Illiberal Democracy and Vladimir Putin's Russia

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Over the last two decades electoral politics have spread far beyond the wealthy West, crossing

economic, ideological, and cultural frontiers, so that now most countries can claim to be

democracies. Yet various scholars have raised doubts about the depth and quality of this

democratization. Some have used the concept of "illiberal democracy" to convey their doubts

about putting these new democracies in the same category as the old democracies.

One country that seems always to defy easy classification and that has persistently taxed the

conceptual imagination of political scientists and others -- Winston Churchill's "riddle wrapped

in a mystery inside an enigma" -- is Russia. It is now considered an example of illiberal

democracy. What are the characteristics of illiberal democracy? How does it help us

understand Russian politics?

Defining Illiberal Democracy

Democracy is a bundle of institutional and behavioral components, including regular

competitive elections, full enfranchisement, free speech, an accessible and critical media, and

freedom of association. Proponents of the concept of illiberal democracy strip basic liberties

from the bundle. Democracy is conceived more minimally as the occurrence of competitive

elections.

Fareed Zakaria explains the concept of illiberal democracy in his book The Future of Freedom:

Illiberal Democracy at Home and Abroad (2001). Liberty and democracy may go together in the

West, he says, but they are not necessarily connected. Indeed, the curtailment of liberties may

be popular and have the support of the majority of voters. He argues that, "democracy is

flourishing; liberty is not." Reading Zakaria's argument brings to mind the old nineteenth century

liberal fear of a tyrannical majority and the subsequent intellectual effort to cordon off

individual freedom from majority opinion and decision-making. Democracy is fragile, its self regulating

mechanism is often sluggish, and it is highly vulnerable to breakdown during the lag

between repressive action and an effective critical response. Zakaria argues that Russia is

democratic but also illiberal, pointing to Putin's "superpresidency" and restrictions on the

media.

Let us see how well Zakaria's concept applies in the light of recent events in Russia. How is it

that a constitution that provides for the separation and division of power and enumerates

fundamental rights does not protect liberty? The 1993 constitution of the Russian Federation is

a mixed or hybrid presidential-parliamentary constitution, similar to the French constitution

(also drafted in an atmosphere of coup and crisis). There is a dual executive with a directly

elected president, who has to achieve 50 percent of the vote in one or two rounds of voting as

necessary, and a prime minister.

The prime minister is chosen by the president and confirmed by the Duma, the lower house of

the Russian bicameral parliament. Like the French president, the Russian president has the

power to dissolve the lower house and call new elections. The Duma is directly elected using a

German-style mixed-member proportional system of election. The upper house, the Federation

Council, is composed of representatives of the federal regions and republics. The constitution

provides for freedom of speech, a free media, and a constitutional court. There is a separation

of powers and a division of powers, as well as a judicial branch with long-term if not lifetime

judges.

In America we commonly associate these features of constitutional design with the protection

of basic liberty within a democratic framework. In Russia this constitutional design produces

democracy, but also "illiberalism." To understand what is happening we might be tempted to

fall back on the sorry history of freedom in Russia, from czars to commissars. Are Russians in

the grip of an endless winter of oppression? No doubt all of us are cursed with national

character failings, but it seems a lazy piece of analysis to attribute Putin's Russia to some

political permafrost, to some Siberia in the national soul. Instead, it is worth thinking about

leadership, the decisions being made, and recalling the concept of power.

Sources of Power in Russia

We can identify three major elements of power: coercion, incentives, and persuasion. (See W.

Phillips Shively's Power and Choice: An Introduction to Political Science, 2003.) The coercive

powers of the Russian state were on display immediately before the December 2003

legislative elections, with the arrest of Mikhail Khodorkovsky, the Yukos Oil executive. He was

arrested on charges arising from his business dealings, but most commentary pointed to his

support of political parties opposed to President Putin. The arrest apparently did not sit well

with Alexander Voloshin, Putin's chief of staff (who resigned), nor with the current prime minister,

Mikhail Kasyanov. Before that, in the fall of 2003, Putin's candidate for the presidency

of Chechnya won the election after the withdrawal of rival candidates. Organizations that

monitor human rights violations reported widespread killing, disappearances, and the use of

torture by the Russian authorities in suppressing the insurgency in Chechnya. You would be

forgiven for thinking that Putin's presidency just goes to show that you can take the man out of

the KGB, but you cannot take the KGB out of the man.

Actually, the Putin administration is taking more and more men and women from the KGB (or

the Federal Security Service, as it is now called). A recent analysis by Russian sociologist Olga

Kryshtanovskaya finds that the siloviki (security services personnel) represent almost one-third

of top government officials, and over one-half of the president's closest advisers are former

KGB. To compensate for the federal division of power, Putin has established seven large

administrative districts run by appointed presidential representatives (prefects in France), five

of whom are siloviki.

The use of coercive power is not unpopular and coincides with the recent good performance of

the Russian economy. Putin's approval ratings are high. Putin won the presidential election in

2000 on the first round (electoral rules require a run-off if no candidate gets a majority), and he

is likely to win reelection in 2004 with no difficulty. Voters dislike the rich businessmen or

oligarchs like Khodorkovsky, fear Chechen terror, and respond positively to the incentive of the

improving Russian economy. At the same time, government officials respond to financial

incentives in the form of corrupt payments. Russia ranks as one of the more corrupt countries

in the world, which reduces democratic accountability but does not appear to be a policy priority

for the Putin government.

Political persuasion is a function of the competition among leadership groups and political

parties and the resulting messages delivered by the media. In Russia, journalists themselves

operate in a dangerous environment, attributable in part to organized crime and a high overall

murder rate. Between 2000 and 2003, 13 journalists were killed in Russia. The major

television networks are owned by the government or by Gazprom, the natural gas company in

which the government has a sizable stake. One of the criticisms offered by international

election monitors of the December 2003 Duma election was the media bias in favor of political

parties supporting the government.

Putin's Role

As imperious as General Charles De Gaulle, this former KGB officer also stands above the

competition among the parties. President Putin is not a formal member of United Russia, the

major political party supporting the president. The opposition parties most easily identified with

liberal freedoms failed to make the electoral threshold, leaving the communists as the major

opposition party. Even the communists only managed 13 percent of the vote, about half their

1999 total. The media in any political system have an important effect on political parties, but

political parties are the source of policy alternatives and visions that constitute meaningful

political discourse. The weakness of the parties and lack of media independence in Russia

justify concern. The idea of illiberal democracy is useful in drawing attention to these issues; to

the multiple components bundled in the concept of democracy; and to the observation that on

occasion, and over some political terrain, there may be friction as these components rub

against each other. Less useful is the implication that you can strip out liberty and keep

democracy running. Somewhere there is a tipping point where the reduction of freedom so

affects political competition that it moves an election-holding political system from illiberal to

non-democracy, even if the majority remain on board.