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THE POST-SOVIET SYSTEM OF STATES*#

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1. INTRODUCTION

In this article I attempt to conceptualize some features of the USSR's development from the spring to the autumn of 1991. This period is only one minor phase of the grand transition of the Soviet (post-Soviet) world, a transition which is likely to continue for many years and perhaps even decades to come. In the broad historical sense the Russian/Soviet empire is probably near the end of the long historical period of growth and gradual expansion which started with the rise of the Moscow Principality after the 1236–40 Mongol–Tatar conquest. As has been said in the recent past, 'One of the most interesting phenomena in the history of the world is the incredible growth of Russia from a tiny principality to the mightiest monolithic empire the world has ever seen'.[1]

The growing Russian empire has suffered setbacks during the centuries, one of which was the Time of Troubles, which started in the aftermath of the cruel and irrational reign of Ivan the Terrible (1533–84); this period was marked by uprisings, foreign invasions, virtual temporary disintegration of the country, and ended in the aftermath of the establishment of the Romanov dynasty in 1613. The Time of Troubles resulted in a number of Russian territorial losses to Poland and Sweden. The next deep crisis was when Russia was defeated by Japan in the war and the 1905 revolution commenced. Although historians usually consider the 1905–07 and 1917 revolutions as two separate historical events, it is possible to take the whole 1905–21 cycle as one revolutionary process. World War I unleashed just another stage of this turbulent process, highlighted by the events in March and November 1917. The Russian empire disintegrated almost completely during the 1917 revolution, but the brutal Leninist regime was able to regain most of it by 1921. In the continuing expansion under Stalin and the later totalitarian Communist

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rulers, Russia was able to build a global empire comprising the USSR and its numerous client states. Therefore, with some simplification we may say that the post-1985 Soviet revolution and collapse of the USSR is the third systemic imperial crisis in Russia since the beginning of the 17th century.

2. SEPTEMBER 1917 AND AUGUST 1991

In an article completed in the spring of 1991 I speculated that the Soviet hardliners 'lack the determination to attempt a full-scale crackdown and might instead try some truncated version of it'.[2] What happened in August 1991 seems to have been exactly this type of truncated crackdown, launched in a vacillating manner and with almost visible signs of guilt on the part of its leaders. With some exceptions, the coup leaders acted (or were forced to act) in a mild manner, caring more about organizing press conferences than about getting rid of their opponents. The coup leaders clearly possessed neither the Leninist belief that Communists know how to make mankind happy, and therefore have a natural right to kill everybody, nor the Stalinist contempt for everything except crude military force. The members of the Soviet 'emergency committee' were defending a political system in which they themselves clearly did not believe; their faith in their right to continue to have *dachas*, limousines and offices was apparently not enough to make them ruthless and decisive.

Abortive coups seem not to be exceptional during revolutions: in fact, the unsuccessful attempt of General Lavr Kornilov in September 1917 to topple the provisional government in Russia was in many respects similar to the August 1991 case. As Mikhail Heller and Aleksandr Nekrich put it: Kornilov 'wanted to put an end to the nation's disintegration, re-establish order, and punish the Bolsheviks, whom he considered responsible for the chaos'.[3] But 'Kornilov's troops faded away like ghosts even before reaching Petrograd' and generally his plot was 'a confused blunder'.[4] Like the August 1991 coup, Kornilov's conspiracy had an 'opposite effect': the August 1991 events led to the destruction of the Communist and USSR structures, while the September 1917 developments dramatically strengthened the Bolsheviks (who led the anti-Kornilov fight) and allowed Lenin to move closer to seizing power (which he did in November 1917).

3. FROM COLD CIVIL WAR TO THE NEW DUAL POWER: THREE PHASES

There seem to have been three main phases of political developments in the USSR after spring 1991. The Cold Civil War[5] (which started with the bloody crackdown in the Baltics in January 1991) ended on 23 April 1991 when Gorbachev signed an agreement with the leaders of the nine republics (RSFSR, Ukraine, Byelorussia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and four other Central Asian republics) recognizing the right of the three Baltic

states, Moldavia, Armenia and Georgia to 'independently decide' whether they wanted to join the new Union Treaty. Although the 'nine plus one' statement contained economic threats against the secessionist republics and was vague about what exactly would happen to them in the political sense, it nevertheless formally recognized for the first time on such a level the separate status of the republics that might decide not to join the modified USSR. From the point of view of the Soviet hardliners, Gorbachev's signature on that document was certainly an act of betrayal: it signalled that the Soviet President was deserting the conservatives with whom he had surrounded himself since the end of 1990 and was now trying to find a new power base among the increasingly independent leaders of the republics. Perhaps the Kremlin hardliners also believed that Gorbachev was ready to sacrifice them all if he could preserve for himself at least the symbolic post of the President of the USSR.

