
REALLY EXISTING DEMOCRACIES: DEMOCRACY IN A RUSSIAN MIRROR

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1. Motivation

What can we learn about Russia from the experience of democracy around the world? What can we learn about democracy when we view it from the perspective of contemporary Russia? These two questions motivate our inquiry.

Juxtaposing these two perspectives — democracy in a Russian mirror and Russia in the democratic mirror — turns out to be both revealing and demanding. Perhaps most obviously, we should not be surprised that post-communist Russia did not smoothly embrace institutions and practices that we recognize these days as “democracy.” The correct question is not “Why there is no democracy in Russia?” but “Why would one expect there would be?” “Democracy,” even in its minimalist understanding as systems in which elections are “free and fair” and their results are obeyed by the losers, is a historical miracle, a contingent result of circumstances as well as of intentions. As Holmes puts it, “democracy is a tiny spot in human history, a political arrangement so rare historically that it must have very special preconditions for it to emerge and survive.” The paths to it are convoluted and, as the experience of Russia manifests, it is easy to get “stuck” (Makarenko and Melville) or even derailed into a new form of authoritarianism.

But why enter onto this path at all? Put yourself in the place of some-one who believes that peaceful political order cannot be maintained unless it is regulated by an au-

thoritarian state, that democracy must be “guided,” “tutored,” or “led,” and examine the experience of a country that heralds itself as the cradle and the prototype of modern democracy. You will see a society in which almost half of citizens do not vote even in presidential elections, in which money unabashedly permeates politics, a society that has the highest income inequality in the developed world and the largest prison population in the entire world. This picture may be self-serving but it cannot be easily dismissed. Most people around the world evaluate democracy by its outcomes, political freedom but also economic development and socioeconomic equality. To put forth a case for democracy, including democracy in Russia, one must confront the experience of democracies as they are, “really existing democracies.” To cite Stiglitz (reference), it is not enough to urge “Do as we say, not as we do.”

As one Russian colleague desperately exclaimed during our discussions, “If democracy is flawed, what is the difference?” We think that there is a difference, indeed, there are differences. But pinning down the value of democracy, the value of competitive elections and of political freedom between elections, is not easy and the answers cannot be facile. While several specific answers are proposed below, perhaps the most important feature of democracy is that it is unceasingly perfectible (B.Manin), that the democratic project is never completely accomplished, that democracy is a system that can and does adapt to changing circumstances, perpetually open to institutional innovation. And the force of democratic vitality are not only reforms from above but also pressures from below. As the first democratically elected Spanish Prime Minister, Adolfo Suarez, announced in his opening speech to the parlia-

ment, “The future is not written, because only the people can write it.”

This is why the participants in this adventure — Russian and non-Russian — can share the same pursuit, a pursuit of freedom, welfare, and equality. This is why those of us who live in countries with well entrenched democracies are not afraid that finding faults in our democratic systems would undermine the value of democracy: we can simultaneously criticize the way democracy functions in our particular countries and advocate its generic virtues.

The title that best identifies and organizes our interrogations is perhaps “Really Existing Democracies”. As this title suggests, our purpose is to confront the actual experience of democracies across the globe with both normative and positive conceptions of democracy. We are particularly interested in placing the current political situation in Russia — its origins, its present form, and its possible futures — in the context of general knowledge about the functioning and the evolution of different political regimes. We hope that this knowledge generates lessons from which all can learn, even if perhaps particular people will draw different conclusions. But it would be presumptuous to think that outsiders know better: the experience of American advisers to Russia during the Yeltsin period — “imitate us” — was disastrous not only for Russia but also for a good name of democracy in Russia. “Democracy” as a slogan containing a geopolitical agenda and it has been used to prove the superiority of some countries over others: A book about Russia and the West cannot ignore this ideological legacy.

It bears emphasis that it is not our intention to attach labels or award points to particular political regimes. The elephant in the room is the question “Is Russia a Democracy?” or “Is it less of a democracy than the United States, Italy, or Japan?”. But any attempt to address such questions becomes inevitably mired in definitions, which perhaps please but do not enlighten. We need to escape the prison of polarities, especially the authoritarian-democratic dichotomy, which

led many some self-proclaimed victors of the Cold War to conclude that it is sufficient to get rid of the former to get the latter.

