

Analysis

Russia in Political Country Ratings: International Comparisons of Democracy, Rule of Law, and Civil Rights

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Summary

A series of ratings established by Freedom House, the Bertelsmann Foundation, Transparency International, and other non-governmental organizations (NGOs) attempt to assess the political situation in the countries of the world through regular quantitative rankings. This article investigates how Russia fares in these ratings. The numbers generally confirm the widespread perception of increasing authoritarian tendencies. At the same time, a distinction within the CIS countries can be observed. Russia's rating is approaching that of Belarus, while Ukraine continues to be assessed in an increasingly positive light. However, the ratings also indicate the necessity of differentiating between various policy fields. In the area of corruption, for example, there are no relevant differences over time or among CIS states. It should also be noted, however, that the explanatory power of the ratings is limited by methodological problems and, particularly, by the subjective nature of the indicators being collated.

Ratings: Aims and Procedures

Since *Freedom House* began assessing the extent of freedom in the countries of the world in 1972, the idea of handing out "report card"-style audits to entire societies has won increasing numbers of supporters. In the last decade, several organizations launched new projects which systematically and comparatively assess the political state of affairs. As a result, the areas under investigation are being increasingly differentiated and the rating systems are becoming increasingly complex.

Whereas the first Freedom House project, *Freedom in the World*, only differentiated political and civil rights, the organization's *Nations in Transit* series, begun in 1995, now encompasses seven topic areas ranging from "democracy and governance", "electoral process", "independent media", "civil society", and "corruption" to "judicial framework and independence". The *Bertelsmann Transformation Index*, which was introduced in 2003, evaluates nearly 40 indicators. The *Global Integrity Report*, which was first issued in the same year, tracks almost 300 indicators, but due to this in-depth level of investigation, only covers a small number of countries. In addition, there are several ratings that consciously focus only on certain aspects of a political system, such as freedom of the media or corruption.

The increasing number of indicators has also complicated the evaluation process. Whereas the first Freedom House ranking simply offered scores from 1 through 7, the newer indices are based on composite values which allow for a differentiated ranking of all countries in the world.

All political country ratings primarily refer to the ideals of democracy, human rights, and the rule of law,

and assess the extent to which individual countries meet these ideals. Perfect democracies with rule of law thus receive the highest marks, while dictatorships are generally at the bottom of the tables. Some rankings, however, also take into account the rulers' management qualities or other indicators based on socio-economic and economic policy criteria.

Most of the rankings are based on expert assessments. As a rule, one or two experts write up a country study, which is subsequently reviewed and, if necessary, corrected by other experts. The experts are generally well acquainted with the country in question in their capacities as scientists or journalists. Alternatively, some indices such as the *Corruption Perception Index* published by Transparency International evaluate opinion surveys collected from the population or from economic experts. As a reaction to the increasing number of indices, the World Bank has created a meta-index. *Worldwide Governance Indicators* summarize the results of a total of 31 indices under the heading of a new index.

The documentation starting at p. 7 offers an overview of the country ratings. In the following, we will examine the results that these ratings have returned for the case of Russia. We will show how the assessments have changed since President Vladimir Putin came into office in 2000, and will also compare the current political situation in Russia with the state of affairs in its post-Socialist neighbors.

A Chronological Comparison: From Yeltsin to Putin

One key aspect of how the political climate under President Putin is assessed is the comparison

with his predecessor, Boris Yeltsin. The ratings generally support the perception of increasing authoritarian tendencies on the path from Yeltsin to Putin, which is widespread in the Western media.

In its *Freedom in the World* ratings of 2005, Freedom House downgraded Russia from “partly free” to “not free”. According to the *Nations in Transit* rating, there has been a clear deterioration in the “electoral process” category, where the index value declined from 3.5 in 1997 to 6 in the year 2006, thus approaching the value of 7 for the worst authoritarian states. The same development can be observed for the “civil society” category, and the “independent media” rating is moving in a similar direction. There are no observable changes in the “judicial framework and independence” and “corruption” indices, however – mainly because the situation in these areas had already been assessed as catastrophic in the late 1990s.

The corresponding *Worldwide Governance Indicators*, published by the World Bank, also display only minor changes in the areas of “control of corruption” and “rule of law”. The *Corruption Perception Index* (CPI), published by Transparency International, does not show an increase of corruption under President Putin, either. The index value for 1998 is more or less identical to the one for 2006. Therefore, in the specific area of corruption, the indicators contradict the widespread perception, in Russia as well as in the West, of the situation having deteriorated in the past years. One should note, however, that Transparency International questions the methodological soundness of this comparative interpretation of the CPI over time.

Countries in Comparison: Russia and Its Neighbors

The political developments in Russia must also be regarded in the regional context. For example, Poland, as a new EU member state, is generally awarded noticeably better grades than Russia. But considerable differences can also be observed within the CIS. In particular, since 2005, Russia has clearly been falling behind Ukraine and is moving towards the position occupied by Belarus, according to several rating scales.

