

# Can Centrism Work in Russia?

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Political stability is a necessary precondition for the successful implementation of reforms, especially the complicated and radical reforms underway in Russia today. It is obvious that centrism, both as a political philosophy and as a political practice, is the main guarantor of social stability and strong democratic institutions. Centrism by nature is oriented towards equalizing the interests of different political and social forces, and in this way it balances both the principles of economic efficiency and the higher aspirations of equality and justice. It therefore provides a healthy political and social development while avoiding the extremes of either going too far too fast, or of falling back to the previous situation.

In today's Russia, centrism is usually understood not as a moderating tendency to the existing political extremes, but as a mere "combination of Right and Left views."<sup>1</sup> It is an axiom that in the West, centrism is a manifestation of the will of the middle class. Formulated by Aristotle in his *Politics*, the idea of the middle class as a guarantor of stable democratic institutions has been brilliantly proven in the course of political evolution of Western civilization, from the ancient Greek *polis* (city-state) up to the developed political systems of contemporary Western countries.

## Centrism in Pre-Soviet Russia

The history of Russia though, runs completely opposite the situation described above. All throughout Russian history, the state played the leading role in all the social spheres and there were almost no democratic traditions to speak of. We could consider the Great Reforms of Alexander II as the first Russian attempt at centrism.

Aimed at overcoming Russia's feudal backwardness and building the basis of a new constitutional state, those reforms were carried out as a "bureaucratic centrism." There was no other way. There were no representative bodies in the country and the bulk of the population did not enjoy even the most elementary human rights. Therefore, political struggles were waged only at the top and in the limited framework of the existing bureaucratic structures. Terrorism was the only way for the lower strata to "participate" politically. Nevertheless, Alexander II successfully carried out some reforms by managing to subdue the interests of both the conservative landowners and bureaucrats on the one hand, and of the radical socialist intellectuals on the

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other. He laid down the necessary prerequisites for developing private initiative and elements of civil society. These reforms included: liberalization of the educational system, limited press freedoms, the foundations for local government, an autonomous court system, and the adoption of the first Russian constitution. However, these reforms were tragically interrupted when a terrorist's bomb killed Alexander II on 1 May 1881. The mere assassination of the tsar quickly ended the process of reform, since his centrist course enjoyed only a narrow social base. It had also been carried out only by the elite—small sections of the “enlightened” bureaucracy, liberal landowners and some intellectual capitalists.

Even when Russia entered an early industrial stage in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, there was no economically or politically strong middle class in the country. The share of the population with land was rather low, and insignificant in comparison to the increasing number of landless peasants and other marginals.

Alongside the unfavorable social conditions for a successful centrist policy, there were also several cultural impediments, including what the Russian philosopher N. Lossky once called the “shortcoming of the middle sphere of culture.”<sup>2</sup> Some of the main patterns in the Russian consciousness include the urges to put theoretically ideal social models into practice, humility in the face of onerous circumstances, and finally, a blind obedience to destiny. In fact, such cultural characteristics gave birth to either extreme political radicalism or to a deep distrust of changes and stable conservatism. To a Russian, the values of common sense—a quiet and well-balanced attitude towards life, a habit of regular constructive work, etc.—were and are still of no special importance. The interior polarization of ideas was typical of almost all the strata of the population, even of those theoretically able to bear “positivist” thinking. As the Russian philosopher N. Berdyaev put it, “The average Russian intellectual usually thinks that he is called either to overthrow the world or to live in moral carelessness and to degrade. He gives all industrial activity to the bourgeoisie which, in his opinion, cannot have moral qualities.”<sup>3</sup>

This clearly manifested dualism in Russian culture is conditioned by the fact that the middle classes did not play an important role in Russian history, though the cultural traditions of the centuries did. The early 20th century reforms of Pyotr Stolypin became the second serious attempt at pursuing a centrist course in Russia. They had quite a constructive character since they were aimed at the improvement of the legal foundations of the state (reforms of local governments, courts, etc.) and, most importantly, at creating a class of property owners who could become economically powerful and serve as the basis for the country's political and social stability.

