



Gardariki, the Land of Cities

10 principles of reform for a post-Putin Russia

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INTRODUCTION

Russia today finds itself at a crossroads. Society, the opposition, and even the authorities understand that the country cannot go on as it has, but no one understands what comes next. The regime does not have much time left — five, maybe 10 more years — but nobody knows how it will end.

In light of this and by virtue of how my own mind works, I have decided not to talk about how to replace those in power, but to discuss a practical plan of action. It is my view that it has become necessary to clarify what I am proposing for the post-Putin Russia.

When it comes to the opposition, I am in a unique position. Few have had the opportunity to say to Vladimir Putin's face everything they think about corruption at the highest echelons of power before they are prosecuted and locked up for more than a decade.

Rich in managerial expertise, I am now denied the chance to engage in practical organizational work in Russia. When they kicked me out of the country, the authorities slammed the door tightly behind me, promising unambiguously that a life sentence awaits me, should I ever return.

By no means do I believe I have some monopoly on truth, but I also understand that much in Russia will need repairing when the regime is done. And it will need to happen fast. By this time, it would be good if Russian society has decided who we are, where we are going, and what our shared path is in this rapidly changing world.

So what is the Russia of my dreams? It is a country with national interests that lie in a speedy integration into the world economic system with the opportunity to play a worthy role. It is a democratic state that observes the rule of law, firm in its civilizational unity at home, and based on the fundamental principle of freedom. It is Garðaríki, as the Vikings once called it (from the Old Norse words “gard” for city and “riki” for land) — a nation of many cities that take power into their own hands.

For me, as it is for many of my compatriots, what matters is a thousand years of unbroken Russian history. What matters is the origins of our common European, and now Euro-Atlantic, civilization. What matters to me is that we find ourselves not among strangers in this Western world, but among its creators and defenders.

We are Europeans. We built and we have defended this civilization, and we will be a part of it again. This is history's predetermination.



Mikhail Khodorkovsky

1. THE NATIONAL INTEREST

Why does most of Russia today look like footage from films about post-war Europe, impoverished and in ruins? There are many reasons – an inability to manage, pervasive theft, inescapable monopolism – but the Kremlin also committed a serious error when it made the messianic goal of restoring Russia's superpower status its top political priority.

Superpowerdom is a dangerous myth and its pursuit contradicts the true interests of the emerging Russian nation. In my view, Russia's real national interests lie in its quick integration into the world economy, as well as a new economic and political Perestroika at home, allowing the country to play a worthy role in the global system.

The post-Soviet world's birth was a painful ordeal. There were the natural challenges of any major transition, as well as the economy's sudden collapse, the disintegration of institutions, and the criminalization of every facet of society and the state. Numerous miscalculations by new Russia's leaders exacerbated all these processes. The country lost a significant part of its territories and its central position on the world stage. Russian society saw the Kremlin's defeat in the Chechen military campaign and the fiasco of Russian foreign policy in the Balkans in the 1990s as a national humiliation, which became a powerful stimulus for imperial nostalgia.

Despite this, there was always a reasonable exit possible from this post-imperial crisis, this Russian 'Versailles syndrome,' our version of what the Germans experienced after their defeat in World War I. A deep spiritual, political and socioeconomic transformation would have allowed Russia to emerge as a truly strong country. The Russian leadership, however, chose a different path: one that is spending all its resources on an imitation of this past, and succeeding only at creating the illusion of a national rebirth and the restoration of Russian power.

At the start of the 2000s, the Kremlin made a deal with the Russian people, a society exhausted by the endless crises of the first post-Soviet decade. The terms of the pact were simple: "stability in exchange for freedom." But after the events in Ukraine in 2014, a new agreement was imposed on society: "greatness and stability in exchange for freedom, justice, and prosperity."

The Kremlin achieves this greatness not through any sustainable means; not through developing the economy, education, science or culture. It occurs exclusively through brute military force and nuclear blackmail. Towards this end, the Russian leadership has mercilessly exploited the military capabilities left behind from the Soviet Union, capabilities which will last another 20 or 30 years – just as long as the remaining lifespans of Russia's current rulers. This 'greatness' has been unleashed on Ukraine, Syria, Libya, Central Africa and Venezuela. These 'successes' in the international arena are used to justify any amount of despotism, corruption, cultural degradation and backwardness within Russia itself.

