

Studying Russian Politics through Western Lenses: Changes and Challenges

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Abstract

In contrast to the Soviet period, Russia is now integrated into comparative political science and Russians contribute to Western studies of their country. Current scholars generally fall into three camps, pessimists, optimists, and realists. Their key task will be figuring out how Russia fits into the world today.

Overcoming the Cold War Legacy

For several decades before the Soviet collapse, research on Russian politics in the West (then known as “Sovietology”) formed a distinctive sub-field in political science. During this period, given the strategic priorities of the Cold War, the need to “know your enemy” fueled extensive programs to train specialists and launched a number of scholarly ventures. At the same time, the closed nature of the Soviet political system and limited opportunities for gathering and interpreting data forced scholars to engage in the mysterious art of “Kremlinology,” partially isolating studies of Russian politics from the major developments within comparative political studies. At the same time, Russian scholars did not contribute to Western research (though émigré circles served as an exception that proved the rule). Despite lively debates between scholars of “totalitarianism” (those who perceived the Soviet Union as a unique “totalitarian” society in a manner of the “evil empire”) and “revisionists” (those who considered the Soviet political system to be a peculiar version of the world-wide trend toward modernization), Sovietologists predicted neither the political changes under Mikhail Gorbachev nor the following demise of Communism and break-up of the Soviet Union, calling into question their professional credibility. There is still no consensus on how to explain these developments.

Over the last twenty years, numerous new data sources on Russian politics—ranging from mass surveys to elite interviews—became available, new information technologies dramatically increased research capacities, and Russia is no longer viewed in the West as the No.1 enemy (or even as an enemy at all). Yet, although the major focus of interest among area specialists in Europe and North America recently shifted to China and the Middle East, research on Russian politics still attracts new generations of Western scholars; moreover, some Russian scholars are now actively engaged in international discussions on the subject.

How should we assess the substantive achievements and shortcomings in this sub-field two decades after the end of the Communism and the Soviet Union? To what extent has recent scholarship improved our understand-

ing of post-Soviet Russian politics? What are the major issues worth in-depth analysis? What is the main picture of contemporary Russia in the popular and academic literature? What about biases or inclinations? And what are the authors missing that would be important to discuss?

Understanding Russian Politics: Pessimism, Optimism, or Realism?

One can trace the major trends shaping Western studies of Russian politics just by looking at the titles of English-language books on Russia which appeared after the Soviet collapse. In the mid-1990s, they sounded very promising, with works such as *Democracy from Scratch* (M. Steven Fish) and *The Rebirth of Politics in Russia* (Michael Urban et al.). In the 2000s, the tone became more uncertain and skeptical: *Russia's Unfinished Revolution* (Michael McFaul) and *Russia between Dictatorship and Democracy* (ed. by McFaul, Nikolay Petrov, and Andrei Ryabov) soon turned into *Democracy Derailed in Russia* (Fish, again) and even into *The Consolidation of Dictatorship in Russia* (Joel Ostrow et al.). By the early 2010s, *The Crisis of Russian Democracy* (Richard Sakwa) and *The Politics of Sub-National Authoritarianism in Russia* (ed. by Vladimir Gel'man and Cameron Ross) put an end to the great expectations of post-Soviet democratization in Russia. The multiple deficiencies of post-Soviet Russian politics, such as outrageously unfair and fraudulent electoral events, weak and impotent political parties, heavily censored (often self-censored) media, rubber-stamping legislatures at the national and sub-national levels, subordinated and heavily biased courts, the arbitrary use of the state's economic powers, and the endemic corruption provided considerable fodder for scholars, observers and journalists. However, besides the existing near-consensus about this (rather gloomy) picture, various groups of specialists differ starkly in their assessments of the Russian political regime and its major features as well as in their explanations of the pendulum-like trajectory of post-Soviet political development and their outlook for the future.

