The conservation of the political regime: Yet another failure of modernisation

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The pressing issue of the economic modernisation of Russia is impeded by the political system of Russia which rejects all the attempts to modernise it. The existing contradiction has resulted from the process of the formation of market institutions and mechanisms under the conditions of absence of political culture of democracy. The interests of the political and bureaucratic elite are poorly compatible with democratic institutions. The political circles simulate democratic reforms by way of creating institutional simulacra which are a semblance of public participation in making decisions and an oversight of their implementation and, in reality, are not supported by appropriate channels and mechanisms to perform the functions. The situation is clearly visible on the regional level, which reveals the attempts of the authorities to achieve economic efficiency by optimising bureaucratic structures and organising surrogate forms of public activity.

Nowadays, there is no need to justify and ground the recognition that no modernisation is possible in Russia without reforming its political system. It is recognised by scholars, analysts, and politicians. However, the paradox and dramatic character of the situation is that the issue of the modernisation is not consistent with the structure of the Russian political system which, institutionally and procedurally, accords only with the regime concentrating all processes on the vertical of the executive authority and is, for the time being, successfully rejecting all attempts to modernise it. The constructive peculiarity of the system is “that it focuses on maintaining the status-quo (distributing economic assets and power resources, first of all) and is not aimed at the modernisation development” [2].

In 2008, acknowledging the regional policy pursued in the Russian Federation unsatisfactory the State represented by the president and the government declared they had adopted a new strategy meeting the ‘requirements of the reality’. As President Putin said, “it requires a modern system of regional planning which should avoid any excessive regulation from the federal authority” [6]. Such an approach should have been based on the strategies advanced by the regions themselves with the participation of a wide circle of persons and structures taking decisions and creating a political field, within which they would have established political alliances and looked for compromises.
and which would have encompassed the State, business, public organisations, the court, and the press as the fourth branch of power. However, the expectations the new strategy made one entertain contradicted the features peculiar to Putin’s political regime, under which the regions, in fact, have lost their status of political subjects. In order to solve the tasks of economic development of the regions, the State habitually set in motion the executive echelon of power and virtually eliminated all the above mentioned actors from the ranks of the subjects making decisions. Eventually the State turned out to be the only gamer on the political field. All regional authority bodies and departments became functional extensions of the federal administrative machine beginning with the plenipotentiary representative of the President and ending with the administrations of the municipal districts.

Speaking before the Federal Assembly in 2008, the then president Dmitry Medvedev clearly pointed to the interrelation between the economic modernisation and the political one and he emphasised that the former could not not be achieved without the latter. In 2010, in his material Our Democracy Is Not Perfect and We Are Aware of It. But We Go Forward published on the president’s website, he made an objective assessment of the development of the Russian political system and focused his special attention on the symptoms of stagnation and the danger that stability would transform into a factor of stagnation. Mr. Medvedev stressed that the principle task for Russia was to make the representation of the people more pronounced, so that “the political majority was not merely static and the ruling party had both rights and obligations without being only an appendage to the executive power [...] The political system must be so structured that the opinions of each social group including the smallest ones should be clearly heard, and, ideally, even the voice of one person should be heard” [3].

Although he clearly expressed the thought that Russia needed a political modernisation, Mr. Medvedev could not cross the boundaries of the system that had been established before his presidency. “A consequence of the ‘modernisation without policy’ is the system, in which the domineering bureaucracy is almost entirely independent from the institutions of public policy” [4].

It is quite understandable that the roots of the problem lie in the peculiarities of the Russian transitional period: the transition to a market economy and democratic political regime occurred in circumstances when there were no economic, political and social structures complying with the requirements of the new system, which caused the inability of the Russian society to influence on the choice of the country’s course of development. The choice was made by a narrow circle of State officials who had clearly specified interests of their own, who possessed a management experience and had an access to resources. The privatisation of the State property secured them a lifetime ‘administrative annuity’ and it was on the base of that appropriation that today’s political class of Russia was formed [1]. The existence of this class is not compatible with the democratic political process implying that wide circles of interested organisations and persons are involved into the mechanism of making and implementing decisions and, in such a way, acquire the qualities of political subjects. The openness, transparency, and deliberativeness accompanying the democratisation of the process of political participation undermine the conditions that enable the political bureaucracy to control monopolistically the State resources, which makes the sources of its wealth uncontrolled by the society. The political modernisation is a real threat not only to the wellbeing of the bureaucratic elite but also to its very existence.

