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Another Russia?

AFTER THE LEVIATHAN

Leon Aron

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In a very general sense, there is of course a future for democracy in Russia because there has already been a past. It was a short and highly imperfect past, to be sure, but quite real. More than anything else, the contrast between the 1990s and the Putin restoration has demonstrated the correctness of a regularity (I hesitate to call anything a “law” in social sciences) that is quite well known to political scientists. Namely, that a political stalemate is a necessary, though of course not a sufficient, condition for transition to democracy. Call it the Magna Carta effect.

When in the 1990s Russia was the freest it had ever been, there was a stalemate (complete with vetoes and veto overrides) between the leftist, nationalist plurality in the parliament and the right-of-center, liberal, and internationalist executive. In the 1999 elections, the “oligarchs” too were divided—into those, led by Boris Berezovsky, who supported the pro-Kremlin center-right Edinstvo party and those, most notably Vladimir Gusinsky, who backed the Luzhkov-Primakov center-left Otechestvo-Vsya Rossiya.

A similar situation is visible today in Ukraine, where the road to a sustainable democracy again runs through a stalemate between the remnants of the Yushchenko-Timoshenko Orange coalition on the one hand, and Yanukovich’s Party of Regions on the other. The balance is mirrored in the division among the Ukrainian “oligarchs” between the so-called “Donetsk” group (led by Rinat Ahmetov) and the “Dnipropetrovsk” group (led by Viktor Pinchuk and Ihor Kolomoisky).

By contrast, the political essence of the Putin restoration is the disappearance of these nearly evenly matched conflicts: between the parliament and the executive; between the left and the right; between the state and the oligarchs; and between the center and the provinces. Under Putin, the executive has won decisively over the legislature; the genuine left and right have

been superseded by Kremlin-made parties that stand for little other than the perks of Duma membership; the Kremlin has triumphed over the oligarchs; and Moscow again runs roughshod over the regions and their governors.

Since these victories have been achieved without violence, and with the backing—or at least without protest—of most of Russia's voters, the key question for Russian democracy is why has the electorate opted for the present arrangements and how long will it continue to support them. High oil prices certainly have helped. So has the contrast between the early Putin and the late Yeltsin years, along with the association in the popular mind of democracy with the economic crisis inherited from the Soviet Union. But the most important factor seems to be the erosion of the Russian people's tolerance for conflict and indeterminacy, which are at the heart not just of democracy-breeding stalemates, but of democracy itself.

Given the civil and political material that Russia inherited from the Soviet Union, the real choice facing Russians was between the many large beasts that roamed the post-Soviet wilderness—be they oligarchs or governors—and one giant, all-powerful beast: the king of the jungle, the state, the Kremlin. The former, although they often trampled on smaller animals, were intent mainly on maiming each other and thus left space for other creatures to develop and take wing. The largest beast, although weakened, as is usually the case in the aftermath of revolutions, held the promise of imposing a semblance of order by scaring off all other large predators.

To the Russians' eternal credit, they rejected the one-beast option in both 1993 and 1996, when the danger of a communist restoration was real, but by 2000 they were exhausted and ready to give the Leviathan a chance. This readiness was, and continues to be, the basis of Vladimir Putin's mandate and the ultimate source of his regime's legitimacy.

There was always the risk that the Leviathan, having done away with the larger animals, would begin to salivate after most of the rest of the political and economic fauna. And that is precisely what appears to be happening. The Leviathan has delivered only where he mattered the least: the growing incomes that derived primarily from the oil windfall and from the reforms of the much-maligned and accursed 1990s. With respect to all other urgent social, economic, or security problems—the impoverished and antiquated healthcare and education systems, the overstrained and crumbling industrial infrastructure, or the utterly dysfunctional armed forces—not to mention crime and corruption, the largest beast has proved increasingly helpless.

In the last three years, Russia has at least been inoculated against faith in false shortcuts, the most pernicious of which are order without law and democracy without liberty. It is impossible to say exactly when this realization might translate into renewed tolerance for conflicts and stalemates. The experience of other nations, however, suggests that this will happen when the deficiencies of the current political system begin to reverberate in increasingly more obvious and damaging ways throughout Russia's economy and society.