Political Succession in 21:st Century Russia

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Resumé

Ett stort problem för Rysslands politiska framtid – på sätt och vis kanske det allra största – är att det inte finns några hållbara regler som skulle kontrollera den politiska successionen i Kreml. En stark ledare behöver inga så länge han orkar och lever. Systemet skulle behöva dem så snart klockan är slagen för regimskifte. Makten som ligger gripbar på gator och torg kan bli något mycket farligt. Rysslands demokrati är mestadels fiktiv, och utvecklingen går i fel riktning. En pseudodemokrati löser inte successionsfrågan. Vill man förfalska valresultatet, måste man redan på förhand veta i vems favör man ska göra det. Vladimir Putin vann 2012 presidentämbetet för sex år framåt. Han har ingen rival för ledarskapet, och ifall ingen katastrof uppstår som kan läggas honom till last kommer han igen att vinna valet 2018. Att Putin alltid efterföljs av Putin är emellertid inget tecken på stabil demokrati eller stabilitet över huvud taget. En dag kommer hans tid vid makten att ta slut. Som autokratisk ledare behöver Putin ideologisk legitimering. Den håller på att byggas upp åt honom av mycket konservativa element med stormaktsdrömmar. Men en sådan legitimitet är personlig och har ingen institutionell koppling. Den kan inte ärvas, desto mindre som ingen efterträdare tillåts existera.

THE RUSSIAN PRESIDENTIAL election in the spring of 2012 formally decided the question of Russia's highest leadership for the following six years. Not many people thought the election quite honest, but then hardly anyone had expected it to be. In any event, Vladimir Putin enjoyed stronger support than did any potential alternative. Very probably he was supported by a genuine majority of those Russians entitled to vote. To that extent his victory could be regarded as legitimate.

A different and at least equally important question remained, however, unresolved. More than that: any chances for solving it seemed to have weakened with the beginning of Putin's third presidential term. How will political succession be organized in Russia when death, illness, a palace coup or rebellion in the streets will one day vacate the seat of highest power? When a successor will need to be found, and then once more a successor to the successor? Will there be institutional rules to make the decision a self-evident one? If so, what will those rules be like?

Reliable anwers there were none. Formal ones were easy to enumerate, since they could be read from the Russian constitution. The president's term is six years, at the end of which a new election will be held. The winner will be the candidate who receives over fifty percent of the vote in the first round or defeats his or her remaining opponent in the second. In a functioning democracy the problem of succession does not exist.

In Russia, however, it does exist and historically often has. The immediate question of succession in contemporary Russia was intimately connected with the question of democracy's workability there, and

from the spring of 2012 onward a negative assessment was becoming increasingly unavoidable. Formally, the rules were clear. Reality looked different.

Looking further, over several decades, the question was one of assessing some specific features of Russian political culture. Should we believe that the experiment with a constitutional form of government had already met the same fate as earlier attempts at westernization under the emperors Peter the Great, Alexander I and Alexander II – that a certain amount of copying is done, but always so that reforms are not carried to a conclusion and that the powers that be will not come under serious threat?

It was difficult to draw any other conclusion from Putin's early actions in his new term. Looking west, he was certainly not searching for models. Rather, he seemed to be looking for grounds to portray the whole of the Western world as deserving only of rejection and hostility. The authority and workability of Russia's own formally democratic institutions did not seem to interest him in the least. Rather, he seemed to be labouring to guarantee the security of his personal power and the immobility of the country's political and social arrangements.

Putin had held highest power in Russia through two four-year presidential terms in 2000-2008, then another four-year period as the (theoretically subordinate) prime minister 2008-2012. It was reasonable to guess that he intended to continue in office as president over two full six-year terms until 2024 – unless of course death or serious illness or a coup should intervene. After that he would again face a constitutional obstacle, but hardly a more difficult one than he had already met in 2008. The framework for a lifetime presidency seemed, more or less, to be in place.

With a hard steering hand Putin's power might, should he think it useful, preserve its formal democratic trappings, but the reality would certainly be different. Not one of his electoral victories up to 2012 had been democratically blameless. There were no visible grounds for believing that his conduct would in the future be fundamentally different; certainly not in the direction of democratic purity.

A falsified democracy can be varyingly useful as a legitimating device for a dictated succession and as camouflage for authoritarian power. It cannot serve, by itself, as the method for deciding on a successor. If an election is to be stolen, the real succession must already be a *fait accompli* – how else would you know in whose favour the falsification should be made?

What sort of rules, if any, would guide the succession after Putin? Who would be the people to make the arrangements and do the deciding? Those were the questions seeking answers after the spring of 2012 and finding none.

Threatened continuity

Constitutional democracy has its well-known answer to the problem of succession. All other political societies have had to wrestle with it, and have done so since long before the birth of the representational form of government. The solutions attempted have been of various kinds. At least the best of them have all laid emphasis on predictability.

It is not difficult to understand why. Power left loose on streets and market squares is a very dangerous thing. Power left loose in the corridors of a government palace is hardly more reassuring.

Power will always find a taker, and power left loose may easily find more than one. Therefore it is always safest to bind power to institutions of one sort or another, and the stronger and more widely accepted they are, the better.

The enormous value of publicly regulated succession for the health of political societies is often forgotten in democratic countries, although warning examples from outside their own circle have never been lacking. During the lengthening years of Putin's tenure it seemed to be largely forgotten in Russia, too, even though the country's own history is replete with disconcerting reminders.

In Putin's Russia, elections were held with regularity and there was no serious alternative to the highest leader. Blemishes in the methods used did not seem to matter all that much. If Putin was his own successor first as president, then as prime minister and then again as president, continuity at least seemed to be assured. And continuity was something that Russians knew to appreciate after all the upheavals of the last two decades of the twentieth century.

But continuity without the support of political institutions is always open to question. With the Soviet Union gone, democratic institutions were built in Russia following Western examples, but very soon they ceased to look like the originals. Power flowed more and more brazenly past them, through quite different channels.

Both houses of the Russian parliament were degraded into feeble serfs of executive power. Of the independence of the courts of law there was little sign despite repeated assurances to the contrary. To the extent that security organs were answerable to anyone at all, it was only to the highest level of executive authority. Much the same could be said of the ever-expanding state bureaucracy in general.

What will happen to continuity when the time has come to transfer power to a successor and eventually to a successor to him? (A transfer to "her" in Russia's present reality being a rather remote alternative). Helpless institutions will remain silent, unless someone is found to breathe unexpected life into them. A leader retaining sufficient power might choose his own successor, but what if he does not care to do it or no longer has time? Bequeathing the necessary amount of authority and credibility along with power is in any case a difficult thing to do.

Without political liberty and honest elections there is no democratic legitimacy. Without generally understood institutional rules of succession there is no legitimacy at all. Unless a leader ascending to supreme power brings his own in his baggage, he must be in a hurry to acquire as much of it as he can. If he does not succeed, either power will soon begin to seep away from him or he will need to resort to increasingly naked coercion. Even then he will be dependent on such loyalty as he can find within the coercive apparatus itself, be it genuine or simply bought.