The Kremlin sees 'greatness' through the lens of foreign policy. Its goal: to achieve the division of the world between Russia, China and the West into zones of influence. In those regions given over to Russia, the Kremlin intends to establish its exclusive political and military influence – to erect a new Iron Curtain.

This begs the question: why does the largest country in the world need to control even more territory? The answer is that Russia today is run by individuals with an archaic view of the world, whose understanding of international politics can be summarized in three points:

1. All relations with the outside world are part of a zero-sum game. In this game, there are no nuances or subtleties: any proposed compromise is merely some trick, any alliance some ploy.
2. Territory trumps all. It is the basis of power, of riches, of influence. The basic goal of every world leader is to increase the territory under his control.
3. The world is divided into defined spheres of influence. Expanding these spheres is the overriding imperative of both domestic and foreign policy.

This approach is ineffective today. The rest of the world has long since been playing by different rules, the foundation of which is the strategy of 'win-win.'

One could suggest that the main driving factor behind the Kremlin's policies is stupidity. But this is only a partial explanation – greed is even more important. The leaders of Russia's ruling class do not actually seek to make war for its own sake. They need Russia to have the status of a military superpower in order to isolate Russia from the West at an official, state level. But all the while, they themselves are constantly striving towards a Western lifestyle at a personal level.



Today's conflict between Russia and the West is in reality a war of the Russian ruling class for their privileges, for the ability to securely store and freely spend in the West the money they have stolen from the country. Putin's regime arms itself and projects military force not in order to prepare an attack on the West, for the Kremlin well understands the limits of its military capabilities. Rather, it does this in order to force the West to accept the conditions it puts forward: that Russia requires its 'traditional' sphere of influence, and that all attempts to interfere in this zone must cease.

Does this correspond to Russia's national interests? Of course not. Russia's true national interests are the exact opposite: they are the country's emergence from international isolation, and the removal of those present rulers who brought the country to its current miserable state.

2. THE CIVIC STATE

Russia has existed as an empire for at least five centuries. People in Russia have grown used to it. They trust the empire, see it as a guardian from destruction and ruin. But while Russia was busy building and breaking empires, the world around it moved on. Empires are now a thing of the past, having been replaced by civic states – countries inhabited by a people with a common culture, who wish to live by the same laws on the same land. They organize their lives by entirely different principles than empires – and not only do they not perish, they prosper. The gap between these societies and Russia is growing at an enormous rate.

Russia today is at a civilizational crossroads. The choice between empire and civic state is a fundamental, civilization choice – one which will guide the answers to dozens of other complex and no less global questions standing before Russian society.

My choice for Russia is the civic state – a choice in favor of the future, not the past. I reject the nostalgia for the empire, whether overt or disguised behind pseudo-democracy. The Russia of my dreams is the unification of people of different ethnic origins, for whom their commonalities are more important than their differences.

The peoples of Russia today are on the path towards the creating of a true Russian nation, but they have not achieved it yet. A civic state can arise only as a result of their freedom of self-determination. It should be the state of all the peoples of Russia who wish to participate as its founders. It should have nothing to do with the state granting privileges based on blood or religion. The European experience of multiculturalism is not a panacea; therefore, it is important for Russia to add to it the principle of cultural integration, allowing for harmony between those of different ethnicities and different religions in the common space of Russian culture.

In a true civic state, a citizen proudly identifies himself first with his country, and only then with his ethnicity, clan, region, or profession. A simple example of the importance of this: in Russia, both the people and the authorities are afraid of their country's elite military forces. In the USA, they are not. I once discussed this idea with a military intelligence officer, Colonel Vladimir Kvachkov, a veteran of the Afghan war. We are people from different worlds, with different views; stark opposites, to say the least, but one phrase he said has stuck with me all these years:

"An American special forces soldier considers himself first and foremost an American citizen, and only after as an elite soldier. And this is natural – if something were to happen to him, he would receive protection as an American citizen. A Russian special forces serviceman is just the opposite – if something happens, he will receive no help from the state; at best, his friends and fellow servicemen might help. The Russian officer is therefore a special force soldier first, and only then a Russian citizen – the exact opposite of the American."

The creation of a civic state is a serious test, a massive political challenge – but it is absolutely necessary in order to build a strong foundation for the future of the country. It requires three landmark steps to be taken, in order:



1. A decisive rejection of the imperial paradigm and the creation of conditions for a free choice of the peoples of Russia.
2. The direct establishment of the founding charter of the new Russia. Adopting such a decision, prevented by the Bolsheviks a hundred years ago, may require the creation of a new Constitutional Committee.
3. The conduct of radical constitutional and court reforms, with the goal of creating the political and legal infrastructure of the Russian civic state.

