INTRODUCTION TO DMITRI FURMAN

Russia's leading comparative scholar on the political systems of post-Soviet states, Dmitri Furman was born in Moscow in 1941, and studied history at Moscow State University, specializing in the history of religions—a formation whose traces are still evident in his current work. After graduating in the late 1960s, he initially focused on religious conflicts in the late Roman Empire, before turning to the contemporary world starting in the late 1970s. His book on Religion and Social Conflicts in the USA *appeared in Russian in 1981, and in English in 1984; by this time he was at the US and Canada Institute of the Soviet Academy of Sciences.*

Like many of his contemporaries, Furman greeted perestroika *with great optimism. But while much of the intelligentsia switched to a reflexive anti-Communism as the Soviet system hurtled towards its demise, Furman—with characteristic independence of mind—refused to embrace the opportunism of Yeltsin, and retained an admiration for Gorbachev that is uncommon in liberal circles. In 1992, he spent a year at the Gorbachev Foundation, before returning to the Academy of Sciences, where he began working on contemporary politics.*

Towards the end of the Soviet era, Furman—who wrote urgently of the dangers that would arise from disintegration of the USSR—observed how little was actually known at the centre about the Union's different republics. Over the next decade and a half, he would undertake, as editor or sole author, a series of studies of the former Soviet periphery: collections on Ukraine (1997), Belarus (1998), Chechnya (1999), Azerbaijan (2001), the Baltic States (2002), a monograph on Kazakhstan (2004), and dozens of separate essays and articles. Continuing with his earlier specialization, he produced works on religion in post-Soviet Russia in 2000 and 2006, as well as a collection of his political journalism, Nashi desiat' let *(Our Last Ten Years, 2001).*

Virtually alone among Russian political scientists in his comparative orientation, Furman has spoken of his political writings as analiz na begu*—'analysis on the run'. But as the interview published here makes clear, his observations are anything but improvised, combining broad historical and geographical knowledge with considered attention to deeper-lying social dynamics.*

dmitri furman

IMITATION DEMOCRACIES

The Post-Soviet Penumbra

Fifteen states emerged from the collapse of the ussr*: Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova; three on the Baltic Sea—Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania; another three in the Transcaucasus—Georgia, Azerbaijan, Armenia; and five in Central Asia—Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan. If we are seeking to understand the trajectories of these states since 1991, what categories or subgroupings offer the greatest analytical purchase?*

A purely regional subdivision does not, in my view, bring out any especially significant post-Soviet characteristics. It would be better instead to class these states according to their type of political development, which produces the following three groupings. First, countries in which power has several times been transferred to the opposition through elections, and which we can consider as being squarely on the path of democratic development. These are: Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, to which we might add Moldova—though this is a more complicated case, developing in its own distinctive fashion.

Second, countries in which power has never been transferred to the opposition, or indeed to anyone not nominated by the authorities themselves. There are four of these: Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, ruled today by Nursultan Nazarbaev and Islam Karimov, both former First Secretaries of the cp Central Committee of their respective republics; Turkmenistan, ruled by Saparmurat Niyazov, also a member of the Soviet *nomenklatura*, until his death in 2006, when the presidency was handed to one of his comrades-in-arms; and Russia, where power has twice been transferred—but to men designated by their predecessors.

These are what I have termed 'imitation democracies', characterized by a huge disparity between formal constitutional principles and the reality of authoritarian rule.

Thirdly, in between these two paths of development—democratic and authoritarian—lies a large group of countries which have, as it were, switched between the two. There are seven of these: Ukraine, Belarus, the three Transcaucasian countries—Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan—and in Central Asia, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. They have followed highly varied trajectories. Ukraine experienced one democratic rotation of power, in 1994, from its first post-Soviet president Leonid Kravchuk to the second, Leonid Kuchma; the latter then made an unsuccessful attempt to establish an 'imitation democratic' regime, leading in turn to the 'Orange Revolution' of 2004. At present, a democratic system is stabilizing in Ukraine, gradually and with great difficulty. Belarus, on the other hand, currently has a harsh authoritarian regime. But it has not been on this path from the beginning: President Lukashenko was democratically elected in 1994 as a representative of the opposition.

In Transcaucasia, there was an initial period of rule by former dissidents, followed by the establishment of imitation democratic regimes of varying severity. In Georgia, the former dissident and philologist Zviad Gamsakhurdia came to power at the close of the Soviet era, but was overthrown at the end of 1992; after a short civil war, the former Georgian CP First Secretary Eduard Shevardnadze returned to the country and established an imitation democracy. This was eventually overthrown by the 'Rose Revolution' of 2004—but it seems that the man elevated to the presidency by it, Mikheil Saakashvili, is himself now attempting to establish a similar regime.

