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Excerpt

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1 Stability and authoritarian regimes

With the collapse of Soviet rule in 1991, Russia was widely seen both within the country and outside to be embarking on the road to a democratic future. The democratic mobilization and consequent partial opening of the political system in the last years of perestroika (especially 1988–91) encouraged many to believe that Russia would slough off its authoritarian past and proceed to build a democratic polity. However, such hopes were doomed to disappointment, as the potential for democratization was snuffed out and an authoritarian polity built. This book seeks to understand how an authoritarian polity could be built and become consolidated in Russia and the potential for democratic development thereby blunted.

The Russian experience of a potential opening to democracy being closed off by a reassertion of authoritarian rule was not unique. This was one possible trajectory of development for states that experienced political change during the so-called third wave of democratization during the last decades of the twentieth and first of the twenty-first century. Despite the characterization of these years as a period of democratization, the survival, resilience, and even emergence of authoritarian rule was a significant trend – as of 2013, some 54 percent of all regimes on the globe were adjudged not to be free¹ – and has led, belatedly, to an interest in the reasons for the survival of authoritarian regimes. This essentially means the question of the bases of stability of these regimes: why do they survive and how do they cope with challenges?

Attempts to explain authoritarian rule, including in Russia, have generally focused either on questions of legacy or path dependency, or on the primacy of the actions of particular actors.

¹ According to Freedom House, 46 percent of polities were adjudged to be “free,” 30 percent “partly free,” and 24 percent “not free.” Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2013: Democratic Breakthroughs in the Balance*, www.freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/freedom-world-2013#.U13eRMcwily, p. 4. Accessed December 20, 2013.

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Two basic types of legacy explanations have been advanced to explain authoritarian stability: a focus on values, and a concentration upon the circumstances of the regime's birth. In both cases, the argument is that the regime is sustained by factors stemming from the past. This has been a common characteristic of analyses of Russian development.

The first type of explanation is about values. One of the enduring themes in the study of Russian politics has been the idea that that country is destined to have an authoritarian political system because of the values inherent in Russian popular culture. There has been a tendency to argue in circular fashion, that Russian history is overwhelmingly characterized by nondemocratic political systems, that this reflects the weakness of democratic values within the political culture, and that this means that a democratic outcome of political development is highly unlikely. Feeding into this line of argument is the view that traditional Russian conceptions of authority are highly authoritarian and paternalistic.

This sort of approach has been evident in a wide range of types of studies of Russia and its past.² It was reflected in works that sought to argue for a specific Russian "national character," in line with a common approach evident in the 1950s to the question of attitudinal differences between nations.³ Others have sought to explain this perceived attitudinal pattern by references to assumed psychological traits of the Russian people.⁴ There has been a tendency to attribute authoritarian values to Russian culture,⁵ encapsulated by the so-called "Russian idea."⁶ Closely related, history and the perceived pattern of Russian history have also

² For two overviews of some of this literature, see Nicolai N. Petro, *The Rebirth of Russian Democracy. An Interpretation of Political Culture* (Cambridge [Mass.]: Harvard University Press, 1995), Chapter 1; and Alexander Lukin, *Political Culture of Russian 'Democrats'* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 22–32.

³ For example, see H.V. Dicks, "Some Notes on the Russian National Character," C.E. Black (ed.), *The Transformation of Russian Society* (Cambridge [Mass.]: Harvard University Press, 1960), pp. 558–73.

⁴ For example, Geoffrey Gorer and John Rickman, *The People of Great Russia. A Psychological Study* (London: The Cresset Press, 1949); Geoffrey Gorer, "Some Aspects of the Psychology of the People of Great Russia," *The American Slavic and East European Review* 8 (3), 1949, pp. 155–66; and Margaret Mead, *Soviet Attitudes toward Authority. An Interdisciplinary Approach to Problems of Soviet Character* (New York: William Morrow, 1955).

⁵ For example, Tibor Szamuely, *The Russian Tradition* (ed. Robert Conquest; London: Secker & Warburg, 1974). Also see James H. Billington, *The Icon and the Axe. An Interpretive History of Russian Culture* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966); D. Tomasic, *The Impact of Russian Culture on Soviet Communism* (Glencoe: The Free Press, 1953); and Nicholas P. Vakar, *The Taproot of Soviet Society. The Impact of Russia's Peasant Culture upon the Soviet State* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1961).