The creation of a Russian civic state is the greatest historical task towards which the peoples of Russia have strived towards, but failed to decisively achieve, for more than a century. This task must be accomplished at last by the present generation.

I do not exclude the possibility that the Russia of our children may be able to survive in something like its current form, lurching forward as a creaking, pseudo-imperial husk. But if we want to see a Russia for our grandchildren, then it is imperative that we build something else: a state founded on the wishes of its people to live together in a common cultural, linguistic, legal, and political space. We find ourselves facing a historical moment, one in which it is no longer to postpone this decision; we must make this choice now, or never.

3. DEMOCRACY

Over the course of its history, the Russian political system has created its own unique answer to the challenges of history. We can call this answer 'permanent despotism.' At its core, it is the division of power into an internal and an external state, in which the internal controls the external and acts as the hidden true center of power.

This 'internal state' has gone by different names at different times – the imperial court, the Communist Party, the Ozero cooperative – but its essence has remained the same. It is a network of informal power: the power of the 'overseers,' who stand above and outside the law, living off of privilege. It permeates all the formal institutions of the external, official state. This is a uniquely Russian paradigm, constantly changing and adapting to new conditions – but never disappearing.

In the historical consciousness of the Russian people, there is a deeply ingrained conception of the permanent existence and almost mythical power of this internal state. There is also a strong belief in the effectiveness of so-called 'authoritarian modernization.' In the national consciousness, Russia's various 'victories' are usually associated with the reforms of Peter the Great and Josef Stalin. Taking a longer view of history, however, it is clear that it was precisely from these 'victories' (and the resulting revolutions) that the country's systemic backwardness emerged.

Strategically, there is no alternative to democracy for Russia. Otherwise, sooner or later, the next swing of the revolutionary pendulum will simply destroy her as a state. The impact of the pendulum can be blunted only with the aid of democracy.

What kind of democracy does Russia need, and how can it be built with minimal costs?

Let me start with a caveat. We are not talking about restoring some older system. We are talking about building a democratic foundation for the first time in Russia's history. The previous experiences – the short period between the February and Bolshevik revolutions, the 1990s – are too ambiguous and insignificant to build upon.

Before embarking on the establishment of democracy itself, Russia needs to build a democratic foundation, of the kind that has long since been established in Western Europe. A system can only be seen as democratic when all of Russian society, including all of its minorities, has a say in political decision-making.

The key question standing before us is how to transform Russia's current political system – that 'permanent despotism' – into a system based on the democratic principle of separation of powers. How do we subordinate supreme power – the all-powerful internal state – into a system of checks and balances? Is it even possible to remove its sacrosanct status?

This is a purely institutional task, one which can and should be accomplished by constitutional and legal methods within the framework of Russia's overall political reforms. Will these reforms make Russia into a successful democratic state? Democratic, yes, but not successful. The reason for this uncertainty lies in the systemic challenges and hurdles that democracy faces everywhere today – not only in Russia, but in the whole world, including the West.

It is unclear how to best go about establishing functional democracy in these fundamentally novel conditions.

But if we try to build yesterday's democracy in today's Russia, then it may fail despite all efforts, and the entire project will collapse. It is therefore that Russia has no other choice than to try to become not only democratic, but the most advanced democratic society. It will thus be crucial to employ the most innovative and modern political methods.

4. DECENTRALIZATION

A democratic state can be highly centralized (like the United Kingdom or France), or largely decentralized (as in the USA and Germany). Russia needs to choose the most suitable system for itself, based on its cultural heritage and the specifics of the unique historical challenge it is faced with.

Since the 15th century, Russia has been a hyper centralized state, a condition pushed to the limit by the Soviet empire. Today, the political principle of centralism paradoxically unites both supporters and opponents of the current ruling regime. For the former, centralism is a question of maintaining control and preserving the political and economic status quo. For the latter, it is a guarantee of protection for citizens from the arbitrariness of local elites, which are seen by many as a bastion of reactionary politics.

The problem lies in the fact that in a country as vast as Russia, centralism inevitably gives to authoritarianism and autocracy. In order to maintain its material basis, centralism requires the constant redistribution of resources within the country and the maintenance of huge financial flows. All of this necessitates an enormous bureaucratic apparatus, over which society has no control or influence. It forms a simple path dependency: from centralization to the redistribution of resources, a massive state bureaucracy, and the suppression of civil society.

