POST-SOVIET TRANSITIONS AND DEMOCRATIZATION:

TOWARD A THEORY-BUILDING

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Paper for presentation at the 29th ECPR Joint Session of Workshops, Grenoble, France, 6-11 April 2001
Workshop 2 “Political Transformations in Soviet successor States: the States of the CIS in comparative and theoretical perspective”
Introduction

It is a widespread belief among political scientists that the best approach to analyze politics in any given society is a marriage between comparative politics and area studies. As to studies of Soviet and post-Soviet politics, this marriage has been developed in a complicated way. Even in 1960s-1980s, Sovietologists have borrowed some concepts from comparative politics (see Almond, 1990). In mid-1990s the problem of coexistence of “universalism” that taken roots in the comparative politics, and “particularism” that reflected specific post-Communist realities, became a core of polemic among scholars (Schmitter and Karl, 1994, 1995, Bunce, 1995a, 1995b). By 2000s those debates seems to be exhausted: studies of post-Soviet politics in a comparative perspective are obviously a mainstream of scholarly works elsewhere. Yet, this comparatively oriented focus of analysis opens broad opportunities for explanation of peculiar features of Russia (and other post-Soviet polities) such as federalism (Stepan, 2000), party system (Golosov, 1999a), or voting behavior (Colton, 2000). But while one could analyze regime changes in post-Soviet societies, conventional models of “transitions to democracy” shown their incompleteness and insufficiency. Say, some attempts to describe Russia as a “hybrid regime” (see Gel’mán, 1999b, Melville, 1999a, 1999b, Shevtsova, 1999) or use other descriptive “adjectives” for so-called “new democracies” (Collier and Levitsky, 1997), makes a little innovative step forward to explain the very fact that regime changes in Russia and other post-Soviet societies are definitely beyond those textbook schemes of “transition to democracy”. Indeed, the label of “hybrid regimes” rather serves as a residual category that “seems to be neither democracy nor dictatorship” (Bunce, 2000: 723). No wonder that the need of new analytical frameworks posed a new question for research agenda that symbolically represented in a title of one panel at 1999 APSA annual meeting: “Russia as a Comparative Case ... of What?”
This question turns us to the well-known typology of case studies by Arend Lijphart (Lijphart, 1971: 691-692). Lijphart, who left aside atheoretical and interpretive case studies, argued that those theory-confirming or theory-infirming case studies (i.e., theory-testing) have few value for a scientific discovery rather than hypotheses-generating case studies, including deviant case analyses (i.e., theory-building). In fact, theory-building case studies makes possible not only to explain causality of investigated cases, but to establish new theoretical approaches that could be useful for study of broader social and political phenomena. Thus, theory-building political inquiry could launch a “research cycle” (Skocpol and Somers, 1980) in a study of post-Soviet politics.

It would be too naive to solve such a research task in a single paper, while it is required long-term collective efforts of international scholarly community. The goal of this paper is much more modest: to reconsider some conceptual frameworks for analysis of democracy and democratization in the light of experience of post-Soviet political developments. For this purpose, I shall: 1) discuss theoretical perspectives of models of democracy in post-Soviet societies; 2) analyze explanatory powers of major schools of thought of democratization; 3) formulate distinctions of regime transitions in the post-Soviet area; 4) provide some theses about how (and, to some extent, why) political contestation and political institutions have emerged (or not emerged) in the post-USSR; 5) propose some ideas for an agenda of future research.

**Definitions redefined: democracy and political regime**

Paradoxically, but it is hardly to say that the experience of last thirty years of studies of transitions to democracy as a special field in political science (after the appearance of the seminal article by Dankwart Rustow (1970)) have a significant impact on better
understanding of democracy per se. “Transitologists” merely accepted existed definitions of democracy as a “point of arrival” of the transition process by default and without special discussions (see Merkel, 1998: 33-35). Meanwhile, it is not so obvious, to what extent these concepts could serve as useful analytical tools for studies of politics in transition, and what kind of innovative knowledge they could provide. From this viewpoint, however, most widespread models of democracy seem vulnerable in the light of post-Soviet political practices.

