SERGEY RADCHENKO

RUSSIA AFTER 30 YEARS

INTRODUCTION

Thirty years after the Soviet collapse, something has gone terribly wrong. With very few and well-known exceptions, post-Soviet nation-building has not led to the emergence of stable and prosperous democratic polities. By contrast, many of the former Soviet republics are mired in ugly authoritarianism. Their corrupt, spiteful rulers have silenced and manipulated media, rigged elections, and unleashed brutal repressions to maintain their hold on power. Some of these post-Soviet leaders, among them, Alexander Lukashenka of Belarus and Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov of Turkmenistan, are quite cartoonish in their hideousness and brutality. But as awful as these regimes are, they are really just side stories to the larger, unfolding drama of Russia's relapse into authoritarianism. For good or (unfortunately, all too often) for ill, Russia sets the mood across the region. Russia's bad governance, growing militarism, and corruption have broad regional, if not global, implications. How and why did Russia's democratic transition lead down this blind alley?

Russia's backsliding was not a foregone conclusion; instead, it is a consequence of specific choices made at key turning points. The long-term implications of these choices were not necessarily evident at the time. It is only with the passage of years—decades sometimes—that their fateful character can be fully appreciated. I would highlight three such turning points in the 1990s. The first was Russian President Boris Yeltsin's brutal crackdown against his political opponents during the constitutional crisis of September-October 1993. The second was the deep corruption of the

Sergey Radchenko, Distinguished Professor, The Henry A. Kissinger Center for Global Affairs, Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies

State, and the empowerment of the oligarchs, all occurring against the backdrop of a worsening economic crisis that peaked in the devaluation of August 1998. The third was the sharp deterioration in Russia's relations with the West over the conflict in Kosovo in March-June 1999. These three turning points did not in themselves turn Russia into an autocracy. What they did was to narrow the scope for alternative paths. Let us look at the three in turn.

THE 1993 CONSTITUTIONAL CRISIS

In the early 1990s, Russia was in an economic meltdown. The sharp downturn began before the Soviet collapse but intensified with the political disintegration and ensuing chaos across much of the former Soviet space. Early efforts to transform Russia's struggling economy along neoliberal lines—the so called "shock therapy"—badly misfired. The release of price controls fed hyperinflation, leaving millions in misery. Unemployment skyrocketed even as the welfare system largely collapsed. Yeltsin's team of economic reformers faced an uphill struggle in the Russian parliament, then called the Supreme Soviet, in part, undoubtedly, because their proposed fiscal measures were so painful and so costly in social terms.

This struggle between Yeltsin and parliament worsened in early 1993. Yeltsin began dropping dark hints about having to take "extreme measures" against his detractors, while the deputies attempted to impeach the president. In April 1993, Russia held a referendum on confidence in Yeltsin: The majority of respondents voted "yes," with a slight majority also favouring the government's economic policies. The president continued to push for constitutional changes that would redistribute power away from the legislature, entrusting the presidency with much greater powers. By September 1993, tensions between the president and parliament came to a head. Violating his constitutional powers, Yeltsin declared parliament disbanded, which then retaliated by impeaching him and appointing Vice President Aleksandr Rutskoi as Russia's new leader. After a standoff (which included violent skirmishes on both sides of the political divide), Yeltsin resorted to brute force. On 4 October 1993, the government forces shelled the parliamentary building. Yeltsin "won".

In the events of October 1993, Western sympathies were clearly on Yeltsin's side, despite the seeming brutality of his response to the parliamentary challenge. This was because the Russian parliament, under the influence of "leftist" forces (i.e., those tending towards the Communists), gave voice to populist anti-reform sentiment, which clearly contradicted neoliberal policy prescriptions. These quasi-communists, as they were seen from the U.S. and European capitals, were *a priori* unattractive, and even although it was of course unfortunate that Yeltsin had to roll out the tanks to deal with them, it was perhaps not so tragic in the end, since Yeltsin's victory would mean a victory for economic reforms. There was, however, another side to the issue—the setting of a nasty precedent. Using military force against a (legitimately elected) legislature augured extremely badly for the future of Russian democracy, fatally undermining the country's fragile political institutions. One might argue in retrospect that Russia's political backsliding began in 1993, and it stemmed from the president's inability or unwillingness to resolve his political problems through a dialogue with the elected representatives of the people.

