Consolidation Of Democracy In Post-Soviet Russia Essay, Research Paper

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Introduction

The fall of the Communist regime in the Soviet Union was more than a political event. The powerful

interaction and fusion between politics and economics that characterized the state socialist system created

a situation that was unique for the successor states of the Soviet Union. The penetration of the

Communist regime into every facet of life left the Russian people with little democratic traditions. Russia

faces the seemingly impracticable task of economic liberalization and democratization. This is combined

with a necessity to answer nationalist and ethnic questions that have plagued Russia for centuries.

This paper addresses the problems of creating a stable democracy in Russia. The prospects for a stable

democracy in Russia are limited at best. I will outline some of the concerns that academics have in the

consolidation of Russian democracy. What is paramount to note is that a stable democracy must

adequately address what Ken Jowitt calls the ?developmental trinity?: nation-building; capitalism and

democracy. The dilemma that is especially relevant to Russia it that these conditions are often

contradictory. The often messy business of politically reconstructing a nation defies traditional

democratic ideals. The establishment of democratic institutions can hinder the development of a market

economy and, conversely, programs that are designed to enhance capitalist expansion often are

antagonistic towards democratic goals (Jowitt 7). These seemingly endless Catch-22?s are at the heart of

difficulties facing Russia in its attempt to create a stable democracy.

The Process of Creating A Nation-State

The question of who is the playing the game and what makes the playing field is an important one for the

Russian Federation. Ethnic and nationalist questions plagued the Soviet Union and continue to stress the

Russia Federation during its nascent period. The dynamics of center-periphery relations provides Moscow

with some of the greatest challenges in establishing a stable democracy. Phillipe Smitter writes, ?There is

no simply democratic way of deciding what a nation and its corresponding political unit should be?

(Smitter 66). Later in his article, he writes ?those that have not yet resolved the dilemma of defining their

national and territorial boundaries are unlikely to make much more progress in other domains? (Smitter

73). The dilemma facing the Russian Federation is that it finds itself with a charge of establishing and

following democratic institutions, while at the same time facing secessionary pressures that seem to

require extra-democratic means to preserve the integrity of the nation.

Nationalism in multiethnic areas in the Russian Federation has provided a substantial challenge for

democratization. There is a direct relationship between democratization and ethnic peace (Smitter 72). In

a democratically weak society, ethnicity assumes a stronger role, and when democracy and ethnicity are

balanced, political stability is possible. As a result of a lack of democratic institutions and channels for

dialogue, Russia?s inhabitants are now increasingly identifying themselves as members of ethnic groups

rather than as citizens of the Russian Federation (Drobizheva).

An important development in center-periphery relations is the growing importance of ?economic

nationalism,? an effort to create an economic basis for political independence. Economic nationalism is a

protective defense against the Russian federal government?s economic dominance. Alternatively, it is also

a sign that the republics wish to retain relations with Moscow since politics remains primarily in the

hands of the center (Drobizheva).

For example, Tatarstan and Sakha-Yakutia both have a wealth of natural resources, giving them a

potential advantage in economic development and a desire to establish control over these resources.

Tatarstan, for example, strives to sell its oil at world market prices in foreign markets to generate income,

and in 1993-94, the local governments in Tatarstan and Yakutia sought economic decentralization in

Russia by refusing to pay federal taxes. Consequently, an agreement reached between the federal

government and the republics gave the latter what they wanted: increased economic autonomy

(Drobizheva).

Further inquiry into the agreements with Tartarsan demonstrates the flexibility the Yeltsin regime is

willing to employ in dealing with possible powder-keg situations. A treaty signed on February 15, 1994

attempted to mollify the tensions on both sides. The treaty affirmed Tartarsan right to its own

?international and economic relations? and, as previously noted, provided substantial autonomy in

economic issues for Tartarsan. Smoothing over contradictions in each state?s constitution, the agreement

affirms the union between Russia and Tartarsan (Lapidus 107). The treaty with Tartarsan provides a

possible blueprint for future center-periphery relations. It forebears a evolving and fluid approach that

should be beneficial in establishing a stable democracy. But in typical Yeltsin contradictory manner, the

war in Chechnya has demonstrated the worst of the Yeltsin regime.

The conflict between Chechnya and the Russian Federation should not be considered an ethnic conflict.

The authorities did not even give as a pretext for the invasion the defense of Russian-speaking people.

Such a pretext would have been unbelievable, in light of the fact that Russian- speaking people suffered

from the bombing of Grozny at least as much as the native population. The war was connected more with

the struggle for power in Moscow than with either economic or ethnic factors. The Chechnyan campaign

was characterized by Yeltsin employing Soviet-era coercive measures. Paternalism, clientelism, and

military intervention prevailed over legal methods and legal institutions. Lilia Shevtsova considers the

Chechnyan war a byproduct of the Yeltsin regime?s reliance on personal politics. She writes

?Yeltsin saw the war as a chance to flex his muscles…neutralize

the conflicts within his own regime; expand his political base…and

appear before the world…as a strong leader? (Shevtsova 67).