If there are more than one pair of hands reaching for supreme power, a very dangerous situation is created. With impotent institutions and no relevant tradition, power must eventually end up in the possession of the strongest contender. Before that point is reached, blood may flow and a lot of other kinds of damage may be done.

The three principles

If Russian history is read at its most general and generalizing level, there have been, all told, three basic principles for the

legitimation and transfer of power. All three have come in different varieties and all of them were at times violated.

The earliest and overwhelmingly the longest-lasting was of course hereditary power within princely families. In one form or another it was preserved from the Kievan period in the early Middle Ages to the Russian Revolution in 1917. It was followed by the power of the self-perpetuating Communist elite, with succession always treated as an internal party affair. This arrangement was in force from 1917 to the collapse of the Soviet state in 1991.

After that, Russia formally became a democratic republic, but with a strongly manipulated – or, as half-official descriptions had it, "guided" or "sovereign" democracy. Elections were regularly held, but leaders were careful to make sure of acceptable results.

No discernible rules existed for these behind-the-scenes games. That is not surprising, since none had ever been seriously considered. Boris Yeltsin found highest power as part of a profound upheaval. As the most powerful politician of the biggest Russian republic of the Soviet Union, he defeated a reactionary coup attempt, allowed the multinational state to fall apart and chased the Soviet president and party leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, out of the Kremlin.

Weakened and seriously ill, Yeltsin named Putin as his heir-apparent. Considering his own immediate need he chose wisely; considering the long-term interests of the Russian state the choice was as dangerous as it was strange. The keys of an emergent state, groping toward something like democracy, were trusted in the hands of a former mid-level officer of the Soviet political police, a man who had never taken credible distance from the ethos and ideology of the KGB. When Yeltsin in July 1999 made his aspiring aide chief of the FSB, the KGB's domestic successor service, Putin declared that he was returning "home". There is no evidence that he ever left.

The new strongman thanked his benefactor by shielding him from investigations and a possible trial. After that, the only succession has been from Putin to Putin. It is possible that Yeltsin would actually have preferred to leave Russians with a genuinely democratic system of government. If so, that alternative fell victim to the unalterable facts of Yeltsin's health, of his fears for himself and of the dead weight of the country's political culture.

Hereditary power

Of the historical methods of political succession, inheritance of princely power from father to son (or sometimes daughter) was the safest and most stable, but only when a generally accepted order of primogeniture had been established.

In Russia this important development only really took place during Tsar Paul's reign 1796–1801. This emperor, an unfortunate ruler in many other respects, was the first to decree that the throne should always be inherited by the eldest son of the deceased ruler. Peter the Great had still reserved for himself the right to choose his successor from among all his sons.[1]

It may seem strange that fully credible rules of succession had, in the preceding centuries, never been agreed upon. The altogether not very solid Kievan state suffered repeatedly from long and cruel civil wars as the sons and other relatives of deceased rulers resorted to arms in their power quarrels. The claims to the throne of a prince's brothers could sometimes be considered of equal weight with those of his

sons, with the result that an obvious preference could not always exist even in theory.

According to one estimate, the history of the Kievan state contained, in the 170 years following the death of its greatest ruler Iaroslav the Wise, fully 80 years of civil strife.[2] One could be forgiven for thinking that a lesser sequence of catastrophes would have taught to Kievan princes the advantages of ordered succession.

Not that the Kievan state was historically alone with its difficulties. Bitter wars of succession and fratricides among brothers-rivals to the throne have been a common enough occurrence in various parts of the world through the centuries. Even within princely families, the rules have surprisingly often and for long periods been left undefined, or at any rate unobserved, with correspondingly disastrous results.

From the history of European antiquity we can pick the story of how Caracalla, son of the Roman emperor Septimus Severus, in the year 211 murdered his brother Geta in the arms of their common mother. In the Turkey of the Ottomans for long periods the death of a sultan was almost regularly followed by either a wave of assassinations or an inter-province civil war between the deceased ruler's offspring.[3]

In the early 17th century, the "Time of Troubles" or *Smutnoye Vremya* that still haunts the memory of historically conscious Russians, was prolonged by the absence of a commonly accepted successor to Boris Godunov – a man who was himself a usurping outsider on the throne of the Tsars and, to add insult to injury, the rumoured (though never proven) murderer of the lawful heir Dmitri.[4]

The Romanov dynasty ascended to the Muscovite throne at the end of the *Smutnoye Vremya* period in 1613 and only lost it in the revolutionary year of 1917, when the last of the Tsars, Nicholas II, abdicated. Not that succession would always have been plain sailing even for the Romanovs. Catherine the Great was a German princess and a Romanov only through marriage. In some cases succession was decided not so much by family members as by the officers of the most illustrious regiments of the Russian army. Catherine herself, like later her grandson Alexander I, had contemporary guards officers to thank for her accession to the throne.

Even this variant of succession of course had historical precedents elsewhere – we need only to recall the role of the praetorians in imperial Rome or the janissaries in Ottoman Turkey.

The durability of the Romanov dynasty over more than three centuries must for all that be considered an extraordinary achievement in the Russian context.

The future emperor Alexander I seems still to have been at least indirectly complicit in the conspiracy to murder his father Tsar Paul. By the 19th century, succession had become entirely orderly: Alexander I was succeeded (the unsuccessful Decembrist uprising notwithstanding) by his brother, the later Tsar Nicholas I. After Nicholas died the crown went peacefully in regular succession from father to son, that is to Alexander II, Alexander III, and Nicholas II, respectively.

The fact that Alexander II died in an assassination has of course no bearing on the lawfulness of the succession itself. As the 19th century progressed, the legitimacy of Russia's autocratic system itself came under increasing criticism and outright threat. For those willing to concede the principle of tsarist power, however, there was no longer any difficulty identifying the lawful heir to the throne.

Party power

After the destruction of imperial autocracy in Russia in 1917, democracy was initially tried. In conditions of general chaos and continuing war the attempt was probably doomed from the start.

In any case, democracy was put to death by the October Revolution. The uncontested leader of the victorious Bolsheviks, Vladimir Lenin, simply dissolved the freshly elected Constituent Assembly in St. Petersburg (at the time Petrograd). What emerged was "dictatorship of the proletariat", a system of rule by one single all-powerful party machine.

Of political *succession* Lenin had no coherent idea, which under the circumstances is easily understandable. Russia was at war, and the sudden success of the coup d'etat had caught the Bolsheviks almost as unprepared as the country in general. In their first years the new rulers had their hands full with consolidating their power and repelling their numerous enemies without and within.