The effort to prevent a real democratic process has determined the imitation model of the Russian democracy basing on poor capacity of constitutional institutions as well as on establishing structures which duplicate their functions under the supervision of the executive power all over the so-called “verticality”. Mr. Putin’s coming to power put an end to the period of spontaneous democracy under Boris Yeltsin’s presidency. The political regime stabilised and the dual nature of the Russian State established itself on all the levels of the economic and political systems. According a certain researcher, the political actors “did not follow the structures and rules that ensured the framework for order, but adapted the structures and rules to their own objectives and, at the same time, they created new ones which supported the regime and concurrently circumvented the formal constitutional order” [7].

The Russian society, which, for seventy years, existed in circumstances of the discordance between the proclaimed principles of the organisation and distribution of power functions and the actual practice of the Soviet State clearly having it introduced into the mass consciousness, up to the present has been unable to realise that the democratic mechanisms and processes have been substituted by simulations. The simulations radically changing the meaning of democracy discredit the idea and conceal the selfish aims of the ruling elite. The lack of alternative has become a
basic condition of the latter's existence [1]. The guaranteed irremovability of the power elite determines its stability and simultaneously it is one of the chief causes making the political system of Russia unable to develop democratically. Removability is realisable through competitiveness and elections. Free elections and competitiveness create a danger of losing not only political but also economic positions, whereas irremovability guarantees the retentions of the achieved status. In these circumstances, the political practice is such that it produces institutional simulacra. The process is clearly visible in the regions demonstrating the efforts of the authorities to achieve economic efficiency through the optimisation of bureaucratic structures and the organisation of surrogate forms of social activity. The change in the structure of the Federation Council has resulted in the removal of the regional authorities from the process of making decisions and deprived the regions of their status of subjects which they have in accordance with the constitution declaring the principles of federalism. The governors authorised by the local society and having political influence have been replaced by officials appointed by Moscow. The positions of the senators of the federal legislative body whose duty is to represent the regions and protect their interests have been filled with retired Moscow generals, sportsmen or regional delegates of no political importance both in the Centre and provinces. The regions have been doomed to be passive; they “do not act as initiators, subjects of innovations but as objects, recipients of the initiatives of the federal Centre, as platforms to carry out federal projects. All decisions determining the life of the regions are made by the government which takes into consideration, first of all, the interest of the Centre. The governors and mayors become ‘auxiliary bodies’ as well as regional parliaments do” [5].

The undertaken reforms aimed to beat a path to democracy do not change the situation. The fact that, henceforth, the institution of senators must be formed only from the number of persons elected to the representative power bodies and that of deputies of the local government agencies of the pertinent subject of the Federation makes no sense since the residence requirement has been cancelled. It means, in practice, that the office may be filled by any appointee from the Centre.

The issue of decentralisation has been discussed currently by the representatives of the federal power. Suggested within the context of the development of democratic principles in the system of government it is treated uniquely within the limits of the executive echelon, of which part is also the party United Russia. Domineering everywhere and among the political parties of the subjects of the Federation as well, it is capable to initiate and approve any decisions taken by the executive power. Despite the representatives of the United Russia eagerly deny the use of it, the so-called administrative resource cannot but work for the party in power which is an official component of the administrative machine. The qualified majority of the members of the party in the legislative power condition the existence of today's political system. The election of heads of city administrations by the city dumas in which the majority will be guaranteed for the representatives of the party in power will bring the executive vertical to a logical completion: at last, the governors will gain power over the budgets of the regional centres.

Along with the isolated and irrelevant changes in the field of election process and the partial rotation of the heads of the legislative and executive bodies of the subjects of the Russian Federation, the reform of the party legislation easing the requirements to register political parties is yet another democratic simulation. In fact, it not only did nothing to promote the democrationisation of the election process but it also generated a phenomenon of the so-called ‘spoiler parties’ engaged as part of the administrative resource by the regional administrations to draw votes away from unwanted candidates.

