
The Policy of the Siamese Twins

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We do not have separation of powers or even a diarchy. We have highly hampered powers.

Another scandal has broken out in the European home. Everyone lives in tranquillity in this home and everyone is friendly to some extent. Wailing can always be heard near the eastern entrance, however. Many people live on this side of the building, but when the shouts are heard, everyone knows it is not Ukraine bickering with Belarus, not Latvia fighting with Lithuania, and not even Armenia arguing with Azerbaijan (they were at war and they still "do not say hello to each other," but they do not start any scandals either). It is Russia "getting up off its knees" and fighting with one of its neighbours.

We Rail Against the Social Order

This happens for a variety of reasons - because Estonia moved the Bronze Soldier, because we do not like Moldovan wine, because we support the separatists in Georgia, and certainly because of the prices of the gas we deliver and the transit fees for this gas. We are more or less accustomed to gas controversies, but this time the scandal acquired colossal dimensions, affected all of the people in the building, and is being discussed in every household.

The argument that these scandals are neurotic in nature and give Russia exactly what it does not want (the anger of its neighbours, who dream of being less dependent on it and having less to do with it in general, and the Western countries' treatment of it as a "problem state," with which "something has to be done") is self-evident. The connection between this policy (if it can be described as such) and the evolution of our social order is also quite obvious. On the one hand, our order is the main cause of our isolation and the reason for the impossibility of our integration into the alliances of the developed democratic countries and for the danger of the expansion of these alliances. On the other, the disappearance of the opposition in our country and the total unanimity of our main media outlets are a sign of the atrophy of critical thinking, which can restrain neurotic impulses and correct behaviour. All of this is understandable, but something else is less understandable: the reason that our conflicts with our neighbours acquired this unprecedented intensity after Putin left office as the president.

First, Second, Third

The fundamental outlines of our foreign policy, just as the fundamental outlines of our sociopolitical system, took shape before Putin took office. Putin's personal mindset (we can recall his image of the boy walking towards a hostile group, clutching a piece of candy in his "sweaty fist," hoping to exchange it for something better but knowing it might be taken away from him instead) and his professional habits were ideally suited to our public thinking and those established outlines. Our second president strengthened and thoroughly developed everything that was put in place when the first president was in office. The futility of that policy, in which we were driving ourselves into a corner, was already fairly obvious after Putin took office. Furthermore, there was a sense that Putin's increasing anxiety and irritability towards the end of his term were connected with his vague awareness of that futility, and his decision to leave office was

due partly to his realization that the next stage of development would require a different person, someone with a different mindset and a different image. It was no coincidence, of course, that when Putin named his successor, it turned out to be a man who was of the same stature (which evidently was extremely important), but did not have the same social origins and the same mindset. He was not as stiff, he was not at all neurotic, and he had some righteous and liberal tendencies. There was every reason to expect the new president to make some "corrections" in the policy line.

In democratic systems, the opposition waits for each mistake the government makes, exaggerates it, and strives not to be ignored. The government, knowing that elections are on the way, strives to avoid mistakes and has to listen to criticism and take it into consideration. If it is unable to adjust its policy line, it ceases to be the government and someone else makes the adjustments instead. The system of democratic rotation is a mechanism built into the society for the constant adjustment of the policy line and the correction of mistakes.

This mechanism does not exist in undemocratic systems. Even in these systems, however, the policy line is periodically adjusted. In tsarist Russia, each new tsar made some changes in policy. The new tsar was the new man in charge, he could look at policy from a new standpoint, and he had no reason to stubbornly defend the obvious mistakes of his predecessor. After all, they were not his mistakes. This also happened in the Soviet era. As soon as Stalin died, his successors ended the futile Korean war, and the thaw began soon afterward. Why did the change of presidents in today's Russia not lead to policy adjustments? Why did it actually intensify its most dangerous aspects instead? Why did we start moving more quickly towards an impasse instead of trying to avoid it?

Side Effects

We have already caused ourselves colossal damage in the two conflicts of the "early Medvedev era." As a result of the Georgian conflict, Georgia, under any president whatsoever, will be Russia's enemy for many decades, and we do not have the slightest idea of what should be done about Abkhazia and South Ossetia (which even Belarus has chosen not to recognize). As a result of the gas conflict with Ukraine, we not only lost our good reputation (although these fine points are no longer relevant here), but also lost billions of dollars and will lose tens of billions more in the future - an amount many times the sum we ever could have gained from Ukraine. We abruptly intensified our isolation tenfold. We strengthened the tendency towards European integration, which is something we did not need at all, because it is more convenient for us to take advantage of the conflicting interests of various European countries. The gas conflict also revealed the surprising inertia and ungainliness of our policy line. It is obvious that the conflict did not have to happen. The agreement Putin and Tymoshenko recently reached could have been concluded in December. When it became completely obvious that it was time to end the conflict, when Europe was freezing and moaning, we could have concluded the agreement and turned the gas back on in a day or two, but this is the third week that nothing has been done.

