the failure of the coup. In fact, it also has lost many of the accomplishments it inherited from the USSR. The authorities, or at least a part of them, are pretending to pursue a positive course by adopting numerous broad resolutions that nobody has to observe. The Russian government itself gives birth to many problems which it then tries to solve. Being in the opposition for all the years of Gorbachev's rule, the

democratic forces managed to convince all of Russia that they had an excellent salvation program, and that their only obstacles were the conservatives, the CPSU and Gorbachev. After the coup and the disintegration of the USSR, when all the obstacles vanished, it became evident that they had no such program, and they started improvising. This deception has become the deepest frustration for Russia in the past two years. And it spoiled society's psychological proclivity for any further reforms.

Secondly, the months following the coup witnessed a quick breakup of the previously united democratic forces, an explosion of political ambitions, and a high rate of political hostility inside the groups and between them. Recently, President Yeltsin called this "the corrosion of the democratic movement." As a result, instead of the expected democratic coalition, Russia has seen several opposite groups vying for power. What is even worse, the Russian democratic movement is duplicating the situation which before they chided as inadmissible and focused their struggle against it—that is, political monopolism. After having destroyed the CPSU and its monopoly, they have managed to be alone in the political Olympus. Some democrats want to keep this monopoly, and if they take the upper hand, we could not realistically expect democracy in Russia to survive much longer. As a result of not fostering a constructive opposition, Yeltsin risks facing a destructive one after the nearest elections—a new block of nationalists, Communists and the movements of the extreme left who enjoy support from the impoverished. The complexity of his position derives from the fact that the President has failed to form an appropriate, consistent team so far. Permanent institutional reforms proceed alongside constant administrative shuffles. This is a symptom of two diseases. One is the personification, as opposed to the institutionalization, of policy. The other is related to the Russian tradition of simply moving to another office to escape responsibility for clumsy or unscrupulous politics.

The third serious political problem facing Russia is that all this is occurring amid the growing disintegration of the country. Having begun at the Union level and depriving Mikhail Gorbachev of his power, this uncontrolled process went ahead impetuously during 1992. Boris Yeltsin is more and more a "paper president" losing control of the federation. His many orders are ignored, including those concerning the army, internal and foreign affairs. As they say in Russia, the president is free to issue any order and the people are free to disobey them. The loss of power and the lack of control is spreading rapidly underneath. Only a few local

leaders can boast of controlling the situation in their cities. Personal representatives appointed by Yeltsin are often unable to influence the situation in their regions. For instance, the resignation of Gavriil Popov was connected with the fact that he proved helpless at his office, kept none of his promises, and exhausted the Muscovites by endless controversial orders that touched on very important and complex problems, and which often canceled out one another in a senseless way. Like a great Russian historian, Mikhail Karamzin, wrote, "Russia is happy with the fact that bad laws are badly observed here." And even otherwise used to dishonesty, Russians are shocked by the rate of corruption of the new authorities. That is why the Muscovites started to ignore all of the decrees of the mayor and the city council, as they had done to Gorbachev's, the former Russian prime minister Ivan Silaev's, and even Yeltsin's beginning in the spring of 1992.

The fourth problem is that the split occurring in Russia has had strong economic implications. Russia is now only a conglomeration of several dozen separate regions—each with its own specific interior situation. Under such circumstances, those that possess resources for consumption or barter are much better-off. For instance, living standards in eastern Siberia are 47 percent lower than those of the European part of Russia, and declining fast. Only now are the Siberians beginning to partly control their immense resources. The European regions also differ. For instance, the cost of living in Moscow, with a great number of pensioners (approximately 20 percent of the total population), students, scholars and bureaucrats, the groups that are unable to offer anything for barter, is rather high despite government subsidies. The situation in St. Petersburg is not any better either. In other words, today's Russia is governed not by the state offices but by those who have something material to offer. For example, the organization Vodokanal cut off the St. Petersburg water supply and put forth a package of demands. It was supported by Lenenergo, which switched off the electricity that supplied more than 50 of the biggest plants. They forced the city's leadership to meet their demands. Most curiously, all this did not damage Anatoly Sobchak's democratic image.

The Stillborn Multi-Party System

The fifth major political problem facing Russia today is that many political parties face serious difficulties (at present there are more than forty political parties in Russia; one third of them not registered). For

many of them, the difficulties are unsurmountable. The hopes of the previous two years, that a multi-party system would rapidly develop, have failed to materialize.

When at last in November 1991 Yeltsin read his economic reform draft at the extraordinary Congress of People's Deputies, all political groups which had previously backed the president immediately backed out, afraid that the economic shock of those measures would drag down their ratings. But they misplaced their fear—their ratings dropped mainly in the eyes of the Russian president. It tends to remain a steady feature: none of the parties can suggest anything thoughtful, real and complex, even when they try, and Yeltsin has stopped to take them seriously. At the same time, internal contradictions rise within the parties causing splits. For instance, the once-mighty movement Democratic Russia recently split into several quarreling groups. But while they are now losing their federal importance, the parties are strengthening their regional roles at a time when regions are becoming more important. And the importance of local leaders is also growing, usually damaging the interests of Moscow. More and more, the Russian political system resembles a mosaic of regional parties, regional trade unions, etc.

It appears that the crisis in the multi-party system could be partially attributed to the Russian government's position as well as to some policies pursued by Yeltsin regarding the party aspect. The Russian leadership does not seek a developed political system with strong and popular parties able to become a serious opposition. What is worse, it seems that Yeltsin invites to meetings only those party representatives that have declared their support for his policies in advance—thus relying on those who do not resist.