The party of course did have its organizational structure and, in its early years, something resembling internal democracy. Lenin himself only became preoccupied with the question of succession when his health had collapsed and hopes of recovery began to fade. As he saw it, there were two men in the party leadership who were superior to the rest, Iosif Stalin and Lev Trotsky, but he was not fully convinced of the suitability of either. He tried to leave his power evenly divided between them, but the attempt came too late to have a chance of success.[5] Power ended up in Stalin's hands alone, although the prolonged and complicated struggle toward a personal dictatorship took him several more years.

As the case tends to be in an ideological movement, doctrinal, tactical and power quarrels within the Bolshevik party went hand in hand. Lenin was himself a veteran of this type of political warfare. He had split the Russian Social Democratic Party in two – into a "Menshevik" (minority) faction and his own "Bolshevik" (majority) one – on the basis of an organizational and tactical difference. Even his treatise on Marxist theory, "Materialism and Empiriocriticism", was written as an ideological blow at some party comrades who had become dangerous to his own position.[6] In the later Soviet Union, all students were nevertheless required to pretend that the book was an outstanding philosophical achievement.

Stalin's own journey toward absolute power led, after Lenin's death, along similar paths. Personal power contests among the highest party leadership were at the same time doctrinal quarrels about the correct interpretation of Marxism and the correct tactics in emerging situations. Stalin defeated his main rivals as representing alternatively "left" or "right" deviations from the proper party line. He introduced his own doctrine of "socialism in one country" against Lev Trotsky's "permanent revolution". Trotsky's was probably the more orthodox Marxist interpretation, but that did not prove decisive. Stalin's doctrine was better suited to the situation the country was actually in.

What was ostensibly fought about were majorities in the politburo and central committee of the Bolshevik (later Communist) party. To that extent, the power contests were "democratic" within the party framework. In actual fact Stalin was very effectively using his patronage as General Secretary to man key positions of the machinery with people from his own entou-

rage. By the late nineteen-twenties he had become strong enough to use openly coercive methods to silence and sideline his rivals. While the struggle lasted, however, Stalin was still content only to humiliate his defeated enemies in the top echelons of the party. The time for terror and murder only came in the thirties, when his final victory had been assured.

Stalin, as we know, died as the unquestioned dictator of the Soviet state. At his death in 1953 the Communist party enjoyed an absolute monopoly of ideological and political power and an apparatus reaching into every remote corner of the gigantic country, but there was no readily available, previously thought-out method to decide on the succession. There were the extravagant personality cults of both Lenin and Stalin – entirely perverse, really, in doctrinal terms – but no cult in the making for an officially anointed heir. There was the politburo (at that time called the presidium) and the central committee, there were the party conferences with all their pompous trappings, but they were rarely called in session and had, in any case, served Stalin's and only Stalin's needs for the last twenty-odd years.

Real power after Stalin was on the loose in the corridors of the Kremlin. It was clear of course that one or more from among the dictator's closest associates would inherit it, but there was no predicting the identity of the winner or winners.

The sorting-out of the inheritance took some time, until Nikita Khrushchev emerged as clearly the strongest. Only Laurenti Beria, the former head of Stalin's political police, was killed by his comrades. The others thought him too dangerous and had him arrested in the middle of a politburo meeting. His trial was conducted in the best Stalinist tradition as a farce of mostly invented charges and falsified evidence, but murdering at the top of the party's leadership stopped with his execution.[7] From then on the instinct of self-preservation and the memory of constant fear during the years of Stalin's terror worked, if nothing else did, to persuade the leaders to spare the lives of their defeated rivals.

In 1957 there was an attempt to topple Khrushchev by means of an internal conspiracy within the politburo. For once internal party democracy can be said to have worked, after a fashion: Khrushchev refused to stand down without a decision by the central committee. When a plenum was called and it duly voted on the matter, he won. The conspirators Lazar Kaganovich, Georgi Malenkov, Vyacheslav Molotov and Dmitri Shepilov, the so-called "anti-party group", were expelled from Moscow into relatively low-level positions, but nothing worse than that was done to them.

Khrushchev's own turn to fall finally came in 1964. That time the matter was already decided in the politburo. When the central committee met, Leonid Brezhnev with his allies was firmly in control and Khrushchev's fate was sealed. He spent the rest of his life as a pensioner under virtual house arrest.

During and after Brezhnev's long reign, party power in the Soviet Union slowly began to ossify and power struggles became rarer and less fierce. The country entered what was later called the *Vremya Zastoia*, the time of stagnation.

The role of the central committee was in this period quite secondary. Brezhnev, like his two immediate successors Yuri Andropov and Konstantin Chernenko, stayed in office to the end of his life. Succession was in practical terms an internal matter for the politburo and no longer required serious battles or purges.

Andropov was in principle a strong leader and could have developed into a real (albeit very conservative) reformer, had illness and death not intervened. Chernenko's nomination to succeed him no longer reflected much of anything but the ruling gerontocracy's fear and horror of impending generational change. His pathetically inactive and fruitless time in office lasted all of thirteen months.

To restore something like vitality and hope to the Communist party a younger man was needed, younger by a whole generation. The choice fell on Mikhail Gorbachev, who had already climbed the ladder to great influence as Andropov's protégé. His nomination to the highest party post in November 1985 was an undramatic decision in the politburo, however dramatic the sequence then proved to be. When Gorbachev's career was finally terminated in 1991 and he was driven from office, the whole story of the Soviet Union and its ruling party was also at an end.

Transition

Gorbachev left behind him no principle of political succession. He had deliberately broken the prevailing Communist order. He had started more or less systematically to move in the direction of democratic governance, but he lacked either the will, the time or the ability to go all the way. When the Soviet Union collapsed the country was in a curious limbo between contrasting systemic alternatives.[8]

The formal position of power could not be transferred to anyone after Gorbachev, since when he was ousted his office, or rather both of them, ceased to exist. The combined highest leader of the country and the party was replaced by no one. Boris Yeltsin, the strongman of the biggest constituent state, retained the highest power only in Russia. The other states went their separate ways.

One principle had remained in force throughout the whole 70-year history of the Soviet Union: the core Leninist idea of "the leading role of the party" as the avantgarde and lone decider on the country's direction. There may at times have been room to discuss how broadly the party's internal democracy should be applied and who had the last word on the choice of the highest office-holders, but all those questions were self-evidently and indisputably internal to the party and the party alone.

In the period of Stalin's absolute power those questions even disappeared from view. After his death the highest leadership was forced to improvise, but the principle of the party's monopoly was itself never doubted. After Brezhnev the right to decide questions of succession was more or less permanently housed in the politburo. In the last years of the Soviet Union there was no longer even much of a queue to fill the highest office. The aging elite hardly wanted anything any more beyond staying secure in immobility. Tyranny was still in place, but the tyrants no longer had much real confidence in themselves.

