Playing Democracy: Some Peculiarities of Political Mentality and Behavior in the Post-Soviet Countries  

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The modern experience within most of the post-Soviet countries shows that proven democratic procedures, initially and optimistically copied from Western countries, do not work as they are designed to. In most of these societies, democracy as an ideology and mechanism is misused by the officials and the ruling groups seeking to be reelected in perpetuity, for the reproduction of the same elite in a wide or narrow sense (from family to political party). This paradox stems from the present condition of the political culture in the post-Soviet societies, as well as specifics of social structure. These issues should be examined separately and at the same time in connection with each other, and before adopting democracy in its pure form. However, until recently, most research papers on the post-Soviet democracies present only post-scriptum analyses: democracy was adopted and certainly some processes of adaptation have taken place. The main issue to understand with regard to the peculiarities of the post-soviet democracies is: what has been adapted to what—have the specifics of local societies been adapted to universal principles of democracy or vice versa?  

First of all, one of the local misperceptions about democracy is that democracy is basically a political phenomenon. Accordingly, democracy means formal political institutions, including parties, electoral procedures, and legal norms. Armenia and most of the other post-Soviet countries went in this direction and quite quickly created all the necessary political formalities for welcoming democracy. A couple of decades have passed, and now most of the post-soviet regimes may be called “national models of democracy,” or, if taken universally, there is no democracy in those countries at all. The presumption that democracy is basically a political issue and that political institutions and processes are enough to have democracy is wrong and a fatally misleading way of thinking commonly shared by the first-generation and used by next generation post-soviet political elites.  

The point is that democracy needs to be adopted not only by political institutions, but also and firstly by society as a system initial to the state. If society, with its specific structures, cultural traditions, ethical norms, and national or
ethnic peculiarities, is not ready (or willing) to adopt “a child of democracy,” it may nevertheless be accepted on a secondary level, that is, by state only as a step-child may be being tolerated, but not loved. Actually, the “secret” of “national models of democracies” in the post-Soviet space is that democracy is not loved there, even if being tolerated, like in Georgia or Ukraine, and is sometimes being beaten and punished, like in Russia or Turkmenistan.

Again, the “secret” is that societies may or may not accept democracy even when seeing its advantages. For example, to understand the political processes in the post-Soviet countries, it is important to appreciate the cult of the family, a tradition-based, deep, and essential component of social life. This historically evolved cult is supported by the experience of many nations, including Russia and some in Central Asia, which needed to survive in the wild environment of the deserts and taiga. The populations of these regions lived in family units which tended to be enlarged in order to be stronger and more functional. The social structure based on the family or clan and their interrelations determines modern political life in these countries and societies. Family interests are a major concern for political leaders and understandable to common citizens, who would behave in the same way if they had become leaders. As for the most of the leaders on the post-Soviet space, politics is a very useful arena to protect personal and family interests using public needs and manipulating public goals. Oppositions perceive things the same way; they just wait for their turn to protect the interest of the enlarged family-parties or clans—using a different ideology. In order to be strong and to solve problems, it is necessary to be a member of any group, particularly political, to protect personal rights and the rights of relatives should a given party come to power (see more in: Sahakyan, Atanesyan 2006).

The tolerance shown by the population regarding such phenomena as personification of elections and party structure, as well as clan and community-based principles of organization of political life, might be understood because each member of society has the potential ability to feel and behave as if part of the same political culture where family and community are still the natural players.

One of the essential elements of the mentality and behavior of post-Soviet citizens is that their participation in the electoral process is not congruent with the rational behavior or rules of rationality assumed in rational choice theories. Such rational choice is based on individual interests, and participation in elections and voting must be justified by the interests of the individual and society. If the interests are not understood and defined in terms of the individual, there is no participation and no action.

Moreover, another theory related to marketing, and specifically to political marketing, offers some basic rules of political behavior that apply equally to