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First Steps Toward a Multiparty State

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While the modern political system was formed in most of Western Europe and in the United States during the 19th century, for the Russian Empire that century was a time of underground groups fiercely persecuted by the authorities; only the "Great Reforms," and particularly the zemstvo movement, opened a restricted venue for some sort of political activity.

Political parties in the modern sense of the word appeared in Russia at the turn of the century, first as illegal networks in the country with headquarters abroad, then, following the October 17 Manifesto of 1905, as legal or semi-legal organizations taking part in the Duma.(1)

Some scholars believe that the early 20th century, when Russian political parties existed, offered an opportunity to create a fully formed democratic political system. In reality, however, the 1917 Bolshevik coup, followed by the dispersal of the Constituent Assembly early in 1918, put an end to democratic experiments in Russia, and by 1920 it was clear that the country was firmly on the road to total single-party dictatorship. (A short period in 1919 was the last time in Russia's history when activities by an alternative political party were tolerated, and only in a very limited way).

Up to the 1980s Russia remained a one-party state; free political expression assumed the form of the dissident movement which arose in post-Stalinist times but was for the most part a mirror image of the Soviet system. Since the late 1980s we have witnessed

the second Russian experiment with free elections and political parties. The current experiment, however, differs significantly from the first due to diverging initial situations and conditions. In addition, while Russia's first experiment lasted for about a dozen years, with a great deal of lability, the newly emerging parties and political associations have existed for only about six years. Both are extremely short historical periods for the serious development of real parties and a viable political culture. Nevertheless, it is already possible to draw some conclusions from a comparison between parties in the Russian Empire and parties in post-Soviet Russia.

First, the 19th century Great Reforms definitely laid the groundwork for the rise of a party system; however, the Soviet Union's development, despite the Thaw, failed to allow for any political follow-up. All attempts to set up any kind of independent political organizations were suppressed from the outset. Thus, when Gorbachev inadvertently let go of the political controls, newly aspiring politicians found themselves in a vacuum. This had an almost fatal effect on the incipient political culture in the new Russia.

Second, continuity has always been a key component in party development, and all Russian parties in the early 20th century took their cue from past thinkers and political actors. After 1985, as things began to change, politicians had to search back more than 70 years for continuity, and most of them were unable to carry off the attempt. The only political position they could find to support was a crude form of monarchism, quite out of place in the 1980s. It seemed that no one had any true interest in democracy. There was some discussion of reviving the Constituent Assembly, but since none of the politicians could hope for a majority in a truly democratic body, the idea was dropped (in effect for the same reason that had caused Lenin to disperse the Constituent Assembly early in 1918).

Third, although money and power do play leading roles in politics, there is also an ethical component. There are rules politicians must follow and mechanisms to enforce these rules. Russia has still not developed even a rudimentary system of this kind, and this lends a Wild West characteristic to politics. Indeed, in Russia it is a common

occurrence to see politicians settling scores with their fists rather than through dialogue--an activity more often associated with early 19th century parliaments than with the 20th century.

Although lately scholars have been drawing attention to the similarities between left-wing and right-wing extremes in the political spectrum, the left-right dichotomy (with any number of intermediary positions on the scale) still remains crucial both in the study of parties and in political practice.

The rise of political parties in Imperial Russia, in addition to lagging behind Western countries in time, differed in the order in which parties of various orientations arose.⁽²⁾ Paradoxically, essentially conservative parties, closest to government circles, were the last to emerge. The first to appear were the socialist parties which developed under the double impact of Narodnik ideology and Marxism from the West. Although official communist textbooks have taken the failed congress of 1898 in Minsk as the founding date of what later would become the Communist Party, it is more reasonable to regard the first few years of the 20th century as the time when both social democratic and socialist revolutionary parties were established. The (liberal) Constitutional Democratic Party, also known as the Party of People's Freedom after January 1906, was founded in October 1905, although its leaders had been active earlier. The (moderate) October 17 Union was set up in November 1905. The Union of the Russian People, a conglomerate of (anti-semitic) Black Hundreds groups regarded as closely linked to government circles, developed a short time later, in November 1906.⁽³⁾

Thus, the party system in Russia in the beginning of the 20th century was marked by the existence of socialist, liberal and conservative parties. There were several features, however, that left the pre-1917 political system still very primitive. The Duma, regularly dismissed by the tsar, was hardly a real parliament, and party activities in it had only a limited effect on political life in the country. Parties still had very little chance of gaining any real power, except through violent means, to say nothing of party rotation in power.