It was precisely the Leninist dogma of absolute party power that Gorbachev knowingly destroyed. With it his own position of power became questionable, something that he himself was curiously slow to acknowledge. Even after Stalin, the Communist leadership had based its power largely on the fear that its coercive apparatus maintained, and Gorbachev was equally deliberate in removing the fear. With it, an important precondition for the cohesion of the vast multinational state was also undermined.

A number of the old system's reactionary strongmen tried to topple Gorbachev with a clumsy coup d'etat in 1991, but they were hopelessly late and clueless. The attempt turned into farce, but its aftermath sufficed to tear both the party and the country apart.

The hero of those tense days and the real vanquisher of the coup was not Gorbachev. It was Boris Yeltsin. The latter wasted no time in proving both to Gorbachev and to the whole confused giant of a country that the rules of the power game in Moscow had been totally overhauled.

Thus the defeat of the coup did not lead to Gorbachev's continuing from where his departure and house arrest had interrupted his work. Formally he was still the president of the Soviet Union, and formally the Soviet Union still existed, but in reality both the office and the state were paralyzed. By Christmas 1991 Gorbachev no longer had any choice but to recognize what had happened and accept the implications. He resigned. The Soviet Union broke into its constituent parts. As the president of Russia Yeltsin remained to rule over its overwhelmingly biggest and most important successor state.

Yeltsin never became a real dictator either. When the Soviet Union collapsed, Russia already had something resembling democracy, at any rate more of it than the Soviet state had ever had time to acquire. Yeltsin had as valid a mandate from Russian voters as could reasonably be asked for under the circumstances. With the Russian parliament matters stood a good deal worse. It had been assembled through a hybrid procedure during the Soviet period and was not conspicuously representative.

This discrepancy was a source of repeated tensions during Yeltsin's early years in power. In 1993 it resulted in an armed confrontation between the two branches of government. Yeltsin stepped openly outside the constitution then in force and dissolved the parliament. The deputies answered by dismissing the president and choosing a successor. The stalemate was broken only when army commanders agreed to support Yeltsin. They arranged for the parlament's building, the so-called "White House" in central Moscow, to be bombarded and set on fire. The rebels surrendered. Yeltsin promised fresh elections and a referendum on a new constitution.

That law was written on Yeltsin's orders and under his direction, and nothing approaching a full public discussion about it was held. Under the circumstances, it was nevertheless by no means a worthless document. It turned Russia into a very strongly presidential republic, but a republic all the same – at least in so far as the letter and spirit of the law were honoured. Even the December parliamentary elections in 1993 were considered honest. A proof of that was the composition of the new parliament, which was a bitter disappointment to president Yeltsin. For the next few years it continued to make life very difficult for the master of the Kremlin.

If Russia ever had a realistic chance to develop into a genuinely functioning democratic state, the best moment to start the work would have been the period immediately following the ratification of the new constitution. Not that Yeltsin himself was always scrupulous in staying true to his own creation. More than once he came out with presidential directives in open contradiction to the law. As chief of the executive branch he repeatedly sidestepped his own responsibility by humiliating and changing his prime ministers. In the next presidential elections he shamelessly misused the resources of his office for electoral gain.

In Chechnya he waged a needlessly bloody war against citizens of his own state, and so on and on.

Still, he was not an altogether arbitrary ruler. In Moscow the institutions of constitutional government and administration had been put in place. Given sufficient political will, the conditions existed for them to function as intended by their framers. It was not to be. Some very persistent qualities of Russia's political culture rather easily got the better of institutions borrowed from abroad.

Yeltsin's own choice in favour of democracy had been half-hearted, rather more theoretical than operational. Putin was not much concerned even with the theory. A thin camouflage was sufficient to satisfy his political and tactical needs. The Russian public accepted his methods with only few and feeble voices raised in protest. Really significant public pressure for democratic reforms never materialized, at least not before the restless winter and spring days of 2011-12.

"Sovereign" democracy

When Putin's power in 2012 reached its third (or really its fourth) electoral term, a number of problems began to manifest themselves. The question of succession was not yet among them, although passing references to it had here and there been made. In the beginning at least Putin was healthy and energetic and, at sixty, not yet too old. In any case, he had before him the full six-year term promised by the constitution.

The problems were created by the deepening contradiction between the outer forms of Russia's system of governance and the political realities of Putin's rule. The outer forms were those of constitutional democracy. Real development had for many years already led away from any such thing, and after the 2012 elections it was proving more and more awkward even to preserve the façade. The need was growing within the Kremlin to prop up the reality of authoritarian power with public propaganda in its favour and to develop an ideology for its rationalization and explanation. An anti-democratic mentality sat less and less comfortably together with democratic-looking stage decorations.

A second strengthening need was to tighten police power to counter the possible growth and unity of the opposition. During 2011–12 it seemed at least that resistance to the Kremlin might become a serious force. The relatively large demonstrations in Moscow and other cities clearly rattled the Kremlin. The authorities initiated a whole series of legally questionable repressive measures. With his background in the political police, KGB, Putin, even in the past, had never bothered overmuch with the niceties of things like freedom of expression and citizens' rights.

Already as acting president before the 2000 elections Putin had said in an interview that a person in deliberate defiance of the authorities had no right to expect that legal protections would be applied in his or her case. He was referring to Andrei Babitsky, a Russian correspondent for Radio Liberty, who had earned the Kremlin's wrath by reporting on the Chechen war from the guerrillas' side.

Coming from a person with academic legal training Putin's claim was of course strange. Coming from the president of a great state it was, from a Western point of view, scandalous. Putin does not seem to have noticed anything untoward in what he said, and indeed it did not remain the only remark of its kind from his mouth. Twelve years later, when his definite choice

in favour of authoritarian power was becoming fully obvious with the start of his new term, whatever had remained of constitutional constraints and safeguards in Russia started to fade.

However clear the change may have been in principle, it remained difficult to acknowledge it openly. Even in Russia a political leader cannot easily go to a retail store of political systems and pick his own favourite from its shelves.

One obstacle was the greatly increased moral authority of the democratic system in the rest of Europe after the end of the Cold War. With the collapse of the Socialist camp, no alternative to democracy was really considered any more as coming into question. The Soviet Union itself joined this consensus by signing the Paris document of the CSCE in 1990. Russia in turn joined the democracy-promoting Council of Europe in 1996.

A great power, of course, will not be bound by obligations of that sort if it is determined not to. Still, there is always a certain price to pay in diminished credibility and prestige.

The idea that political power fundamentally belongs to the people is very broadly accepted and anchored in most constitutions in Europe and across the world. In its modern representative form it has its roots in the American and French revolutions. Imperial Russia belonged, before the revolution of 1917, to the reactionary exceptions; the autocracy of the emperors was still considered to come directly from the Deity. Even the last of the Tsars, Nicholas II, seems to have literally believed in this doctrine.[9]

Lenin and his Bolsheviks were certainly no democrats, but they did consider themselves as governing on the people's behalf for the people's benefit. In this rather roundabout way they acknowledged the basic premise. Later Iosif Stalin shrouded his dictatorship with his constitution of 1936, a document that was formally democratic. Even after him the leaders of the Soviet Union were careful to preserve the formal trappings of constitutional people's power. Still later, both Gorbachev and Yeltsin alternately encouraged or put the brakes on a movement in democracy's direction. Certainly, neither of them would have thought of denying the validity of the fundamental idea.