Our focus is analytical. We want to understand how democracy really works, what goals it achieves, and in what aspects it fails. We want to assess what one can reasonably expect of democracy at its best but also why it is not always at its best. We are interested in the genesis of democracy and stages of its evolution. Hence, we approach democracy not only as a state but a process as well. Different polities may find themselves at different stages of development and may face different challenges and goals. Some may enjoy centuries of gradual democratic development, others may simultaneously face the challenges of state-building, national integration, and political competition. Hence, we need to identify “pre-conditions”: what is possible where and when?

Obviously this very formulation may evoke disagreements. They may concern the criteria by which any political regimes should be judged: “freedom and justice,” “order and prosperity,” or whatever criteria individual citizens want to judge them by. They may also concern facts, the stylized statistical facts that rationalize our general beliefs but also facts not subject to systematic observation, such as the intentions or the moral virtues of politicians. Indeed, the authors of this volume continue to disagree about several issues, normative as well as factual. This is as it should be: pretensions of certainty are a recipe for disasters.

2. Tentative Contents

Introduction

Part I: Russia

Mikhail Ilyin. Democracy: Russian Perspectives

The chapter provides a linguistically-oriented historical background of “democracy” and related cognates in the Russian historiography.

Andranik Migranyan. Peculiarities of Russian Politics

Nowadays Russian authorities are very cautious when conducting political reforms toward liberal democracy because of their past experience, when twice this kind of reforms led to the collapse of the state and radical shifts of the political regime from one (right) extreme to the other (left) and vice versa. Russian elections of the past decade lack the most important characteristic of democracy — the uncertainty of the elections outcome. The reason is that still there are very strong anti-system forces that could carry out fundamental changes of Russian political and economic system if they would come to power through elections. Russia is not Western Europe or the United States, where uncertainty of electoral outcomes is accompanied by an unequivocal certainty that the winner will not attempt to change the foundations of the socio-political system. In Russia the process of transition to consolidated democracy and competitive elections is determined by the ongoing process of formation of several citizenships simultaneously: civil citizenship, social citizenship, cultural citizenship, and political citizenship. This process requires adaptation by Russian people to the difficulties of the culture of horizontal political controls, which would render possible to build consensus, achieve agreements of mutual interest, and renounce a zero-sum game. Russian authorities are determined to move in direction of liberal-democratic institutions and values, but they want to do it on their own, determining their own priorities and their actions without someone from the outside rushing them.

Valery D. Solovei. Color Revolutions and Russia

The chapter compares Russia with the countries that have experienced color revolutions: Georgia, Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan and Moldova. The sociological theory of revolutions provides a theoretical framework for

the analysis. The main reasons of color revolutions, their character and revolutionary results are considered. Counter-revolutionary policies of Russian authorities are analyzed. The main factors of the revolution are absent or poorly expressed in Russia. At the same time, the fundamental inability to predict a revolution is pointed out.

Stephen Holmes. Imitating Democracy, Imitating Authoritarianism

The sprawling Russian state apparatus is not only internally factious but also weakly connected to a largely passive, depoliticized, and weakly organized society. The militarized wings of the state bureaucracy (especially the FSB and MVD) have had greater success in “*raiderstvo*”, that is, using the threat of violence to transfer cash flows to their members, than in solving any of Russian myriad problems. Nevertheless, it seems impossible to imagine the abolition of periodic national elections for the Duma (national legislature) and the Presidency. These elections do not serve to discipline power or make it responsive and accountable to the voters. So what function do they serve? And why does the prospect of rigged elections, which the unrivaled United Russia party cannot possibly lose, nevertheless produce something that seems close to panic in the ruling clique? This chapter is a study of political mimesis in post-Yeltsin Russia. My thesis is that pseudo-democracy in today’s Russia can only be understood in the context of a whole series of imitative imperatives: the imitation of authoritarianism, the imitation of stateness, the imitation of nationhood, etc.