Regarding the evolution of the multi-party system in Russia, it is evident that the majority of the political parties are simply uncalled for. Also, the bulk of the Russian population is not involved in party activities, including the whole of the working class, the majority of the peasantry (because they are not landowners, and therefore have no real interests to dispute), and many intellectuals. Only recently, the interest of another extremely significant political group—manufacturers, plant directors, administrators and "captains of industry"—has organized itself. This political group, together with the two biggest non-Communist parties, the Democratic party of Russia (headed by Nikolai Travkin) and the People's party of Free Russia (headed by Vice President Alexander Rutskoi)—have concluded an agreement on political cooperation and formed a coalition called Civic Union, after proclaiming their adherence to centrism. But

while Civic Union is centrist, the unification of the strict anti-Yeltsin forces is also closing ranks merely on the basis of their "common enemy." But within the coalition, the Communist organizations are getting stronger. The deeper the country's crisis, the stronger and more united they become, finding more common ground with the "patriots" and nationalists.

The crisis of multi-party politics in Russia is far from being solved. At present, such parties could make a breakthrough and combine the ideas of economic and political reforms with those of the revival of a strong Russian authority. The purpose being, of course, to provide the country with badly needed concepts, people, and broad mass support. Nobody has any of this to date.

A New Attempt at Authoritarianism?

Even the broadest concepts of the evolution of contemporary Russian politics can hardly be raised in a small article. The most complicated problems facing today's administration concern the development of new structures, the solution to the cruel national conflicts, controlling the army, the crime rate (a record high for all the post-revolutionary years), parliamentary reforms, control of the former KGB by representative bodies, etc.

Despite all these problems, coupled with the mistakes committed thus far by the democrats, the fact that the Russians certainly back the policy aimed at creating a truly democratic state, able to carry its authority at home and contribute to peace and development abroad, has not changed. And though many claim that the path taken by the Russian leadership will not result in these accomplishments, nobody has offered any real alternatives yet. But until Yeltsin learns (as the old cliché goes) not to repeat old mistakes, he will fuel his own resistance. In the meantime, it is becoming obvious to political scientists that a new regime, authoritarian by character, is emerging in Russia. The reconstruction of the high echelons of power begun in October 1992 is a sign of this. The council of the heads of the autonomous republics set up by Yeltsin's initiative can become a counter-balance to the Parliament. And the apparatus of the newly created and very powerful Security Council (which includes Yeltsin, Rutskoi, the prime minister, Deputy Parliamentary Speaker Sergei Filatov, Defense Minister Pavel Grachev and Security Council Secretary Yuri Skokov), is becoming its working body. Thus, power is starting to move away from the legislature to the parallel bodies controlled only by

the president. The same steps were taken by the USSR president when the power center was moved from the Kremlin to Novo-Ogarevo, the place where he gathered the republic leaders for drafting a new union treaty, largely leaving the Union Parliament out of the political discussions there. Gorbachev needed the shift in order to have the new Union Treaty signed and his interpretation of it maintained. Yeltsin needs the same process now to adopt his version of the Russian Constitution by the spring of 1993. And his relationship with Parliamentary Speaker Ruslan Khasbulatov resembles the conflicting "friendship" between Gorbachev and his parliamentary speaker, Anatoly Lukyanov.

The real question now is whether Yeltsin will be able to combine the growing authoritarianism in his regime with his declining popularity, especially in the background of gloomy economic perspectives for at least the next two years. The struggle for power which had been proceeding for some years resulted in victory for Yeltsin's supporters, and the country, after breaking from the chains of totalitarianism, appeared to be in a situation close to February 1917, when the Romanovs were overthrown. But then the weakness, cowardice, and disorganization of the democratic forces led to the coup d'état of October 1917, when the ultra-leftist party of the Bolsheviks took power. The same conclusion from the current crisis is quite possible. And recall that this would be more in line with Russian psychology than a market economy, democratic elections, and human rights. Soon after taking power, Vladimir Lenin wrote the article, "Whether the Bolsheviks Will Hold Power." We could ask the same about Russian democrats today.

Notes

1. We could say that a middle class was formed by the Russian system, to some extent. But it is very special. Contrary to the Western one, it was formed mainly in the system of distribution and not production. When it was not supported by Gorbachev, it occupied a position contrary to his own.
2. Gorbachev told a joke about it in November 1989: "President Mitterand has 100 mistresses, one has AIDS, but he does not know which one. President Bush has 100 bodyguards, one is a terrorist, but he does not know which one. President Gorbachev has 100 economists, one is good, but he does not know which one."
3. At the same time, it would be interesting to say a few words about the main difficulties in creating a Russian middle class. The term "middle class" means a certain income rate and a social position. However, the policy pursued by Yegor Gaidar in 1992 stressed macroeconomics while ignoring microeconomics, thereby making it statistically seem that the majority of the population is below the poverty line. Secondly, the government's strategic course was oriented to raw materials

and fuel, with export priorities that added to the strengthening of the old distributive moods. This affects the middle class in manufacturing, among other areas.

4. In October 1964 at the CPSU Central Committee plenary session, Nikita Khrushchev was relieved of all his offices. The clique in the Central Committee headed by Leonid Brezhnev violated the Constitution by dismissing Khrushchev from the position of chairman of the USSR Council of Ministers, which was technically the jurisdiction of the Supreme Soviet. But, naturally, nobody paid attention to it.