In fact, using typology of David Held (Held, 1996), one could say that the most of theorists of “transition to democracy” explicitly (see, for example, Huntington, 1991, Schmitter and Karl, 1991) or implicitly accepted one of two conceptual models of democracy. 1) “competitive elitism” in its Schumpeterian version that associated democracy with “individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people’s vote” (Schumpeter, 1947: 269). 2) pluralist model of “polyarchy” by Robert Dahl that includes two vital dimensions of democracy such as competitiveness and participation, while the set of major civic and political rights and freedoms serves as a basic indicator of democracy (Dahl, 1971: 2-6). Although some scholars of democratization focused attention on distinctions between “minimal” (procedural) and “maximal” (substantive) dimensions of democracy (see, for example, O’Donnell, 1994, 1996, 1998, Diamond, 1999), or paid attention to different levels of consolidation of new democracies (Linz and Stepan, 1996, Merkel, 1998), these issues are not a part of agenda of post-Soviet transitions, at least, as yet. Thus, those substantive issues of democratization such a degree of acceptance of democratic values among masses and elites, institutionalization of party systems, etc., are still beyond the scope of this paper, which is focused on “minimal” requirements of democracy in post-Soviet countries.

First of all, both Schumpeterian and Dahl’s models are ideal-type schemes that makes their use methodologically difficult in terms of measuring of degree of democracy (see, for
example, Bollen, 1991, Beetham, 1994, Fish, 1998). Therefore, both one-dimensional models of Schumpeterian democracy and two-dimensional Dahl’s polyarchy could not be viewed as a black-and-white dichotomy. For example, it is not so easy to evaluate Russia within the framework of polyarchy, while only five of eight Dahl’s indicators of democracy works more or less meaningfully (see Brown, 1999). Even simple test of “free and fair elections” could be irrelevant at the time of “machine politics” and “parties of power”. Under these circumstances outcomes of election (even competitive one) depends to a certain degree upon opportunities of ruling groups for administrative mobilization of masses as well as electoral fraud, not to mention systematically unequal assess of candidates to campaign, as it was in case of Russia’s 1996 presidential elections (see Treisman, 1998, McFaul, 1997, Gel’man and Elizarov, 1999). But if elections are neither serve as a mechanism of power shift, nor affect to governmental policies, their role and meaning are completely different from those of Schumpeterian model. In an extreme case (that is not so rare in post-Soviet area) elections could be non-competitive, when incumbent won more than 70% of votes (Vanhanen, 1997: 41). However, ruling groups of post-Soviet regimes are sometimes able to establish a kind of “minimal winning coalition that gained enough resources for incumbent’s victory, or, at least, for prevention of power shift by electoral means. Post-Soviet elections from Kazakhstan to Belarus and from Primorskii Krai to St.Petersburg are clearly demonstrated varieties of these developments.

It should be noted that these observations of post-Soviet electoral practices are beyond of those liberal attacks on “electoralism” (see O’Donnell, 1994, 1996, Diamond, 1999) that qualified elections as necessary, but not exhausted condition of democratization. The point is that elections could have no connection with democracy at all in terms of competitiveness (or, at least, an outcome of electoral contest is known a priori). In this respect, the judgment of one Russian scholar on “authoritarian adaptation” of post-Soviet elections (Afanas’ev, 2000:
17) is more appropriate. The very criteria of free and fair elections is unlikely for analysis of such a phenomena – even if one could take into account somewhat intermediate qualification, like “free but not fair” elections or “elections with some fraud or coercion” (Coppedge and Reinicke, 1991: 49), etc.

The application of Dahl’s two-dimensional model that is added to competitiveness another important variable, participation (i.e., right to elect and to be elected) (Dahl, 1971: 4), however, seems no more useful for analysis of post-Soviet transitions. For comparative historical analysis of establishing and strengthening of democracies the role of universal suffrage is, of course, undeniable. But what might we learn here for study of post-Soviet politics with its legacy of mobilized mass participation, or what Dahl called as an “inclusive hegemony”? On the background of 99% participation in non-competitive elections of Soviet era this approach has failed to say us anymore about patterns of post-Soviet regime changes (if any). As to more complicated and more popular schemes that linked participation with “civicness”, “social capital” (Putnam, 1993) and other attributes of “right” democracies, their relevance toward post-Soviet societies with strong dominance of patron-client relationships (Afanas’ev, 2000) is at least, doubtful. On the one hand, post-Soviet developments changed negligibly political participation beyond elections (save for short wave of mass mobilization in 1989-1991), and post-Soviet political activism to a great extent inherited from the Soviet past (see McAllister and White, 1994). On the other hand, the emergence of electoral participation in a form of “machine politics” under conditions of administrative mobilization that substituted Communist party control (on city of Moscow politics, see Brie, 1997) is definitely undermines “civic” participation. The resource exchange pork-barrel deals have little common meanings with “civicness” in post-Soviet context, even if they look similar at the first glance. Say, Nikolai Petro in his analysis of “success story” of democratization in Novgorod oblast’ of Russia found that the activity of public associations in this region (in
terms of number of those associations per capita) has been comparable with “civic” Northern (not Southern) Italy in well-known Putnam’s study (Petro, 1999: 243-244). Although Petro evaluated these developments as a clear sign of “civicness”, almost simultaneously with the appearance of his article incumbent governor of Novgorod region called early gubernatorial election. In the absence of visible competitors, he easily gained about 95% of votes with wholeheartedly support of those “civic” associations that have been completely loyal to the ruling group. In fact, “civicness” in post-USSR could not be reached at least, until the emergence of significant autonomy of social and political actors vis-a-vis the state and each other. As yet, mass attitudes and behavior in post-Soviet societies are still to be dependent upon (and determined by) various segments of elites. Thus, “civil society” in a sense of normative democratic theory is exist (or not exist) in post-Soviet areas to an extent, to which elites are allowed to do so.