CORRUPTION

Although he resorted to strongman tactics in 1993, Yeltsin did not become a "strong" president. He suffered from recurrent health issues, and was given to drink. His popularity declined steadily through the decade, and he just barely had himself re-elected in 1996. The new Russian Duma (elected in December 1993 after the Supreme Soviet was disbanded) was dominated by leftist and rightist populists who were often just as sour on the president's economic agenda as the deputies of the Supreme Soviet had been. Politically weak and physically frail, Yeltsin was unable to create effective constraints to keep business interests in check. He found himself beholden to a group of creative entrepreneurs who helped bankroll Yeltsin's electoral victory through the infamous loans-for-shares scheme. The scheme allowed select businessmen close to the Kremlin to purchase state assets at knock-down prices (without anything like transparency or competition). One foreseeable consequence of this scam was the emergence of an oligarchy—billionaires with extensive connections inside what was then called Yeltsin's "family".

Corruption eroded the foundations of Russia's still weak political institutions. The fusion of political and business interests inside the Kremlin was just one (most visible) facet of this national phenomenon. But it penetrated much deeper, into every political institution, at federal, regional, and local levels. Corruption was rampant in the police and in the army, even as it became bogged down in a protracted conflict in Chechnya. Privatisation of state assets (a programme launched in 1992, of which Yeltsin's loan-for-shares arrangement was one manifestation) became synonymous with state-sanctioned looting, enriching the few but leaving millions cheated out of their assets in various Ponzi schemes. With the state paralysed by corruption and often unable to collect tax revenues, much of Russia's economic activity took place in the shadows. One estimate puts the size of the shadow economy in 1999 at 47%—on par with some of the most corrupt countries in Africa (though a little less than Ukraine).[1]

The government's difficulties worsened in the late 1990s due to external factors. The Asian financial crisis had a knock-on effect on Russia, and a decline in oil prices made it difficult to maintain foreign reserves. Russia suffered from capital flight, with money leaving the basket-case country faster than the IMF could plug the gap through new financing. The economic situation was worsened by political instability, in particular, Yeltsin's ongoing conflict with a hostile Duma. The country's chronic economic crisis and fiscal woes came to a head in August 1998 when the government defaulted on its debts and devalued the rouble, leading to further impoverishment of the reform-weary populace.

KOSOVO

Russia was not doing well in the 1990s but it certainly did better than Yugoslavia, which fractured along ethnic lines, leading to years of war and genocide. Bosnia and Herzegovina unquestionably fared the worst; ethnic conflict raged there in the early 1990s, with the international community finding itself largely unable to prevent unspeakable atrocities. The Bosnian conflict was an early test of Russia's ability or willingness to coordinate with the West in developing an effective response. The

[1] F. Schneider, A. Buehn, and C.E. Montenegro, "New estimates for the shadow economies all over the world," *International Economic Journal* 24.4 (2010), pp. 443-461.

experience was mixed as far as Moscow was concerned. For, although Russia's views (and its special standing with the Serbs) were sometimes taken into account in the context of the informal Contact Group for the Balkans, the Russians, faced with a united front of Western countries, struggled to shape policy outcomes, and were generally cut out of the important decisions. Thus, the Dayton Agreement, which brought an end to hostilities in Bosnia and Herzegovina, was negotiated and concluded without much Russian involvement.

Moscow's self-perceived role as the protector of the Serbs put Russia on a collision course with the West over events in Kosovo in 1998-99. The situation in Kosovo began to deteriorate a decade earlier, in the context of the general break-up of Yugoslavia, when Kosovo Albanians saw their autonomy undermined by Belgrade. This, in turn, led to the emergence of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), which resorted to terrorist tactics against the much better armed Serbian forces. Clashes between the KLA and the Serbs intensified in 1998-99 as the U.S. mulled intervention. In February-March 1999, NATO-sponsored peace talks between the Serbs and the Kosovo Albanians at Rambouillet. The Serbs rejected the draft agreement (which would have seen the deployment of a substantial NATO peacekeeping force in their country), leading to NATO airstrikes on Serbia, beginning on 24 March 1999.

