
Gorbachev, Yeltsin and how eleven Soviet member-states came to be 'presidential republics'

The characteristics of the presidents of these eleven republics from the 1990s to 2015

MIREES' Open Lecture

Professor Emeritus Jean Blondel, from the European University Institute in Florence, examined the reasons lying behind the break-up of the Soviet Union into eleven presidential republics during his open lecture on May 26th, 2016, further outlining the development of the presidential system as an institutional entity. Presidential republic as a governmental system was invented in the XVI century by the newly independent United States. The whole system revolved around the figure of a single president, who was to be elected by the population (or, at least, quite a large group of voters, who complied with certain characteristics) and had a limited mandate. The length of the presidential mandate was set by the constitution, and could then be renewed only after another regular election. "A great invention with a great timing", as it was defined by professor Blondel: it was, as a matter of fact, soon followed by the progressive democratisation of the European political scenario. It also became crucial in the decolonisation of Latin America and Africa. In fact, new states, and especially newly independent colonies, were usually struggling with their own legitimisation in the international arena. For this reason, they tended to perceive the United States as a model, and therefore adopted their government system. Legitimacy, on the other hand, soon proved to be directly connected to the tendency to "corrupt" the form of the presidential republic, usually by extending the role of a single leader, who was frequently supported by the army. Various "tricks" were hidden behind the perfectly democratic façade of the presidential system, which allowed the establishment of authoritarian governments and left scope for frequent successions of coup d'états led by the military forces.

Similar concerns regarding political legitimacy were experienced by the USSR at the end of the 1980s. Mikhail Gorbachev's attempts to apply some sort of "socialism with a human face" within

the USSR gave poor results. Yeltsin, on the other hand, opted for the dissolution in order to re-establish a stable legal basis for the political power, while seeking to renew its popular acceptance. Eleven presidential republics were therefore born from the USSR's ashes (with the exception of the Baltic states, which developed their own parliamentary systems). They all had to face troubled nation-building processes, undermined by various weaknesses, ranging from a weak sense of national identity to ethnic clashes. This statement appears to be particularly true when referred to the post-Soviet area formed by: (1) the former "central core" of the Russian Empire, namely Russia, Ukraine and Belarus, (2) the South Caucasus (Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia) and (3) Central Asian countries, including Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan.

In spite of their territorial and cultural differences, a certain tendency towards authoritarianism appears to be a common trait shared by post-Soviet presidential republics. Nowadays, well-established authoritarian regimes are especially common in the Central Asian countries, and can be found also in Belarus and Azerbaijan. The fact that post-communist state-building followed a similar pattern in the whole area is tightly linked not only to their choice in terms of governmental system (since, as mentioned before, presidential republics have already proved numerous times to be easily "corruptible" systems of government), but also to the fact that the former Soviet *nomenklatura* was still detaining a great deal of power in most of these countries. This combination of factors easily opened the doors of the higher ranks of the new political elite to the former bureaucrats. Furthermore, the Soviet legacy surely exerted a great influence on the first steps these post-communist republics were taking into the world. As a matter of fact, the local population was not used to considering politics as a game they could actually participate in. For decades, they simply had to ratify fixed situations already decided by the leaders. Free elections or actual political debates were practices they were not accustomed to, and this perspective of theirs had, quite understandably, a strong impact on the country's political development.

With regards to this matter, professor Blondel underlined the fact that these populations might have found, and still find, the idea of having just one, single, powerful president to be perfectly reasonable, since such an "improvement" was not so different from the situation they had been experiencing for years. This concept raises immediate concerns, especially among Western scholars, as it is labelled as undoubtedly "anti-democratic" and "oppressive". This reaction, however, clearly underlines the Western-centric approach that dominates the field of political science. This school of thought is, according to professor Blondel, too simplistic. It frequently fails in taking into consideration both the specific needs and the different historical backgrounds that characterise every country. Alternative paths are, however, not highly appreciated among the Western political and academic elites and usually seen as deemed to failure. To conclude, the

progressive debate professor Blondel encourages could certainly prompt interesting developments in the field of political science, as the very grounds of democracy are now undergoing a deep crisis.

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