The first post-Soviet president of Armenia—the medievalist Levon Ter-Petrosian—was removed by a bloodless military coup in 1998; thereafter, a relatively weak and mild imitation democratic regime was established. In Azerbaijan, as in Georgia, the first democratically elected president—the ex-dissident Abulfaz Elchibey—was toppled by a coup in 1993; a civil war ensued, followed by the ascent to power of Heydar Aliev who, as former head of the Azerbaijan KGB and then First Secretary of the republican CP Central Committee, is an obvious analogue to Shevardnadze. But unlike his Georgian counterpart, Aliev was able to establish a durable authoritarian regime and even hand over power to

LITHUANIA
FINLAND
Tallinn
POLAND
Riga
Vilnius
ESTONIA
LATVIA
Minsk
BELARUS
MOLDOVA
Kiev
Chisinau
Moscow
UKRAINE
Arctic Ocean
0
500 miles
RUSSIA
Sea of Okhotsk
Black Sea
GEORGIA
TURKEY
Tbilisi
Yerevan
AZERBAIJAN
Baku
ARMENIA
IRAQ
Caspian Sea
KAZAKHSTAN
Astana
UZBEKISTAN
TURKMENISTAN
Ashgabat
Tashkent
Almaty
Bishkek
KYRGYZSTAN
Dushanbe
TAJIKISTAN
IRAN
AFGHANISTAN
CHINA
MONGOLIA
Sea of Japan
NORTH KOREA
SOUTH KOREA
Yellow Sea

his son Ilham in 2003—the first quasi-dynastic transfer of power in the post-Soviet space.

Turning to Central Asia, Tajikistan was racked by a long and bloody civil war, lasting from 1992 to 1997. Emomali Rakhmonov, president since 1994, has now established an imitation democratic regime there, but it is softer and less consolidated than those of Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. In Kyrgyzstan, Askar Akaev took office in 1990, and also set up a regime of this kind; but he was toppled in 2005 by another 'colour revolution'—'Tulip' in this case—issuing in a transitional period of democratic anarchy. At present, a new imitation democratic regime, harsher than that of Akaev, is being consolidated there under Kurmanbek Bakiev, Akaev's prime minister from 2000–02.

This is a very schematic picture of post-Soviet political developments. The first two groups are identifiable enough. The third set of countries, wavering between the two paths, will eventually opt for one or the other. Ukraine, it seems to me, is already solidly on the path of democratic development; Belarus, having initially moved along the same track, is now firmly in the authoritarian camp. Relatively stable authoritarian regimes have been established in Tajikistan, Azerbaijan and Kyrgyzstan. Georgia and Armenia are still standing at the crossroads.

But what explains this grouping itself—what underlying factors influence the trajectories taken?

In my view, the deepest factor is the religious-cultural one. It is no coincidence that the first group consists of countries with a Western religious-cultural tradition—mostly Lutheran and Catholic, with the idiosyncratic addition of Orthodox Moldova. The countries in the second, authoritarian group are Muslim, with the exception of Russia. The rapid construction of democracy after 1991 in the Baltic states is undoubtedly connected to their Western religious-cultural affiliation—there was no comparably rapid or successful transition to democracy in any of the Orthodox, or mainly Orthodox, countries (Ukraine, Belarus, Russia, Moldova, Georgia). The influence of Orthodoxy on political systems is a much larger question, worthy of separate discussion; but it is evident that Orthodoxy had a different impact from Lutheranism and Catholicism, and a less favourable one for post-Soviet democratization. Similarly, the reasons why democratic processes have encountered most obstacles in

the Islamic world are complex, and the social influence of Islam is the subject of intense debate; but the same obvious facts apply in the post-Soviet space as in the rest of the world.

Of course, religious-cultural affiliations are in part a product of geography. The proximity of the Baltic states to Western Europe was important in determining their inclusion in the West. But it was not geography per se that led to this; rather, it was historical processes—the conquest of Estonia and Latvia in the 13th century by Germanic knights, the union of Lithuania with Poland in the 16th.

Naturally, though the religious-cultural factor is the most important influence on the choice of political path, it does not entirely dictate it. Nor is it the only cultural factor affecting development. A very important consideration, relatively independent of religious-cultural affiliation, is what might be called the 'political colouration' of national consciousness. All peoples have certain events and periods in their history of which they are proud, but these vary greatly in their political hue, and these differences have noticeable contemporary effects. To give an example: both Russians and Ukrainians are by and large Orthodox. The Russians created an imperial state, and the periods that loom largest in Russian national consciousness are dominated by the autocrats Peter the Great and Ivan the Terrible. The Ukrainians, meanwhile, have for most of their history been subordinated to other nations, but can look to the late medieval period for an unstable state of their own—the semi-anarchic semi-democracy of the Cossack Hetmanate of the 17th century. The differences between post-Soviet political developments in Russia and Ukraine are partly conditioned by this dissimilarity in the political colouration of national consciousness.

