The War in Chechnya and the New Russian State

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The West's reactions to the Russian military campaign to restore Moscow's control over the breakaway Chechen Republic have been ambivalent and confused. On the one hand, Western governments emphasized that Chechnya was an internal Russian affair and that the Russian government had a right to defend its territorial integrity. On the other hand, the methods used by the Russian government shocked international public opinion. Concern mounted over massive human rights violations and excessive use of force. On top of that, having moved tens of thousands of troops into Chechnya, without prior notification to member states of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, Moscow was found in violation of OSCE rules which it had pledged to observe.

Part of this confusion reflected an inherent conflict between two principles of modern international law: defense of national sovereignty and protection of human rights. But the Chechen war also highlighted the dangerous and unstable condition in which Russia found itself after three years of post-communist reforms.

Since 1991, the Yeltsin government had been widely seen in the West as the best possible vehicle for democratic and market reforms in Russia, as well as for establishing a friendly or allied relationship with the USA and other Western countries. Yet, this very government was now waging a brutal war in the Caucasus and had failed to provide a serious legal case for it. In addition, the government was increasingly resorting to authoritarian methods in its domestic policy and developing an assertive foreign policy which was at odds with Western goals and preferences.

There is a contradiction here. Are we observing a reversal of the democratic reform process in Russia? Or, are the war in Chechnya and other disturbing Russian developments temporary aberrations from, or perhaps a pause in, the continuing movement toward markets and democracy? Some observers prefer to look beyond Chechnya: after all, similar events have taken place in Western democracies, and are perhaps not unexpected in a new and unstable democracy like Russia, with its ingrained authoritarian and imperial traditions.

Whatever the causes, new authoritarianism is a very serious threat to Russia's democratic gains. But it is worthwhile to look for the sources of this ominous trend, not just in the stubbornness of old Soviet ways and the activities of anti-reform forces, as is the prevalent mode, but, more importantly, in the reform project itself, its premises and its social base.

Transition from communism in Russia, as well as in other former Soviet and satellite countries, has been shaped by a combination of factors. To name just a few, there are the following: the widely perceived need of societies to develop market and democratic institutions; pressures of the world economy in its current pro-market and anti-statist phase; the rising tide of nationalism; and the processes of transformation of communist-era elites and their methods of rule.

In its earlier stages, the transition could be easily characterized as "democratic," since the combined impact of these factors seemed to push Eastern European countries towards Western-style democracy. Democracy was seen as a necessary condition for effecting a shift toward markets, for being accepted into the Western club, for replacement of the empire with new nation-states, and even for effecting a regrouping and a rationalization among elites. After a few years, however, the danger became clear that democracy may be sacrificed as an obstacle to the realization of other goals. "Shock therapy" and the concomitant push to integrate Russia into the world economy seem to have taken precedence.

Simultaneous pursuit of both political and economic liberalization has been a hallmark of Russian reforms since Gorbachev's perestroika. Russia, striving to emerge from the Soviet crisis, needed both, just as it needed an end to the Cold War and a drastic demilitarization of economy and society. It seemed clear that to weaken the bureaucracy's stranglehold on society, to pull the economy from stagnation, and to narrow the gap between the state and the people, it was necessary to move toward both political and economic freedom at the same time.

However, contradictions between political and economic components of the reform project soon became apparent. When the economy ground to a halt in 1989, the Soviet government turned to its habitual method: it looked for solutions at the people's expense. "We live as well as we work," declared Gorbachev's economic adviser Leonid Abalkin with a remarkable insensitivity to the plight of tens of millions of hard-working but underpaid Soviets. The new message from the government was that the economy was in crisis because people demanded too much and worked too little, and that even the modest Soviet living standards were largely undeserved.

The first version of "shock therapy" was launched not by Yeltsin's reform cabinet, but by Gorbachev's Prime Minister Valentin Pavlov in the spring of 1991, as part of the general shift to the right in Soviet politics. The government's assault on people's incomes

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and savings went hand in hand with the escalation of repressive measures against democratic activists, nationalists in the Baltic republics, businessmen and others. When Pavlov and other key figures in the Soviet government staged their coup against Gorbachev and Yeltsin in August, their crackdown on political liberties was combined with a promise to continue market reforms. They were not trying to save socialism—they were looking for an authoritarian road to capitalism. The dominant Soviet elites saw nothing wrong with the institutions of private ownership and market exchange, so long as the development of those institutions helped them keep and increase their power.

The narrow power interests of the top Soviet oligarchy were so naked in that coup that the plotters were betrayed even by the army and the KGB. But what confronted and defeated the coup was not just a critical mass of citizens who had lost their fear of the state and were determined to see freedom prevail, but, just as importantly, a critical mass of second-rank Soviet elites who were interested in reforms to the extent that reforms opened paths to the top for them. For these elites, the coup meant a rebuff to their climb and a reimposition of the old pecking order. As underdogs to those in the Kremlin, however, they were able to make common cause with the broader array of social forces pressing for radical reforms. Boris Yeltsin, with his nomenclatura background, his sudden conversion to the cause of radical reforms, and his image as a populist rebel fighting to free Russia from the yoke of the Soviet state, symbolized the crucial elite component of the new Russian revolution.