I think the reason for the intensification of our propensity for conflicts and our sluggishness is the highly peculiar situation of the tandem Putin created. Putin decided to abide by the Constitution and give up the presidency. But he could not give up his power, as Yeltsin did, and he chose to become the prime minister. It would have been psychologically difficult and even dangerous for a man as young and healthy as Putin to give up all of his power. Besides this, Putin probably thought he could

consolidate the government, help the young president, and guarantee the continuity of policy by taking office as the prime minister. He attained his goals, but the attainment of any goal often has unforeseen side effects. By changing offices, Putin created a situation hampering his friend and successor, himself, and our entire political mechanism.

We now have a president who was chosen by his prime minister, and the removal of this man from office would be incredibly difficult for the president in the psychological and political sense. By the same token, even if the prime minister regrets his choice, he has virtually no chance (at least until 2012) of getting rid of the president he chose. Our ruling tandem is "fused together by a single goal" and is even something like a set of Siamese twins, and any operation to separate the two would be extremely dangerous and frightening to both of them and to our entire political system.

There is no doubt whatsoever that our rulers are friends and that Putin chose a man he trusts more than anyone else as his successor. There are certain situations that objectively breed conflict, however, and they are stronger than we are. We must not think, for example, that the members of the Stalinist Central Committee Presidium "made a mistake" when they elected Khrushchev, or that Khrushchev was a villain, planning from the very start to destroy the people who had put their trust in him and with whom he had shared whole barrels of wine at Stalin's dacha. It is just that all of them were in a situation in which conflict was inevitable, and Khrushchev's victory was the highly probable outcome. The same can be said of many historical conflicts between friends and colleagues - from the conflicts between the Roman triumvirs to Yeltsin's conflict with Rutskoy and Khasbulatov.

Trapped by Each Other

Putin and Medvedev are friends, but they have ended up in a situation which is objectively uncomfortable, painful, and conflict-prone. It is a situation in which neither can make a single move freely, because the people around them are waiting with a sinking heart for any sign of real or imaginary disagreements between the rulers, and any sign of disapproval of one partner in the tandem could give rise to an extremely painful conflict with unpredictable results and to overall destabilization, which both men dread. Putin and Medvedev are very different people, and there are signs of their differences of opinion, if not disagreements. Medvedev may have said it was wrong to "create nightmares for business" at the very time that Putin was "creating nightmares" for Mechel, for example, and Medvedev even expressed his dissatisfaction with the excessively bureaucratized government recently. These statements probably were not meant to send any particular message, however. At a time when the president's decision truly could have sent this kind of message, Medvedev, who obviously is not an evil man, nevertheless did not pardon Svetlana Bakhmina.

Any attempt at the adjustment of the policy line would be extremely difficult and dangerous in this situation. If Putin had simply gone away, as Yeltsin did, Medvedev could have made some changes in our policy and could have blamed various difficulties on the burdensome legacy he had inherited, as Putin had done earlier and Yeltsin had done before him (every president inherits a burdensome legacy). He cannot do any of this, however, because Putin did not go away. If the prime minister had not been Putin, Medvedev could have sent him packing and then gone on to make some changes in policy and to blame everything on the man he fired. But Putin cannot be removed from office! If, on the other hand, Putin had stayed in the president's office, there would have been less chance of policy

adjustments, but they nevertheless would exist. It is difficult to admit one's own mistakes, especially for a man who only hears words of praise and support from every direction. It is possible, however. Now there is no possibility of this being done by Medvedev or by Putin.

The present situation is not a lawful democratic case of the separation of powers or even a case of diarchy. This is a case of severely hampered powers. Medvedev cannot be a normal, fully empowered president as long as Putin is the prime minister. Putin, a man who was just recently referred to as the national leader and whose face was on the T-shirts handed out to Nashi members, cannot be a normal prime minister, modestly working on the crisis-ridden economy and waiting to be dismissed. They are fused together. Siamese twins have to synchronize their moves. They have to move together along an appointed route, not deviating from it in any way. It is logical that the leading member of the tandem is Putin, if only because all of the current conflicts are continuations of conflicts that existed when he was the president. He has already mastered the proper reactions and he is more familiar with our common route leading to an impasse.

The gas conflict could have been resolved quickly. If Medvedev had done this, however, it would have signified indirect criticism of Putin. Some people would have been certain to say that Putin raised Russia up off its knees, but Medvedev is a weak man who makes concessions. Others would have said that Putin led us into a blind alley and Medvedev had led us out of it. If, on the other hand, Putin had done this himself, it would have been an admission of his own mistakes. Theoretically, this would have been possible for President Putin, but it is not something Prime Minister Putin can do. As a result, the conflict acquired unprecedented dimensions, and a problem that could have been solved in a day at a loss of a few billion is now taking weeks to solve at a loss of tens of billions.

Our ship of state is sailing in an unknown direction. Neither Putin nor Medvedev knows where they are sending it. Of course, even in the absence of a distinct route, the captain of a ship can change course if he sees reefs. If, on the other hand, there are two captains and they are Siamese twins, their reactions are slowed down and they lose control of the ship. The storm of the crisis is ahead. The losses we incurred during the gas crisis as a result of this loss of control are only the beginning.

[translated from Russian]