The next significant change took place on 12 June 1991 when Boris Yeltsin was, by popular ballot, elected President of Russia, receiving almost 60% of the votes. The election of Boris Yeltsin as Chairman of the Russian Supreme Soviet (in spite of Gorbachev's desperate attempts to stop it) by a Russian parliament in May 1990 marked the emergence of dual power in the USSR, the division between Moscow and the Kremlin. Yeltsin's victory in the popular presidential elections in June 1991 represented another devastating blow to Gorbachev, who still had the moral burden of being nominated to membership of the USSR parliament in 1989 under the non-democratic election law by the Communist Party Central Committee. Although the 1991 Russian presidential elections did not destroy the dual power in the USSR, the balance started to shift markedly in favour of the RSFSR governmental institutions. For example, when on 20 July 1991 Yeltsin issued a decree forbidding the party cells in the executive organs (attached to Soviets at all levels) and state enterprises a move that was of course aimed primarily against the Communist Party – the General-Secretary of the Communist Party Gorbachev offered only very moderate resistance. In fact, Gorbachev's diluted critical remarks looked more like a face-saving gesture toward the Party apparatchiks and rank-and-file Communists than a genuine sign of opposition to Yeltsin.

Finally, the coup that started on 18–19 August 1991 and was over some days later marked the beginning of the third distinctive phase. Perhaps the most interesting thing is that the dual power in Russia did not disappear in the immediate aftermath of the coup. What happened was a decisive change in the balance of power: Gorbachev was now clearly representing power position number two, whereas Yeltsin assumed the number one position (together with the responsibility for economic failures).[6] Again there was a spectacular contrast with the situation a year earlier: in the summer of 1990 the All-Union government in the Kremlin was like a city-state almost without territory but with a huge and powerful economic, Communist Party, military, foreign policy, etc., apparatus. By the autumn of 1991 the remnants of the All-Union government had maintained a certain degree of control over the weakened and fragmented military, security, intelligence and foreign policy apparatus, whereas its role in

economic, party-political and constitutional decision-making had almost completely vanished. The Communist Party was suspended and many of the USSR government's departments were practically taken over by the RSFSR authorities. Gorbachev was looking more like a commander-in-chief of the ex-territorial armed forces of the evaporated empire than a President of the USSR. In 1990 he was fighting to stop the republics from seceding from the USSR and in the autumn of 1991 he was increasingly worried that the units of the Soviet armed forces would distance themselves from the central command and disobey orders. 'Attempts are being made to nationalize or even privatize units of the Soviet Armed Forces. This is not a joke. Furthermore, such talk is dangerous', said Gorbachev in October 1991.[7]

4. TOWARD THE NEXT COUP?

The developments in 1991 gave additional support to the thesis that the unity of the USSR in the form of the unitary state or federation is incompatible with its democratization and profound economic reforms.[8] The independence of the Baltic states was recognized by the new State Council of the USSR in the course of 30 minutes on 6 September 1991. Although Baltic independence is not yet irreversible, these 30 minutes completed on a formal diplomatic level the transformation which was first highlighted on 16 November 1988 when Estonia declared its sovereignty and the right to veto USSR laws. It is also significant that most[9] of the other Soviet republics declared their independence in the aftermath of the coup, although in many cases (the Central Asian republics, Byelorussia) these declarations seem to have served mainly the purpose of defending the local (post)Communist elites and strengthening their bargaining positions with Moscow. Generally speaking, the disintegration trend in the USSR had been gathering momentum throughout the period 1985–90 and was dramatically intensified in 1991. The head of the nationalist Russian Liberal-Democratic Party Vladimir Zhirinovsky said during his visit to Estonia in August 1991, just before the coup: 'The boundaries of our state are unlikely to change, but if they do, it will be in the direction of expansion'.[10] He proved to be dramatically wrong in the short term, and I doubt whether he will be right in the long term.