The decentralization of Russia's political system is therefore the most important of all the political tasks facing the democratic coalition of forces in the country.

What could serve as the blueprint for the new system?

In the centuries-long history of Russia, there exists one possible model for the basis of a fundamentally different state structure, a plausible alternative to rigid centralization. In the 12th century, Russia was a country of highly independent self-governing cities. This was known to the Vikings as 'Gardarika' – an Old Norse word meaning 'the country of cities.'

Cities have always been the cornerstones of development of European civilization; to this day they remain the focal points of a new potential universal civilization.

In the modern world, we are talking about not just cities, but mega-cities, which host millions of people each. It is these mega-cities, as a fundamentally novel form of societal organization, that have become the engines of worldwide technological, economic, and cultural change.

It is for precisely this reason that a political union of mega-cities should form the basis of a new state structure in Russia.

There cannot be more than twenty such centers in Russia: there is simply not the population to support more. These megacities will become territorial centers, the capitals of new administrative units – lands that have the necessary political and administrative trappings of a regional center, as well as the corresponding judicial systems, military districts, and so on.

We are talking here about the creation of new economic and political units – the building blocks of a new Russia, which will be built from the bottom up and not the top down, as it always was before. This new network will someday replace the current regional divisions.

This program of deep restructuring of the territorial and state configuration of Russia may take a decade or more, however. Therefore, in parallel with the establishment of an entirely new system, it is necessary to start reforming the existing one.



There are two main tools available for carrying out the effective decentralization of power: self-government and federalism. Although both are mentioned in the Constitution, they do not function in Russia's political system in reality. In practice, the federation serves as a form of legitimization of the partial autonomy of the colonies (Russia's regions) to the parent state (the Kremlin). Although self-government has real historic roots in Russia, any traces of these were completely destroyed in the Soviet period.

It is precisely the effective development of local self-government, however, that will serve as the primary check against any backsliding of Russia towards the chasm of authoritarianism. The development of federalism will supplement this as an additional driver of decentralization.

It is much easier to ensure public control over state structures if they are within walking distance. Russia's citizens must learn to solve problems at the level at which they arise. No democracy anywhere in the world can exist without this basis.

The only viable system of government in Russia is a three-dimensional one, a pyramid based on the key elements of strong local self-government; mega-cities as regional centers; and a strong central government. If one of these elements is not present, the entire system will invariably collapse, either into traditional authoritarianism or possibly the total disintegration of the state itself.

5. THE LAWFUL STATE

The rule of law, which the Kremlin is so fond of talking about, is in reality the dictatorship of the will of one clan that has usurped power and held power over the Kremlin for more than two decades. The laws so glorified by the Kremlin exist for one purpose: to lend to despotism the illusion of legitimacy. These are the unlawful laws of political violence, which make the system incapable of constructive evolution.

A lawful law should not be an expression of the sole will of the ruler, nor of the ruling clan which holds power. Rather, it should be the consolidated will of civil society as a whole. This is what lends laws their legitimacy and allows them to serve as the basis of a functional state, where citizens obey the law because they respect its foundations.

What makes a law lawful? Strictly speaking, there are two circumstances by which this occurs: the process of their adoption, and compliance with a defined set of principles.

A law is lawful if it is passed by a full-fledged independent parliament, one elected democratically – the sole legitimate form of legislative body. Parliament acts as a codifier of the popular will, in which the will of civil society is transformed into the text of laws. Even the best parliament, however, one in which the political will of civil society is consolidated, and an ideal balance of public and expert opinion has been struck, does not guarantee that the laws passed there are lawful. To ensure this, laws must be built upon unchanging principles, ones not subject to alteration on the whims of the moment.

It is my view that the most fundamental such principle is freedom. It is precisely freedom that rejects the unlawful law and accepts the lawful, that shuns the dangerous dictatorship of law used by authoritarianism to enshrine its unjust rule over society.

Conflicts should be resolved not in favor of the majority or in favor of the minority, but on the basis of freedom as an unwavering value. Only a law with this as its foundation can be considered lawful.

This should not be surprising: after all, rights are in many ways a measure of freedom. This understanding has developed from the combination of Greco-Roman and Christian traditions. It is perhaps this combination that is the essence of Europeanism and modernity. It is according to our ability to comprehend and implement this conception of rights and lawful laws that we will eventually be able to judge Russia's readiness to become a European country.