If one dare not openly overthrow the democratic principle, how does one go about keeping power away from citizens' hands? The methods that come into question are finally not very many in number. All of them are in need of some kind of ideological explanation and institutional support. Purely personal power, however broadly accepted and charismatic, cannot last beyond the span of one human life.

For the Soviet Union, the central institution had been the Communist party, to which the fundamental power of the people was held to flow via a sort of metaphysical Marxist-Leninist osmosis. In China this same principle stayed surprisingly workable well into the twenty-first century, although the country's economy had long since ceased to have much of anything Marxist about it.

For Russia it was too late to attempt to follow the Chinese model. The tradition of Communist party dominance was broken when the Soviet party dissolved. Russia's own graying Communists no longer had the means or even really the will to try to step in as a successor. If institutions to serve as carriers of non-democratic continuity were desired for Russia, the only possibility would have been to try to cre-

ate them – and, incidentally, credibility for them – from scratch.

Putin was therefore in an awkward situation when he was launching his third presidential term. There was no getting rid of the outward trappings of democracy, particularly as there was nothing, at least in the short term, with which to replace them. The president had just received his mandate in a popular election which, however manipulated, still served to legitimate him both at home and abroad. Nevertheless he clearly desired, and thought he needed, much broader powers and greater immunity than a genuinely constitutional system can possibly allow. Thus he needed to argue that the demands of the Western-oriented opposition for cleaner democracy and stronger legality were really part and parcel of an attempt by foreigners to interfere in Russia's affairs and undermine its sovereignty. Genuine Russian democracy needed to be something different.

In 2012 this tactic was no longer new. The Georgian "Rose" revolution in 2003 and the Ukrainian "Orange" one in 2004 had caused real panic in the Kremlin. Both were claimed to have been manipulated from abroad, and the latter, in particular, was feared to serve as an inspiration for dissatisfied Russians. It did not happen at the time, but the shock had been severe and left its mark on the inner circle of the Kremlin. In official Moscow parlance, democratic reforms in neighbouring countries were referred to as a Western-led geopolitical aggression to the detriment of Russia's national interests.

The Kremlin's fears were of course not entirely groundless: in both Georgia and Ukraine, not only democratic principles became ascendant at the time, but also Western orientations in foreign and security policy. More awkward was the fact that in Ukraine Putin had publicly sided with Viktor Yanukovych, the candidate who had demonstrably falsified election results, against an opposition demanding an honest vote.

In other words: honest elections were Western interference, falsified elections were genuinely national politics in both Ukraine and Russia. From then on, that distinction became a standard one for Putin and his entourage.

Later the Orange movement failed badly in its policies and was torn apart by a confrontation between its two heroes Viktor Yushchenko and Iulia Tymoshenko. Yanukovych succeeded in 2010 in winning the presidency even in an honest election, but soon afterwards he started to imitate his Russian peer's antiliberal policies. There was clearly a great deal of relief in the Kremlin.

As things turned out, Ukraine's problems with itself and with Russia were by no means reliably solved. In 2013 a new serious crisis erupted.

Alternatives

It can fairly be claimed that the democratic principle is not in harmony with Russia's traditions and political culture. In the first years after the collapse of the Soviet Union the claim was often branded as condescending and insulting to the Russians. Later, many Russian nationalists and conservatives made it their own. They used it as an ideological weapon against Western-minded *zapadniks* and their dreams of a democratic republic copied from Western examples.

The claim that democracy in Russia is a Western import should, however, be kept separate from the claim that introducing it in Russia would be tantamount to sacri-

ficing Russian sovereignty to foreign overlordship. The former is true; the latter of course is empty demagoguery.

No other political system in the world is better protected against foreign domination than the democratic one, so long as democracy works. When democracy with its honest elections has taken root, elected leaders owe their positions only to their voters, all of whom as a rule are their compatriots. Legitimacy is purely internal; no debt is owed to anyone beyond the country's borders.

It may sometimes be possible to influence an electorate with propaganda from abroad. If such efforts at influence extend to coercive measures, and candidacies are subjected to a foreign veto, democracy has in proportion been violated. Citizens of Finland have their unpleasant memories of this sort of thing from the era of the so-called Finlandization.

Once democracy works it is a matter of no consequence whatever from which point of the compass its model was originally borrowed. Should Russia copy its democracy from Finland, Finland's ability to pressurize Russia would not be greater by an ounce. If Russia copied it from the United States, American influence in Russia would not grow at all. Certainly relations of dependency and subordination can be found between nations in most parts of the world, but the democratic system is not responsible. Where it is in force, it tends to lessen the risk.

Adopting democracy could therefore not possibly become any sort of threat to Russia's sovereignty. What it could clearly threaten was the personal position of Putin, his entourage, or indeed any authoritarian successors to either. That was precisely what was at stake for the Russian governing elite as Putin's new term commenced.

As long as the way to democracy in Russia remains blocked, the democratic solution to succession is also unavailable. It is sometimes possible to construct, behind the façade of a false democracy, institutions to facilitate a non-democratic transfer of power. By Putin's third term none existed in Russia, and there were no visible signs of any being planned, let alone constructed.

Such an institution could be a strong and recognized party of domination. Permanent majorities in the most important organs of the state could be guaranteed to it by suitable techniques. Were the party hierarchic and well organized, it could produce from within its ranks the future leaders and, with luck, keep their rivalry non-violent and within acceptable rules of the game.

By Putin's third term there was in Russia one dominant party, the *Yedinaya Rossia,* which fulfilled some of the criteria of such an institution. Not, however, the most important ones. For one thing, it derived almost all of its power directly from the executive to which it was woefully subordinate; that is, from Putin himself. It seemed very unlikely that the *Yedinaya Rossia* would ever qualify as a genuine kingmaker in Russian politics.

Another possibility would simply be a generally respected and stable tradition, where the highest leader would always in good time nominate a future successor and see to it that he/she receives proper training for the future exercise of power. The decision could then be ratified with a suitably manipulated plebiscite.

The obstacles in the way of such a system are as difficult as they are easily understandable. A strong leader will not normally wish to have at his side another strong personality who will remind him constantly of the shortness of his life and the tran-

sience of his power. The safest heir to the leader's throne is a weak and obedient retainer – Dmitri Medvedev comes automatically to mind, though he was probably never seriously meant for the role – but a "safe" successor is not necessarily an adequate or acceptable one when the time has come to confirm the choice.

