

Uncaptive Minds



Seminar Papers

Post-Communist Development of
Political Parties & Oppositions:

The Tragedy of Failure and Political
Parties in Russia

by Arkady Dubnov

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Theme 3

Post-Communist Development of Political Parties & Oppositions

The Tragedy of Failure & Political Parties in Russia

by **Arkady Dubnov**

Nearly twenty-five years ago, in 1991, the Soviet Union collapsed and democracy won its place in Russia. Today, we can see that this is no more than a myth. In fact, the creation of the Russian Federation was not the result of an ideological fight but simply the result of the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Yuri Levada, a Russian sociologist, wrote that Soviet ideology was not strong enough to save the system from collapse and that this ideology died with the empire. This, too, is a myth. The Russian Federation is the only country other than Belarus where decommunization did not take place at all. And so we now go back to a mindset that rehabilitates the Soviet system and Soviet values, the most important of which is that the state is more important than the individual. The secret police and security services have not changed their oppressive nature. Their principal aim is unchanged: it is to maintain the regime, not to safeguard democratic institutions. Media are now functioning like the old Soviet propaganda machine.

Another illusion was that Russia adopted a free market economy. The planned economy continues to exist and the nomenklatura continues to

operate according to the old Soviet hierarchy. The new system has legalized the redistribution of private property and as a result the old nomenklatura now owns most property. Post-Soviet political parties are also in the hands of the former nomenklatura. One can see this extend to Crimea, where the state bureaucracy is restructuring to incorporate officials from one nomenklatura party to another, from the Party of Regions of Ukraine into the United Party of Russia.

Does all of this mean that pluralism and democratic processes were doomed to failure? There are differences of opinion here. I believe there was a possibility of following a democratic path. In 1991, we established the *Democratic Russia* newspaper from scratch and I was the deputy editor-in-chief. The newspaper ultimately went bankrupt but it showed that something was possible. I believe that if Yegor Gaidar's government had received political and financial support from the West on the scale of the assistance Germany and Europe received after World War II through the Marshall Plan, there would have been a chance for democratic change. But the West did not trust Boris Yeltsin because he had opposed and deposed Gorbachev and the West felt grateful to Gorbachev for the fall of the Iron Curtain and the reunification of Germany.

History is much more complex than just human interrelationships—we can see it also looking at the example of Ukraine. The failure of Russian democrats in the early 1990s—apart from their own mistakes—is also due partly to the euphoria of the West and the US. They believed that they had won the Cold War and were not interested in policies that would establish a strong Russia.

The tragedy of democracy's failure in Russia could be seen twenty-one years ago in the events of October 1993, the attack on parliament. What took place in Moscow was in fact a civil war. Absent the timely assistance from the West that Russia needed, the country had headed towards an economic collapse. And Yeltsin, by his own mindset, was not ready for compromise. That is why he had to fight against the attempted Red-Brown coup d'état; everybody remembers the tanks in those days attacking the parliament building. This tragedy became a personal one for Yeltsin. I used to speak with him in those days, both as a journalist and a human rights defender, and it was clear that after those days Yeltsin changed from any democratic orientation.

Another historical marker in the failure of Russian democracy was the presidential election in 1996. The leader of the Communist Party, Gennadi Zyuganov, would have won the elections if the results had not been falsified to ensure Yeltsin's victory. From this point on, the oligarchs took advantage of Yeltsin's weakened position and brought Putin to power.

Today, as before, the role of political parties in Russia is quite weak. There is not a real tradition of political pluralism in the country and it was unrealistic to think this could be achieved in the late 1980s or early 1990s. With Putin's United Russia Party, the "party of power" was recreated. Former prime minister Viktor Chernomyrdin used to joke that whatever party you created in Russia would be the Communist Party. Today, however, Russia resembles more Tsarist Russia in that democratic institutions like political parties are only a façade; they are fake institutions. Some officials think that the return to Tsarist monarchy is just waiting for the right time.

As regards any political opposition, this word should be in quotation marks. All the "opposition" parties are single-personality parties based on their leader: Zyuganov's Communist Party, Zhirinovskiy's Liberal Democratic Party (LDPR), even Yavlinsky's Democratic Party, known as "Apple."¹ There are differences among these parties, but they are all based on the character of the leader. The Communist Party would dissolve without Zyuganov; the same for Yabloko without Yavlinsky. Regardless, they exist in the political context where the United Russia Party is dominant.

The people who are aged 45 and over are the most likely to vote in elections, out of habit, and they are the most conformist. For these voters, the nation and the United Russia Party are one and the same. People are not interested in the party's platform or agenda. They focus only on the party's leaders in both presidential and parliamentary elections.

Of course, the State Duma, or parliament, plays only a technical role and the Kremlin regards it as part of the state administration. The role of the parties like the United Russia Party and the controlled opposition is to implement the policies of the executive branch, of the state.

We can see devolution of Russia in all directions. The country is moving towards autarchy as the outside world further isolates Russia. Its technological development has devolved. The country operates on the basis of legal nihilism and is ruled by force and violence. The result is clear. A few numbers: between 2008 and 2011, forty thousand people left Russia; in 2012, 122,000 left; in 2013, 186,000. We will see higher numbers.

The post-Crimean Russia is a country with serious vulnerabilities and disadvantages. Unfortunately, the West still focuses on Russia's leaders and not on the society and the nation. It is another example of the tragic clash of values of principles and practices as mentioned yesterday. Our colleagues who took the floor—Viačorka, Haindrava—stated their belief that decades are needed to pass before Russia is ripe for the changes that we hoped for in the early 1990s. If the West continues its policies, I agree.

¹ The Democratic Party of Russia is generally referred to as "Yabloko," or Yavlinski's bloc, which in Russian means "apple." — Editor's Note.