⁶ Nikolai Berdyaev, *The Russian Idea* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1948).

been identified as a source of popular attitudes toward authority,⁷ an approach that underpinned much of the “political culture” literature that emerged from the 1970s.

The essence of these sorts of studies was the argument that Russian history and culture were characterized by a model of authority in which supreme power was vested in an autocratic leader, be that a patriarchal father or the tsar, that such power was validated by a higher authority,⁸ and that the populace owed total loyalty and obedience to this authority. All-powerful and all-wise, the authority figure was one to whom no opposition was possible. This was a model that saw initiative and innovation coming from the top; the people were the passive receptors of what the supreme authority figure deigned to pass down to them. Rather than being active participants in a dynamic process of political life, the populace was reduced in this conception to the passive receivers of wisdom from on high. This was clearly a highly authoritarian conception of power, and one which, in the eyes of observers at the time, was deeply unsympathetic to the values associated with democracy. It was, it was argued, this conception of authority that underpinned the tsarist political system, and that was carried forward into the Soviet era where the chief orientations of the regime reinforced this pattern.

The basic logic here appeared simple: an authoritarian political culture underpinned and was consistent with an authoritarian political system. Where popular values were overwhelmingly authoritarian in their orientation, they provided a buffer to nondemocratic rule because they portrayed that form of rule as the norm. In this sense, the regime gained popular legitimacy because its forms reflected predominant values. Such legitimacy would have been lacking had authoritarian political forms confronted a political culture dominated by ideas of democratic accountability and popular control because the modus operandi of the system would have been so at odds with popular values. This logic seems simple and compelling, but it does obscure some important qualifying factors.⁹

⁷ For example, see Richard Pipes, *Russia under the Old Regime* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1974); Stephen White, *Political Culture and Soviet Politics* (London: Macmillan, 1979); and Stephen White, “The USSR: Patterns of Autocracy and Industrialism,” Archie Brown and Jack Gray (eds), *Political Culture and Political Change in Communist States* (London: Macmillan, 1977), pp. 25–65.

⁸ On the association between God and tsar, see Billington (*Icon*), p. 35. Also M. Cherniavsky, *Tsar and People: Studies in Russian Myths* (New York: Random House, 1969), p. 35.

⁹ For an excellent critique of the way the notion of political culture has been used in communist studies, see Mary McAuley, “Political Culture and Communist Studies: One Step Forward, Two Steps Back,” Archie Brown (ed.), *Political Culture and Communist Studies* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1984), pp. 13–39.

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One is the question of causality. Much of the literature on Russia's so-called authoritarian political culture assumes that culture shapes, perhaps even determines, the political forms that take hold in the society: Russia has an authoritarian political system because it has an authoritarian political culture. However, this seems to assume that the state and its political forms play no role in helping to shape the way that popular culture develops. Clearly what the state does and how it does it can have an impact on popular values. For example, the Soviet industrialization drive, which led to mass migration from the countryside into the cities, and the accompanying expansion of education is likely to have had a profound effect on popular values. Similarly, in Britain, the gradual expansion of the franchise from 1832 reinforced the strengthening of democratic values throughout British society in a way that might not have occurred so easily in the absence of such reforms. So values and structures interact in an important way, each shaping the other as they go. This means that a model of values determining structures is too simplistic and misunderstands the complex way in which these two interact. But once we accept that they interact, the danger is that the argument could become circular, the institutions are shaped by the institutions.¹⁰

There is also an assumption that values are unchanging, that rather than being something that is dynamic and in a process of continuing development, political culture is something that once established remains largely in its original form. This is, clearly, a view at odds with the reality. A society's values are in a constant state of change, and although this process may have accelerated and become more complex in recent decades, it has nevertheless been a characteristic of culture at all times. Even when regimes sought to restrict this process, as in Ming China and Tokugawa Japan, they achieved only limited success. Acknowledgement that a culture changes and may therefore be differentiated (i.e., some parts may have changed in ways that are different from and incompatible with other parts), makes it more difficult to draw a direct causal line between regime forms and cultural values.