If the only important question were one of trust between the power-holder and the future successor, the best theoretical variant would be a transfer from father or mother to son or daughter, or why not to a person of the next generation deliberately adopted for the purpose. But then the institution of hereditary monarchy would need to be restored in one form or another.

In the democratic monarchies of Western Europe this arrangement lives on with no great difficulty, but what is transferred there is of course not political power but merely the ceremonial role of a symbolic head of state.

It is a little hard to imagine how the principle of hereditary power could be made workable in the Russia of the 21st century. Not many people in Moscow or in the provinces could really be expected to support the idea of copying the political systems of North Korea or even Azerbaijan.

If a self-perpetuating elite is well organized and has a lengthy tradition, it may succeed as a manager of peaceful succession. When a pope dies, the cardinals gather in the Vatican and closet themselves in a confidential negotiation until the name of a new pope can be announced. All sorts of intrigues and conflicts of views and interest may accompany the process, but the rules of the game are clear. Battles are waged quietly within the closed circle of participants and violence has been unknown for many generations.

It is perhaps equally unlikely that the Vatican's model could be directly applied in Russia. Building credibility for such an institution would in any case take several years or, more probably, decades.

There are, however, parallels of a sort between the practices of the Vatican and the Chinese Communist party. When the Chinese equivalents of Roman cardinals come in conclave in Beijing, outsiders can hardly know more about their internal calculations than of those of the Vatican elite. The task of the Chinese is actually even more sensitive than that of the cardinals has been. A new pope has as a rule been elected only after the death of his predecessor (whether Benedictus XVI's decision to retire in 2013 will create a precedent, of course, remains to be seen). In today's China, a rhythm of five- and ten-year periods has been adopted for political succession. If this arrangement one day proves to have stood the test of time, the achievement must be considered quite extraordinary.

If we leave this uneven pair, China and the Vatican, out of consideration, there does not seem to exist a workable institutional framework in the 21st century for orderly non-democratic, non-hereditary succession.

No doubt an heir will eventually emerge to fill Russia's highest office after Putin. No political vacuum anywhere will long remain unfilled. There is even no certainty that the change will prove particularly difficult or traumatic, let alone violent. Still, there is no predicting as yet how the process will play out. There will be danger.

Granted, if an authoritarian leader has sufficient self-reliance and if premature death does not catch him unawares, he can always try to name an heir. Finally confirm-

ing or rejecting the choice will even then remain for others to do.

Who are those others? They are the people and groups with enough power in their hands at the decisive moment. They may be found in the top reaches of politics and administration, in the wealthiest economic elite, or most likely among the *siloviki*, people high up in the armed forces and the various security services. Whether they can, when the time has come, reach a consensus among themselves is a question that cannot possibly be answered before the event.

Reinventing ideology

However the matters stand with regard to succession, no dictatorial leader wants to run the risk of a palace coup, general anarchy or open rebellion. Even in Russia a decision to move away from a constitutional system toward an authoritarian one calls for some sort of ideological justification, or at any rate an explanation of why it should be imperative. An appeal is necessary either to tradition and history or to some urgent practical need.

That task was made easier in Russia by the memory of the difficult situation in the 1990s and the perceived utter incompetence of the "democrats" of that period as economic managers. Putin was from the start careful to stress the contrast between Russia's miserable recent past and the success and prosperity, under his own tutelage, of the new century's early years.

Another powerful helper may have been the Russian tendency, much discussed by innumerable commentators, to admire a strong will and a hard fist at the top of the country's political pyramid. Putin was skillful in cultivating his image as precisely this sort of leader, a self-confident man standing no nonsense and brooking no irresponsible opposition.

Even democracy of course produces political giants at times – we may mention Franklin Delano Roosevelt in the US and, in the scale of a small country, president Urho Kekkonen of Finland – but in Russia there is no historical experience of such a person.

A third source of support was the Russian Orthodox Church with its long and questionable record of subservience to secular tyranny and with next to no internal tradition of democracy or liberality. By the second decade of the new century the Kremlin and the Orthodox Church were well on their way toward a very close political and ideological partnership, to the great satisfaction and benefit of both.

Finally, authoritarian power in Russia could also appeal to the great and demanding task the country was considered to have in re-conquering the status of a truly great power after the collapse of the Soviet empire. Putin was not at all alone in his assessment that what had happened was "a major geopolitical catastrophe of the (20th) century". That was what it was for all those Russian nationalists who found it impossible to think of their country in any other terms except those of a world power.

A state can of course aspire to world status even under a democratic system – the USA is an example familiar to everyone even in Russia – but for a Russian it is, as a rule, much easier to imagine a great power under a single powerful leader than under shifting political coalitions and a bickering parliament.

Only members of the intelligentsia tended to argue that you needed democracy for effective economic development and an effective economy to climb to prominence in the world. People who thought like that

had, however, mostly abandoned Putin already before he started his third term. The ones he needed to persuade where elsewhere.

National feeling was of course not the monopoly of any single group in Russia, and the intelligentsia was by no means immune to it. When Communist ideology collapsed together with the Communist empire, it left a vacuum behind it. A need arose almost immediately to fill it with new material and find for Russia an "idea", meaning a national self-understanding and identity to fit the radically changed circumstances. All sorts of discussion circles and task groups were formed, and even competitions arranged, for the purpose, but the results were meagre. It did not seem to be suitable subject matter for conscious efforts of will.

An inevitable upheaval in the national understanding of the country's history did not make the task of searching for an identity any easier. Soviet-style "Marxist-Leninist" historiography no longer came in question, at least not outside of very conservative circles. Replacing it with something wholly new proved to be tricky work.

As archives began to be opened it became obvious for unprejudiced people that even the history of the Second Word War, or rather "the Great Patriotic War", could no longer be easily presented as a tale of unblemished national heroism from start to finish. The field was opened for many different variants of revisionist historiography, as the political leadership was confused and ideological control no longer worked. The long-frustrated need for an unrestrained pursuit of truth demanded fulfillment in historical research as it did in all branches of intellectual activity.

Very powerful forces soon appeared, however, to oppose any such intellectual opening. It became clear that the wounded pride of many Russians after the collapse of their country's superpower status demanded not fewer but more of those consoling stories of national greatness and virtue that patriotic history tends to offer. It was obviously very difficult to satisfy both of these needs at the same time.

Putin's inner circle soon discovered that it had its own important interests to defend in this connection. It began to form its own special organs to combat historical "falsifications", that is: interpretations of Russian history detrimental to its political goals. Among those goals was developing and promoting a variant of patriotism that saw the greatness of the country and its history as inseparably connected with its present system of government and its present leader. Opposition to the latter, by the same token, was to be understood as unpatriotic by definition. The preparation of an authoritative new history textbook for schools was part of this effort.

Perhaps the most important early trial run of this new brand of Putinist patriotism was the president's annual address to the combined houses of the Russian parliament on December 12th 2012. A year later he used the same venue to launch a virulent attack against the supposed moral decay of "many nations", quite evidently meaning the Western world as a whole.

