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Russia Is Trapped In 1991

By Georgy Bovt

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Every once in a while I have the traitorous thought that it might have been better if the putschists won in August 1991. It wasn't impossible; they could have arrested Yeltsin and found the necessary amount of loyal troops to disperse the crowds in Moscow.

After all, there weren't any other crowds to disperse. Outside the two capitals, where decisive events in Russian history take place, all was quiet as usual. There was absolutely no mass movement for reforms in the Soviet Union. There were no significant public groups that could have supported a move toward a market economy and democracy.

Even the government's reformers did not really expect the result they got. The game of democratization that Gorbachev started — in part, I believe, out of ignorance on the part of a Soviet apparatchik as to the depths and true nature of this type of process — was aimed at "restoring Leninist norms in the party." This clearly backfired.

In short, the fall of the Soviet Union was not something the majority of people fought for. It came to them like a bolt from the blue, an unexpected present from the ruling elite playing their power games, including the elite of other Soviet republics. Suddenly, all the Communist

Party leaders of the Soviet republics wanted to become presidents of independent nations, and so they did.

The result of this overly speedy dissolution is that most people have tacitly supported the revival of the Soviet way of life at every opportunity.

Russians traditionally consider those three days in 1991 — from Aug. 19 to 21 — to be the key, dramatic moment marking "the end of the Soviet empire." That was when everything was decided, right then. But it didn't, at least not entirely.

The continuity between the Soviet Union and the current regime is obvious. This continuity is primarily found in the dismissive attitude toward individuals and their rights, which can be seen both in government actions and everyday interactions. It is also evident in the state's paternalistic regard for its citizens, and the citizens' lack of faith in nongovernmental organizations. For many, if an organization is not government-run, there is the chance they are suspicious anti-government subversive bodies.

In all the years of the post-Soviet period, the country has still been unable to form stable civil-society institutions. The judicial system seems to be even more dependent on the executive branch than during the Soviet Union, when the direct dictatorial rule was at least mitigated by party bodies. Today's Russian parliament is painfully reminiscent of the obedient Supreme Soviet of the U.S.S.R. The presence of "opposition" parties should not mislead anyone. The very word "democracy" has been completely discredited in the eyes of the Russian public.

At the same time, the evolution of Russian society and the Russian government, a process in which August 1991 was just one of several intermediate episodes that did not change the essential character of the government or its relationship with its citizens, must be analyzed against the background of a longer period of time.

I believe that to understand the transformation of the Russian state, which came into existence in the ninth century, we have to consider, at a minimum, the entire 20th century. After all, despite what was taught in Soviet schools, the U.S.S.R. was not a complete break from the Russian Empire. The level of continuity between the empire and the U.S.S.R. is even clearer now — take, for example, the similarities between serfdom and Soviet collective farms.

This evolution, including a trend toward more personal freedoms, continues to the present. Russians today have more freedom than at any other point in the country's history, no matter what anyone says about President Vladimir Putin's regime. And this evolution will continue, through objective changes in technology, the information sphere and the general level of human culture.

Today's Russia faces essentially the same challenge that the Soviet Union faced on the eve of its dissolution, and one that the coup of 1991 failed to meet. This challenge is the need to energize the country and its society. Having failed to find an acceptable response to this challenge within the cultural and political system that was formed when the Soviet Union fell, Russia and its citizens are now trying to find it in Crimea and the so-called "Novorossia" of eastern Ukraine.

That's where they might find some new idea to fill the void left after the end of the Soviet Union and communist ideology. The fact that this undertaking might lead the country not only into total international isolation but also a historical dead end in terms of its own development is far from obvious to those generally known as the "moral majority."

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