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Human Rights in Russia and the Former Soviet Republics: Prospects for Democracy

Abstract

Upon the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991, the countries of Eastern Europe and Central Asia that had hitherto lived behind the Iron Curtain inherited new independence and uncertain political futures. Since then, the world has watched a political entity that once covered 8.6 million square miles shatter into 15 new nation-states, each with the potential to throw off the shackles of the past and forge new democracies. Fifteen years after the fall, we see elections at state and local levels, multi-party systems, and constitutions touting freedoms of press and religion. While these elements are vital to the survival of any sustainable democracy, their presence alone in no way proves democracy's existence. Despite claims of democratic rule, the region today has a lengthy record of human rights abuses, intimidation of political opposition and, what is more, flawed and fraudulent elections. The former Soviet states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania are the obvious successes of the region, given their integration into both the European Union and NATO in 2004. Conversely, the other former Soviet states have not been so lucky, as evidenced by the fact that five of the region's countries have not seen a shift in political power since the early 1990s. With politically-appointed leaders, constitutions revised on a whim, and landslide pageant-elections, is there hope for democracy in the future of the countries of the former Soviet Union?

Keywords

Human rights, Russia, Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, Central Asia, Democracy

Prospects for Democracy

By Nick Stokes

Upon the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991, the countries of Eastern Europe and Central Asia that had hitherto lived behind the Iron Curtain inherited new independence and uncertain political futures. Since then, the world has watched a political entity that once covered 8.6 million square miles shatter into 15 new nation-states, each with the potential to throw off the shackles of the past and forge new democracies. Fifteen years after the fall, we see elections at state and local levels, multi-party systems, and constitutions touting freedoms of press and religion. While these elements are vital to the survival of any sustainable democracy, their presence alone in no way proves democracy's existence. Despite claims of democratic rule, the region today has a lengthy record of human rights abuses, intimidation of political opposition and, what is more, flawed and fraudulent elections. The former Soviet states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania are the obvious successes of the region, given their integration into both the European Union and NATO in 2004. Conversely, the other former Soviet states have not been so lucky, as evidenced by the fact that five of the region's countries have not seen a shift in political power since the early 1990s. With politically-appointed leaders, constitutions revised on a whim, and landslide pageant-elections, is there hope for democracy in the future of the countries of the former Soviet Union?

As evident in a number of sources presented below, a major impediment to democratic representation is the difference in opinion of what constitutes a participant democracy. In personal interviews with citizens of multiple former Soviet countries, it has been revealed that average, blue-collar citizens and wealthy, powerful upper class citizens had opposite opinions of what was most important in the democratic process. The upper class citizens felt that the most important feature of a successful democracy is the rule of law and enforcement of justice—perhaps because they are in a position to afford justice. On the other hand, the average citizen insists that democracy means political involvement, freedom of assembly and fair elections; in other words, precisely what they lack.

Given Russia's influence and dominance in the region it is only natural to begin with its president, Vladimir Putin. The former Saint Petersburg mayor, as well as KGB operative, Putin was elected as the second democratic president of the Russian Federation. In contrast to many former Soviet rulers, both Putin's first and second elections were found to be democratic and fair by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). Putin even announced recently that he will not seek a third term in 2009 when Russia's next presidential elections are scheduled to be held. However, as we stressed earlier, none of this in any way should imply that Russia is a full-fledged democratic state. While the presidential elections may have received passing grades from international observers, the issues of gubernatorial and some legislative elections still remain points of contention. Why are these areas important? They are issues because they no longer exist. In 2003, after Russia witnessed the horrific hostage standoff and subsequent massacre of over 300 schoolchildren at Beslan, Putin was able to harness the fear of the nation to pass legislation to change the Russian Constitution. The content of these constitutional changes made it so that the elections of regional governors would no longer take place—instead governors would be politically appointees. This move almost guaranteed that no one from the opposition would be able to gain access to political power. Political dissent against the Kremlin's policies is also off-limits, as

evidenced by the recent murder of Anna Politkovskaya, a journalist and outspoken critic of the war in Chechnya.