The other factor that this logic obscures is the nature of the perceived values that constitute the political culture. Anyone trying to outline the contours of a particular culture must be selective in the choice of values they see as important. This means that values that are contrary to the presumed main thrust of the culture are excluded (or at least downplayed) in the analysis. For example, the view that Russian culture

¹⁰ The danger of circularity is quite high as soon as scholars shift from an understanding of political culture as subjective values to a wider one including institutions and patterns of action. But the focus on subjectivism also has problems. See McAuley ("Political Culture") and Lukin (*Political Culture*), pp. 28–31.

was one that involved popular passivity seems to ignore the history of rural revolts and the revolutions of the twentieth century, while the presumed absence of notions of control over the rulers ignores the *veche* of medieval Novgorod¹¹ and the role of the *zemskii sobor* in 1613.¹² Or turning to the Soviet period, the perception of Soviet political culture as unrelievedly authoritarian needs to take into account things like the rhetorical dominance of “democracy” in official rhetoric, the practice of representation embodied in some of the lower level political institutions, and the upsurge of democratic activism between 1988 and 1991. These examples are not meant to deny the strength of authoritarian themes in historical Russian/Soviet culture, but to note that no culture is homogeneous. Once this is accepted, it becomes increasingly tenuous to draw a direct and unambiguous causal link between values and institutions.

This does not mean that values do not have an influence on political institutions and the way they develop, nor that they have no relevance to the question of regime legitimacy. If there is a lack of fit between regime forms and popular perceptions, the buffer of popular support enjoyed by the regime is likely to be thin and the credit the regime enjoys with the populace limited. In contrast, when values and structures broadly align, popular attitudes to the regime are likely to be generally supportive and to allow the regime some leeway before disillusionment and opposition set in. But given the nature of value patterns, and the likelihood that in any particular national case there will be a diversity of values and attitudes, the precise relationship between political culture and regime will be complex. This is clearly the case with regard to post-Soviet Russia. It also means that, while values may help to shape regime outcomes and forms, they do not determine them.

The second type of legacy argument concerns the circumstances whereby the regime came into existence. This essentially amounts to an argument about the way in which the contours of politics in the new regime are shaped by the disposition of forces that brought about the regime change. In the Russian case, the key element about the replacement of the USSR by fifteen independent states of which Russia was one, is that this was a process governed by elites and one in which mass-based political actors played relatively little part.

The trigger for ultimate regime change was the process of reform set in train by Mikhail Gorbachev following his election as General Secretary in

¹¹ The assembly that was central to the running of the city before its incorporation into Muscovy in 1478.

¹² The assembly that elected Mikhail Romanov to the throne following the “time of troubles.”

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March 1985. This reform program,¹³ popularly known as “perestroika,” was something that for the first three and a half years (i.e., until the middle of 1988) comprised overwhelmingly measures introduced by Gorbachev and his supporters from the top. Hence the term used by one scholar, “revolution from above.”¹⁴ Although one aspect of this program, that of “democratization,” did call upon the populace to become more active in political life – and over time this did become more radical in terms of the shift from simply criticizing malfeasance by officials to electing them in a competitive ballot¹⁵ – this was to be at the behest of the political leadership and was to be strictly circumscribed within the boundaries specified. Thus, while increasingly there was recognition of the need for popular activism, this was still seen as being within parameters tightly defined by the leadership. The logic of this stage of perestroika still vested primacy within the top political leadership, with all others being supplementary to this. However, this began to change with the XIX Conference of the Communist Party in June–July 1988.

At this Conference, Gorbachev significantly radicalized the reform program, not only introducing a new structure of state legislative institutions and sidelining the party, but also shifting towards a competitive electoral process.¹⁶ But also it was from this time that actors outside the political elite began independently to influence the reform process. Political parties began to emerge at this time,¹⁷ although for the most part they remained weak and marginal to the mainstream of political life. What were to become more important were the popular fronts that emerged in most of the republics of the USSR from 1988 on. It was the activities of these groups that propelled the country on the trajectory to disintegration, with the main role in this being played by the fronts in the Baltic republics of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania.¹⁸ These were popularly based movements, usually led by dissidents from the elite, that

¹³ Although use of the term “program” gives too great a sense of coherence and considered thought to what was a much more disjointed set of measures which, over time, became increasingly radicalized.

¹⁴ Gordon M. Hahn, *Russia’s Revolution from Above 1985–2000: Reform, Transition, and Revolution in the Fall of the Soviet Communist Regime* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2002).

¹⁵ On this, see Stephen White, “‘Democratisation’ in the USSR,” *Soviet Studies* 42 (1), 1990, pp. 3–24.

¹⁶ On the Conference and its importance, see Graeme Gill and Roger Markwick, *Russia’s Stillborn Democracy? From Gorbachev to Yeltsin* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), Chapter 3.