Needless to say that the above critique of models of democracy related not with their “conceptual stretching” as such, but with their low capacity to make distinctions that has value for analysis of post-Soviet politics. Following lines of Dahl’s typology of political regimes, scholar may reach a conclusion that Russia during 1990s transformed from “inclusive hegemony” to a “competitive oligarchy” (Melville, 1999b) But such a statement is just fixed the research problem rather than solved it. Using Lijphart’s typology of case studies, one might say that from the viewpoint of models of democracy the grape of post-Soviet cases itself not fit well into categories of theory-confirming or theory-infirming studies. Nevertheless, it makes possible to turn to hypotheses-generation (if not deviant) case analyses, based on inquiry into peculiarities of these phenomena and factors that responsible for their development.

Recent scholarly efforts to explain peculiarities of post-Soviet transitions fell into three different, although overlapping groups. The first school paid attention to specific complexity
of “dual” (Przeworski, 1991), “triple” (Offe, 1996, ch.3), or even more multi-level problems of post-Communist political transformations that is significantly differs from those of Latin America and Southern Europe (Bunce, 1995a, 1995b, 1998). However, the broadness of this macro-level inter-region comparisons between “East” and “South” is so wide that it fails to explain meso-level intra-region distinctions between Eastern Europe, which has moved across 1990s to at least “minimal” democracy, and post-Soviet area, which is still far from such an evaluation. Alternatively, the second school is tried to explain troubles of Russian/post-Soviet transitions through the prism of historical and cultural background of these countries. Some general concepts, like “divided culture” (Akhiezer, 1997) or “clash of civilizations” (Huntington, 1996) are claimed that Russian/post-Soviet societies are unlikely for democracy a prioi, due to the legacy of their past. These views, however, assumed a self-sufficient logic of explanation: while post-Soviet countries cannot achieve democracy because of their “wrong” culture, the “right” culture have a few chances to emerge here because of absence of democracy (for similar lines of critique see Golosov, 1999a). Finally, the third school focused on the role of the state in the transition process. It is based on the statement of Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan that postulated, following by well-known words of Barrington Moore Jr.: “No state, no democracy” (Linz and Stepan, 1996, ch.2). Yet, the distinctiveness of post-Soviet states (especially of Russia) from other post-Communist countries in terms of “weak states” became a widespread qualification among scholars (see, for example, Volkov, 1998, McFaul, 1999, Solnick, 1999, Stoner-Weiss, 1999).

State weakness as a distinctive feature of post-Soviet politics has two different dimensions. First, weakness meant significant constrains of the capacity of the state. In other words, state monopoly on legitimate violence is undermined due to competition between state and non-state actors (some of which claimed to be “the state”) (Volkov, 1998: 39). Second (and no less important) that weak state could not provide the principle of the rule of law, or, at least,
could not enforce it (even if they claimed slogans of “dictatorship of law” and the like). The use of different labels to describe these phenomena such as “oligarchy”, “feudalism” (on details, see Solnick, 1999: 805-812), “caciquismo” (Matsuzato, 1999), etc., is just underlined importance of this peculiarity.

If one consider “weak state” as a point of departure for future analysis of post-Soviet political regimes, the existence (or non-existence) of the rule of law could be re-formulate in terms of democracy and/or its alternatives. Taking neo-institutionalist perspective (North, 1990), the “rule of law” could be defined as a dominance of formal institutions, i.e., universal rules and norms serves as significant constrains of major actors and their strategies within the given polity. Meanwhile, the non-existence of the “rule of law” meant the dominance of informal institutions that based on particularistic rules and norms like clientelism and/or corruption. Thus, the opposition to the “rule of law” is the principle of “arbitrary rule”, when formal institutions are either serves as a “facade” of informal dominance or does not matter at all.