Another example would be the disparity between the national consciousness of, on the one hand, the Uzbeks—whose national pride is oriented towards the era of Timur, conqueror of much of Western and Central Asia in the 14th century—and on the other, that of the Kazakhs and Kyrgyz. The latter two peoples were nomads who did not create powerful states; their social order has been termed a 'nomadic democracy', since it vested weak authority in elected khans, usually selected from the Chingizid line that claimed descent from the great Mongol ruler. One could adduce many more examples of this kind. There are also a number of other cultural factors that have exerted a strong influence on

post-Soviet developments. For example, the varying degree of cultural homogeneity—in Ukraine, there are very strong regional differences, in Russia there are not—or of linguistic and cultural proximity to Russia, which affected the status of the various peoples in the Russian empire, and the extent of their subsequent russification.

What about traditional social structures?

Tribal and other loyalties undoubtedly play a role. Again, there are large variations across the post-Soviet states—some societies possessed tribal structures, others did not. Azerbaijan, for example, has no tribes, nor does Tajikistan, where regional identities carry a great deal of weight. Kazakh society, however, is different: it was traditionally divided into three *juz* or Hordes—known respectively as the Greater, Middle and Lesser—each consisting in turn of a number of tribes. Kazakhs themselves will tell you that the issue has been overstated by outsiders, but every Kazakh today knows the tribal provenance of co-workers, friends, neighbours. It is difficult, though, to say with any precision what influence tribal structures have on the present—the degree to which they have been transformed by economic and social pressures remains unclear. This is a rich and as yet largely unexplored field of research; scholars have thus far confined themselves to ethnographic description of such systems rather than analysis of their political implications. It would seem, though, that tribes do not necessarily obstruct processes of democratization—they can even assist it, by providing a basis for resistance to the imposition of authoritarian rule. Political parties can be destroyed or outlawed; tribes cannot.

The factors I have mentioned can all influence the trajectory of a given society—speeding up political developments or slowing them down, giving them various forms. But they do not determine the direction of political development itself. It is harder, in my view, for Uzbekistan to become a democracy than it is for Russia to do so, and for Russia harder than for Ukraine, and so on. But this does not mean that Uzbekistan and Russia cannot become democracies at all. When I spoke earlier about the choice of post-Soviet paths, I was referring specifically to this historical phase. In the final analysis, authoritarian systems are merely stages on a path that I am convinced leads to democracy.

Moreover, although the past explains a great deal, it does not explain everything. Contemporary factors, such as those of personality, are also highly significant. To give one example: Belarussian culture, as I see it, provides a much better basis on which to construct a modern democratic order than that of Russia: there is no 'imperial complex', and in the west of the country there remain some social memories of the medieval Lithuanian state and of interwar Poland, a more liberal society than the Soviet Union. But Belarus today has a very authoritarian regime, harsher than that in Moscow. Purely personal factors clearly played a role here, in this case the strong personality of Belarussian president Lukashenko.

The former Soviet Union in effect occupied the territory of the former Russian empire, which had conquered the surrounding peoples in a gradual process starting with Ivan the Terrible's capture of Kazan in 1552. The vast Siberian landmass to the east followed relatively swiftly, but other additions came more slowly: present-day Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova were absorbed piecemeal in the 17th and 18th centuries, the Transcaucasus and the northern steppe of what is now Kazakhstan were seized in the first half of the 19th century, the rest of Central Asia in the second, although a handful of minor khanates remained technically sovereign even until the Revolutions of 1917. Did the method and speed of their imperial incorporation also affect the further development of these territories? And how would you characterize the Tsarist empire relative to those of other colonial powers?

I would put more stress on the period of incorporation, and the level of political development of the peoples concerned. The Poles, for example, possessed a modern state when they were subjugated, and so could not simply be assimilated, whereas the various Siberian *ethnies* had no such political structures or cultural legacies. But in any case, I feel that the term 'colonialism' is not appropriate to the Tsarist empire—in the same way as it does not really apply to the Ottoman or Austro-Hungarian empire. Colonies, in my view, are sharply separated from the metropole both in spatial and in juridical-administrative terms, as in the case of Western 'overseas' empires. The Russian empire was further distinguished from those of European powers and the Ottomans by the presence within it of a strong demographic core of the 'principal nationality'. There was a powerful Russian centre surrounded by a very mixed periphery, inhabited by the most diverse range of cultures. The centre gradually consolidated itself and expanded, leading to an intensive process of settlement of the

periphery by Russians. Alongside this there was a gradual russification of the minority populations.