This NATO operation—carried out in the absence of a mandate from the UN Security Council—caused serious frictions in Russia's relations with the West. Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov famously cancelled his visit to the U.S. mid-flight. Yeltsin, himself under mounting pressure from Duma nationalists, bitterly criticised then-President Bill Clinton for launching the attacks. "The anti-American and anti-NATO sentiment in Russia keeps growing like an avalanche," Yeltsin told Clinton in one of their testy telephone conversations that spring.[2] Coming in the wake of NATO's first eastward enlargement (Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic formally acceded the alliance just days before the bombing campaign), the sentiment in the Russian policy circles could be summarised as "Belgrade today, Moscow tomorrow." Even Russia's liberals in private conversations with U.S. diplomats maintained that

[2] "Telephone conversation between Bill Clinton and Boris Yeltsin, April 19, 1999," Clinton Presidential Library, https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/58573.

the NATO campaign in Serbia would undermine liberals in Russia itself. As Grigory Yavlinsky (the chairperson of the liberal Yabloko party) told Strobe Talbott at the time, "Your bombs may land on the Serbs but there will be a fatal dose of fallout on those in Russian politics who most want Russia to be part of the West. Think about that irony!"[3]

THE LEGACY OF THE 1990S

What was the impact of these three turning points on Russia's political life? Yeltsin's handling of the 1993 constitutional crisis set a precedent for the use of force against elected representatives of the people. The power balance between the parliament and the president turned decisively in the latter's favour. In subsequent years, Yeltsin's successor, Vladimir Putin, went further in constraining space for independent legislative action, so much so that currently the Russian Duma is little more than a rubberstamp institution, entirely subservient to the Kremlin's will. But it is hard not to see that the sources of this imbalance go back to the early 1990s.

The second legacy of the Yeltsin era—widespread corruption—continues to plague Russia today. Yeltsin oversaw the creation of what is now often termed Russia's kleptocracy, marked by a deep interpenetration of government and business interests at every administrative level, most strongly in the Kremlin itself. Corruption breeds cynicism, and the fact that the first decade of Russia's democracy coincided with the uncontrolled growth of the cancer of corruption, could not help but dampen the Russian public's enthusiasm for the democratic experiment. This faith in democracy was further undermined by the chaotic state of the Russian economy in the late 1990s when, after years of shock therapy and privatisation, the government still appeared unable to rein in inflation, or pay salaries to miners, or maintain a social safety net for those most affected by the bungled-up reforms.

Finally, the decade also saw Russia's relations with the West deteriorate from the initial honeymoon of the early 1990s to the bitter recriminations of the late 1990s. There were many reasons for the falling out, ranging from Russia's concerns about NATO enlargement and the Alliance's approach to the former Yugoslavia (which provided plenty

[3] S. Talbott, *The Russia Hand* (Random House, 2003), p. 331.

of fodder to foam-mouthed Russian nationalists on the right side of the political spectrum) to Russia's own atrocious mistakes, not least in Chechnya, which raised questions in the West as to the country's longer-term trajectory. Russia's tragedy in the 1990s was that it failed to find a place for itself in the West. This was a consequence of both the West's unwillingness to see Russia integrated into Western institutions and Russia's own unwillingness or inability to change itself to allow for such eventual integration. It was always easier to fall back on the default menu: authoritarianism, corruption, and the populist anti-Western rhetoric that proved so useful in distracting the Russian public's attention from the failings of their own rulers.

VLADIMIR PUTIN

When in March 2000 Vladimir Putin was elected Russia's president, the ground was well prepared for returning Russia to autocratic governance. Putin built on Yeltsin's successes. He moved rapidly to consolidate his control over the oligarchs. Some were prosecuted. Russia's once-wealthiest man Mikhail Khodorkovsky spent a decade in prison after his arrest in 2003. Formerly powerful oligarchs Vladimir Gusinsky and Boris Berezovsky fled Russia (the latter died under suspicious circumstances in his London home). But although Putin advertised his struggle with the oligarchs as the return of law and order to Russia (a populist take that helped boost his popularity), the reality was an actual fusion between oligarchic interests and Putin's own. Most oligarchs found common ground with Putin's regime. The early years of Putin's rule also saw him consolidate control over the media, once a vibrant space for policy debate. Journalists came under mounting pressure to conform to the Kremlin's narratives. Some (like Anna Politkovskaya) were simply murdered.