The most popular viewpoint perceived Russian political trends through lenses of growing dissatisfaction. This scholarly camp typically portrayed Russia as

“authoritarianism without authority” (Kathryn Stoner-Weiss) or as the major deviation from patterns of post-Communist democratization in Eastern Europe. However, a number of scholars vividly rejected this approach, affected by a normative bias, and argued that Russia is just a “normal country” (Andrei Shleifer and Daniel Treisman) with middling socio-economic development that actually faced multiple challenges not so dissimilar to many other states and nations from Latin America to East Asia. Accordingly, one should not simply write off Russia as a land of permanent political troubles, but analyze it as a case of the international phenomena of poor quality democratic institutions under “crony capitalism”. Also, some experts stressed the simultaneous co-existence of both democratic and authoritarian elements in the Russian political system and thus qualified it as a rather distinctive type of “hybrid regime” (Henry Hale) which would require a more nuanced understanding of the peculiarities of the causes and consequences of its political developments.

The theoretical focus of explanatory paradigms for post-Soviet Russian politics is diverse and based upon different disciplinary approaches. Roughly speaking, scholars might be divided into “pessimists”, “optimists” and “realists” not only because of the conclusions of their analyses but also because of various logical foundations of their research. If one would compare scholarship with medical diagnostics, the causes of the multiple diseases of Russian politics are perceived as consequences of genetically-transmitted viruses, post-traumatic syndromes, or poisoning. “Pessimists” believed that the troubles of Russian politics are inherited from the past and thus cannot be healed by any treatment, at least in the short run. They concentrate heavily on the impact of Soviet legacies (and/or pre-Soviet) Russian history and culture, so it is no wonder that their understating of contemporary politics is merely path-dependent. Given the embeddedness of many pathologies in Russian politics (ranging from patrimonial leadership to the “imperial syndrome”), the argument of “pessimists” is that post-Soviet developments are nothing but a “flight from freedom” (Richard Pipes) to the natural continuity of Russian autocracy. By contrast, “optimists” view major post-Soviet political and economic problems as the temporary effects of Russia’s complex and rather traumatic transformation and especially of the weakening of the Russian state’s coercive capacity after the collapse of the Soviet Union in the 1990s and its complicated restoration in the 2000s (Vadim Volkov). The protracted post-traumatic syndrome, even though painful, according to this view, is gradually improving over time and there is significant hope that a rebirth of the Russian economy and society will occur under the guid-

ance of a strong Russian state, the way a broken arm heals in a cast. Finally, “realists” consider the process of turning Russia’s “growing pains” of the 1990s into the “chronic diseases” of the 2000s to be the result of purposeful actions by special interest groups resembling the poisoning of the social organism. The list of these “poisoners” who seek to maximize their power and wealth at the expense of the country’s prospects for progress include various segments of the Russian elite, be they “oligarchs”, “siloviki” or other so-called “Kremlin towers”, and the top leaders, including Vladimir Putin and Dmitry Medvedev. Many observers of current events in Russia see a vicious circle: the continuation of the status-quo will decrease possible antidotal effects for the Russian state and society, although it is too early to say to what extent the social organism of Russia will be able to develop immunity against the “poisoning”, or if it will be impossible to heal the disease.

Comparative Frameworks

The recent effort to integrate studies of Russian politics into the broader theoretical and comparative perspective of political science is another major advantage of the post-Communist changes. Previously, scholars included Russia only as a case study in broader historical examinations of political developments, such as the classic work of Barrington Moore on the origins of democracy and dictatorship or Theda Skocpol’s study of social revolutions, while contemporary comparisons were rather sporadic. Now, research on post-Communist Russian politics is legitimately placed into a three-dimensional comparative perspective: cross-national, cross-temporal, and intra-national (or cross-regional).