To some extent, this dichotomy of dominance of formal and informal institutions is related with Weberian ideal types of legitimacy: the domination of formal institutions is associate with rational-legal legitimacy, while the dominance of informal institutions is a feature of charismatic and/or traditional rule. But the relation between formal and informal institutions is not a total opposition; rather, they substituted each other on a manner of filling gaps. In practice, the institutional dimension of political regime seems to be a kind of continuum, not two opposite poles. If rule of law is weak or not existed at all (say, in the case of total breakdown of ancien regime), it replaced on arbitrary rule. If courts are unable to execute their decisions on legal suits, these disputes resolved through the use of “violent entrepreneurship” (Volkov, 1999). If government is not accountable to the parliament, the decision-making process depends not on people’s representatives, but on narrow circles of “family” or “court” around leader (O’Donnell, 1994). If political parties are not capable to
link elites and masses, these functions realized by clientelist-based “political machines”, etc. 

Post-Soviet politics shown plenty of examples of this kind of substitutions like the Yeltsin’s electoral campaign in 1996 or the very beginning of the first Chechen war in 1994. Obviously even the restoration of the state capacity without the emergence of the rule of law (what can be observed in Russia under Putin) not tend itself toward the dominance of formal institutions in post-Soviet societies.

Thus, the distinction between types of predominant institutions (formal or informal) make a watershed between “transitions to democracy” (where the “rule of law” is assumed almost by default) and post-Soviet transitions to somewhat different regime (for similar lines of arguments, see Bunce, 2000: 713-715). Therefore, the very definition of political regimes could be reconsidered as well. The term “political regime” is commonly applied in varying political science contexts – such as constitutional models (parliamentary or presidential regimes) or forms of government as a whole (democratic or authoritarian regimes). However, these classifications are not always applicable to studies of politics in transition, where forms of government as well as legal arrangements are ill defined and change sometimes rapidly. In light of these issues, the understanding of political regime should be re-examined. In this sense, we could use this term as an exhausted minimal description of the model of concrete polity on a manner of description of distinctive kind of games. If we need to explain to someone a distinction between, say, chess and tennis, at least two major distinctions might be functionally useful – 1) distinction between those, who play in these games, including distinction of their resources and strategies; 2) distinction between sets of rules of these games. In the light of these speculations, the use of the concept “political regime” hereafter is purely functional. Similarly to this game description, “political regime” as a distinctive kind of political game is just a set of: 1) political actors with their resources and strategies, and 2) political institutions, i.e. a set of both formal and informal rules and norms (North, 1990).
This definition is not related to a particular institutional design or an ideological schemes such as, for example, totalitarian regimes.

Thus, as employed here the concept of regime requires a re-examination of Dahl’s dimensions of political regimes. Providing similar, but different two-dimensional matrix of regimes, the first dimension of a regime includes two ideal types: on one extreme is the dominant actor, who structures all political opportunities for other actors; on the other extreme is the fully-fledged competition of actors for dominance. Thus, we create a dichotomy of a monocentric non-competitive regime and a polycentric competitive regime that is resembled Schumpeterian scheme. While Dahl ascribes to democracy only “procedural” dimensions, namely actor competitiveness, the “substantive” dimension includes the type of predominant political institutions. In these terms, ideal democracy could be qualified as competitive regime with the dominance of formal institutions, while the late-Soviet regime with its “administrative market” (see Naishul’, 1991) is regarded as non-competitive regime, in which decay of formal institutions leads to their substitution on informal ones (see also Solnick, 1998). Within such a scheme, post-Soviet regimes in Russia and Ukraine are competitive ones, with the dominance of informal institutions, and, say, Belarus or Kazakhstan is non-competitive regimes with the dominance of informal institutions.

Certainly, this typology of political regimes as well as the definition of democracy is posed new methodological problems. For example, it is unclear as yet, how to measure the practical impact of formal (or informal) institutions. It is also too risky that the very term “informal institutions” could easily transform into a kind of “residual category” that played earlier by the term “political culture” (Lane, 1992). Nevertheless, the redefining of those definitions might be useful for analysis of the following issues: 1) whether or not the results of the transition processes in the post-USSR are really “point of arrival” or just a halfway house in the long way of democratization; 2) what about causes and consequences of distinctions of
transitions within the post-Soviet area (i.e. between post-Soviet countries and regions of Russia). Looking for answers on these questions, one should turn to concepts of regime transitions.

Sources revisited: democratization, contestation, and institutions

The concepts of regime change are actually concepts of democratization, because transitions to non-democratic regimes are located at the periphery of political research. These concepts cold be classified as 1) “structural” (Melville, 1999a: 168), or “functionalist” (Hughes, 2000: 22-26), and 2) “procedural” (Melville, 1999a: 168-169), or “genetic” (Hughes, 2000: 26-29), depends on their attribution of “objective” pre-condition for successful democratization. While “structural” approaches are looking for causal relationship between social, economic, and cultural background and democratic transitions, “genetic” approaches are explicitly rejected the very idea of predetermined outcomes and paid most attention to transition process as such. But both “structural” and “procedural” schools cannot effectively explain varieties of post-Soviet transitions.