Prime Minister Stolypin, despite his best efforts, did not manage to make the Russian political process stable and centrist. This was so because he

suffered many of the attributes characteristic of the top Russian bureaucratic caste; an inclination towards authoritarian methods of administration, and a distrust of the emerging legislative bodies represented by the first parliament of Russia, the state Duma. But above all, Stolypin failed to establish a friendly working relation with the leading centrist liberal party, the Constitutional Democrats (Kadets), which advocated the interests of the middle class and of the landless classes at the expense of the large and wealthy landowners. The contemporary Russian historian Dyakin notes:

The liberals represented a narrow path of reforms between the stubborn immobility of reaction and a revolutionary jump to nowhere. But they could not really lead the masses. Only God knows if they would have managed to carry out those reforms together with the old power. Nevertheless, it was disputably the only chance for the monarchy to survive—an alliance with the liberals [Kadets], on their terms.<sup>4</sup>

The last pre-Soviet attempt to carry out centrist politics was undertaken by the Provisional Government which came to power after the February 1917 revolution, which overthrew the tsarist monarchy during World War I amid growing social unrest. Under the circumstances, the Provisional Government's centrist course took on a *situational* character. Sharp political changes were the result not of planned strategic objectives but of the government's spontaneous reactions to sporadic quandaries. This only made the goal of national reconciliation all the more elusive. The Provisional Government's finance minister and prominent Kadet leader, A. Shingarev, wrote as early as the summer of 1917: "We are not the leaders of the people, let us stop standing as an obstacle, useless and helpless. One day everybody will listen to us, but now we are understood only by intellectuals and by the educated representatives of the rich."<sup>5</sup> Shingarev's gloomy predictions came true only four months later when the October coup put an end to the Provisional Government and its centrism.

Thus, in pre-Soviet Russian history, the conditions for the development of a centrist course were rather limited. The root of the problem was the lack of a strong and numerous middle class, and of its accompanying political culture. The lack of such basic democratic elements as political parties and representative bodies predetermined a bureaucratic usurpation of the emerging movement towards centrism. Therefore, the very success or failure of centrism ultimately rested on the political personalities in the high echelons of state power.

### **Centrism under Perestroika**

The totalitarian regime established after October 1917 took the issue of centrism off the agenda for a long time. This was not by chance. Under all totalitarian systems, politics resembles a medieval intrigue close to that of

absolutist regimes and oriental despoties. The social structures became homogeneous since the bulk of the population was turned into state serfs.

In the course of the industrial revolution experienced in the USSR in the 1960s and 1970s, the share of the population involved in intellectual labor, as well as the workers and managers in advanced and sophisticated industries, rose considerably. These were the strata forming the basis of the emerging Soviet middle class. This new phenomenon though, differed greatly from the Western one since the Soviet middle classes were formed not from production, but from distribution—not in a market environment, but in the command-administrative system. In this case, the main criterion was not the income level, but the access to certain resources for material welfare. The upper levels of this Soviet middle class (the academics, the leaders of creative groups and alliances, those who could regularly go abroad, etc.) had a social status close to or part of the ruling *nomenklatura*. A maturing conflict between the Communist *nomenklatura* and the middle class centered on the idea of a “more just socialist distribution.”

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Gorbachev's perestroika appeared from a section of the Party oligarchy which sought a radical modernization of the Soviet system, originally with the idea of continuing to successfully compete with the West. Immediately in its first stage of reforms, perestroika gained the support of the Soviet middle class, which pinned its hopes to the promised deep economic changes and the liberalization of cultural and political life.

Gorbachev's course was originally centrist rather than radical, as his rhetoric up to that point implied. However, this became quite obvious at the Communist Party Conference of 1988, when it was becoming apparent that the general secretary was unable to carry out radical economic changes. After this, the bulk of the middle class began to abandon Gorbachev and to form their own democratically oriented political groupings to challenge the Communist regime. This situation only reinforced Gorbachev's position at the center of the political stage, since from that time until his new lease on political life after the failure of the August 1991 coup, he kept balancing between the orthodox wing of the Communist Party (which had been well-represented in his government), and the democratic movement supported by the middle class.