How does the Soviet system compare with this?

The Bolsheviks created a very contradictory but flexible system. The Union that was formed in 1922 was, on the one hand, the heir to the Russian empire, where Russians were officially the 'older brothers'; on the other, it was a union of formally equal peoples and republics—the imperial aspect was camouflaged by Communist ideology. Russia clearly still occupied a special position. From Stalin onwards, the USSR was no longer seen as the kernel of a future world communist society, but rather as a new avatar of the Russian empire. Unlike the other republics, Russia did not have its own Central Committee, its own Academy of Sciences, and so on, because it was tacitly assumed that the all-Union Central Committee and Academy were basically Russian. For Russians, the USSR was to a significantly greater extent 'their' state than it was for other nationalities.

Settlement of the periphery by Russians continued—to the extent that by 1989, for example, ethnic Russians composed 38 per cent of the population of Kazakhstan. There was also a tremendous degree of cultural and linguistic russification—though much of this took place voluntarily, and was often connected to possibilities for social and economic advancement. In fact, two opposed processes took place in parallel in the Soviet period: alongside substantial russification, there was a consolidation of national self-consciousness, as the USSR promoted the cultures of non-Russian peoples through the Union's formal structures. In some cases, it made the nations themselves: in Central Asia, for instance, the Bolsheviks drew up states according to ethno-linguistic categories that they had themselves devised—in effect creating identities that later took on substance, in a way similar to British imperial surveys of India in the 19th century. Hence, for example, the fact that a majority of Belarussians now speaks Russian, rather than Belarussian, is testimony to the extent of russification; but the fact that they even call themselves Belarussian speaks of the 'nation-making' dynamic sponsored by the Soviet system, since they would scarcely have done so in 1917.

The consolidation of national self-consciousness inevitably led to a rise in nationalist sentiment towards the end of the Soviet period. By this time, moreover, the balance of ethnic forces, as it were, had begun to

change. The birth rate of the Russians dropped sharply, and with it their demographic expansion to the periphery; population growth among Central Asian peoples remained very high, such that a reverse process began, of demographic expansion of Asian peoples into Russia.

What about the actual functioning of Communist rule—how did this vary across the Soviet Union, and how should it be periodized?

The Communist system evolved in broadly the same manner everywhere, and correspondingly falls into the same periods across the USSR—Stalinism was Stalinism wherever you were. There was a common formal institutional structure, and a single ideology. But these were applied to very different peoples, with distinct cultures and pasts. This actual diversity made its way to the surface—a variegated picture showing through the monochrome red paint daubed over it. Formally, the Estonian and Turkmen CPs had the same structures; but the lives of *raikom* heads in the two republics, conditioned by local traditions and informal practices, were not at all alike. Formally, Moscow had the same amount of control over all the republics, but in practice this varied hugely, both in degree and in form.

The USSR was not, of course, the federal state its Constitution made it out to be, but neither was it as unitary as is often supposed. The Baltic republics, for example, were 'allowed' more than others, and life there was significantly freer than in Russia or Ukraine. On the other hand, in Central Asia and the Transcaucasus there was no ideological 'liberalism' of any kind, but rather de facto despotisms, about whose internal life Moscow knew little and understood less. These were in effect closed systems living their own separate lives. Central Asian CP heads had only to turn up in Moscow bearing gifts and mouthing the right slogans, and they would be left in peace. The notable exception came in 1986, when Gorbachev removed the Kazakh CP head Dinmukhammed Kunaev—sparking riots in the streets of Almaty. This was the first serious manifestation of nationalist sentiment in the USSR under *perestroika*, and played a much larger role in the unravelling of the Soviet order than is now generally acknowledged.

The disintegration of the USSR unfolded in widely varying ways—while the Baltic states declared independence in early 1990, for example, several others

did so only after the Soviet Union had been formally dissolved by the Belovezha Accords. How would you explain these variations in 'escape velocity'?