Putin learned from Yeltsin's inability to create a viable political force that would support his claim to power. The story of Putin's rise thus became intertwined with the concomitant rise of his ruling party, United Russia, which became the predominant force in the Duma with the 2007 parliamentary elections when it won over 64% of the vote. There is no doubt that for a time United Russia, which offered vocal support for Putin's agenda, enjoyed genuine popular support. But there is also no doubt that

this support was being rapidly eroded by the corruption of Putin's regime. Pervasive corruption contradicted the regime's narrative of general economic growth. The growth, largely fuelled by the increase in the price of Russia's key exported commodities (oil and gas), was undeniable but so was the deepening economic inequality, which translated into public dissatisfaction. It became more and more important for the regime to control the electoral process. But perceptions of electoral fraud in turn served to intensify public anger. This became patently obvious in the aftermath of the 2011 legislative and the 2012 presidential elections, which were marked by substantial protests in Moscow.

The scale of these public protests deeply unsettled Putin. By the time he was elected to his third term as president in 2012 (having served for two terms, 2000-08, plus another term as "prime minister"), Putin had witnessed a series of anti-government uprisings that toppled long-time rulers or overturned fraudulent elections: the overthrow of Slobodan Milosevic (2000), the Rose Revolution in Georgia (2003), the Orange Revolution in Ukraine (2004), the Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan (2004), and of course the Arab Spring, which caused upheaval in the Middle East in the early 2010s. It is clear in retrospect that hopes that these revolutions would usher democratisation proved mostly misplaced. Most just entailed a violent transfer of power that (predictably) left political institutions seriously weakened and the prospects for democratisation ever more remote. Regardless of what these revolutions managed, or failed, to accomplish, Putin perceived them as having been externally manipulated, a part of a U.S.-led effort to "promote democracy" around the world. He then extrapolated from this conviction to argue that the public protests in Russia were, too, managed from Washington in a deliberate effort to destabilise the Russian state and instigate regime change.

By framing Russia's anti-corruption activists and pro-democracy protesters as a "fifth column" supported and sponsored by the West, Putin built on themes already current in the 1990s: grievances about Russia's exclusion from the West, and in particular from a decision-making role in regional conflicts, and about NATO's eastern enlargement. Protracted U.S. involvement in wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and NATO operations against Libya aided this effort. The West in general and NATO in particular turned into convenient lightning rods for

public dissatisfaction with the stagnating living standards and creeping authoritarianism. Russia's invasion of Ukraine and annexation of Crimea in 2014 (followed by Western condemnation of Russia's actions and the imposition of economic sanctions) further helped sustain the regime's discourse of "Russia as a victim of the West", which helped Putin with maintaining legitimacy in the public eye in the absence of other viable sources of legitimacy.

In his famous 1960 book, *The Divided Self*, Scottish psychiatrist R.D. Laing contrasts an ontologically secure person—someone whose view of himself/herself coincides with what others think of him/her—with an ontologically insecure individual who thinks that he/she is someone other than what others perceive him/her to be. Briefly resorting to a psychiatrically unjustifiable projection, one might argue that Russia in the immediate aftermath of Soviet collapse, in the early 1990s, was ontologically insecure: its self-perception was that of a democratic and open society, but it faced serious doubts on this score among external audiences who perceived remnants of authoritarianism and quasi-imperialist tendencies lurking right under the surface. With time, Russia began to act more and more in line with the more sceptical assessments. Yeltsin's brutal crackdown against the Supreme Soviet in October 1993, Russia's disastrous war in Chechnya, the deepening rot of corruption—all of these constituted particular acts that combined to form a narrative of what Russia actually was: a bear in the woods.

Putin continued building on this narrative by strengthening Russia's anti-democratic credentials. Before long, Russia acquired a greater degree of ontological security: not only was it perceived as a bear in the woods by the West, but Russia began to see itself as such, and to act its part. Russia's comfortable settling into this role of a spoiler is the most tragic consequence of its 30-year transition from authoritarianism to authoritarianism.