¹⁷ On parties, see M. Steven Fish, *Democracy from Scratch. Opposition and Regime in the New Russian Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

¹⁸ On the role of the popular fronts, see Mark R. Beissinger, *Nationalist Mobilization and the Collapse of the Soviet State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

were able to mobilize sections of the populace into political activism, ultimately confronting the Moscow leadership and using this oppositionist stance to make major gains in the elections to the new central Congress of People's Deputies in 1989 and, more importantly, the republican elections of 1990. It was the capacity of the fronts in the Baltic states to win control of the republican governments that was the key factor in driving the union towards fragmentation along republican lines.

But while the Baltic popular fronts thereby played a key role in shaping the last years of Soviet political life, the corresponding front organization in the Russian Republic remained weak and politically marginal. It was never able to generate the sort of popular support based on opposition to Moscow that was evident in some other republics and was thereby never able to command a prominent place in shaping the course of Russian politics. More important in shaping such a course (and crucial for the union as a whole) was the split that occurred in the Communist elite. From the outset, members of the elite had held different views about the reforms, with no one sure of the consequences of what they were doing, but some unutterably opposed. By 1989, that elite was split in three ways. A group around Gorbachev sought to continue with a measured pace of reform, although in practice this involved some tacking back and forth, a process that ultimately led to the erosion of the numbers comprising this group. Another, more conservative group opposed the course of reform. Some of these believed that all sorts of change were wrong, others accepted that some change was needed but argued that the changes espoused by Gorbachev went too far too fast. Initially this group was personified by Yegor Ligachev,¹⁹ but in the last years there was no single person who could act as its primary standard bearer. The third group was headed by Boris Yeltsin,²⁰ and believed that Gorbachev's reforms went neither far enough nor fast enough. Over time, the center around Gorbachev seems to have contracted while the two extremes expanded.

All three groups sought to court popular appeal, but only the third one around Yeltsin saw this as a major priority, and this was simply a recognition of their apparent weakness within the traditional Soviet structure. The conservatives sought to rely overwhelmingly upon the institutional structures of the Soviet regime (including the newly established in 1990 Communist Party of the RSFSR), although they did also seek to

¹⁹ Ligachev was a leading party official, a CC Secretary 1983–90.

²⁰ Yeltsin was a leading party official until early 1988, a member of the CC Politburo (a candidate member) and Secretariat and head of the Moscow city party committee until his open clash with Gorbachev at the end of 1987. Then he was effectively an independent politician.

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mobilize sections of the populace fearful about the impact of the reforms upon their lives. Gorbachev and supporters sought to shift the power from the old Soviet institutions to the newly created bodies, as well as appealing to that section of the population they believed supported the moderate path of reform they were pursuing. The group around Yeltsin sought to use his personal charisma to generate a wide wave of support and to thereby sweep into power in the republican organs of government in Russia. This strategy had some success in establishing a beachhead for the Democratic Russia party in the Soviet Congress of People's Deputies, but even more importantly gaining a significant position in the Russian Congress of People's Deputies. This facilitated Yeltsin's election by the Congress as chairman of the Russian Congress of People's Deputies in May–June 1990, followed in June 1991 by his popular election as President of Russia. Once he occupied the top position in the Russian government, he eschewed party building²¹ and sought to rest his authority solely on his charismatic relationship with the people. He used this to oppose Gorbachev at every turn.²²

While Yeltsin's appeal to charisma seemed to insert the populace into the political equation, it did so in only a subsidiary fashion. They were there only as support for an elite actor, and there was never any sense that Yeltsin was willing to foster the development of autonomous political activity that was likely to diverge from his own course of action. As the dynamic of the final eighteen months of the USSR played out, its focus remained the conflict between elites, with the mass of the populace playing a mainly observer role. The elite focus was clearly reflected in the attempted putsch of August 1991 and the means of the final dissolution of the USSR. The putsch was one set of elite actors (the conservatives) moving against another (Gorbachev et al.), and although a section of the populace was mobilized into the fray, significant in this was Yeltsin and his ability to generate that popular support. Thus, while the show of popular opposition to the putsch was crucial for its collapse, it remained secondary to the role of Yeltsin (and of Gorbachev). In terms of the final dissolution of the USSR, the elite focus is even more clear. Despite a majority of those who voted in March 1991²³ expressing a desire to

²¹ Hence undercutting the development of Democratic Russia. See Geir Flikke, *The Failure of a Movement: The Rise and Decline of Democratic Russia 1989–1992* (Oslo: Faculty of Humanities, University of Oslo, 2006).