For obvious reasons, those most ready to exit were the Baltic states, which had only been incorporated into the USSR in 1940. The least ready, probably, was Belarus, which had a very weak national self-consciousness and was highly russified. But the main factor was the weakness of opposition to the USSR's dissolution from the Russian centre. However much the Baltic people had struggled to exit the Union, if there had been concerted Russian opposition to it, the USSR might have remained intact to this day (though not, of course, forever). The Russian democratic movement therefore made a critical contribution to the collapse of the Soviet Union. The ideological motivations of this amorphous movement were complex: a small minority sought to reject empire, while many supposed that Russians were being 'exploited' by the periphery in the Soviet system, and that their lives would improve if the USSR were to fall apart; the non-Russian republics would in any case 'not go anywhere'. The independence of the Soviet successor states was not understood as being real, and the Commonwealth of Independent States that was created at Belovezha was presented as a revised version of the same union centred around Russia, whose first form had been the Russian Empire and second, the USSR.

What overall impact did the Soviet experience have on the successor states' subsequent trajectories?

This is not an easy thing to gauge. The very diversity of outcomes after 1991 suggests that deeper-lying factors weigh more heavily. In some cases, however, it seems to have helped prepare the way for democracy. Prior to their absorption by the USSR, the Baltic states had been ruled by more or less fascist regimes—Lithuania for ten years after 1926, Estonia and Latvia from 1934 until 1940. After the fall of the Soviet Union it was a different story altogether. Similarly, Ukraine's period of independence after 1917 was utter chaos, but after 1991, it too formed a modern democratic state. Elsewhere in the Union, modern societies formed under Soviet rule, which were eventually the basis for viable states. The USSR in effect provided the structures for this statehood in advance, forms which had only to be filled with real content. All the national republics had 'parliaments', Councils of Ministers, Academies of Sciences, and so on; all the borders between republics were clearly defined. The Communist ideology that held the Soviet Union together may have died, but the formal

statehood of the USSR's constituent parts made its collapse a relatively bloodless process.

The economic and social outcomes of the fall of the USSR were appalling, however—bringing sudden impoverishment and unemployment to millions, as well as economic and monetary collapse, and several civil wars. How would you characterize the political upshot of these traumatic changes?

Almost everywhere, the advent of democracy brought anarchy, and in some cases criminal elements even came to power: the warlords Tengiz Kitovani and Jaba Ioseliani in Georgia, Suret Huseinov in Azerbaijan and Sangak Safarov in Tajikistan. In most countries there was soon a reaction, in the form of a strong demand for order. Communist ideology was now too weak to fulfil this, and only in Moldova did the horrors of 'transition' lead to the Communists returning to power, after elections in 2001. Otherwise, no anti-democratic or anti-market ideology arose, and the reaction therefore took shape in efforts to strengthen the power of presidents. These figures, elected by popular suffrage, took their distance from a democracy that had resulted in chaos; but they did not negate it ideologically, instead opting to preserve its forms while emasculating them. Thus, with the exception of the Baltic states, imitation democracies were established across the post-Soviet space.

What are the main features of 'imitation democracy', and what have been the principal stages of its development since 1991?

The distinguishing trait of this model is the combination of democratic constitutional forms with a reality of authoritarian rule. Such systems arise when conditions in a given society are not ripe for democracy, and yet there is no ideological alternative to it. In the contemporary world, for example, there are practically speaking no alternative ideologies. These regimes are therefore compelled to imitate democracy. The model does not only apply to post-Soviet states—it is characteristic of the post-colonial world too; the regimes of Suharto in Indonesia or Sadat and Mubarak in Egypt are in principle not dissimilar to those of the Alievs in Azerbaijan or Nazarbaev in Kazakhstan. I should further emphasize that imitation democracies are not simply transitional forms, but rather distinct systems, functioning and developing according to their own logic. Viewed within a longer time-frame, of course, they are transitional—but from such a standpoint one could also say the same of Soviet power.

Given that the Soviet successor states all departed from a shared institutional starting point, the first stages of their development have a great deal in common. Across the post-Soviet space there was a wave of conflicts between presidents and parliaments, many of the latter popularly elected just before the Soviet collapse. The forms of the conflict varied, but its essence was the same. For example, Yeltsin's dissolution of parliament in 1993 took a violent, bloody form, with tanks sent onto the streets of Moscow and shells fired at the Supreme Soviet building. Elsewhere the conflict was milder: Nazarbaev was a more flexible politician than Yeltsin, and no blood was spilt even though he dissolved two parliaments in a row in 1993 and 1995. There were analogous conflicts in Kyrgyzstan in 1995 and Belarus in 1996.