First and foremost, comparativists have included Russia into multiple cross-national quantitative studies of political values and attitudes (such as the World Values Survey), corruption perceptions (like those performed by Transparency International), quality of governance (produced by the World Bank and other agencies), and the like. These tools and measurements, although providing a rather mixed picture of Russia’s place in the contemporary global political map, are widely (if not routinely) used in many analyses produced by specialists on Russian/post-Soviet studies as well as by global experts. Second, beyond large-scale quantitative studies, more focused case-oriented comparisons of Russian politics involve numerous comparative referents, both contemporary and historical: the list of such parallels include party systems in early US history (Hale) and in Mexico under PRI (Ora John Reuter and Thomas Remington), ideological constellations in the French Third Republic and in Weimar Germany (Stephen Hanson), and state-business relations during the “gilded age” in

the US (Volkov). Third, given the political, social, and economic diversity of Russia's regions and localities, a great deal of research on comparative sub-national politics in Russia has been conducted by both Russian and Western scholars. Besides regular observations on Russia's regions such as Carnegie Moscow Center's Regional Monitoring Project, or the cross-regional Georing mass surveys of the Public Opinion Foundation (FOM), some comprehensive studies dealt with nationalist mobilization in Russia's ethnic-based republics (Dmitry Gorenburg), the use of fiscal federalism for electoral purposes (Treisman), political party development in the regions (Grigorii V. Golosov), the involvement of businessmen in regional politics (Scott Gehlbach, Konstantin Sonin, and Ekaterina Zhuravskaya), and a number of other issues. All in all, Russia is no longer perceived as an isolated object of study but rather as a comparatively-oriented case in the world-wide map of political phenomena.

What Has Been Done, and What Lies Ahead?

Probably, there are no major topics of empirical political analysis which scholars of post-Soviet Russian politics have not considered. Political institutions, patterns of governance, mass attitudes and behavior, the role of ideology, ethnicity and nationalism and many other political phenomena in Russia during the last two decades were not only mapped and described but also analyzed according to the state of the art standards of modern political science. To summarize, research on Russian politics is no longer isolated from mainstream empirical comparative research. Sometimes studies of post-Soviet Russian politics produced interesting counter-intuitive conclusions—such as the observation that popular protest in Russia's regions in the 1990s was merely a by-product of conflicts between federal and regional elites (Graeme Robertson) or the implications of the study of “virtual politics” in Russia, which serves not only as a tool of political manipulation but also as a major instrument for legitimizing the status quo political regime and eliminating alternatives to it (Andrew Wilson).

The study of politics under a non-democratic regime in contemporary Russia poses new challenges as well as constraints on the research agenda. On the one hand, present-day Russia should be considered a new El Dorado for those scholars who study corruption, clientelism, arbitrary rule, and institutional decay because it provides plenty of field evidence and fertile grounds for testing and building various theories. On the other hand, a number of research arenas have been systematically distorted due to political interference—in particular, electoral studies. In fact, the destruction of electoral competition in Russia raised the question of the validity of official electoral statistics: if this data is usable only for the study of electoral fraud (which is flourishing in Russia), should we seriously analyze voting behavior and the electoral strategies of political parties? At least, research tools should be attuned to electoral authoritarianism in Russia and beyond.

Unfortunately, research on post-Soviet Russian politics rarely provided major insights that might affect political studies beyond Russia and the post-Soviet world. Probably, the time is not ripe yet, and in the future we might expect that the accumulation of knowledge on Russian politics and interdisciplinary and international efforts within the scholarly community will result in new path-breaking studies that shake the world of political science not only because of new data from Russia but also because of new ideas that will emerge out of this country. But at least one major difference between Soviet and post-Soviet Russia should be taken into account: unlike in the Communist period, present-day Russia is no longer a world superpower that claims global leadership, but rather a semi-peripheral state which might become in the future either an Eastern province of Europe or a Western province of China. And, quite probably, such a country would never produce key insights for research on politics in the contemporary world. Addressing these issues over the next two decades will form an agenda for the new generations of scholars on Russian politics both in Russia and in the West.

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