The current situation in Belarus under the leadership of Alyaksandar Lukashenka is one that has been given Putin's own seal of approval. Widely referred to as the last dictator in Europe, Lukashenka has ruled his country with an iron fist since 1994—ironically enough, he ran as an anti-corruption reformer. His first term was slated to end in 1999, but after dodging impeachment in 1996 he enacted a referendum to extend his term to 2001. Despite the outcry from the international community and the OSCE in particular, Lukashenka won re-election in yet another landslide. Scores of protesters and members of the opposition were beaten by police and arrested when they called foul, which should seem strange given that the incumbent had garnered over 80 percent of the vote. With economic production and household income both plummeting and the international community scorning Belarus' administration, the country was in a downward spiral. The president temporarily expelled ambassadors and declared the Chernobyl zone safe and inhabitable again, urging former residents to resettle. If nothing else, at least citizens could count on him to step down in 2006 at the end of his second term. This was not in the president's plans; in 2004 he changed the constitution again to eliminate presidential term limits, leading many to wonder if he holds ambitions of a president-for-life. In 2006, Lukashenka won his third presidential election with 85 percent of the vote. The election was widely considered to mirror his previous elections—riddled with fraud and deceit.

With such dismal examples and numerous others (Tajikistan's Rakhmonov and Uzbekistan's Karimov both altered their countries' constitutions to extend their own terms and have won elections with 97 percent and 91 percent respectively in recent years), is there any prospect for democratic transition to sweep across the remainder of the territory? Between 2003 and 2005 the region saw three revolutions—in Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan—in which ordinary citizens peacefully ousted oppressive regimes and demanded representative democracy. All three states initiated what observers viewed as open and transparent elections, but since then little seems to have changed in terms of political progress. In Ukraine, President Yushchenko sacked his entire cabinet and today his prime minister is none other than Viktor Yanukovich, the same man that the revolution sought to keep out of government. In Kyrgyzstan Bakiyev, too, fired his cabinet and his countrymen are demanding that he abdicate—overall the country is stuck in political chaos. For many the idea of revolution has a more Marxist connotation than democratic undertones. Things like term limits and representative elections mean more accountability for the politicians of the region, yet these leaders are rare. Sadly, while people clamor for political freedom and fair elections, it is the powerful leaders to whom they appeal that continually keep democracy just out of arm's reach.

1996. "How Is Russian Pressing Faring in CIS States?" *Current Digest of the Post-Soviet Press* 48: 13-14.

Annotation: The article covers censorship of television and the media in Belarus, Ukraine, Armenia, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. It is not extremely helpful for two key reasons: there are simply too many countries to cover in so few pages; and, written ten years ago, it does not accurately reflect several current-day situations in the aforementioned countries.

Aslund, Anders, Michael A McFaul. 2006. Revolution in Orange: The Origins of Ukraine's Democratic Breakthrough. Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

Annotation: This book is a compilation of works written by several different authors. For the purpose of this research I focused on the chapters dealing with the role of the media and the effects that the revolution has had upon the media. The book contends that the media was poised to react years before the revolution under severe censorship and an atmosphere of largely state-owned and controlled media. The articles illustrate what the role of a free and independent media can have upon the political atmosphere of a nation in transition from communism to democracy.

Basch, Raymond M. 1998. "The Effects of Ethnic Separation on Democratization: A Comparative Study." *East European Quarterly* 32 (2): 221-237.

Annotation: This article focuses on three countries of the former Soviet Union, Belarus, Moldova and Ukraine, for an examination of how ethnic and minority composition play into the success or failure of democratization attempts. All three countries, the authors explains, have approximately the same percentages of ethnic make-up—around 70 percent of a majority and 30 percent of one minority in particular. These discrepancies in the ethnic make-up then create schisms that defeat an overall sense of unity within the states, thereby slowing the process towards democratization. The concept is interesting and certainly seems valid outside the context of the article, given that those nations that have achieved democracy after the fall of the USSR typically tend to have a greater sense of national identity and fewer ethnic lines separating them.

Clark, William A. 2004. "Russia at the Polls: Potemkin Democracy." *Problems in Post-Communism* 51 (2): 22-29.

Annotation: After the Kremlin-backed parties swept the parliamentary elections of 1999-2000 they paved the way for Putin's re-election. The authors point out the fact that almost all of Putin's opponents have gradually withdrawn from running against him, causing many to wonder if these politicians bowed out gracefully to the better opponent or if they were muscled out by the president's supporters. Instead of labeling Russia as a potential democracy the author opts for "managed democracy," meaning that Putin combines features of both democracy and authoritarian dictatorship to manage the country. While this may be true the author should pick one side for Russia--if an answer offers partially true and partially false information on the whole it must be false, the same should apply for Russia's political leanings.

Furman, Dmitrii. 1999. "Centers and Peripheries: The Political Systems of the Three East Slavic Republics." *Russian Social Science Review* 40 (6): 28-47.