Attempts to manipulate the electoral process also began everywhere, ranging from disqualification of dangerous parties to out-and-out vote-rigging. There was also a string of new constitutions, which mandated strong presidential power and limited the prerogatives of parliament. Russia adopted a new constitution in 1993, as did Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan; Belarus followed in 1994, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia in 1995, and Ukraine in 1996. Impeachment of the president was made impossible either in principle or in practice, and the post of vice-president was abolished; only one person could now be 'popularly elected'. Yet even though the new constitutions were more congenial to post-Soviet rulers than the earlier ones, for authoritarian rulers any kind of constitution is an inconvenience; hence even the new texts have frequently been amended, and still more frequently violated.

Initially, post-Soviet presidents had each been first among equals—whether they emerged from dissident milieux, like Elchibey and Gamsakhurdia, or from the Soviet *nomenklatura*. But they soon moved to marginalize their former comrades-in-arms, and conflicts at the summit of power unfolded along similar lines everywhere. There were confrontations between president and vice-president—in Russia, Yeltsin versus Aleksandr Rutskoi; in Uzbekistan, Karimov versus Shukrullo Mirsaidov; in Kyrgyzstan, Akaev versus Feliks Kulov; in Kazakhstan, Nazarbaev versus Erik Asanbaev—as well as between presidents and speakers of parliament: Yeltsin versus Ruslan Khasbulatov; Nazarbaev versus Serikbolsyn Abdildin; in Azerbaijan, Aliev versus Rasim Kuliev. The presidents won everywhere except in Moldova, where the incumbent

Mircea Snegur was defeated in the 1996 presidential election by the speaker of parliament, Petru Lucinschi.

Privatization became a means for the consolidation of presidential power everywhere, as leaders effectively nominated millionaires who would then be dependent on them. The processes through which post-Soviet elites were created is a murky and complex one, and has received little study. But it is significant that the key positions were precisely not filled by the former *nomenklatura*, but rather by more marginal figures. This is something I understood more clearly with regard to Russia from my work on Kazakhstan. In the early 1990s, Nazarbaev allocated lucrative oil contracts and handed state-owned companies to ethnic non-Kazakhs—some were Jews, others foreign companies. The goals were, firstly, to prevent any Kazakh from acquiring sufficient wealth and power to pose a challenge to the incumbent, and second, to block the enrichment of any one clan over all the others. Once Nazarbaev had consolidated his power, however, a handful of Kazakhs were allowed to enrich themselves.

In Russia, a similar logic may explain why Yeltsin allowed the emergence of so many Jewish oligarchs—six out of the seven wealthiest bankers, for example. It was far better from Yeltsin's point of view for the likes of Berezovsky and Abramovich to become colossally rich than for an ethnic Russian to do so; as relative outsiders in Russian national life, they would be unable to mobilize a mass following, and could later be shunted aside with relative ease if need be. Indeed, when the Russian oligarchs threatened to escape the president's control, they were swiftly brought to heel by Putin: the cases of Gusinsky and Khodorkovsky are well known. But even earlier than this, an analogous fate befell the Kazakh oligarchs Galymzhan Zhakiyanov and Mukhtar Ablyazov.

The commonalities are striking. But how do these aspects interrelate?

One problem flows from another. The main concern is to guarantee the president's power, and ensure there are no alternatives to it. But for this to be the case, there need to be no alternatives within the parliament either—hence the need for presidential parties; examples would include United Russia, Otan in Kazakhstan, Yeni Azerbaijan, the People's Democratic Party in Tajikistan. These are entirely lifeless, artificial creations, completely unlike ruling parties such as the Chinese CP or Mexican PRI, which came to power through genuine social revolutions. To ensure

their success, imitation democratic rulers need to control elections; and for that, you need a tight grip on the media, and so on. Murder of political opponents becomes a feature of political life: journalists such as Anna Politkovskaya in Russia or Georgi Gongadze in Ukraine, the politicians Zamanbek Nurkadilov and Altynbek Sarsenbaev in Kazakhstan.

Where does this all lead? In the end, to crisis and collapse. Increased control over society means the atrophy of 'feedback mechanisms'. Once elections become pure fiction and the media are on a tight leash, the authorities lose all sense of what is happening in the country. The strengthening of control leads, 'dialectically', to a loss of control. The quality of the elite deteriorates, due to systematic promotion of the weakest and most servile. Corruption reaches monstrous proportions. Legitimacy disappears, since there is no alternative ideology and democracy itself becomes an increasingly transparent fiction. Moreover, as societies develop, the psychological bases for imitation democracy are eroded. What had seemed incredible freedom in 1991—for example, the ability to travel overseas—has now become the norm, and it becomes more and more difficult for new generations to be satisfied with imitation democracy.

How do such regimes fall?