6. THE PARLIAMENTARY REPUBLIC

Russia faces the task of thoroughly comprehending and adapting the Western experience of parliamentarianism. This must be done without blind replication or shortcuts; we must develop a suitable system on this basis, which will enable us to adopt laws that are truly lawful.

Discussions of whether a presidential or parliamentary system is suitable for Russia have already been long occurring. The question of which form of governance, however, is closely linked with the question of its political substance: democracy or autocracy. It is a question of political philosophy, one which is purely ideological.

Contemporary Russia is often called a presidential republic. This is, to put it mildly, a vast exaggeration. Over the past hundred years, not one Russian ruler has come to power by truly democratic elections. Even Boris Yeltsin's victory in June 1991 was won in regional elections within the Soviet empire. Autocracy has been, and remains, the only political configuration known in Russia.

This personalized model has become a political addiction, the rejection of which will lead to a breakdown in Russian society. But does this mean that we should abandon any attempt to kick the autocratic habit?

Choosing the presidential model would mean creating a space for the innate autocratic instincts of Russian political culture to reemerge in the future, leaving authorities with a path from which to depart from the democratic transformation. It is for this reason that I consider a parliamentary republic to be the preferred model for Russia. There should be no state institution in Russia which rises above the other branches of government. No institution should have powers that are unchecked by other branches.

Under the framework of a parliamentary republic, the separation of powers has an additional democratic dimension: the division into two roles of the head of the executive branch, and the head of the state. The head of state may be an entirely nominal figure (like the Queen of England); may play the role of arbiter (as in Italy); or may exercise important powers himself (as in France).

The choice of a specific model of parliamentary republic is the central task of any prospective constitutional commission. Whatever the specifics may be, one constant will always be present: the chairman of the government and the entirety of the government itself are accountable to parliament, which has the ability to both appoint and dismiss it.

Why is this especially important in Russia? Because in such a configuration, parliament's relative political importance rises dramatically. If parliament occupies a central institutional place in Russia's political system, the importance of any one parliamentarian's mandate grows; and so, too, does that of the entire electoral process.

Along the way, the price of regional representation in both chambers of the Russian parliament will sharply increase, since in these conditions the satisfaction of the vital needs of the territory will directly depend on its quantitative and qualitative composition. This means that the system of federal relations, which today exists as window dressing under a strictly centralized unitary state, will begin to function as intended.

Of course, the transition from an autocratic and strictly centralized personalized system of government that has existed in Russia for several centuries to a system of parliamentary democracy will be a severe political shock. But if we do not change the system of development of Russian statehood, then each subsequent regime, no matter how promising it may be, will sooner or later inevitably turn into an autocratic one. A series of autocratic regimes can lead to the country's collapse as a result. The transition to a parliamentary republic is the only true way to restart the political system in Russia, despite all its risks.

7. THE LEFT TURN

The division of politics into left and right wings is one of the most ingrained notions in the modern conception of politics. At the same time, it remains one of the vaguest. As I see it, the basis of this division relates to how each side views societal equality. Left-wing politics are characterized by the desire to strengthen equality and weaken inequality. Right-wing politics are defined by their recognition of inequality, primarily property inequality, and their attempt to stimulate economic activity by harnessing this inequality. Neither side holds the absolute truth, and changing between the two is a natural and cyclical process.

We are presently situated at one of those historical moments, where the cycle is about to lead to a shift again. But while the world remains uncertain on the specifics of this, there have appeared as a result a number of 'interim leaders' with an unclear ideological profile; leaders such as Donald Trump, Boris Johnson, and Vladimir Putin. At some point, however, leaders with a defined political leaning will enter the scene. Will they be left-leaning or right?

Most likely, we will witness a global 'left turn,' which I have described repeatedly over the last 15 years. After several decades of right-wing politics, and the resulting rise in inequality and social division, the left's program is in demand. It is the fight against inequality that will be the focus of the next political cycle.

The democratic movement in Russia must therefore put forward a left-wing agenda, one informed by Russian realities. It should combine two basic positions: a consistent push-back against overconsumption, and strict guarantees on maintaining social support for the population, especially in health care, education, and social security.

Russia's 'left turn' began to gather momentum at the turn of the century. The country entered the 21st century with one of the highest inequality levels in the world, on par with the USA. Against the background of sharply increasing social stratification and nostalgia for the Soviet past, a difficult choice arose: either right-wing policies, under the same banner as the post-Soviet economic reforms, or democracy, the formation of which was the entire point of those reforms. This is when I made my first call for a 'left turn,' asking the reformers and democratic forces to join together and make an unequivocal choice of democracy.