The “structural” concept that linked democratic regimes with socio-economic development (Lipset, 1959, 1994; on analysis of evolution of the concept, see Diamond, 1992) recently focused on social preconditions of democratization, such as index of human development. However, as M.Steven Fish shown, the correlation between those index and Freedom house indicators of liberties in post-Communist societies is relatively weak (Fish, 1998: 225-226).

But if one could focus only on the group of post-Soviet countries (or, group of Russia’s regions), the relationships between social indicators and democratization seems much more questionable. In fact, what about causality between the emergence of non-democratic (if not “sultanistic”) Lukashenka’s regime in Belarus (Furman, 1998) that have highest index of
human development in post-Soviet area? Why among Russia’s regions political regimes in pre-industrial Kalmykia (Magomedov, 1995, Senatova, 1996) is similar to those of post-industrial Moscow (Brie, 1997) due to a lack of political competitiveness and the domination of informal institutions. It is also hard to explain the existence of completely different political regimes – why non-competitive “elite settlement” emerged in the Nizhnii Novgorod Oblast’ (Gel’man, Ryzhenkov and Brie, 2000, ch.4) and relatively developed competitive regional party system developed in the Sverdlovsk Oblast’ (Gel’man and Golosov, 1998), as both regions exhibit relatively close patterns of mass voting behavior for 1989-1996 national elections (see McFaul and Petrov, 1998). Regardless to these paradoxes, “structural” approach has more principal weakness. “Objective” preconditions have not only a long-term pre-history, but also a long-term impact that could be negligible in short-term perspective. Therefore, it explanatory power is not enough for analysis of distinctions of ten years of post-Soviet transitions. As a result, the issue of applicability of these frameworks to post-Soviet politics at least will remain on the agenda of future discussions.

On the first glance, “procedural” approach that has been focused on actors’ activities in transition process, could compensate those “flows” of structural determinism (Rustow, 1970). But “genetic” transitological schemes are vulnerable even more. Yet, they might be useful for understanding HOW transitions could occur (see O’Donnell and Schmitter, 1986, Huntington, 1991, Przeworski, 1991), but even not try to analyze WHY outcomes of transitions could be so differ. The explanations of causes and consequences of these outcomes are merely ad hoc: for example, unsuccessful “transition to democracy” in Russia after the 1991 breakdown of Communist rule is linked with Yeltsin’s unwillingness to call then first “founding elections” (see McFaul, 1995: 226-227, Linz and Stepan, 1996: 392-394). Not to mention that after the “breakthrough” assertion of power in 1991 Russia’s “democrats” have few incentives for electoral contestation (Shevtsova, 1999), this kind of argument as such too
closely resembled some considerations about the role of Napoleon’s cold in the outcome of French-Russian war of 1812 that have been ridiculed in Leo Tolstoi’s “War and Peace”.

The other conceptual weakness of the “transitology” is the overestimation of analysis of specific modes of transitions, such as “pacts” or “elite settlements” (Rustow, 1970, O’Donnell and Schmitter, 1986, Higley and Burton, 1989, Burton, Gunther and Higley, 1992), while other modes of transitions are still to be neglected. Meanwhile, the post-Soviet experience is far from those “pacted” models of Eastern Europe roundtable talks (like in Poland and Hungary) (Linz and Stepan, 1996, Elster, 1996). The breakdown of the Communist rule as well as the breakdown of the Soviet Union itself, in fact, could be qualified as an “imposition” (Karl and Schmitter 1991: 275). But what is more important that is the meaning of “pacts” in post-Soviet transitions was far from those “transitions to democracy”; post-Soviet pacts were merely cartel agreements about elimination of political contestation and acceptance of informal institutions (see Kholodkovskii, 1997, Elizarov, 1999, Gel’man, Ryzhenkov, and Brie, 2000). Thus, these “pacts” not enforced democratization, but blocked it. Andrei Melville even called Russian version of the elite pact “perverted” (Melville, 1999b: 63), although such practices are not unique (see, for example, Knight, 1992, Case, 1996). But even if one could consider the whole range of varieties of transitions (on typology, see Linz and Stepan, 1996) – both in terms of breakdowns of previous regimes and of emergence of new regimes (whether democratic or not) (Gel’man, 1999a), transitology itself has failed to explain causalities of success or failure of democratization.

Thus, the scholarly task for analysis of post-Soviet transitions seems as two-fold: to find pathways for the synthesis of above contested (but not mutually exclusive) approaches, on one hand, and to eliminate their ‘flows”, on the other. But if one consider democratization as the transition (whether simultaneous or not) toward: 1) political contestation and 2) the rule of
law, the search of sources of emergence and survival of both phenomena should became a focus of the research agenda.