Annotation: Furman analyzes three capital cities in the former Soviet Union—Kyiv, Moscow and Minsk—and their “transitions” to democracy since the collapse of the USSR. As noted in a handful of other articles, the author points out the differences in the political opinions and ideologies of the upper and lower classes. He finds that among those who have received higher education at university and beyond, a trend of Westernization and a move for democracy exists; conversely, among the lower, uneducated classes there is a persistent pining for the stability of communism. Finding the happy medium between the two appears to be the key to success, but the definition of “success” will vary dramatically. The article is useful for understanding pivotal changes since independence, but given the outcomes of elections in the three countries in question since the article was written in 1999, the implication for today are in some cases similar, but in others very different.

Hanson, Stephen. 2006. "Postimperial Democracies: Ideology and Party Formation in Third Republic France, Weimar Germany, and Post-Soviet Russia." *East European Politics and Societies* 20 (2): 343-372.

Abstract: *Post-Soviet Russia, the early Third Republic in France, & the Weimar Republic in Germany can be understood as cases of “postimperial democracy”—a situation in which a new democratic regime emerges in the core of a former empire that has suddenly collapsed & where democratic elections continue for at least a decade. However, the regimes consolidated in these cases—republican democracy in France, Nazi dictatorship in Germany, and weak state authoritarianism in Russia—vary dramatically. These divergent results reflect the impact of new ideologies, which generated collective action among converts by artificially elongating their time horizons in an environment of extremely high uncertainty. In France, ideological clarity allowed radical republicans to outflank more pragmatic parties; in Germany, ideological clarity allowed the Nazis to mobilize more successfully than centrist parties; and in post-Soviet Russia, the absence of any compelling new political ideology -- democratic or antidemocratic—has rendered political parties too weak to challenge even a very weak state.*

Hawkes, Malcom. 1998. "Republic of Belarus: Turning Back the Clock." *Human Rights Watch*, 19 July: <http://www.hrw.org/reports98/belarus/>.

Annotation: Hawkes reviews small, brief changes in the media between the collapse of the Soviet Union and the 1994 election of Alyaksandar Lukashenka. Shortly after the election this progress was quickly reversed with the new president tightening his grasp on all non-state media through assault and harassment by secret government agents. The article is a good review of how the government is steering the media away from dissent and towards absolute control. Despite being written only four years after Lukashenka’s first election and eight years before his latest, the article’s argument accurately predicts the path that the country has taken.

Iourine, Alexandre. 2006. "The "Blame Russia First" Syndrome in the Us." *International Affairs: A Russian Journal of World Politics*.

Annotation: The focus of this article is the nearly automatic anti-Russian sentiment shared throughout Western democracies. The author points out, however, that Russia has made progress towards implementing the democratic reforms that will classify it as a functional democracy by some Western observers. It does not go deeper into details though in order to explain how Russia is achieving its own democratic state. It interestingly counters some of the other articles that are critical of Russia, but would be more effective if it offered these crucial explanations.

Jost, Kenneth. 2005. "Russia and the Former Soviet Republics: Can Democracy Take Hold in the Former Soviet Union?" *CQ Researcher* 15 (23): 541-564.

Annotation: This entry traces the Soviet past linking the countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States, tying it to the current political situations. It is useful for understanding where the countries have come from and how they came to their present state of political affairs. According to the article, only three of the former republics can be classified as free democracies. The overall tone of the article is not completely pessimistic, however, pointing to potential breakthroughs in the region, it portrays all of these areas as hanging in the balance of current foreign policy and domestic leadership.

Kosachev, Konstantin. 2005. "From the Logic Of "Near Abroad" To the Community of Interests." *International Affairs: A Russian Journal of World Politics* 38 (2): 85-91.

Annotation: Written in the wake of democratic revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine, both former Soviet Republics, the article examines the implications for Russia's policy in the near abroad. In both cases, the Russian Federation interpreted the revolutions as breaks away from Russian influence and control, and as steps towards Western democracy. The article also raises notions of EU membership for the more Westernly-situated states such as Ukraine and Moldova, as well as how this would affect Russian foreign policy within the region. The piece raises important issues that could have been more developed in a longer work.

Kubicek, Paul. 2006. "Democracy Derailed in Russia: The Failure of Open Politics." *Perspective on Politics* 4 (2): 401-402.

Annotation: While not very substantial in length, Kubicek offers a rather comprehensive list of complaints on Russia's inability to adapt to open market economics and politics under the leadership of Vladimir Putin. Hindrances to the media and questionable elections (not to mention Putin's policy of gubernatorial appointees after the Beslan siege) have contributed to these perceived failures of the current administration.

Kuzio, Taras. 2006. "Ukraine Is Not Russia: Comparing Youth Political Activism." *S.A.I.S. Review* 26: 67.