Gorbachev had paid lip service to radical reforms up until February of 1991, when he proclaimed centrism as his norm of governance. This instance reminds one of previous times in Russian history—and it was at this point when it became popular to compare Gorbachev with the tragic Alexander II. Having no mass support for his reforms, Gorbachev had to rely on a narrow

section of the *nomenklatura* which shared his vision. This put him in a risky position, vulnerable to shifting political winds. Thus, Gorbachev's centrism gave the impression of being of a situational nature. He could not maintain it by setting up a new political party or movement, for he went on acting within the framework of the Communist Party (CPSU), which was essentially unable to adjust to any radical changes. That, despite the genuine intentions of the last general secretary, doomed his centrist reforms to be administered by the bureaucracy.

Gorbachev's centrism was doomed from early on and would have been unable to set the basis for a steady and smooth development towards democratic changes. In this way, Gorbachev's destiny was very much alike those Russian reformers which preceded him. By the spring of 1991 Gorbachev found several rivals wishing to wrest from him the course of centrist politics in the country. The organization "Experimental Creative Center" (ECC), supported by the first secretary of the Moscow Communist Party Yuri Prokofyev (a Gorbachev opponent), came out with the program "Initiative at Political Centrism." The ECC was headed by the ideologist Sergei Kurginyan. His program intended to carry out reforms through a bureaucratic and authoritarian modernization of the country and was called centrist by the authors only because they advocated neither a radical Communist return nor liberal market reforms. Kurginyan's proposals, however, proved to be short-lived, as they ended in a heated discussion at a regular plenary meeting of the Moscow Communist Party City Committee.

### **Centrism in Flux: Post-Putsch Problems**

The abrupt end of the Communist regime after the failure of the coup attempt in August 1991 changed the situation in the country completely. In fact, it could be said that the coup's aftermath was a revolution by the middle class which sought to finish off the orthodox Communist bureaucracy.

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However, on the wave of democratic expectations of the majority of the population, another bloc of social forces captured power. This bloc included a part of the *nomenklatura* that had chosen the values of a market economy and rejected Communist ideology, as well as the

top section of the middle classes guiding the democratic movement. The backward structure of the Russian economy, dominated by state property, remained unchanged. Both social forces leading the ruling bloc remained, to a great extent, genetically adherent to the old distribution philosophy and did not rush to start radical changes in the sphere of property relations. Large-scale privatization was obviously delayed.

From the start, the new regime hindered the process of transformation of the middle classes formed by the command-administrative system to a middle class akin to the Western model. In other words, the socio-economic basis of the cities' middle classes remained unchanged. The price liberalizations of January 1992 inflicted a serious blow to them, suddenly placing many of their members below the poverty line. Under such circumstances, the middle class no longer corresponded to that name. Small businesses caught in bureaucratic tangles and criminal interference simply could not form the core of a new, socially consolidated middle class. Furthermore, the many decades of anti-entrepreneurial propaganda have hindered the self-confidence and independence of the average citizen, and as a result only a handy few are up to the daunting task of setting up a business amid the ruined economy and the problems mentioned above. Determining who belongs to the middle class in Russia is not a simple task, since no international model applies to it.

During the radically reform-minded government of Acting Prime Minister Yegor Gaidar, Russia experienced a situation where the "old" middle class of academics, creative elites and others on fixed salaries, was rapidly decaying. But a "new" one failed to emerge and take its place. This meant that the social support for the politics of radical reform was very narrow. The bulk of the middle classes began to abandon Gaidar, whose reforms were seen benefitting mainly the interests of a small group of large enterprises and monopolists oriented towards exporting raw materials and the commercial structures closely tied in with them.