In the *Bertelsmann Transformation Index*, Russia continued to be ranked 47th in the 2006 evaluation, the same position it had had in the 2003 study, while Ukraine had improved its standing from 44th to 32nd rank. The number of countries evaluated grew from 116 to 119, but this change had no impact on the relation between Russia and Ukraine. The *Freedom in the World* 2006 ranking assessed Ukraine as having improved in terms of “political rights” from 4 to 3, while

Russia was in 2005 downgraded to 6 and Belarus to 7. In the category of “civil liberties”, Russia’s score remained at 5, while that of Ukraine improved from 4 to 2 between 2004 and 2006. Belarus’s civil liberties rating was 6.

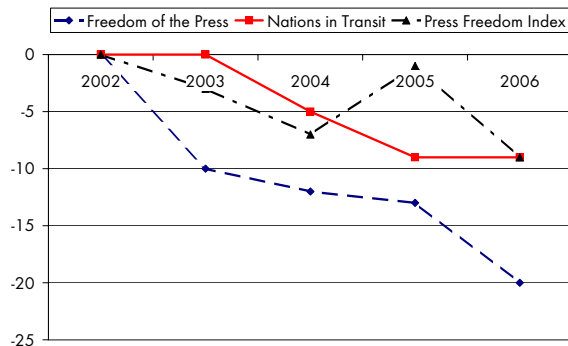
The divide between Russia and Ukraine is most apparent in the *Nations in Transit* rating in the categories of “electoral process” and “civil society”. Whereas the values for Ukraine have consistently been approaching those of Poland since 2004, the corresponding values for Russia in 2006 were almost as bad as those of Belarus. The development in both *Nations in Transit* and the *Worldwide Governance Indicators* is much less straightforward for the topics of “rule of law/judiciary and corruption”. As far as these areas are concerned, the three CIS states are at the same level, far behind Poland.

In summary, the results of the democracy tests are devastating for Putin’s Russia. Particularly in the areas of “media freedom”, “civil society”, and “elections”, the ratings allow us to attribute responsibility for the deterioration directly to developments during Putin’s presidency. In the area of “rule of law/judiciary” and “corruption”, on the other hand, the situation had already reached the current deplorable state when he took office.

Comparing Apples and Pears? Remarks on Methodology

It should be noted that some researchers contest the explanatory power of these ratings. While many academics use country rankings in order to compare democratization processes internationally and to identify causal factors in successful transformations, others view such rankings as public-relations stunts or even as misleading. The limits of their explanatory power can be seen when comparing several indices that purport to measure the same variables. Since 2002, the freedom of the press has been assessed by as many as three independent ratings, namely *Freedom of the Press Rating* (Reporters without Borders), *Nations in Transit – Media*, and the *Press Freedom Index* (both from Freedom House). The following diagram (overleaf) illustrates the development of the respective index values in percentages, as transposed into a single unified scale. All three graphs indicate deterioration in the freedom of the press. However, the significant discrepancies in the development of the individual indices also illustrate the limitations of quantifying the freedom of the press.

Another weakness of country ratings is that short-hand representations in the news media overstretch the explanatory power of such indices. This is particularly



true of the *Corruption Perceptions Index*, published by Transparency International, which is regularly described in the mass media as a ranking of the world's most corrupt countries, with development trends being indicated by comparison with the previous year. In its notes on the index, Transparency International denounces both of these uses as inadmissible. The index only measures perceptions, not actual corruption. Studies have demonstrated that this is a significant distinction. Direct comparisons with the values for the previous year are not admissible because of variations in sources used, changes in how averages are calculated over several years, and other methodological problems.

The World Bank also tones down the applicability of its *Worldwide Governance Indicators* in the fine print. The section on "frequently asked questions" states that changes in country rankings over time may be caused by four different factors. Three of these are related to

changes in surveying methods and are not connected to the development of the country in question. In conclusion, it is stated that two of these factors "typically only have very small effects on changes".

In assessing the explanatory power of the country ratings, what is more important than methodological questions on indexing is the fact that they rely on the subjective appraisals of experts. These experts derive their opinions from journalistic publications and from their own personal assessments as academics, journalists, and business professionals; as a rule, they have no access to other non-public sources. At the same time, the experts, who generally only scrutinize one country, are limited in their ability to draw comparisons between different countries. Therefore, there is no guarantee that two experts assessing different countries that are on the same level of development will award the same rating to their respective countries.

Accordingly, the *World Bank*, for example, declares: "We recognize there are limitations to what can be achieved with this kind of cross-country, highly-aggregated data. Therefore, this type of data cannot substitute for in-depth, country-specific governance diagnostics as a basis for policy advice to improve governance in a particular country, but should rather be viewed as a complementing tool." This is probably also why most organizations supply extensive country studies together with their country rankings. These, however, generally tend to be disregarded by the media and the general public.

Translated from German by Christopher Findlay

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