Annotation: Like the title infers, the two Eastern European nations have come to the beginning of a potential split in direction since the days of the Soviet Union. More specifically, Kuzio focuses the Westward turn Ukraine took at the beginning of the Orange Revolution and the role that youth activists such as Pora played in the actual revolution and democratic breakthrough. While smaller in scale and number, youth groups for democratic reform are emerging in Russia as well, but face more political oppression than their Ukrainian counterparts.

Lipman, Masha. 2005. "Apathy into Anarchy Does Go." *Index on Censorship* 34 (4): 52-56.

Abstract: A discussion of the Russian culture of popular alienation from the state, greatly intensified in the waning years of the Soviet state. Although Russians are often passive and submissive in relation to the state, adjusting to a social order of corruption and deception they perceive as inevitable, they also learn to adjust to that order by subverting its overt rules in day-to-day practice. Following a brief period of now-regretted optimism about democracy, Russians maintain a profound cynicism about the state and low moral expectations for themselves and others. As a result, overt resistance or objections to state policies and practices are rare, but noncompliance with laws is nearly universal, and it is nearly impossible for the state to implement policies.

_____. 2005. "Constrained or Irrelevant: The Media in Putin's Russia." *Current History* 104 (684): 319-324.

Annotation: The article highlights factors impeding Russia's media from becoming truly free and independent. The argument is that to a large extent, Russia's press remains extremely oppressed to the point that journalists automatically self-censor themselves for fear of offending or opposing Putin's regime. Much of the media is also state owned and seems little more than a propaganda machine for the current administration.

Marples, David R. 2004. "The Prospects for Democracy in Belarus." *Problems in Post-Communism* 51 (1): 31-42.

Annotation: Written fairly recently, this article explores possibilities for democratic reform in Belarus 12 years after independence. It examines the administration under the leadership/dictatorship of Alyaksandar Lukashenka, who is the first and only president since independence; despite winning his last election with nearly 82 percent of the popular vote, independent polls showed that his approval rating among voting adults was less than 30 percent. One of the more interesting topics is the author's exploration of Belarus' awkward position between the United States and Russia. On the one hand, Russian influence plays a huge role in Belarussian politics, yet Russia's commitment to the US-led war on terrorism apparently creates tension, given that the U.S. considers Belarus a "rogue state."

Miller, A.H., et al. 1997. "Conceptions of Democracy among Mass and Elite in Post-Soviet Societies." *British Journal of Political Science* 27 (2): 190.

Annotation: In this article the three authors discuss the prospects for a democratic transition for the countries of the former Soviet Union using the examples of Ukraine and Russia. More specifically, the authors look at the problem through personal interviews with two different demographics within these countries: the powerful and wealthy elite on one hand, and the every day citizen on the other. When pressed for definitions, the elite of the two countries generally stressed the need for law and order and the general rule of law; average citizens, however, are more concerned with their particular freedoms (specifically speech, personal involvement in the democratic process and security). While it is interesting to note the divide between the two classes, the authors could have expanded their research to other nations of the region, perhaps one whose citizens differed linguistically and ethnically more from Russia's.

Putin, Vladimir. 2005. "Annual Address to the Federal Assembly." ed. The Kremlin. Moscow, <http://www.kremlin.ru/eng/speeches>.

Annotation: In his widely publicized address to the General Assembly of the Russian Federation in which he claims that the collapse of the Soviet Union was one of the biggest political disasters of the century, President Vladimir Putin talks about the prospects for democracy in his own country. He combats the notion that the Russian people have been silenced for centuries and unaccustomed to concepts of freedom, but dismisses this as a false interpretation of reality. While he does not specifically reference any of the former Soviet states by name, he does make numerous references to the USSR, leaving the reader with a lingering tone of nostalgia interspersed with promises for democratic rule.

Tokmazishvili, Michael; Papava, Vladimir. 2006. "Becoming European: Georgia's Strategy for Joining the E.U." *Problems in Post-Communism* 53(1): 26-32.

Annotation: The authors look at the post-communist "Rose Revolution" in Georgia and the progress (or lack thereof) in the country since then. From the transition from Shevardnadze to Saakashvili, the article looks at potential democratization successes and problems. The most effective argument is the importance of civil society linked with government as a means for maintaining a democratic state. Georgia is a good example of recent efforts towards democracy, but at the same time it was always a fierce opponent of Russification and has no ethnic or linguistic ties to Russia that were not imposed upon it.

Tumanov, Boris. 2006. "Mission Never to Be Accomplished." *New Times*: 42-43.

Annotation: The author talks briefly about Russia's failure to uphold agreed human rights policies as well as its inability to veer away from authoritarian politics and towards democratic reform. Written very recently, it is a valuable source for examining Putin and Russia's path from 1999 and his election to the present day.