In fact, the appearance of parties was closely linked to social movements and mass revolutionary action.

The circumstances which brought about the rise of a multiparty system in the 1980s and 1990s did not mirror the earlier version. The Soviet Union was a different society than turn-of-the-century Russia. The Communist Party that had ruled the country without free elections or any legislative/judicial control tolerated no free political activities or expression of political ideas. While the country's economic modernization proceeded rapidly, at least in terms of quantity if not of quality, the political culture remained at a feudal level. In particular, the left-right continuum was virtually meaningless in the Soviet Union and was replaced by a more primitive continuum from hard-line to moderate. Thus, when Gorbachev opened the Pandora's box, the country was in no way prepared to travel the road to multiparty development. This accounts for the failure of strongly democratic groups to materialize and for the political crisis from which the country has been unable to extricate itself.

The rise of alternative parties began at the First Congress of People's Deputies in May 1989, where the formation of the Inter-Regional Group of Deputies was announced on the last day by a breathless deputy from Ohrenburg. It was from this group that Democratic Russia and the Democratic Platform in the CPSU eventually emerged, followed by a snowballing number of new groups and parties.

Today the number of parties, blocs and political groups has surpassed 100, but in many cases they are merely offices with (or even without) facsimile machines or commercial enterprises. Ironically, the only organization qualifying for the Russian idea of a political party, complete with apparat and card-carrying members, is Zyuganov's Communist Party of the Russian Federation. The CPRF was founded on June 20-21, 1990, in Moscow, as part of an effort to revive the governing Communist Party. There are also several splinter groups originating from the former Communist Party, including Kryuchkov's Russian Communist Party and Anpilov's Russian Communist Workers' Party.

Zyuganov's party is supposed to head the people's patriotic bloc as the only significant opposition to the government. Following its defeat in the previous presidential elections, analysts have concluded that the left-wing opposition was unable to offer a viable alternative to the existing government. Zyuganov's party fell victim to its own respectability. It accepted parliamentary rules of the political game and avoided any kind of activity that might be judged illegitimate. As a result, a party with 600,000 members and 45 percent of the seats in the State Duma (but only 22.3 percent of the popular vote) became isolated from social protest and the strike movement.(4) One might have thought these are not communists but liberals playing the part of a loyal opposition.

The 4th Congress of Zyuganov's party, held on April 19-20, 1997, attempted to change this situation. The central committee report confirmed party loyalty to the ideas of socialism and proclaimed the goal of combining the social class and national liberation movements into a single mass resistance movement. Instead of the concept of "constructive opposition" the communists now focus on "responsible and irreconcilable opposition." Zyuganov explained that the party would not stop short of forcing the entire corrupted clique out of "Russia's pores."(5)

The central committee report also proposed the idea of "dual power," resembling the theories of the New Left in the West in the 1960s and 1970s, whereby existing institutions of power would be replaced by grass-roots organizations. Delegates called for a referendum on changing the constitution and ending "shock therapy reforms." However, demonstrations on May 1 and 9 proved to be tame and yielded no significant results.

