What Cripples Democracy in Russia?

Korotich, Vitaly

Boston University Center for the Study of Conflict, Ideology, and Policy

http://hdl.handle.net/2144/3469

Boston University
What Cripples Democracy in Russia?

By VITALY KOROTICH
Former Editor, Ogonek

[Mr. Korotich recently resigned as editor-in-chief of the weekly magazine Ogonek, and expects to embark on a university teaching career. Under his distinguished editorship, Ogonek has made a signal contribution to the fight for democracy in the Soviet Union and the exposure of political abuses.

In his article for Perspective, completed just ten days before the abortive putsch in August, Mr. Korotich displays striking prescience in his prediction of a possible "little miniature coup d'etat"—a perevorotik, to use his original derisive term—condemned to failure . . . ]

In the Soviet Union we are constantly trying to guess when the next political shift will occur. Such events as the resignation of the former leader of the ultraconservative Russian Communist Party, or the latest in a series of threats by the agitated Col. Alksnis to carry out a coup d'etat, are now regarded as only minor news. Gradually the range of mutations that are possible in the USSR has shown itself to be unlimited. The system is regulated neither by logic nor by law. I have trouble imagining an American colonel who calls for the overthrow of the President in a television interview. In our country it evidently is possible. In fact, everything is possible, since endless disputes continue about how many parties are needed in a democratic society, yet on the other hand there is no discussion at all of why a complete paralysis of laws has arisen, why they are ineffective.
I continue to think that the American democratic model rests on the power of law and on nothing else. In American political life there are no political parties at all as they are understood in the Soviet Union, i.e. with a permanent membership, rigid statutes, regular meetings, and membership dues. Our model of democracy, if it can be considered such, rests on a framework of enthusiasm and hopes, emotions—anything you like, rather than sober calculation and the force of law guaranteeing democratic changes.

The conservatives are incapable of carrying out a coup d'état on the national plane. They can frighten people with the prospect of one and engineer provocations. They would be able to stage a little miniature coup d'état, but nothing more than that. Following standard recipes, colonels would be capable of seizing power within a particular area of territory—the so-called "Algerian option," the dream of the French anti-de Gaulle forces—and would be capable of massacring a number of people who are striving for major reforms.

This represents a danger for specific people, for instance for me personally, as well as for a few thousand other people. But at the strategic level our zealous superpatriots are impotent. For you in America, they are not a danger—you are beyond their reach, indeed they will fawn before you. They are capable of destroying, but incapable of building anything, or of feeding the population. After carrying out repressive measures, they will still need to feed the infuriated population. Indeed, now even the most obdurate colonels understand that they are not up to this task. They frighten people, they carry out killings in the Baltic countries, they would be glad to see terrible confusion in the country so they can flex their muscles. But that is the extent of it.

The liberals also are incapable of real action, since they have only now begun to make attempts at joining ranks. I have taken part in numerous meetings of founding groups trying to create a semblance of political parties, but every time I ran up against our Soviet fractiousness and the enormous variety of different political positions, which do not unify but only divide good people. A lot is being said about the repetition of the
mistakes that were committed by the liberals in the tragic year 1917, when a group of politicians, small in number but inspired by its own demagoguery and and successful in deceiving the popular masses with this same demagoguery, carried out the October *coup d’etat*, the consequences of which we are still paying for today.

Openly fascist forces are joining ranks in greater and greater numbers, from "*Pamyat*" to new populist leaders like Zhirinovsky. They enjoy support because their slogans are simple and readily comprehensible, and their recipes elementary, but they are a long way from gaining power. Gorbachev remains the leader of the communist party—and this is the strangest fact of all. After making so many departures from communist dogmas, and even going to London—where Marx is buried—in order to bury the very idea of communist superiority, he remains as before occupying his supreme communist post, unable to make up his mind finally to break with an idea that it is totally compromised and politically dead.

Today, Gorbachev seems to me to be the hostage of the party in the same way as a man who has saddled a tiger becomes the hostage of the tiger. It's impossible to get off the tiger, because it will tear him apart if he does, but at the same time it's difficult to ride the beast, since it is uncontrollable. Nevertheless, Gorbachev is trying to master the art of riding in such races. He is afraid of abandoning this gigantic structure to the boneheaded conservatives, and he also fears a possible rebellion on the part of the KGB and the army.