There were, however, some troublesome considerations hampering the development of a state ideology as a legitimating device. One of them was that nationalism is always a dangerous instrument for power-holders, if they try to apply it with too much enthusiasm.

It is very difficult to monopolize nationalism reliably. In its own way it is an equal-

izing force; every member of a national community has an equal right to it. If a political leader manages to harness nationalism to his or her service, it can be immensely useful. A nationalist, however, can just as well be a passionate democrat, or decide on some other grounds that the current leaders are not worthy of the nation. If so, nationalism becomes the power-holder's enemy. The danger is especially real in a multinational state like Russia, particularly if nationalism becomes tainted with ethnic arrogance and xenophobia.

Those same considerations are of course relevant to the use of religion in a country where there are many millions of people of other confessions beside the dominant one of Russian Orthodoxy.

The Kremlin's solution to this difficulty was copied more or less directly from the ideological playbook of the Soviet period. All-Russian nationalism, in a form not overtly hostile to minorities within the state, was regarded as positive and called "patriotism". Separate ethnic nationalisms, including (at least in theory) the most virulent Russian varieties, were negative and needed to be suppressed. Nevertheless, Russian culture and language were to be given a special place not granted to minority ones, and only the great Russian people was to be seen as the historically state-creating one. Russia was a unique "state-civilization" with its historical, moral and religious traditions that set it apart from the supposedly declining and degenerate West.

Russian leaders are, however, faced with a fact that they cannot escape. In most of Europe, constitutional democracy does work and works quite well. To Moscow, that is a standing rebuke. After the collapse of Communism, Europe has in its overwhelming majority become a community of states committed to respecting the rule of law and citizens' rights. In today's parlance "Europe" is almost a synonym for the European Union, and the latter does not, in principle, allow its members to depart from its common base of values. Of course, any number of blemishes can be found and no member is entirely secure from criticism, but the fundamental choice is clear.

Putin's Russia no longer seeks to identify with those values, but departing too fast and far from them does carry a political and psychological price. The same is true of efforts to re-write history once again as a glorious tale of just purposes and national heroism. That practice was of course common to well-nigh every European country in the heyday of nationalism. At least here in Finland the affliction seems not to be entirely cured even now. Still, in today's Europe, it has become embarrassing and tends to arouse contempt.

As we know, the question of whether or not Russia is "European" has long been a complicated one for both Russia's neighbours and Russians themselves. Asking it has in some part always been either intentionally provocative or largely without content, since the answer will always depend on what, from one case to another, we wish to understand by "being European". The answer can, moreover, be different depending on what area of culture or social life we are talking about.

A well-known Russian expert on foreign and security policy took part in a Wilton Park conference in Britain in the spring of 1996. He had been obliged to listen to a long discussion by his Western colleagues on aspects of Moscow's policies. They talked rather condescendingly and from a mental distance, as if of a country on a far-away continent. Finally the expert got very angry and exploded: "It seems, from the

way you talk, that Coca-Cola is European but Tolstoy is not".

The sentence very effectively put in a nutshell one of the reasons for the enduring feelings of anger and hurt that Russians harbour toward Westerners. At the same time, there was within it a characteristic misunderstanding. If the question were only of writers like Tolstoy, composers like Tchaikovsky or painters like Repin, the borderline between Russia and Western Europe would be no more difficult to cross than the Atlantic is for the salesmen of Coca-Cola. In the field of high culture Russia has been part of "Europe" for these last two centuries at least. Artists and scientists have generally had little difficulty in coming together and understanding each other.

When moving on to political culture things become very different. The collapse of Communism for a time lowered the barrier considerably. At first it was imagined that it might be disappearing for good. That hope had soon to be abandoned. The Putinist political culture of Russia's "sovereign democracy" is a deeply Russian phenomenon and very far removed from its present Western counterparts.

The Putin principle

In its latest version Putin's legitimating ideology is not just very different from all Western models. It is, by the president's deliberate choice, directly and quite startlingly hostile. The change could be seen in sharp relief as a new Ukrainian crisis developed toward the end of 2013. What could otherwise have been a sovereign nation's free (if difficult) choice between two economic orientations came in the Kremlin to be seen, with an awful inevitability, as a clash between two mutually estranged worlds and their mutually exclusive principles' legitimating power.

In the East, a leader elected on a ballot to be sure, but increasingly portrayed in a semi-metaphysical light as the beacon of an ancient tradition, of true Orthodox religion, of conservative social values and the hope of a rebirth of imperial glory. In the West, seen through Moscow's resentful eyes, plutocracy posing as democracy, foreign expansionism and aggression, corrosive individualism, barren materialism, same-sex marriages and paedophilia in place of Christian morals, and so on.

Putin, to be secure in his position of power, badly needs successes. Since Russia's political institutions lack coherence and credibility, Putin's legitimacy is almost purely personal. He has made Russia's "greatness" an ideology and a goal, and in practice that means restoring something resembling, as closely as possible, the now defunct Soviet sphere of domination. His new Customs Union and his projected Eurasian Economic Union need, for their full credibility, Ukraine's participation. A large part of Ukraine's population, however, would much rather move in a generally Western direction and adopt the association agreement offered by the European Union.

The stakes for Putin were therefore very high when the crisis broke. Should he fail to safeguard Ukraine within the Russian orbit, he would be faced with a double and dangerous defeat.

First, his most important foreign policy goal, Eurasian integration under Moscow's leadership, would suffer a devastating setback. His own authority and credibility as a leader would be correspondingly damaged.

Second, the danger would arise of Ukraine's possible long-term success as a builder of a Western-style market econo-

my and Western political institutions. Not only would Ukraine be lost to Russia as a strategic partner and geopolitical asset, it would also be an embarassing contrast and a standing accusation against Putin's own ideology of authoritarian, indeed arbitrary, power.

No wonder the president was ready to go very far and pay a very high price to prevent any such outcome. He sought to make it as sure as he possibly could that the agreement with the EU would remain, for Kiev, a dead letter.

A jittery system

The political arrangement that was developed in Russia in the Putin period could best be described as authoritarian, improvising and unstable. It was authoritarian because that is what the people in power wanted it to be. It was improvising because it relied neither on clearly agreed-upon programmes nor on established channels of administrative authority. It was unstable because it lacked the necessary institutional supports of systemic stability.

Power had no secure legitimacy, since its formal justification rested on a falsified vote and a half-baked ideology. It enjoyed no reliable continuity because succession had not been anchored in any generally known and accepted arrangement. No principle of succession existed.

Thus the system that Russia came to rely on in the early years of the 21st century seemed frighteningly unclear and jittery for a nuclear-armed state with an enormous geographical span and great natural riches.