The study of sources of political contestation is a really developed field of comparative political studies of advanced democracies. At least, the emergence and enforcement of competitive party systems in Western democracies has been investigated within the framework of the comparative-historical concept of “cleavage structure” (see Lipset and Rokkan, 1967, Rokkan, 1970: 72-144). However, originally this framework has been elaborated for analysis of the formation of social bases of mass politics in Western Europe through the prism of societal cleavages that accompanied modernization processes. Then it was criticized because of failure to explain why some parts of really existed societal cleavages has been translated into the structure of political contestation, and other parts has not (Sartori, 1990 (1968): 176). After that, Giovanni Sartori and Stein Rokkan reformulated this concept, paid most attention to principal role of political elites (or “alliances of political entrepreneurs”) and their strategies toward masses as a crucial factor of formation of competitive party systems (see Rokkan, 1977). In other words, while in advanced democracies political contestation (on the level of party competitiveness) is survived merely due to “frozen” societal cleavages, for new democracies the very basis of political contestation depends upon intra-elite cleavages. It is even more important in post-Soviet societies, because of 1) weakness of societal cleavages (at least, in terms of ideological preferences) (see Evans and Whitefield, 1993, Whitefield and Evans, 1999, Diligenskii, 1998, 1999); 2) the high level and relative growth of dependence of mass clienteles upon elites’ patronage (Afanas’ev, 2000). The clear evidence of this statement is the practice of 1999-2000 national elections in Russia clearly shown hat the degree of monopolization of resources by different segments of national and sub-national elites played crucial role in electoral outcomes.
Thus, the principal source of political contestation as a necessary (although not sufficient) condition of democratization is elite cleavages rather than “pacts” (see Gel’man and Golosov, 1998, Golosov, 1999b, Gel’man, Ryzhenkov, and Brie, 2000, ch.5). This condition, however, could be used as a “point of departure” for analysis with, at least, two limitations. First, the intra-elite cleavage meant not a conflict between persons or groups (like “oligarchs”), but the very existence of bases for their continuity, otherwise they could be easily eliminate due to change of balance of forces among politicians. Following the logic of the concept of cleavages, one could propose that these intra-elite cleavages that became open in post-Soviet period, in fact has rooted in the Soviet past. Likewise those cleavages in Western societies, they were by-product of modernization process of Soviet period that formed latent conflicts between “hidden” interest groups (see, for example, Skilling and Griffith, 1971). These conflicts, to some extent, reflected typical controversy of the modernization (including the Soviet one) such as center vs. periphery conflict (see Eisenstadt, 1978, 1992). The center-periphery conflict has been important driving force in the post-Soviet transformations. Some scholars regarded this cleavage as most important both in terms of intra-elite relationships (see Furman, 1999) as well as on societal level in terms of mass voting behavior (see Kolosov and Turovskii, 1996).

Second, besides to the very existence of structural bases of cleavages, the outcome of conflicts is even more important for survival of political contestation as such. Put it simply, zero-sum game solution of intra-elite conflicts is undermined the foundations of democracy in its early stages. Thus, the dominance of either “enter” or “periphery” tends to be realized within the “proper” institutional framework of new political regime that excluded threats of democratic accountability for “winners” (on similar lines of arguments, see Przeworski, 1991: 51-53). Such kind of outcomes of intra-elite conflicts is typical for post-Soviet areas, though. In case of Belarus (Furman, 1999) or in Saratov oblast’ of Russia (Gel’man, Ryzhenkov, and
Brie, 2000, ch.3) the dominance of the “periphery” over the “center” has marked the emergence of non-competitive neopatrimonial regimes. The dominance of the “center” over the “periphery” tends not to so radical alternatives to democracy, but for limitation (if not elimination) of political contestation as well (Gel’man, Ryzhenkov, and Brie, 2000, ch.4)

At the same time, the foundations of the emergence of dominance of formal institutions in post-Soviet societies are still to be unclear. Democratization theories, with rare exceptions (see Linz and Stepan, 1996, Weingast, 1997), for a long time assumed the very existence of rule of law either “by default”, or inherited from previously-existing regimes, or installed due to external influence on transition processes as a result of internationalization and globalization. However, post-Soviet experience, again, is distinctive one in all of these respects, because: 1) the Soviet legacy has developed sustainable dominance of informal institutions both on the level of policy-making (Naishul’, 1991) and of everyday life of ordinary citizens (Ledeneva, 1998); 2) the impact of the international influence on the emergence of the rule of law and on the performance of formal institutions in post-Soviet societies was quite controversial (on critical evaluation, see Wedel, 1998): at least, the establishing of the rule of law in post-Soviet countries was not at the core of Western assistance across 1990s (see Aslund, 1997); 3) in Russia the zero-sum game victory of the ruling group during the “impositions” of 1991 and 1993 as well as during competitive elections of 1996 and 1999-2000, incentives to bound their own powers by the dominance of formal institutions were obviously undermined. But whether or not it means that the once achieved “bad equilibrium” of dominance of informal institutions (Solnick, 1999: 805) is “doomed” to be reproduced across the time?