²² On this, see M.K. Gorshkov, *Gorbachev–Yeltsin: 1500 dnei politicheskogo protivostoiania* (Moscow: Terra, 1992) and Fedor Burlatsky, *Mikhail Gorbachev–Boris Yeltsin. Shkhvatka* (Moscow: Sobranie, 2008).

²³ For the results of the referendum, see Richard Sakwa, *Russian Politics and Society* (London: Routledge, 1993, 1st edn.), p. 427.

see a renewed union continue, in early December the leaders of Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine met privately and disbanded the USSR. This was not something that the populace was given a say in, but was purely the result of elite action.

Overwhelmingly the course of politics in the Russian Republic in the 1985–91 period was structured by elite activity, with little scope available for organized popular involvement. Where the opportunity presented itself, people often did organize in the so-called informal groups, and later political parties and popular movements, but in Russia these remained largely sidelined. The elite sought to use these instrumentally, but without allowing them significant independent power. This means that genuine democratic forces, which were emerging at this time, had little scope for either popular involvement or for their own growth. The result is that when the new Russia emerged on January 1, 1992, democratic forces were very weak. The stability of the new regime in this argument thus rested on the weakness of potential popular mobilization and challenge to the regime stemming from the late-Soviet period.

As well as explanations focused upon a legacy of earlier development – values that have emerged over time or the elite dominance of politics stemming from the circumstances of regime change – there have also been explanations emphasizing the centrality of actors' actions. While such actions can contribute to the development of longer term structural factors, in the short term what political actors do has immediate effects in shaping the context of political life and regime development. A number of this type of explanation has been offered for the survival of authoritarian regimes, with most involving a combination of at least two of three elements:

- regime strength and capacity, or how regime elites go about building the regime;
- opposition strength and capacity, or how opposition forces seek to develop a viable opposition to the regime; and
- international influences, or how international actors attempt to affect the domestic political dynamic.

These three elements – what regimes do, what oppositions do, and what international actors do – interact with each other to shape the immediate process of regime building and survival. Different explanatory schema deploy these elements to varying degrees to offer sophisticated explanations for the survival of authoritarian regimes. The three main examples discussed below show how these different elements can be interwoven to produce a theoretically robust explanation of political change and its absence.

Valerie Bunce and Sharon Wolchik²⁴ have sought to explain why post-communist authoritarian leaders have been overthrown via the ballot box. Their analysis emphasizes the role of the opposition and of international influences. They reject the view that the strength of the regime, the position of civil society, economic performance (e.g., onset of economic difficulty, or increasing prosperity), political trends (e.g., recent crackdown on opposition), or US government support for the opposition can provide any real purchase in seeking to explain regime change or survival. Instead they emphasize the potential independent role of elections in bringing about regime change. But this can only occur, in Bunce and Wolchik's view, when the opposition adopts an innovative electoral strategy. This means that they are not concerned with the structural position of the opposition, with any attempt to evaluate the strength of the opposition, but with the electoral strategy it brings to the election.

Bunce and Wolchik are not completely clear about the components of the electoral strategy that has produced opposition success, but this so-called electoral model seems to involve²⁵

- opposition unity; this means not only creation of a united bloc among established opposition forces, but the drawing into oppositional activity of civil society organizations.
- measures to improve the quality and transparency of electoral procedures; principal means are through a high level of election monitoring, the conduct of exit polls, and the holding of parallel independent vote tabulation.
- an ambitious and well-organized campaign that offers a real policy alternative to the government and focuses on increasing voter registration and turnout; this is where the activation of civil society is central.
- possession and projection of the conviction that real change is possible through the electoral process.

Bunce and Wolchik argue through their case studies that where this model was applied (Slovakia, Croatia, Serbia, Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan), authoritarian leaders were removed and where it was not (Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Belarus) those leaders remained in power.

This electoral model, argue Bunce and Wolchik, emerged in the Philippines in 1986 and traveled from Southeast Asia through Latin America (1988 Chilean referendum) to eastern Europe. It then moved through the successful countries, beginning in Slovakia in 1998 and (thus far) ending

²⁴ Valerie J. Bunce and Sharon L. Wolchik, *Defeating Authoritarian Leaders in Postcommunist Countries* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011). Also Valerie J. Bunce and Sharon L. Wolchik, "Defeating Dictators. Electoral Change and Stability in Competitive Authoritarian Regimes," *World Politics* 62 (1), 2010, pp. 43–86.

²⁵ Bunce and Wolchik (*Defeating Authoritarian Leaders*), pp. 252–60.