At that moment, the left path found a most unexpected supporter: Russia's ruling regime. The Kremlin saw it as a tool for curtailing democracy and building a post-Soviet authoritarianism.

Under the guise of populist slogans, the Kremlin began to roll out a false leftist program, promising to develop social programs and to narrow the gap between rich and poor. With abundant oil and gas revenues and the appearance of stable relations with the West, the Kremlin directed considerable resources towards social programs. This raised the standards of living for much of the population and ensured strong support for the regime.

Putin's social paradise, however, did not last long. Social stratification has not only not decreased, it has grown significantly. A new oligarchic class has appeared: Putin's 'oprichniks.' Socialist ideas were increasingly interspersed with nationalistic and even militaristic ones. This dangerous combination resulted in 2014 in war with Ukraine.

The 'left agenda' declared by Putin is a simulacrum. Putin is not a left-wing or even a 'hybrid' politician: he is a radical right-wing one. Imitating the methods of fascist leaders, he adapts his declared agenda to the situation, covering his true course of action with leftist slogans.

In this situation, what can the democratic opposition do? The paradox of Russia is that society accepts both a flat tax scale and overconsumption. Many people react much more harshly to a slight advantage enjoyed by their neighbor than to the luxuries of an anonymous magnate. There is a dislike for the latter, but not a class hatred. The reasons for this attitude are historical and philosophical, rather than purely political.

In Russia, the rudimentary estate structure of consumption and the corresponding scale of social pretensions remain. Unlike in the West, Russians for the most part recognize class boundaries and do not attempt to break them. At the same time, however, they demand the preservation and even improvement of their quality of life within these boundaries. People don't demand much, but even this small amount they will never receive. They firmly hold onto the status quo and their modest social goods, not wanting to lose them even when these goods have a purely symbolic practical meaning. The privileges of the upper caste are of little concern to them.

The estate nature of Russian society prevents the development of a true left-wing ideology in the country. What is the typical leftist agenda in Europe, besides the nationalization of the economy? The implementation of a progressive income tax. This idea does not work in Russia. There is still no structured left-wing agenda in the country as one has not yet been created with the country's class specifics in mind.

It remains practically impossible to fight overconsumption in Russia today, since society has not demanded it. This is despite the opposition's continuous anti-corruption campaigns. There is an important caveat here, however: people are willing to put up with the overconsumption from 'fathers,' but not from 'children.' This is to say that the class tolerance does not carry over from one generation to the next. It is here that democratic forces have a window of opportunity to resolve the problem: through the introduction of expropriation tax rates for the inheritance of extremely large estates.

As far as social guarantees for a broad stratum of society are concerned, Russia is doomed to remain a social state, where fragments of Soviet socialism will long remain. The democratic movement will win mass support only if it can form a clear and unambiguous position on this issue. The only solution to all fiscal and financial problems is increasing the rate of economic growth, reducing the costs inflicted by corruption, and by implementing an inheritance tax – not by an emergency reserve of Soviet exemptions.

8. FREEDOM OF SPEECH

Freedom of speech is the highest legal and constitutional principle to which the state is subject. It is guaranteed by the whole of the power of civil society and the political state built upon that.

There is no such freedom in modern Russia, although many still have illusions about this. Instead, there is a restricted space, strictly delineated by the authorities. The functioning of this space is one hundred percent dependent on the whims of the state. Alongside this, the ruling regime has learned to use these remnants of freedom for its own purposes.

In Russia, truth and falsehood coexist in an unnatural way as mutually exclusive principles of social life. At the heart of this phenomenon is the regime's ability to maintain ultimate control of information. The information market today is one of the most monopolized spheres in Russia. The state owns, directly or indirectly, not only pro-government media, but also the majority of opposition media. Despite the widespread opinion that the Runet today is large anti-government, the state also occupies a dominant position there.



The Kremlin's efforts have resulted in the creation of a dominant information stream in Russia. This is an extremely aggressive method of disseminating information that resembles a permanent information war. The source of this stream is the Kremlin, and the main agents carrying it out belong to the Kremlin's army of agents who control information on multiple levels. This complex system includes, among other things, an extensive and decentralized network of think tanks that fill this stream with thoughts and ideas.