Part II: Democracy: What It Is? How It Works? What It Does? General Perspectives

John Dunn. Judging Democracy as Form of Government for Given Territories: Utopia or Apologetics?

Authorization by presumptively free and fair elections is the least implausible and most

widely diffused current formula for legitimating government. The prevalence of purportedly free and fair elections reflects the continuing current force of the need for regime legitimation and the relative plausibility of this way of supplying it. Democracy is a treacherous criterion for legitimacy today because it has come to combine extreme conceptual vagueness with extravagant political hyperbole. Elections in Russia have recently been less than wholly free in several respects, and, like elections everywhere, they are often quite elaborately unfair. A central ideological disagreement in Russia today is whether the country's future would be more or less secure if its elections were considerably freer and fairer. This is better seen as a question about the relative political merits of different Russian political forces and agents than as one about the political properties of democracy as a type of regime.

Pasquale Pasquino. Democracy: Ancient and Modern, Good and Bad

The chapter offers a general historical survey of the concept of democracy as a really existing political regime. The term was born in Greece in the 5th century BC to designate the most inclusive form of self-government in a political community, with elections playing a marginal role. Thomas Aquinas' theory of mixed constitution is at the origin of a new political language, the one we still use, which identifies democracy with the popular choice of the governing elites through elections. The last section of the article is an attempt to assess the positive aspects and the drawbacks of contemporary representative government (vulgo democracy) based on competitive repeated free elections.

Alexei D. Voskressenski. Non-Western Democracy

General Settings, Regional/National Factors and the Concept of Non-Western Democracy

The economic and political problems facing the modernizing countries of the non-

Western world are not unique to any of them. Western countries had solved them earlier, albeit in their own ways and within their own timeframes. However, the ways of solving these non-unique problems are in fact exclusive to each country because of regional as well as national factors. Hence, there are different ways in which a country's social, economic and political systems modernization can be successful, problematic or unsuccessful and the ultimate result is either success or failure of the entire modernization process. Remarkably, several countries in the East a region that, as a whole, has embarked on this path later than the West, have managed to come up with them in its own way, different from the Western one. Having delineated the initial difference between Western and non-Western societies, it is possible to try to determine the special character of the non-Western political process. This requires defining the systemic particulars of non-Western societies. According to the arguments developed in the chapter, we can add a spatial dimension to the political analysis of the development of non-Western countries; this is tied to the civilizational/geographical and cultural/political logic of their development. Having formulated these ideas, it is possible to categorize all varieties of political systems and models into specified types based on their ideologies of state governance and the structures of their political regimes, as well as on certain other parameters of their political systems. This makes us to define different types of democracies: ultra-liberal, liberal, illiberal and to add a new category — non-Western democracy, the concept explained in details in the chapter.

Adam Przeworski. Non-Western Democracy in the West

While the claim that political arrangements must reflect particular cultures has been recently revived in different conceptions of "non-Western democracy," there is no good reason to believe that cultural traditions limits political possibilities. The orig-

inal conceptions underlying the establishment of representative government in the West was also based on a claim that societies are harmonious and that collective decisions should be based on consensus. Yet, even if it took a long time, the West learned that regularized political conflicts do not threaten civil peace and that political order can be maintained even in the presence of partisan competition. Traditions are plastic and contain heterogeneous principles from which politicians can pick and choose.

Elections and Between Them

Boris Makarenko. Really Existing Democracies: The Role of Elections

The virtue of elections is not limited to competition: they are a ritual but the only one in which masses of citizens get involved in politics. Even non-competitive elections change subjects into voters: they habituate citizens to voting as a sole way to create rulers. The genesis of elections in “traditional” and “emerging” democracies is explored. The degree of competitiveness can be characterized by “affordable uncertainty” that is, the extent to which the ruling elites are prepared to entrust the destiny of power-holding to voters, or, in a negative definition, the degree of control and manipulation of the electoral process. Competitive elections legitimize not only winners but also losers, shape the political landscape, and the style of politics. While observing the features that make elections “free and fair” is difficult, visible signs that elections have been manipulated or fraudulent can be detected.