The president's powers were already very extensive in constitutional terms, but he seemed able to extend them almost at will and with few adverse consequences. He had his own bureaucracy serving him directly, but its powers in parallel with and beyond those of the government were unclear. They seemed to depend more on personal relationships and influences than on any established rules. Of the Russian prime minister it was not known whether he was meant to be an effective administrator, a subservient underling of the president or merely a potential scapegoat for the eventuality that things went wrong.

The famous "vertical" of power, the purportedly clear hierarchical chain of command from the highest level to the lowest, was not quite what it was meant to be either. Personal power used past all institutions is the most effective when its channels are invisible to the public and, often enough, to the people concerned. What results from this secretiveness can, however, be a tangled web of competing power groups with no trust between them and no real ability to co-operate for common goals. The time and energy of the highest leader is then spent in trying to sort them out and in playing them one against the other.

Ambitious reforms can be declared and even initiated in almost any field, but they are at every moment in danger of degenerating into mere battles for spoils and turf. Corruption thrives at every level, and any hopes of stopping its growth prove illusory. The courts cannot develop independence, since both the highest leader and the executive as a whole would then lose one of their most useful and highly prized political tools.

The wider implications of Putin's ideological stance for Russia's foreign relations are far from clear. Russia obviously is far too big and important to be isolated for any significant period of time. The president's rhetorical anti-Westernism is of course an irritant, but it is widely seen abroad as serving mostly internal political

needs. Its substantive content hardly merits serious consideration in any case. Still, an ideology used for personal legitimation is always in danger of spilling over to the realm of practical action, especially if, as the case is with Ukraine, concrete policy goals and important prestige considerations get entangled with public posturing.

Elite feelings of frustration and inferiority vis-à-vis the West are a very old Russian phenomenon.[10] Surprisingly often they still drive Moscow's leaders to act in ways in which any disparaging feelings in the West could not possibly diminish but only grow as a consequence. The management of the so-called Magnitsky affair in early 2013 was an eloquent case in point.

Moscow has for a long time and under a number of different rulers had great difficulty in deciding for what role it needs the West more: as a political counterpoint and potential enemy, or as a partner in economic relations and cultural exchange. Combining the two is not easy. The choice should not really be a hard one to make, but in fact that is precisely what it has repeatedly proved to be. Not, however, for Putin in his third term as president. His choice soon became rather clear.

Toward an uncertain future

A falsified democracy does not function as a method of political succession. Alternatives are few, and those few strike one as anachronisms. If Russian leaders should one day acknowledge the value of an orderly transfer of power, what might the way out look like? The theoretical answer is an easy one: since the formal institutions of democracy are still in existence, a phony democracy can always, in an emergency, be replaced by the genuine variety.

In practice, international experience since the turn of the century has repeatedly warned of excessive optimism. One successful election does not equal a healthy democracy and even if it did, its longevity would not, for lack of a favourable tradition, be by any means assured. It is not probable that a Russia with a long tradition of authoritarian leadership would promptly develop a functioning democracy, even if an emergency would for once force an open and peaceful contest between candidates. There is no proper party system in existence, no tradition of rule of law and no real notion of political power as only a temporary trust and loan.

A single one-time jump into democracy must of course be admitted as a *possibility,* in the sense that everything is possible in a history that never exactly repeats itself. One cannot regard it as probable.

Slow piecemeal development is another matter. A high level of education, a prosperous middle class and increasingly embarrassing comparisons with the West might do their part. Had Ukraine in 2004 succeeded in developing a mature democracy it might have proved difficult for Russia to remain behind for very long.

The obstacles, however, as things now stand, do not seem to be getting lower. The further the Russian elites drift from effective legal constraints and the more they accumulate not only power but also material goods and money, the more difficult and dangerous it will get for them to tolerate any change in their positions, and the more fierce their resistance can be supposed to be. The longer and harder the drumbeat against all things Western, the more awkward a sudden reversal of propaganda might prove to be.

Perpetuating the personal power of a single aging leader threatens with a *Vremya*

Zastoia, a Brezhnevite stagnation in both society and economy. That would be a bad but by no means the worst effect of such a state of affairs; unconstrained tyranny with increasingly paranoid features would be another. An unorderly succession and a struggle for the highest power could, in turn, produce a *Smutnoye Vremya,* a time of troubles lasting long and bringing severe misfortunes to the country as a whole.

Nothing like that needs to happen; there are no iron laws in history. Presidential aide Vladislav Surkov, to be sure, said already in 2007 in his memorable lecture on Russia's "sovereign democracy" that "for people and their communities culture is fate" and that Russia should therefore not borrow democracy from abroad like "second-hand clothes from someone else's shoulders".

Surkov went on to claim that for Russia's political culture, "it is just the person that is an institution. Not the only one, but the most important".[11] That institution being, for the moment, Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin, it was not easy to see how its essential attributes could simply be passed on to the next incarnation, whoever he might turn out to be.

Surkov's own model, intended as a genuinely national alternative, was in reality only a model of centralized authoritarian rule, and that of course was what Russia was already developing. Nor did Surkov have anything whatever to say on the topic of succession. Still, even if culture really is equal to "fate", perhaps even a national culture could, with time and luck, experience a benign novelty or two. Maybe when the Putin era is over.

The author is a Pol D.

Notes

1. See for example Riasanovsky, Nicholas: *A History of Russia*, Oxford University Press 1969, p. 303.
2. Ibid., p. 45.
3. Francis Fukuyama claims that a sultan did not, for religious reasons, even have the right to name his successor from among his sons. See Fukuyama, Francis: *The Origins of Political Order. From Prehuman Times to the French Revolution,* Profile Books, London 2011, p. 221.
4. See for example Vernadsky, George: *A History of Russia*, Yale University Press, New Haven 1974, p. 115.
5. See for example Service, Robert: *Lenin. A Biography*, Pan Books, London, 2002, pp. 464-480.
6. See Sabine, George H.: *A History of Political Theory*, 3rd ed., Lowe & Brydone, London 1964, p. 821.
7. See for example Service, Robert: (The Penguin) *History of Modern Russia*, Penguin Books, London 2009, p. 333.
8. See for example Hoskins, Geoffrey: *Russia and the Russians. From Earliest Times to the Present*. 2nd Edition, Penguin Books, London 2012, p. 585.
9. Op. cit. Riasanovsky, Nicholas, see note 1, p. 456.
10. The French Marquis de Custine for example wrote, in his travel report from the Russia of Nicholas I in 1839, that a perceptive outsider there is constantly called to discover and discern "the struggle between two nations carried on in one community. These two nations are – Russia as she is, and Russia as they would have her to appear in the eyes of Europe". See de Custine, Astolphe: *Letters from Russia*, New York Review Books, New York 2002, p. 234.
11. Vladislav Surkov's Russian-language lecture, *Russkaya Politicheskaya Kultura – Vzglyad iz Utopii,* or *Russia's Political Culture – a View from an Utopian Point of View* was published on the internet pages of the party Yedinaya Rossia on June 21st 2007.