The dramatic transitions of 1991 also provided additional arguments in favour of the hypothesis that what will eventually remain of the USSR may be more of an Asian state than a European state. The most significant and serious fact in this connection was of course the Ukrainian declaration of independence, adopted by its Supreme Soviet on 24 August 1991. If the Ukraine really implements its independence declaration, then it will radically alter the European and even global political architecture. The Baltic States, Ukraine and Moldavia will then form a belt of newly independent countries between Central Europe and Russia. The Ukraine will probably emerge as a new great military and possibly even nuclear power.

It is even trivial that the trademark of the whole Soviet post-1985 change has been democratization. But the changes of 1991 also strengthened a thesis that destruction of Communist totalitarianism does not necessarily lead to Western-style democracy. During the autumn of 1991 the possibility of the emergence of non-Communist authoritarian regimes was clearly demonstrated in Georgia, where the government of President Zviad Gamsakhurdia was cracking down not only on Communists and national minorities but also on the non-Communist opposition. The mode of thinking of the Georgian popularly elected President was well demonstrated in his interview with one of the Estonian newspapers on 2 October 1991, where he emphasized: 'There is no normal opposition in Georgia. We have just a handful of Kremlin agents who slander their democratically elected President. The enemies of the people must face the firing squad'.[11] Some decisions by the leaders of the other post-Soviet republics (attempts to establish control over the press, to limit parliamentary control over newly created security services, etc.) indicate that the potential for authoritarianism exists outside Georgia, too.

In fact, I believe that the failed coup did not invalidate the prediction that economic anarchy and crisis *will with considerable probability sooner or later again lead to some form of political crackdown* in Russia and in most of the other post-Soviet republics. The basic reason for predicting the coming authoritarian phase is the continuing and deepening economic crisis. Most of the Soviet republics are entering a period of inevitable tough market-oriented economic decisions with populations who are already largely tired of the revolution and want quick changes for the better. In other words, the basic law of the Soviet revolution still seems to be that political conditions for implementing certain economic measures are created when these measures are already 'too little, too late'. Poland started its economic reforms in 1989 with the wide support of the population and yet this support had largely disappeared after two years of 'shock therapy', as was demonstrated during the October 1991 parliamentary elections.[12] Russians, on the other hand, seemed not to be psychologically ready for the market economy even after the August 1991 coup. It was reported on Moscow Television on 13 October 1991 that the majority of people still reject the idea of selling off large enterprises into private hands and 44% believe that the state should, as before, set and regulate prices.[13] Given the predicament of the Russian economy, and the reluctance of its population to sacrifice more in the name of the better but distant future, it is doubtful that any democratic government there can stay in power for long if it really does start the difficult transition to capitalism.

Writing in the spring of 1991, I said that 'the nature of the possible future dictatorship cannot be easily predicted'.[14] I think that after August 1991, an attempt to restore the old-fashioned Brezhnevist Communist order can be ruled out. The possible dictatorship in Russia may be based on the principles of nationalism, xenophobia, fight against 'Western imperialism' and transnational corporations, specific 'Russian way' of development, non-Marxist socialism, Orthodox Church, market economy with strong state sector, welfare state, revival of Russian empire after the

years of Gorbachevist defeatism and humiliation, even restoration of the monarchy, but the return to something based on the Communist ideology in its Leninist guise seems extremely unlikely. Leninism may still be one of the conservative ideological trends in Russia, but it will not become a dominant one again.