Jose Maria Maravall. Elections and the Challenge of More Democracy

Some political leaders in democracies have encouraged programs of “more democracy”. This stands in contrast with the positions of political leaders in Russia, notably Vladimir Putin and Dmitri Medvedev, who see democratic reforms as a threat. The pa-

per examines more particularly five political problems of established democracies: the information that citizens need to attribute political responsibilities; the uncertain verdict of elections; the division of power that can ensure the possibility of rotation in office; the existence of a credible opposition and the preservation of the rules of competition; the prevalence of the electoral verdict of citizens over autonomous strategies of politicians. These five problems affect the control of citizens over governments. Reacting against the political and economic chaos that followed the collapse of Communism, rulers in Russia have tried to establish a strong and capable state as a pre-condition of democracy. Elections in Russia are controlled by the Kremlin: they are an instrument of domination, rather than a form of citizens’ self-government. What exists is only a pseudo-democracy. Fear of democracy leading to political and economic chaos is contradicted by vast comparative evidence. Russian rulers cannot credibly commit themselves to a passage from pseudo-democracy to democracy.

Ian Shapiro. Democracy between Elections

This chapter summarizes the role of partisan opposition, interest groups, and the civil society in between elections. Partisan opposition provides a government in waiting, generates information and institutionalizes arguments about politics (which are not the same as “deliberation”), and provides an anti-corruption check. If the incumbents want the opposition to be loyal, they need to create incentives for the opposition to cooperate by accommodating some of their interests. The role of interest groups varies across democratic systems, so it is not an easy subject for generalizations. One of their important, insufficiently appreciated, effects is on shaping public opinion. Finally, civil society at times spontaneously erupts in the form of political movements but the normative question of the extent to which expressions of intense but minoritarian views should be ac-

commodated under democracy remains open.

Part III: Paths of Political Change

John Ferejohn. Instituting Democratic Governance

Russia seems to be in a transitional situation and many hope that this transition will lead to the establishment of a stable liberal democratic regime. Transitional situations are hard to define in advance, however until some kind of transition has actually taken place. So we do not really know if we are looking at a transition or a stable semi-authoritarian regime. Some think that the current regime can be characterized as a sovereign democracy not because of its current practices but because of its future promise that will eventually transform itself into a liberal democracy. This view seems to see the current power holders as exercising both constituent and regular (constituted) powers. These two kinds of power may not be able to coexist, however, because the constituent has a strong incentive and special opportunities to make itself permanent: to be not only a constitutional dictator but an ordinary one as well. The paper tries to explore this situation on a theoretical plane and suggests some choices confronting Russian political leaders and expresses skepticism about sovereign democracy because it seems a variant of constitutional dictatorship.

Adam Przeworski. Political Institutions and Political Order

The chapter is an attempt to understand why some countries are unable to establish any kind of peaceful order, a few maintain order without holding elections, many cel-

ebate peaceful elections in which opposition is either not allowed at all or not given a chance to win, while in some countries, those that we identify as democracies, elections are competitive and peaceful. He emphasizes the complementary role of force and consent, focusing on the role of political institutions in structuring, absorbing, and regulating contacts. He then inquires under what conditions countries adopt competitive elections, arguing that such transitions typically entail divisions within the elite accompanied by popular mobilization.

Boris Makarenko and Andrei Melville. How Do Transitions to Democracy Get Stuck and Where?

The authors review the outcomes of the third wave of democratization and analyze the roles played in contemporary transitions by “objective” (“structural”) conditions for democracy and by “subjective” (actor-related factors, like will, personal ambitions or perceptions, vested interests, or mistakes of actors involved in the transition processes. Considering twenty-nine post-Communist countries, they explore whether structure or agency was responsible for transitions that got stuck, deviated from the expected route, or just failed. Examining the scope of favorable and unfavorable factors, they found that agency-related factors were critical in determining the political outcomes of particular transformations. In certain cases decisions of major political actors contributed crucially to the success of transitions to democracy, in others these decisions arrested the process or led to new forms of authoritarian rule. The role of agency is critical in determining the general trajectory of political transformation, while democratic consolidation requires at least a minimum of structural prerequisites.