There have been three such episodes in the post-Soviet space: in Ukraine and Georgia in 2004, and Kyrgyzstan in 2005. In all three, events unfolded according to the same schema. 'Colour revolutions' coincide with elections—the moment at which the contradiction between the forms and the reality of imitation democracy becomes most evident. The results are falsified, and the opposition refuses to recognize them. Note that the opposition here appeals to the constitution, against authorities who are flouting it. A confrontation arises, in which the opposition—since it is appealing to the law—tries to refrain from violence. If they can mobilize sufficient mass support; if strong pressure is applied to the authorities from outside; if the opposition can guarantee the personal safety of those in power—and one could add a number of other 'ifs'—then the authorities surrender. But this does not always happen: for every successful 'colour revolution' there are several that are defeated. While victorious in Ukraine, Georgia and Kyrgyzstan, revolutions on the same template were defeated in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Belarus in 2005–06, with a further unsuccessful attempt coming in Armenia in 2008.

I noted before that imitation democracy is not solely a post-Soviet phenomenon; by the same token, neither are 'colour revolutions'. Another example of the phenomenon occurred in Serbia in 2000. Events unfolded according to a similar pattern, with African modifications, in Kenya and most recently in Zimbabwe. A further point worth stressing is that colour revolutions are possible only under relatively 'mild' regimes, where there is a legal opposition, and where elections may be falsified but at least mean something. In countries such as Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, there is no legal opposition, and elections have been reduced to mere ritual. Such regimes may be more durable, but their ends will obviously be harsher, possessing more of the classical features of a revolution. In these cases, the end comes unexpectedly and has an unpredictable outcome. The prototype for this kind of revolt in the post-Soviet space is the Andijan events of May 2005 in Uzbekistan, where protests erupted with no relation to the electoral calendar, and completely unexpectedly for the authorities—the ostensible cause being the trial of a group of local businessmen who were members of an Islamist organization. The demonstrations in Andijan were brutally repressed, and several hundred were killed. But if the unrest had spread to other cities, and if the government troops had refused to shoot, it could easily have become a successful, 'normal' revolution, closer in type to the Iranian Islamic revolution than to the 'colour' model.

But whatever the type of revolution that succeeds against an imitation democratic regime, it does not necessarily lead to actual democracy. If the society in question has not reached the requisite level of political development, then after a period of anarchy a new regime forms, analogous to the previous one, but perhaps with a slightly different ideological colouration. Various countries have experienced this kind of circular motion—in my understanding, Nigeria, Pakistan, a slew of Latin American countries. Kyrgyzstan is currently caught within precisely such a cycle.

Would you say that Ukraine and Georgia, after their colour revolutions, have moved out of this loop?

Ukraine has, yes. Regardless of who wins the ongoing power struggle, the basic 'rules of the game' have been settled. In Georgia, everything is more complicated. In order for the country to move to the democratic path, it needs at least once to hold clean elections and have a democratic

rotation of power. But elections in Georgia—such as those of May 2008—are considerably less free and democratic than in Ukraine.

How do you explain the anomalous place of Moldova in your schema?

Moldova's trajectory has been highly distinctive. It is the only post-Soviet country where the reaction to the anti-Communist revolution of 1989–91 brought the Communists back to power; not Communists 'repainted' as democrats—those are in power everywhere—but real ones. At the same time, it is closer to stable democracy than all the other post-Soviet countries except the Baltic states and Ukraine. How did this happen? Moldovan society is deeply divided over the question of national self-identification: who are the Moldovans—Romanians or a separate people? What is today called Moldova was formerly part of a princedom vassal to the Ottoman empire, torn from the rest of the historical Moldovan principality as a result of the Russo-Turkish War of 1806–12; thereafter, as Bessarabia, it formed part of the Russian empire, and its predominantly peasant population developed very differently from that on the other side of the frontier.

At the end of the 1980s, movements emerged advocating 'reunification' with Romania, and in the following years, the matter of national identity became the organizing question of Moldovan political life. The resultant divisions prevented the Moldovan elite from consolidating around the president, as elites elsewhere did, in order to prevent the Communists from coming to power. The 'alternativeless' regime in Russia, for example, was founded on the principle of excluding the Communists—with full support from the West, which backed Yeltsin's coup of 1993 and the very dishonest elections of 1996. But the Moldovan example indicates that the Communists were capable of accepting the democratic 'rules of the game'—and shows that a democratic victory for the Communists is not necessarily a catastrophe for democracy. There was also a strong subjective factor at play in Moldova, in the person of the level-headed Communist leader Vladimir Voronin.

Beyond the logic you have outlined, what other factors—geopolitical, cultural, socio-economic—distinguish one imitation democracy from another?