The abolition of the USSR, and the formation of new independent states in its wake, drastically changed the situation. The underdogs were now at the top, busily organizing new institutions of power—building new states, privatizing state assets, and establishing new rules of the game. The rebels' transition from outside to inside the Kremlin walls profoundly changed their attitudes to democracy and bureaucracy in Russia. There were also increasing pressures from the world economy on developments in Russia. These stemmed in part from the growing dependence between the old Soviet Union and the rest of the world. The great reforms reflect Russia's re-entry into the world economy and its attempts to find a better position within that economy.

There are many aspects regarding the liberation of Russian society from the chains of the post totalitarian State which are important, but I would like to focus on the issue of post-Soviet bureaucrats; various bureaucratic elites who inherited power from the old Soviet State. The new liberal project of Soviet reforms had the appearance of a utopia, until enough important bureaucratic elites in the Soviet Union discovered that this project fit their group interests very well.

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It must be emphasized that this project does not involve just bureaucrats. The new rising elites, owing their new-found prosperity to the growing market economy, were just as important. But for every private entrepreneur making money in the new market gains, there were at least ten people who were former first-secretaries on numerous party committees, managers of State enterprises, KGB officers, or former generals. The Russian political scene was teeming with people who had power in the old system and were now attempting to recast that power in new terms. There was a new bourgeoisie, a new private sector, and new entrepreneurs with mixed origins, but origin in Russia gives one a leg up in comparison to newcomers.

To become a full-fledged new entrepreneur in Russia today is much more difficult than it was five years ago. While it was necessary for the most part to be somebody in the old system in order to be somebody in the new market game, a new bourgeoisie was able to develop and is exploiting the opportunities of the growing private economy. As well, managers of transforming State enterprises formed a very important part of the post-Soviet elite. Some of these enterprises were still State-owned and others were technically private, but in reality a strange combination of mixed private-ownership, employee-owned, and State-owned prevailed.

In terms of administrative structure, the executive apparatus of the state had also been recast. Instead of one state organization, there now are some 15 states with Russia being the largest. There has been a tremendous expansion of state executive machinery and the number of people in the executive bureaucracy today is much larger. Reliable counts are not available, but it is at least 50 or 60 percent larger than it was at the time of the Soviet Union, when governmental operations were centralized. There are new elective members in the 15 parliaments in place over the old Soviet Union. Groups of people are preparing for elections and thereby competing for the political limelight.

Finally, military elites are still dominant, with Russian military elites being much more numerous and more influential than their contemporaries in other former Soviet Republics. Altogether, considering changes in Russia from the populist point of view (e.g. people getting the right to vote, the development of the free press, citizen involvement in politics, the formation of associations, and the growth of civil society) in isolation from other factors, creates an inaccurate picture of democracy.

If we attempt to the measure the amount of power that the rank and file citizen in Russia has today, we come to the conclusion that he or she has much less power than before the great reform or before the great democratic revolution. Elites certainly have much more power than they ever had when they were part of a single hierarchical structure, run from the centre by the communist party, and supervised by the politburo and the KGB. What is evident is that a complex of different power centres are emerging, and they are all competing for and utilizing the free press. There is a proliferation of new coalitions and parties. The President of Russia is trying to emerge as all-powerful, or as he says, "number one." In some respects he is number one, but only in some. The limits of his power are all too clear. It is accurate to say that the great reforms have resulted in the empowerment of important elites and of new elites in the former Soviet society, at the expense of the vast majority of citizens, and at the expense of the civil society.

In a great debate among Sovietologists on whether civil society existed in the Soviet Union, some argued that so much power was concentrated in the hands of the party and the State that there was no autonomy to speak of. Civil society could therefore not even begin to develop. Other specialists cited developments such as increasing pluralisation of power in the Soviet Union, the growth of education, educational standards, the emergence of intellectuals, and the existence of informal groups of all kinds. They likewise focused on the Gorbachev era when civil society took a great leap forward. In that optic, the Gorbachev reforms increasingly imposed the notion of civil society on the State while relaxing State controls.

More recently, civil society has become a very conservative concept. It takes a long time for citizens to develop more or less stable structures of interaction and create tools to defend and increase their autonomy. Civil societies do not come into existence over night. And if there was a civil society in the Soviet Union, it owed its existence to decades of shared experiences and years of slow and painful liberalization. After the Soviet Union collapsed, a series of massive blows damaged the structures of that inherited civil society. These were economic blows through "shock therapy" which diminished the purchasing power of the population. They were political blows in the sense that having elected the first head of State in a thousand years, the Russians immediately saw power being re-concentrated in the hands of the executive, at the expense of the parliament, and at the expense of lower levels of State structure. There is a very real sense among many Russians that they now have less political power than they had before radical reforms. In fact, the war in Chechnya demonstrates that powerlessness more than anything else. It is a war that has been waged by the executive branch against almost total opposition of Russian public opinion, against the expressed opposition of the parliament, and against the expressed opposition of most of the media, and there is nothing that Russian society can do about it. If there was an unpopular, unsupported war ... a thankless war, this is it.