Barry Weingast in his thoughtful study of the emergence of democracy and the rule of law draw primarily attention to “pacts” of political actors based on negative consensus among them (Weingast, 1997: 252-253). The model case here is the Glorious revolution in late
seventeen-century England: the agreement between Tory and Whigs that established the foundations of political contestation within the framework of formal institutions, became then possible as a reaction on Crown’s transgressions toward Whigs and Tory. Thus, the latter two parties were forced to cooperate against common enemy as well as were interested to accept new institutions that excluded arbitrary rule by sovereign (yet, we could trace the same kind of negative consensus coalitions in the post-USSR, like in 1996 in Belarus, where liberals, Communists, and nationalists were tried to cooperate against Lukashenka regime, although they have lost in this case). But why one should consider the “success story” of those “elite settlement” in England that launched long-term but peaceful way to democratization in Britain (Burton, Higley and Gunther, 1992) as the only possible outcome of negative consensus coalition-building. What about incentives for pact participants to enforce new rules after the breakdown of the sovereign instead of new rounds of conflict on the manner of “war of all against all”? What about the possibilities of the total dissolution of the polity itself, as it was happened during the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991? And why other kinds of equilibrium rather than the rule of law are less possible and less attractive to pact participants?

The other opportunity for the emergence of dominance of formal institutions resulted from the deadlock of actors’ conflict; thus, those actors, who feel themselves too “weak” to employ force strategies without being risky to lost, could use formal institutions as the only resource, or “weapon” in its struggle for survival (see Geddes, 1996: 18-19). The regular use of formal rules and norms pushed other sides of the conflict to use similar “weapons” as well. Therefore, “war of all against all” may transform into “struggle according to the rules” (see Gel’man, Ryzhenkov, and Brie, 2000, chapter 1) that mean “contingent institutional compromise” (Przeworski, 1986: 59). However, the number of cases of successful installations of “struggles according to the rules” in post-Soviet area is very limited, like: for
example, the emergence of competitive and relatively institutionalized regional party system in Sverdlovsk Oblast’ in Russia after the 1993 intra-elite conflict due to the breakdown of the Urals republic (Gel’man and Golosov, 1998). The transfer of the “struggle according to the rules” into sphere of mass electoral politics through competitive elections and regular power shift – makes democratization process sustainable and irreversible. But, as one can see, those “success stories” in post-Soviet areas depends heavily upon “contingent outcome of conflict” (Przeworski, 1988: 59). The use of formal institutions could be not enough for survival of weak competitors, and in such a worst case all hopes on the emergence of the rule of law could be buried. The “war of all against all” could either be endless or have a zero-sum game outcome on a “winner takes all” manner.

Both models of the emergence of the rule of law – negative consensus coalition and “struggle according to the rules” – are based on the assumption that the installation of dominance of formal institutions and the installation of political competitiveness – are developed more or less simultaneously. However, even in those post-Soviet areas, where political regimes could be regarded as competitive in electoral terms (primarily, in Russia and Ukraine), the role of formal institutions is far from dominant. Political competitiveness here is still survived without the rule of law, at least, as yet. Nevertheless, ruling groups in Russia (since 1991) and in Ukraine (since 1994) concentrated enough resources to prevent power shift by electoral means and, thus, eliminate incentives for self-accountability through the framework of formal institutions. Moreover, the successes of the ruling groups in Russia during 1999 parliamentary and, especially, 2000 presidential elections, as well as experience of Ukrainian referendum of 2000 might be considered as a signs of undermining of structural foundations of the political competitiveness. Thus, the results of the transition process that established (at least in Russia and in Ukraine) political regimes with some (although limited) political competitiveness under the domination of informal institutions, could be evaluated as an
intermediate stage of transition process itself. This leads to pose on research agenda questions of possible new directions of the transition as well as of possible new directions of the research.