There are distinctions. The most vicious imitation democratic regime was that of Niyazov in Turkmenistan: people would kiss his hand,

there are gold statues of him—it was a genuinely grotesque dictatorship, which had a formally valid constitution containing all manner of democratic principles. The regimes of Kuchma in Ukraine, Akaev in Kyrgyzstan and Shevardnadze in Georgia were relatively weak; the societies, too, are completely different. Just as, in the USSR, a common institutional and ideological structure was imposed on different peoples and was modified by their cultures, in post-Soviet times the general logic of imitation democracy has been modulated in the various countries where it has taken root.

Of course, material factors are also important—profits from oil and gas, for example, which have aided in the consolidation of such regimes. Shevardnadze and Aliev began their tenure on similar bases: toppling of an ex-dissident president by an alliance of former *nomenklatura* and semi-criminal elements, with a former Soviet leader as figurehead. The subsequent divergence in their fortunes is partly due to the fact that Azerbaijan has oil and Georgia does not.

Given the similarities between post-Soviet countries, how would you explain the CIS's failure to become an authentic confederal successor to the USSR?

These very similarities are the explanation. The Arab countries furnish a good example of the same logic: they share a language, a religion, and there is even the idea of a single Arab nation. But despite numerous attempts at unification, nothing happened. Why? Authoritarian power cannot be delegated: either you have it or you do not. This is why proposals for a union of Belarus and Russia have come to nothing—losing full power for Lukashenko would mean losing power altogether. At most, the CIS has functioned as a kind of post-Soviet Holy Alliance, a union of presidents against their oppositions.

There are other reasons, however. Given the varying socio-economic and demographic 'weights' of the countries, it is impossible to establish a stable institutional form: any union would either mean subjugation of the rest to Russia or, to give the illusion of an equal union, exploitation of Russia by the small countries. Memory of the past—of the Russian Empire and the USSR—is also a strong factor, giving rise to an extremely unhealthy psychological atmosphere in the CIS. We have recently witnessed the Russian–Georgian war, the product of Russia's struggle to hold Georgia within its sphere of influence, involving support for

separatist forces there, and of the Georgian struggle to integrate its territory and escape from this Russian sphere into NATO. The outcome was a military defeat for Georgia, and subsequent diplomatic recognition by Russia of the enclaves of Abkhazia and South Ossetia—leading to a break in relations with Georgia, and the latter's withdrawal from the CIS altogether.

You say that there is an inevitable degradation in imitation democracies, leading to eventual collapse. But in favourable economic conditions and in the absence of legal opposition, why would such a regime not be able to continue indefinitely?

For a long time, yes—especially with such high world prices for oil and gas; Turkmenistan has plentiful reserves of the latter, Kazakhstan has both oil and gas, for example. In very favourable circumstances even archaic regimes such as that of Saudi Arabia can perpetuate themselves. But not indefinitely. In the case of Russia, it is simply impossible to believe that a system whereby the president nominates his successor, who in turn nominates his successor, who does the same in his turn, could continue for the rest of the 21st century. The chain will inevitably break at some point.

Might the Putin–Medvedev combination bring some modification of the imitation democratic model?

If Putin retains real power and Medvedev is merely a figurehead, it would reduce the significance of Putin's submission to constitutional rules in stepping down. We might then end up with a more personalized regime along the lines of the Somoza clan in Nicaragua, whose members were periodically appointed president. By contrast, if Medvedev becomes a genuine head of government, restricted to two terms, this would encourage the emergence of a system in which constitutional norms are observed, and in which power is not personalized. In that case, the situation might resemble more the rule of the PRI in Mexico, where presidents did name their successors, but their terms in office were strictly limited. Both the comparators I have mentioned were imitation democracies, but the first, harsher and more repressive, ended badly, while the second exited the scene relatively painlessly. Nonetheless, Russia's imitation democracy of today is significantly closer to actual democracy than the Tsarist or Soviet systems were; to make the transition, what is needed is only for

the constitution to be observed, and the contested elections for which it provides to be held. But this cannot be the result of ‘reform’ from above: it requires a battle against the regime, involving mass mobilizations like those of the Ukrainian Orange Revolution.

What possible scenarios do you see for the future development of these states?

In the short term, in countries with harsh authoritarian systems, deep political crises are unavoidable: I foresee there being Kazakh, Tajik, Uzbek and Turkmen ‘revolutions’, which will not conform to the ‘colour’ model, or necessarily lead to democracy. A deep political crisis is also inevitable in Russia. But in a longer-term perspective, I am convinced that democracy will triumph everywhere. It is a necessary component of modernity. After all, in the majority of Western countries, the path to democracy was also very difficult.