The authoritarian turn in Russia could happen in different ways. The economic decline may contribute to the emergence of a strong opposition movement, uniting fascists, monarchists, Russian nationalists, Communists, and so on. The failed coup did not eliminate the social groups who may support the possible transition to authoritarianism: Russian officers returning from military units in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet republics to poor living conditions, or just sacked from the armed forces because of the cuts; Russians escaping from the secessionist republics; workers in heavy and military industry who face unemployment or a sharp decline in living standards if the prices of food and consumer goods are liberalized; members of the banned Communist Party who fear persecution; KGB employees and millions of informers who are afraid of the future Nuremburg trials etc. In fact, the disappointment of the above-mentioned groups is likely to grow (and not diminish) with the transition to a market economy and further dismantling of the empire. The Chairman of the USSR Supreme Soviet Commission for National Security Viktor Minin warned on 25 October 1991 that the planned reduction of the armed forces from 3.7 to 3 million would worsen the country's housing and unemployment crisis. He said that 'the army has become the sixteenth republic, hungry and unsettled, but well armed and trained'.[15] The conservative movement may come to power through democratic elections, but it is also possible that the current Russian government itself will introduce a state of emergency and authoritarian rule in an effort to suppress the rising conservative tide and enforce reforms. One black scenario includes the possibility that new Chernobyl-type nuclear accidents could occur, after which even the most liberal government would be forced to introduce a nationwide state of emergency. It is also possible that the OAS-type organizations would be the first to emerge among the conservative and desperate Soviet military in the newly independent republics and their activities then spread to Russia itself. 'We are reserving the right to act independently if our opinion is not taken into account', said a letter sent by the Soviet airborne division to the Lithuanian President Vytautas Landsbergis. This division is deployed in Kaunas and is unwilling to move from Lithuania to worse living conditions in Russia.[16]

Whereas practically all the post-Soviet republics are facing problems of economic crisis, ethnic clashes, unemployment and a possible authoritarian option, some distinctions exist between the republics. The Baltic republics (because of their certain democratic traditions and links with the Western world) are from my point of view less likely to go through the authoritarian phase than the giant RSFSR or the Central Asian republics. With considerable simplification we can say that traditions of authoritarianism have always been relatively weaker in the Soviet West than in the East and South, but within the limits of this broad historical trend of course almost anything is possible.

5. CONCLUSION: HISTORY AND INEVITABILITY

I do not want to say that the future authoritarian phase in Russia and in most of the other post-Soviet republics is inevitable. It is certainly possible that a strong and flourishing democratic state will exist in Russia, say, in 1995. It is also possible that most of the current Soviet republics will by then be again united in healthy economic union and possibly even in some form of political confederation. But the likelihood of the less optimistic scenario is greater and should at least be considered seriously.

The Western countries can do very little to influence the historical drama that is being played out on the endless territories of the collapsing Eurasian superpower. If the West offers generous economic help, then it can probably influence the course of events in smaller republics like the Baltic states, Moldavia and a few others. But to fight the battle for the survival of democracy in Russia is largely up to the people of Russia themselves; no 'grand bargain' can play a decisive role here, no outside power is rich or powerful enough to change the history of this huge and enigmatic nation.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1 Edgar Anderson, "How Narva, Petseri, and Abrene Came to Be in the RSFSR", *Journal of Baltic Studies*, vol. 19, no. 3, Fall 1988, p. 197.
2 Andrus Park, "From Perestroika to Cold Civil War: Reflections on the Soviet Disintegration Crisis", *Bulletin of Peace Proposals*, vol. 22, no. 3, 1991, p. 263.
3 Mikhail Heller and Aleksandr Nekrich, *Utopia in Power: The History of the Soviet Union from 1917 to the Present* (New York: Summit Books, 1986), p. 35.
4 Ibid., pp. 35–36.
5 Cf. Andrus Park, "From Perestroika to Cold Civil War: Reflections on the Soviet Disintegration Crisis", pp. 260–261.
6 The popularity of B. Yeltsin, A. Sobchak, A. V. Rutskoy and other "heroes of August" rose rapidly in the aftermath of the failed coup and made it easier for them to consolidate political power. Cf. for example the results of the poll conducted in September 1991 in Russia (*Rossiiskaya Gazeta*, 28 September 1991, p. 2).
7 *FBIS-SOV-91-204*, 22 October 1991, p. 27.
8 Cf. my "Global Security and Soviet Nationalities", *The Washington Quarterly*, spring 1990, pp. 37–38.
9 As I am writing these lines (in October 1991) all the former USSR republics, except the RSFSR and Kazakhstan, have declared their independence.
10 *Rahva Hääl*, 10 August 1991, p. 1.
11 *Eesti Ekspress*, 11 October 1991, p. 11.
12 *The Washington Post*, 28 October 1991, p. A17.
13 *FBIS-SOV-91-201*, 17 October 1991, p. 32.
14 Andrus Park, "From Perestroika to Cold Civil War: Reflections on the Soviet Disintegration Crisis", p. 262.
15 *RFE/RL Daily Report*, No. 205, 28 October 1991.
16 *FBIS-SOV-91-202*, 18 October 1991, p. 43.