In the first month of 1992, when Gaidar's reforms began to be implemented in earnest, the conditions for those advocating a centrist course were very unfavorable. The political parties which had declared their centrist orientation proved unable to quickly adjust to the new situation. They had adopted their centrist policies from Western parties acting in developed democracies. These policies, needless to say, were completely inadequate for the realities of postcommunist life in Russia. As a result, the political influence of these parties began to decline, and the organizations of corporate character began to fill the void. These organizations united the representatives of the business elite: alliances of industrialists and entrepreneurs among the old *nomenklatura*, and such parliamentary factions as the industrial and agricultural blocs.

It seemed that from such an unfavorable situation a centrist political course could hardly be advocated, much less implemented. However, in June of 1992 a powerful political bloc was formed declaring its adherence to centrism—Civic Union.

### **Does Civic Union Have a Chance?**

A new phenomenon has emerged in Russian politics, which can be called "centrism of expectations." We could define this phenomenon as a particular

trait from the current transition period in Russia. Contrary to the usual forms of centrism, the centrism of expectations (1) has no clear political or economic program of a centrist character; (2) sometimes adopts a negative character, making clear what it dislikes being unsure what exactly should substitute it; and (3) is more of a psychological state rather than a former movement, a mood which may compel the slowdown of reforms, for example.

In the course of the growing economic crisis, a politically active part of the "old" middle classes, represented also by the scientific, industrial and technological intelligentsia, started to express their disappointment at the negative consequences of Gaidar's policies. They complained about the sharp drop in living standards and industrial output, and the virtual closing of many plants and factories. Without a willingness to go back to the "good ol', bad ol'" days of communism, they aspired to a softening of the effects of the transition to the market. The views of this rather narrow stratum were fed by the views of an otherwise apolitical section of the population which suffered a decline in its living standards as a result of the reforms. This mood of the masses created a special political and psychological atmosphere, a certain social state of mind—the centrism of expectations.

One of its typical features is that in social consciousness, the centrist mood is not necessarily connected to the support of a particular party, political bloc or elite group. At some critical point, the aspirations of the politically minded section of the middle class spread among the members of the Democratic Party of Russia (Nikolai Travkin), and, to a lesser extent, among the Party of Free Russia (Vice President Alexander Rutskoi), which also coincided with the interests of the directors of the large state enterprises. Though this last group enjoyed a relatively high living standard (many of

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them belong to the upper class), it was nonetheless concerned since it felt that the reforms could lead to the closing of many plants and that the "captains of industry" could lose their high social positions and privileges. This explains their desire for reforms "without shock," and which

could guarantee continued government subsidies to assist them during the transition period. The two main blocs (the parties representing the disappointed middle classes, plus the captains of industry) formally consolidated into the Civic Union.

The Renewal party, which represents plant directors, took key positions in Civic Union. This group did not support the ardent Communist and nationalist opposition, nor the radical democrats backing Gaidar. In this way, Civic Union came to occupy the center of Russian politics, advocating a cautious evolution towards a market but at minimal social expense. In

essence, Civic Union remained an organization of the upper classes which had not built up any representative base for itself. Therefore, it had to rely on tactics well known to Russian history—backroom maneuvers and bureaucratic intrigues. The main point is that Civic Union is unlikely to play the role of a real political center for some time to come. In addition, the huge privatization program begun under Gaidar will cause the transformation of the directors' body into a class of large proprietors. This will most likely change the centrist orientation of the industrial directors towards conservatism.

### **The Parliamentary Bureaucracy and the Centrist of Expectations**

Lacking strong mass parties and movements to support the centrism of expectations, how strange it was to see it fully displayed throughout 1992 and 1993 at the Congress of People's Deputies, a remnant of the Communist past.

When political observers watch the often senseless and undefined work of the Congress, they often do not understand its difficult position. The deputies, accusing the government of anti-people politics, at the same time show their utter helplessness in formulating reform any better. But they are only mirroring what is happening in society at large. Russian electors scold the government at every opportunity, yet do not want to revert to the past and also do not have any idea on how to progress confidently into the future—the centrism of expectations in action.