**Conclusion: A New Realist Agenda?**

The emergence of the dominance of formal institutions in the post-Soviet area (and, thus, the further democratization) could be achieved – at least, on first glance, by three different (although overlapping) ways: 1) step-by-step acceptance of formal institutions as a by-product of development of political contestation (even in its current stage) (McFaul, 1999); 2) return to non-competitive political regime and then (re) installation of new formal institutions through forced centralization of monopolized violence as a (re)establishing of the new state (Volkov, 1998: 47); 3) undermining of the emerging political regimes through the new “imposition” as a result of escalation of political conflicts, especially in case of involvement of political outsiders and mass participation (see Solnick, 1999: 815, Gel’man, Ryzhenkov, and Brie, 2000, ch.9). However, the consequences of these scenarios seem to be unclear.

As noted above, electoral contestation is likely for the installation of the dominance of formal institutions only if the competitiveness could not vanished because of the balance of resources among actors and because of the existence of the structural foundations of the intra-elite conflicts. However, Russia (and, to lesser extent, Ukraine) meet none of these conditions and there are few chances to meet these requirements son. Therefore, there are few chances to consider the future of the dominance of formal institutions as “the only game in town” (Linz and Stepan, 1996). Contrary, Steven Solnick noted that the electoral contestation could be a part of strategy of competitive elites in search of equilibrium, but does not leads toward the
rule of law (Solnick, 1999: 805), although in this case formal institutions could serve for undermining rather than securing of the status quo (ibid. 816).

The debates on possible benefits of non-competitive politics are still ongoing since 1989 early attempts of search of “iron hand” mode of post-Soviet transitions (on reviews, see Sautman, 1995, Gel’man, 1999b, ch.2). The probability of such an outcome of transition in Russia seems to be higher due to new rise of neo-liberal plans of economic reforms as well as of popular rhetoric on the revival of the Russian state. However, those post-Soviet countries, where non-competitive regimes have been installed (like in Kazakhstan or in Belarus), are hardly to be considered as examples of the rule of law. In these cases, formal institutions are merely serves as facade of informal ones. Moreover, the broader state capacities within such polities does not guaranteed any defense of citizens and firms from the arbitrary rule, and even makes such threats more actual. No grounds to consider these prospects in Russia or in Ukraine as a somewhat different. At least, monopoly on power not leads to the formal institutions itself; no one actor has incentives to limit its own capacities on arbitrary rule.

Finally, the escalation of the conflict and internal undermining of the regime could be a real alternative to the preservation of the status quo. The level of political violence in Russia or in Ukraine (if not take into account the case of Chechen wars) seems to be very low on the background of the scale of political and social transformation. One could speculate that if post-Soviet politicians will kill each other more cruel and more frequently, the cost of their competitiveness within the framework of informal institutions could be much more higher than the cost of acceptance of formal rules. But the acceptance of formal rules is not the most-preferred choice for politicians. The return to the non-competitive politics through the installation of new non-democratic regime (on case of Mexico’s one-party rule, see Knight, 1992), could be more attractive. No grounds to assume that the crises of post-Soviet regimes are more likely for democratization than for other outcomes of the transitions.
Obviously, the next steps toward study of post-Soviet politics required new scholarly approaches. Until very recently, most of the studies of democratization in general and post-Soviet politics in particular were closely resembled the paradigm of Hollywood film. According to Hollywood paradigm, “good guys” (i.e., democrats) have been confronted with “bad guys” (anti-democrats), but this film should meet happy end (i.e., the victory of “good guys”) (see, for example, McFaul, 1997). But reality is far from Hollywood film, and democracy does not emerged due to will of democrats (even if they have good intentions). Now it is clear that happy end is just a dream, and neither “good guys” nor “bad guys” do exist at all, political scientists (as well as then filmmakers) are forced to turn from Hollywood film to new realism. Realism in the study of post-Soviet politics means not only the rejection of the normative prescriptions and acceptance of really existing actors and institutions as such. In more broader context, the realistic framework includes an analysis of causes and consequences of dynamics of actors and institutional changes in Russia and other post-Soviet countries in the inter-national and intra-national (i.e., cross-regional) comparative perspectives without a bias of ideology of global movement towards democracy. Only such kind of value-free research could be useful in terms of the contribution of studies of post-Soviet politics into general theory (Laitin, 2000). Say, we might learn more for the study of democratization, if we could explain the causes (and the consequences) of the successful installation of non-democratic regime in Belarus. We might learn more for the study of political contestation not from analysis of policy programs of political parties, but from inquiry on machine politics and administrative mobilization of voters. We might learn more for the study of good governance and institutional performance not from the endless debates on civil society and social capital, but from analysis of real attempts of municipal governments to achieve local autonomy and conflicts between local and regional administrations in Russia. Finally, the very practice of the policy toward formal institutions –
such as adoption and implementation of laws, resolution of conflicts and imposition of sanctions between competitive actors – is also should be a part of the realistic research agenda.

The realistic analysis of post-Soviet politics is just begins. To be continued...
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