It was the presence of a powerful state-controlled information stream that allowed the regime to keep the flow of alternative information weak and limited. But even after allowing a controlled dose of openness, the ruling regime has steadily continued to build up its indirect control over opposition media outlets.

The political pressure on the information environment is constantly growing, and sooner or later the state will have achieved total control over it. This will mark the end of a stripped-down postmodern glasnost, and a return to the Soviet model. Invariably, however, this will lead to unpleasant and irreversible consequences for the ruling regime itself, ones that will only hasten its end.

Once this occurs, Gorbachev-style glasnost will no longer be the ideal to strive for. The democratic forces must go further: towards a full-fledged free and open information market, regulated by clear and lawful laws. Only the existence of such a market can form a true guarantee of the right to freedom of speech.

My personal position is that all doubts should be resolved in favor of freedom of speech. Better to let someone say something unpleasant than to deprive another of the opportunity to learn something necessary. The priority of freedom should dominate over security concerns, forming the basic guiding principle of the information space.

How can this be accomplished?

Freedom of speech, naturally, can only be ensured by a functioning democratic political system. This means an effective separation of powers, a working justice system, and even something more: the willingness of society to defend its freedom with weapons in hand. If freedom of speech is political currency, then its security lies in the whole democratic infrastructure of society. In addition to these guarantees, however, there are also specific methods (such as institutional ones) without which freedom of speech cannot exist. These include both economic and political measures.

The main problem of the Russian media, paradoxically, is not censorship, but poverty. Post-communist Russia has never had a truly financially independent media. At least until the 1998 default, the media retained some freedom of maneuver, in the form of the choice on whom to depend financially. The subsequent process of total state takeover of the media, however, meant that by 2006-08, the government had become the only effective donor (whether directly or indirectly) to media. This was a mortal blow to freedom of speech.

At first glance, a solution to the problem could be the creation of a normal market environment for the media sphere, both online and offline. Unfortunately, experience shows that this model by and large does not work in other countries. Few countries can do without state-subsidized media budgets, and Russia stands little chance of becoming an exception to this rule. If government support for media is necessary and inevitable, then it is crucial to ensure that it is transparent – that no one can benefit from this subsidization.

Freedom of speech and societal openness have been, and remain, the most important element of democracy. Their protection from attacks from any side is the most important task of the democratic movement.

9. COMPETITION

Monopolies and competition are not sworn enemies, despite the common wisdom. Both are tools for organizing society, and each has its own advantages. The state's monopoly on violence, for example, is a broadly recognized legal norm today, but this was not always the case. Within a developed information society, however, the concept of monopoly has practically exhausted its usefulness.

There is no other path for Russia other than transitioning from an economy of monopolies to an economy of competition. The establishment and implementation of basic rules for this is an essential task.

The problem lies in the fact that monopolies in Russia are deeply rooted in history. Almost all industry has been created by the initiative of the state, with deep state involvement and remaining under state control. Monopolies were the most important tool of state industrialization in the Russian Empire, and after the Bolshevik Revolution they became the state's only tool. In the Soviet Union, monopolization was driven to the point of absurdity – eventually leading to the destruction of the Soviet state itself, having made the economy uncompetitive and inefficient.

Following the Soviet collapse, Russia briefly freed itself from monopolism, but it was never able to establish normal market competition. In the early 2000s, instead of continuing to develop a competitive environment, a poor strategic choice was made: to restore the monopolies. Under Putin's corrupt authoritarian regime, monopolies have become a tool for enriching clans loyal to the authorities.

Of course, there are countries like South Korea, where the monopoly of a private company (e.g. Samsung), operating in a constitutional state, works effectively. There are also countries like Switzerland, where state corporations (like Swiss Railways) operate very effectively, under the control of a democratic state. But there are no countries where a monopoly, whether private or state, operates effectively in a corrupt authoritarian state.

The advantages of competition are not immediately apparent, although the development of almost all of the world's major economic systems (from the USA to China) shows that competition is a more effective method for structuring the social space. Competition presupposes both the freedom of action of the players and the existence of generally recognized rules of the game that apply to all. At the same time, the creation of these rules should take place amongst equal and fair access for all participants. There will be no real competition if the new rules give someone an advantage.

However, if there is no superstructure in the form of a constitutional state governed by the rule of law, then it is impossible to build a competitive economy. The combination of political monopoly (the corrupt authoritarian regime currently ruling Russia) and economic monopoly guarantees disaster. These risks are inevitable until an alternative model is formed in Russia – in this case, political competition. Political competition turns economic (and social) monopolies into competitive processes, which then enables the cycle to repeat.