Political scientists are quick to point out the unpopularity of the Congress. Yet factually speaking, the Congress is a replica of contemporary Russian society, with all its deformities and absurdities, though the electors do not realize it.

The makeup of the Congress and of its smaller permanent parliament, the Supreme Soviet, is weakly structured. The composition of factions changes all the time, and the level of cohesion and internal consolidation is low. Besides, there is a large group of deputies who have no distinct political views at all, the so-called "swamp." That is why none of the deputies' blocs claiming a centrist role can influence the Parliament totally. Under these conditions, the Parliament falls victim to its bureaucracy (vice-speakers, the chairmen of various committees), headed by Chairman Ruslan Khasbulatov. Skillfully conducting the chaotic behavior of the deputies, Khasbulatov directs the activities of the Parliament towards a centrist way.

This "leading and guiding role" of the parliamentary bureaucracy and its top members could hardly be conceived of in any other democratic country of Europe or North America. This is not because the parliamentary speakers

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are more hardworking or democratic in those countries, but because in developed democracies, the decisive roles in parliament are played by the leaders of the parliamentary factions, and the speakers have the functions of mediators only. Russia is different.

Such a situation cannot last long. The centrism of expectations is likely to transform itself into either a certain political concept, or give way to a new radicalism born from a worsening economic situation. The destiny of the centrism of expectations will also depend on what kind of republic Russia turns out to be—presidential or parliamentary. In the end, it is possible to see that a wave of centrist views will give the mandate to carry out reforms to a new leader of an authoritarian or semi-authoritarian nature. Such a way out, at least, is in accordance with Russian political tradition.

### **What Next?**

Thus, post-coup political centrism in Russia has the shortcomings of previous times, that is, the lack of a firm social basis, an inclination to the bureaucratic implementation of reforms, and weak political institutions. Only the quick adoption of radical change will break this chain. There are two ideas which aspiring centrists need to keep in mind.

First, the centrist course in Russia, if undertaken, must have a constructive character aimed at creating its own social basis—a strong and numerous middle class as the guarantor of overall political stability and stability of democratic institutions. This implies state assistance to small and medium-sized businesses. To promote that, it would be more favorable to carry out a democratic, but not bureaucratic, privatization of state property, which should facilitate the creation of a new middle class comparable to that in the West.

Second, Russian history convincingly proves that political centrism cannot be complete if it is not based on mass political parties and movements. In this connection, new elections to the executive and legislative bodies, local as well as federal, on a case-by-case basis (first studying opinion polls), could play a positive role. Such a plan would activate the political parties, movements and blocs.

Perhaps a parliamentary federative republic would be the most appropriate for coordinating the interests within the country, but following new elections. Tremendous regional divergences, the problems of the autonomous republics seeking independence—all that requires flexible and well-balanced politics. The centrism aimed at parliamentary methods of settling political problems would be able to become the most important factor in maintaining and strengthening Russian territorial integrity.

Russia as a country is the most complicated object of political governance.

**Notes**

<sup>1</sup> V. V. Kolomytzev, "Left Political Movements in the Western Countries," *Svobodnaya Mysl*, No. 4, 1992, p. 107.

<sup>2</sup> N. O. Lossky, *The Conditions of the Absolute Good*, 1991, p. 331.

<sup>3</sup> N. Berdiayev, *The Destiny of Russia*, 1991, p. 79.

<sup>4</sup> V. S. Dyakin, "Did Stolypin Have any Chance?," *Zvezda*, No. 12, 1990, p. 124.

<sup>5</sup> A. Khrushchev, *Andrei Nikitovich Shingarev, His Life and Activities*, 1918, p. 117.

<sup>6</sup> S. Kurginyan, *The Seventh Screenplay*, part 1, p. 234.

<sup>7</sup> This is the result of the research conducted for the sixth Congress of People's Deputies by a group of sociologists headed by I. Yakovenko, *Dialog*, Nos. 8, 9, 10, pp. 8-10.