In this interesting test case, it becomes clear that Russians had few tools to stop war. They demonstrated, yet they were ignored. The newspapers published scandalous accounts, yet the executive branch did not alter its policy. When parliament threatened that it would limit the power of the President, the President responded "I can disband you by constitution." So from the point of view of society, there is less societal power vis-a-vis the new Russian State.

Let us return to the point of view of the new elites who are really in power. They possess new power which they did not previously enjoy. Among other things, there is a growing sense among the bureaucrats, especially those involved in management of enterprises, that there is a real possibility to become owners of the means of production. They certainly have something like a propriety in relationship to the new State which is emerging in Russia. Likewise, new elites in the other former Soviet Republics have developed increasingly proprietary attitudes to their new States.

Simultaneously, there is growing social discontent among the population, not only over the loss of power, but also over the growing chaos, the rising wave of crime and lawlessness, the loss of social prospects, the prospects of downward social mobility, the threat of high unemployment, and the prospect of losing jobs. On the one hand, new elites have assumed power; on the other hand, discontented populations have been increasingly disillusioned. A gap is growing between the government and the people, and between the new States and the shattered and fragmented new societies.

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Nationalism enters the picture at a very propitious moment, because nationalism is used to justify or legitimize the positions of elites in the new regime. Building a proper new Russian State becomes a sacred mission which deflects questions of democracy, elitism, and power. In a recent debate on whether Russia should have a professional army, the Minister of Defence said something very interesting: "I don't think that Russia really needs professional armies. I hate to see Russian soldiers go to battle for money." Chechnya is the first war of the Russian State in which the battle cross of the old Russian Imperial Army has been revived, so that the heroes receive crosses instead of stars. This is not a

professional soldiers' war but a war for national territory. Nationalism is a very important symbol for the masses; to these millions of people who have been battered, whose illusions have been shattered, and who are profoundly in the dark as to what awaits them tomorrow.

The famous work by Hannah Arendt[2] on totalitarianism emphasizes the notion of superfluous people. Arendt explains the process of the transformation of Western nation States into nationalist States, and then into imperialist States, as creating superfluous people. They are growing numbers of people who lose social orientation and ties with other human beings. They become anxious to join with somebody, and join new entities or new communities.

We recall the serious effects of these processes in Western Europe. I'm afraid that there is a danger of similar processes developing in Russia. The vast majority of Russian citizens have opposed the war in Chechnya, and that opposition presents an interesting test. It is not easy to educate people in the politics of new imperialism. Yet, this situation represents only the start of the process. Russian society still has reasonably free information media. The television is not fully controlled. A fight has been pitched between the government and the media, and it is not clear who will win. If the government wins, and it succeeds in taming the media and turning it into propaganda tools to educate Russians in the ideology of new nationalism, then we may see a decline in opposition to wars like Chechnya.

Russians clamoured for law and order when they voted for Yeltsin, and that is what they are getting from the Yeltsin government. The processes which have been generated by the deepening social and economic crisis in the new independent States are very dangerous. Nationalism is dangerous when it acquires extreme features in any place, but in Russia it is doubly dangerous because we are dealing with a State which has a dual imperial tradition. The re-centralization of power in the hands of new Russian elites can be seen as synonymous with the restoration of the Soviet Empire. Even "shock therapy," which was supposedly enacted within Russia for good reasons was imposed on the other former Soviet Republics in a very authoritarian manner. Russia being the largest, and inheriting most of the Soviet assets, initiated the process of "shock therapy," leaving the others to follow or be damned. There was no consultation. And that happened at the start, when the idea of democracy was still shining brightly. Now that this idea has lost most of its lustre and many Russians are talking about law and order and restoration of a strong State, there is a greater danger that an assertion of power in the centre may result in drastic repercussions for neighbouring states. Many of the neighbours are scared by what they see in Chechnya. Certainly, Chechnya is within Russia; but there is no guarantee that similar methods will not be used outside of Russia.

It has been my intention in this brief presentation to emphasize the linkages between radical economic reforms and the imperialist trends which are emerging in the Russian States. I would like to emphasize that the linkage is to be sought in the self-interest of bureaucratic elites. Ultimately, it appears that those who are winning the battle for power which is raging in the former Soviet Union, are those who had power before. The old Soviet elites have not been dislodged. They have been rearranged and are using new tools to perpetuate and augment their power. So the real democratic struggles lie ahead and it is very important that the nature of those struggles are seen properly by Western observers. ■

Notes

1. This paper is an edited version of a presentation at the Centre for Refugee Studies, York University, January 1995. Editorial assistant: Rachel Collins. Ed.
2. Hannah Arendt. 1973. *Origins of Totalitarianism.* New York: Harcourt Brace and Jovanovich. □