Despite the fact that Gorbachev has nothing in common with the Lenin-Stalinist variant of the communist idea, he is unwilling to legalize his divorce from the dogmatic communists. But there is yet another obstacle. Gorbachev needs the backing of the transnational forces represented by the party, the army, and the KGB, since the population is breaking up more and more into separate ethnic groups and it is becoming ever more difficult for a supranational president to find a point of support.
After enumerating all these obstacles—and expressing the hope that the congress of
democratic forces in September as well as the congresses of the national communist
parties in November and December will clarify the situation—I would just like to say
something about another strategic danger that in my view now unmistakably confronts
us. I am referring to the fact that we still have not escaped from the past. On neither
side of the ocean. I am deeply disturbed by this problem.

The twentieth century has been the century of hate. The October revolution in Russia
was born above all of hate—social and class hate, hatreds of all kinds. Before this there
had been the world war, and immediately following the revolution communism and
nazism began their deadly march across Europe. We experienced the Kristallnacht and
the Stalinist terror. Human life came to be valued less and less, so that World War II had
a logic of its own, for mountains of corpses no longer surprised anyone. After World War
II we immediately found ourselves on the threshold of World War III. There followed the
events that took place in Eastern Europe, the Korean War, the Cold War, and the Cuban
missile crisis . . . .

Terrible forces of hatred grew up and became ever stronger. The military-industrial
complexes had never before ruled the world with such unprecedented power and
confidence.

But suddenly hope arose. Presidents kissed each other and signed mutual friendship
pacts, a struggle for civil rights went on, and as a result these rights were indeed
expanded. The world is opening up.

However, the apparatus of hate which evolved over the course of the twentieth century
is still alive and strong. The thousands of generals, the vast quantities of armaments
that debilitate the peoples of the world, the hotbeds of local conflict, and the striving of
national military-industrial complexes to create such conflicts—all this is a problem of
the gravest importance today. In my country they have become the main conflict which
people face. It will be impossible to build a market economy while about one-half of Soviet industry works for war.

So far, it seems to be impossible to extract all this money from the pockets of the generals. The generals don't want war—they are normal people—but they absolutely need to have an image of an enemy, they need to arm themselves against somebody: for them, continued tensions in international relations are indispensable, and that means that they will deliberately provoke such tensions. I am very much afraid of mutual understandings between the military-industrial complexes of various countries—greatly afraid when I see the frequent pictures of generals from various nations posing together on the front page of The New York Times. I would very much like to be mistaken, but I continue to fear alliances and accords between the military-industrial complexes, which could bring us great misfortunes.

I am a Soviet People's Deputy from the huge Ukrainian industrial city of Khar'kov. A gigantic tank plant just closed down in the city. In my view, the 55,000 tanks that the Soviet Army already has in its arsenal should last the generals for a while yet.

I was very glad to receive a letter from the Governor of Ohio. In this letter he proposed that the Soviet Union and the United States begin the conversion of their tank production lines on a joint basis. Perhaps this is the right way to solve the problem—to begin retooling missile and tank plants under strict supervision, and in this way return to people the resources stolen from them by the military-industrial complexes.

It seems to me that if Gorbachev wants to restore his former lofty reputation, both in his own country and in the world outside, he should give a speech in the very near future in which he condemns the philosophy and practice of hatred, which for many years has provided the basis of Soviet national policy. Such a step might become the start of a new spiral of changes in the life of humanity. Everything that I have said in this article is merely an attempt to convey some thoughts about the reasons that our return to humanity has been so difficult, why the path has proved so arduous. There have been
many causes, both of an internal and a more general nature. But the main cause is that we need to renounce our own past with greater decisiveness and with greater honesty. We have no time left to gradually gear ourselves up in order to part with our past.

I am now returning home in order to do everything I can to help. Today, it is possible to do more than at any time before.

Copyright Boston University Trustees 1991
Unless otherwise indicated, all articles appearing in this journal have been commissioned especially for *Perspective*. This article was originally published at [http://www.bu.edu/iscip/vol2/Korotich.html](http://www.bu.edu/iscip/vol2/Korotich.html).