An interesting phenomenon in Russia's new political culture is the term "party of power." The expression is used in a wider sense by some analysts to mean the establishment, but more often it refers to the Our Home Is Russia movement (which is not, however, usually included in the list of top 10 or 12 political parties). The constituent congress of Our Home Is Russia, held on May 12, 1995, adopted a statute providing for collective and individual membership and elected Victor Chernomyrdin as chairman with two

deputies, Oleg Soskovets and the governor of Samara Province, Konstantin Titov, as well as a 126-member council.(6)

There were delegates from four parties and groups at the congress: Shakhrai's Party of Russian Unity and Accord, the Stability faction, New Regional Policies, and Stable Russia. Only the first of these was of any significance. As analysts noted, Our Home Is Russia is not a social movement but a government structure set up to support presidential power.

The platform of Our Home Is Russia is based on "stability and development, democracy and patriotism, and certainty and order." In effect the program meant continuation of the present reform course, and contained promises to support all segments of the population, secure an economic upsurge, and maintain Russia's status of "great power."

There are signs that the new movement did not enjoy tangible support among political parties and lost potential votes among the population due to the "party of power" label. Nevertheless, due to government support, locally Our Home Is Russia has achieved success in building up its organizations to such an extent that some analysts refer to a one-party presidential system in the regions.

As to the Russian "democrats," they are in a state of total disarray, particularly after the appearance of Chernomyrdin's bloc. Russia's Democratic Choice, led by Yegor Gaidar, has been losing followers steadily, and its failure to unite with Yavlinsky's Yabloko was another serious setback for the "democrats." Yavlinsky is a special case of a potentially promising politician whose chief asset--his independence--seems to be his undoing. He is a leader with tremendous ambitions but without a platform and a truly disciplined party.

Finally, mention must be made of the clown in Russian politics, Zhirinovsky, whose Liberal Democratic Party of Russia is nevertheless highly dangerous due to its close links with the criminal world.(7)

Given the state of Russia's main groupings, it is apparent that Russia still has no party system in place, only the possibility of developing one. It has not even arrived at the point which Imperial Russia had reached prior to 1917. The first step along the road to a viable multiparty political system will be taken when, finally, there is a peaceful transfer of power as a result of free election results. It is sometimes forgotten that power has never been transferred in that manner in Russia.

Another requirement is for a stable right-left continuum to develop, providing clear bearings for political actors. There is also the need to work out certain ethical and legal rules in the political game which today resembles a free-for-all more often than not.(8)

The present is clearly a transitional period, and there is no certainty that Russia will produce a stable multiparty political system in the nearest future.

Notes:

1 Recently, there has been heightened interest concerning the parties which the communists called "bourgeois." See, for example, the monumental edition currently being published on the Kadet Party: *Politicheskiye partii Rossii. Konets XIX--pervaya tret XX veka. Dokumentalnoye naslediyeye. Syezdy I konferentsii konstitutsionno-demokraticheskoy partii 1905-1920. vol. I* (Moscow: Rosspen, 1997).

2 *Politicheskiye partii Rossii. Konets XIX -- pervaya tret XX veka. Entsiklopediya* (Moscow: Rosspen, 1996), p. 5.

3 *Politicheskaya istoriya Rossii-SSSR-Rossiiskaya Federatsiya, vol. I* (Moscow: Terra, 1996), p. 435.

4 *Ekonomika i politika Rossii i gosudarstv blizhnego zarubezhya. Analiticheskiy obzor* (Moscow: April, 1997), p. 7.

5 *Ibid.*

6 *Ekonomika i politika Rossii i gosudarstv blizhnego zarubezhya. (Moscow: May 1995), p. 7.*

7 Suffice it to mention that Sergei Sigarev, one of its top leaders, has served several past sentences for fraud, while Zhirinovskiy's chief foreign adviser, Michael Bass, is known for his criminal past.

8 See: V.V. Ryakov, Y.I. Khabanov, *Mezhdu narodom i vlastyu: Rossiiskaya mnogopartiynost: problemy stanovleniya* (Moscow: Izdatelstvo Rossiiskoy akademii gosudarstvennoy sluzhby, 1995); and V.N. Krasnov, ed., *Rossiia: partii, vybory, vlast* (Moscow: Informatsionno-izdatelskoye agenstvo "Obozrevatel," 1996).

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