

Russian Politics in Comparative Perspective

The way in which politics, economics, and ideology were intertwined in the Soviet period has profoundly affected the nature of political change in all of the former Soviet republics and generally has made the democratization process more difficult. How has Russia fared compared to some of the other post-communist systems that faced many of these same challenges, and what can we learn from these comparisons? A rule of thumb, simple as it seems, is that the further east one goes in the post-communist world, the more difficult and prolonged the transition period has been (with the exception of Belarus, which lies adjacent to the European Union and has therefore liberalized less than one might expect). This is partly because the more westerly countries of Central Europe that were outside the USSR (Poland, Hungary, Czech Republic, Slovakia), as well as the Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania), were able to accede to the EU, producing a strong motivation to embark on fundamental reform. This illustrates the potentially powerful impact of international forces on domestic political developments, if domestic actors are receptive. Also these countries were under communist rule for a shorter period of time. In addition most of these countries had a history of closer ties and greater cultural exposure to Western Europe; ideas of liberalism, private property, and individualism were less foreign to citizens in countries such as Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Poland, and Hungary than in regions farther east, including Russia. Historical legacies and cultural differences do matter.

Russia's experience demonstrates the importance of strong political institutions if democracy is to be secured. Their weakness in the 1990s contributed to high levels of social dislocation, corruption, and personal stress, as well as to demographic decline and poor economic adaptation to the market. However, Russia's rich deposits of natural resources have sheltered it from difficulties facing some neighboring countries like Ukraine. At the same time, Russia's natural resource wealth has made it difficult to untangle economic and political power, reducing political accountability to the public. The "resource curse" produces economic hazards as well, including the so-called Dutch disease, in which heavy reliance on export income pushes the value of the currency up, making it more difficult for domestic producers to export successfully and feeding inflationary pressures.

Progression along the various dimensions of the quadruple transition are uneven across post-communist countries, and Russia seems now to be progressing economically, while regressing politically, with nationalism on the rise and aspirations to status of a regional superpower resurfacing. In all of the post-Soviet states (except the Baltic states), the attempt to construct democratic political institutions has been characterized by repeated political crises, weak representation of popular interests, executive-legislative conflict, faltering efforts at constitutional revision, and corruption. Terrorist attacks persist, reinforcing a sense of insecurity and producing fertile ground for nationalist sentiments and a strong role for the security forces, which themselves enjoy a low level of popular legitimacy and are marred by corruption. Nonetheless, with the exception of the Chechnya conflict and its spillover into the neighboring areas in Russia's European south, Russia has escaped major domestic violence and civil war, unlike parts of the former Yugoslavia, Georgia, Moldova, and the Central Asian state of Tajikistan.

Will Russia be able to find a place for itself in the world of states that meets the expectations of its educated and sophisticated population? Even after the first decade of the new millennium, prospects are still unclear. One thing is certain: Russia will continue to be a key regional force in Europe and Asia by virtue of its size, its rich energy and resource base, its large and highly skilled population and its nuclear

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arsenal. However, while Russia's leaders have shown a desire and willingness to identify as a European country, Russia has had an ambivalent relationship to accepting crucial norms that would underlie an effective and enduring partnership with the West.

If the Russian leadership gradually moves Russia on a path closer to liberal democratic development, then this may provide an example to other semiauthoritarian countries in Russia's neighborhood. On the other hand, if the continuation of existing authoritarian trends is associated with sustained economic growth and stability that benefits the majority of the population, then Russia may settle into an extended period of soft authoritarianism that reinforces the East–West divide, and that could, if not resisted by the political leadership, feed destructive nationalist tendencies. Finally, if the Russian leadership's insulation generates unpopular and ineffective policy outcomes, or if world energy prices trigger an economic downslide, this may stimulate a new process of reflection on Russia's future path and offer an opportunity for democratic forces to reassert themselves and find popular resonance.

Summary

Russia's political course since 1991 has been profoundly influenced by the fact that the country underwent simultaneous and radical transformations in four spheres: politics, economics, ideology, and geopolitical position in the world. Managing so much change in a short time has been difficult and has produced mixed results. Efforts to democratize the political system have been only partially successful, and experts disagree both about whether the political controls initiated by Putin were needed to ensure stability and whether they can be easily reversed. In the economic sphere, after recovering from a period of deep economic decline in the 1990s, Russia's renewed growth depends largely on exports of energy and natural resources, making the country vulnerable to external shocks such as the 2008–2009 global crisis. The country faces the challenge of effectively using its natural resource wealth to rebuild other sectors of the economy. In terms of ideology, nationalism threatens to reinforce intolerance and undermine social unity. Continuing high levels of corruption also undermine popular confidence in state institutions. Whereas countries that have joined the European Union seem, for the most part, to have successfully established viable democratic systems with functioning market economies, other post-Soviet states in Eastern Europe and Central Asia face similar challenges to Russia's in consolidating democracy and market reform. Russia has sought to reassert its role as a regional and global force, and a possible reduction in tensions with the West are still on shaky ground.

Key Terms

patrimonial state
democratic centralism
vanguard party
collectivization
glasnost
soft authoritarianism
market reform
joint-stock companies
insider privatization

privatization voucher
mafia
oligarchs
pyramid debt
state capture
nomenklatura
siloviki
clientelistic networks
power vertical

asymmetrical federalism
federal system
civil society
proportional representation (PR)
dominant party
sovereign democracy
vanguard party

Suggested Readings

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Suggested Websites

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www.itar-tass.com/eng/
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www.cdi.org/russia/johnson/default.cfm RECHECK
- Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty
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- The Moscow News*
www.mnweekly.ru
- Russian Analytical Digest*
<http://www.laender-analysen.de/index.php?topic=russland&url=http://www.res.ethz.ch/analysis/rad/>
- Russia Profile
<http://russiaprofile.org/politics/>
- Open Democracy (Russia)
<http://www.opendemocracy.net/russia>
- Center for Eastern Studies (Warsaw), Eastweek
<http://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/tagi/Russian%20Federation>