10. MERCY

It is broadly recognized that justice is the basic moral imperative for politics. The overwhelming majority of people in Russia today believe that the country is being ruled unfairly. This is the main problem of the regime: on a moral level, it is rejected even by its usual supporters.

The question of justice is not a simple one, however. The concept is understood differently for everyone and finding a broadly acceptable definition is challenging. Even more importantly, the cost of restoring the balance of justice is often prohibitive.

The universal quest for justice must be balanced within a defined framework. This framework, as I see it, can be established by only one method: by relying on an even deeper and more universal moral principle than justice. For me, this principle is mercy.

Mercy is the ability to empathize and forgive; it is 'second order' justice. If we measure politics and law by justice, then by mercy we measure justice itself; we prevent justice from becoming cruelty. Naked justice and naked truth are not always as we would hope. It is only through compassion that we have a chance to turn our intelligent decisions into wise ones.

What is the outcome for our discussion of the future of Russia if we put justice, tested by mercy, at the forefront?

1. The division between "us" and "them" disappears: no longer can we perceive ourselves as saints and others as sinners. Once you can empathize with others, and not rely on your own perspective, it is impossible to draw such a line.
2. We realize that before we can demand changes from others, we must be willing to change ourselves. Each of us has flaws that can be fixed.
3. It becomes clear that it is sometimes cheaper to forgive than to punish. This is evidenced by history. While denouncing and condemning the current regime – a necessary process for reforming the state and healing society – we must remember that forgiveness is dearer than punishment. Everyone has the right to repentance. A new society cannot be built through anger and revenge.
4. The contrasts between those who benefitted from the regime and those who did not will become clear. For 20 years, the moral compass of Russian society has decayed, resulting in the lines between good and evil becoming blurred. Tens of millions lived through this experience, with the result that some unwittingly participated in the regime's crimes. But there were also those that played an active role in this moral degradation of society, transforming the state into its present mafia form. The fate of these individuals must be different.
5. We will come to understand that it is impossible to create an ideal state or society, and that we must therefore focus on improving the ones we have. Nearly all current Russian officials are corrupt; but in the present system, corruption is a matter of survival. It is impossible to dismiss all officials, and so the task of the democratic forces is not to remove them all, but to force them to operate in a new way. This will not be easy.

I will add that I am against total lustration – this course has rarely proved effective. Naturally, there is no universally applicable solution to this problem. It is necessary to conduct a thorough investigation of all the crimes of the regime and identify the key beneficiaries of the mafia state, the real perpetrators of the escalation of repression and despotism. These people should be tried and punished within the framework of a public and lawful process in compliance with all those guarantees that they deprived others of, regardless of circumstance. For the other, less significant players, less harsh measures are enough.

Institutional lustration is another matter. This must be carried out in a thorough and rigorous manner. The true, lasting solution to this problem is not settling scores, but conducting deep institutional reforms. A purge is necessary, but it must be restrained by mercy, and not enable revenge.

POSTSCRIPT: ON REVOLUTION

The history of Russia necessarily equates the idea of political change with revolution. In today's Russia, the next revolution is becoming inevitable. The regime is slipping deeper into repression, driven by the desire to retain power at any cost. Having done much to turn the idea of revolution into a bogeyman, it is now reaping the backlash: many have begun to perceive a revolution as the most desirable outcome of the growing crisis.

Revolution is a heavy, yet inevitable tax that society pays to history if the existing laws make life unbearable, but at the same time exclude any change. It is from this point that the view of revolution as an inevitable evil originates. A revolution in Russia is only a question of where and when (and to a lesser degree, how). However, the democratic movement must do everything possible so that the revolution does not become an end in itself.

Revolutions are too costly for society to serve as instruments of settling scores and looting resources. While admiring the other revolutions in the post-Soviet space, one should not forget that their midterm results were far from the expectations of their inspirers and creators.

It is impossible to stop despotism and violence with more despotism and violence. Nor should we lose sight of the main goal of revolution – to make society more humane, more tolerant, more free. It should be the work of all those whom, having passed through the revolution, are morally cleansed and liberated – and such a revolution, despite all its costs, is beneficial to society.

Revolution is necessary, but not in order to destroy the old order. Its task should be to create a lawful society and state, and to build a new order: one based equally on justice, and on mercy.