The recent trend has been towards the attempts to create a more attractive political design of the power structures rather than a modernisation of the system. The aim is to maintain the existing political regime and retain its basic characteristics. It is reflected, in particular, in the fact that a more democratic character has been imparted to the model of political relations in service: the social basis of the political regime has been widened through the attraction of the most active members of society to the consultative zone of the power. The primaries initiated by the United Russia party when determining candidates to fill the offices of party leaders of all levels as well as the obligatory participation of party members in public debates are aimed at activating the competitiveness within the party itself rather than achieving a free inter-party competition. As Dmitry Medvedev pointed out in the above-mentioned article, if the opposition has no chance to win in fair competition, it degrades and becomes marginal, whereas the ruling party that has no chances to lose simply stagnates and eventually degrades, too, as any living organism does when immobilised.
Although non-specified in the constitution and having no plenary power, the institution of civic chambers has become another simulation of a democratic communication between the authorities and the society. According to the concept, the civic chambers were to exempt the legislative and representative bodies of State power both of regional and federal level from the constitutionally determined role of exponents of the society's interests, which lost its meaning in the established constitutional order as well as in the real political practice. Instead of being part of the activities of the State Duma, the platform for communication and discussion has been shifted to the civic chambers to which the political analysts refer as a ‘non-political parliament’ (that is, a powerless one) and a ‘collective ombudsman’. Aimed to act as a mechanism of feedback, it provides a way of letting off steam as well before the conflict situation may take a bad turn posing a threat to the regime.

The practice of the regions of the Russian Far East demonstrates that the regional political regime could not allow any control, even a loose one, by the society and tried to avoid any information on its activities being leaked beyond the limits of a narrow circle of government officials. That is why all the civic chambers that had come into being on the wave of social enthusiasm very quickly transformed into official consultative bodies under the governors. Replacing the odious figure of Sergey Darkin, Governor of the Maritime Province (Primorsky Kray), with the Moscow appointee Vladimir Miklushesvsky, who, unlike the former, had no links with local economic groups or interests in local economic affairs, pursued the goal to reinforce controllability over the region. The immediate task was to make the region more attractive for potential investors by securing political stability in it. The media activity, the multi-month campaign to establish seventeen coordination councils subordinate to the governor, the reanimation of the idea ruined by Sergey Darkin to establish a civic chamber, the pompous meetings with the inhabitants of the region and journalists arranged for the governor by the regional administration as well as the ‘civil referenda’ under the slogan of reformatting the national political system suggested more often than not by the United Russia party are only few lines of the new governor’s activity aimed to democratise the political process in the region.

However, the pseudo-democratic nature of the actions does not pass unnoticed by the regional society. One of the most respectable and by no means oppositional newspapers of Vladivostok representing the positions of the regional business society described the civil referendum as a large-scale political project realised with the use of the resources of the authorities of various levels which pursued no objectives to really renew the power or develop democracy in the individual territory. According to the regional analysts, the measure afforded no optional chance to ‘random persons’ to arrive at power; more than that, it was intended to neutralise the critical attitude of the local public by creating channels to release their criticism and, in such a way, to avoid uncontrolled actions and movements of protest that could expand from the regional centre to the provinces.

The society expressed the similar opinion about the Governor Miklushesvky’s initiative which was widely advertised that seventeen expert councils attached to his office would be established to direct State programmes. According to the conclusions drawn by a Moscow expert group after it visited Vladivostok, Mr. Miklushesvsky began ‘to generate simulacra’ in the Maritime Province, because the activity of such public organisations is consistent neither with the legislation nor political practice and it cannot correct or improve the implementation of the State programmes. The latter being drawn up, the problems of the region being presented in them, the finances distributed, their implementation is under the supervision of the State officials, whereas the expert councils have no credentials to do that. It is generally acknowledged that these and other ways the governor searches for to cooperate with the society work to appease the public rather than to make it an actor of political, economic, and social processes equal in rights with the authorities themselves.

In the long run, as the political analysts say and write, only democracy and federalism can give us an opportunity for development. To achieve the goal, real competitive conditions should be created both in political and economic spheres beginning with the transformation of the system representing the interests of the regions and ending with the establishment of the channels involving the regional society, through which the political and non-political organisations and communities could influence on the formation and implementation of the inner and external regional policy and the development of horizontal communications.

References
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