The tragedy in Chechnya not withstanding, and with all due concern towards the dangerous tensions that

exist between Moscow and it various ethnic republics, I agree with Gail Lapidus and Edward Walker that

it is unlikely that we will see a significant secession movement in the Russian Federation in the near

future. Of paramount importance is the economic and political realities facing both Moscow and the

various republics. Secession provides the republics with a myriad of additional stumbling blocks towards

establishment of stable democracy. These include questions of international recognition, Russian

implemented economic pressures, and devastating civil war (Lapidus 108). The costs of leaving the

Federation would appear to outweigh any perceivable benefits gained by secession.

Yet there are serious nationalist and regionalist concerns that the Russian Federation must address if there

is a chance for democracy to take hold. Economic chaos must be avoided by establishing a sound currency

and creating a common economic bond between the center and the periphery (Lapidus 108). There will

be a deeper examination into the economic issues facing the Federation as a whole in the next section, but

note that these concerns are magnified in the peripheral areas that lack developed agricultural and

industrial economies. Issues of more effective regional and ethnic political representation must be

addressed through a movement away from the Soviet system that unfairly distributes economic control and

political power among ethnicities and nationalities (Lapidus 96). Many ethnic minorities lack

administrative recognition for seemingly arbitrary reasons. It would appear that the best antidote for

ethnic and national ills is a healthy economy that would bind the periphery to the center, therefore making

secession an unattractive option. Along with sensible economic reforms, political restructuring is

essential for stable democracy to take hold.

The Road to a Market Economy

At the heart of the difficulties plaguing the Russian Federation are the economic reforms that the Yeltsin

regime has imposed upon the Russian people. Capitalism is viewed as a necessary ingredient (though not

sufficient) contingency of a stable democracy. All established democracies are located in countries that

place economic manufacture and aggregation in the hands of privately owned firms, with distribution of

scarce resource achieved through market forces (Smitter 66). The movement away from the penetrative,

all-encompassing Soviet economic octopus has caused enormous hardships for the Russian people. It has

placed economic uncertainties in the path of political realities, resulting in policies that attempt to address

the often contradictory objectives of economic liberalization in the wake of political democratization.

Sweeping in after the failed coup of August 1991, economic reformers, led by Prime Minister Egor

Gaidar, placed the Russian economy on a steady diet of economic shock therapy. The government?s

misguided attempt to rest its reform program on fulfillment of a limited number of macroeconomic

variables left the Russian economy in disarray. Despite a precipitous decline in economic productivity,

radical reformers defended their macroeconomic policy, arguing that the supply side of the Russian

economy would receive proper attention after stabilization. But what were the Russians to do in the

meantime? The revolutionary fervor that characterized the early economic reforms did not take into

account the punitive realities of their policies. As Steven Fish writes:

?All had advocated ?transition to a market economy.? But this goal had been more of a dream than a

demand, and few had actually considered how to achieve it (Fish 215).

With all due deference to clich?, the early Russian economic policies can be succinctly summarized in

?Be careful what you wish for; you might just get it.?

Khrushchev stated that a country may follow its own road to socialism, and in a perverse sense that logic

is still be applicable for Russian affairs. But, rather the mandate should be that each country should

follow its own road towards capitalism. An examination of what the Communist apparatus left in its

wake should cause pause for any free-market optimist. Seventy plus years of state socialism has left

Russia with a two-ton gorilla on its collective economic back.

On page 66 and 67 of his ?Dangers And Dilemmas of Democracy?, Smitter outlines possible starting

scenarios for incipient democracies. A best case scenario finds the nation with a preceding autocracy that

had already concentrated profits, encouraged the private accumulation of wealth, increased the state?s

fiscal capacity, invested in the country?s physical infrastructure and provided a positive starting point for

international trade. Countries, such as Chile and Spain, that had inherited these elements, found the

transition to a market economy easier.

Russia and the other successor states to the Soviet Union found themselves in a much more precarious

predicament. The state socialist regime left a legacy of corruption, protectionism, price distortions,

foreign indebtedness, inefficient public enterprises, trade imbalances, and fiscal instability (Smitter 67).

Combined with the simultaneous need for political reform, Russia faces a tall task indeed. The dubious

tradition of the Soviet era has led to an overdependence on foreign advise and models of capitalism.

Yet, it is clear that this may not be a wise path to follow. Much of the literature concerning post-

communist literature warns of Russia relying to closely to the Western model of capitalism. Jowitt warns

that Americans should temper their ?missionary zeal? in exporting an idealistic view of ?what we once

were? (Jowitt 7). The simultaneous difficulties of nation-building, marketization, and democratization

place the Soviet successor states in a unique and precarious situation.

Privatization in Russia did occur extraordinarily rapidly, with the idea being that getting productive assets

into private hands as fast as possible would make economic reform irreversible. This was arguably right –

there is indeed a large and powerful group that has a great deal to lose from any effort to re-nationalize

the economy. But this class is at the same time decidedly not interested in fair rules of market competition

and an open economy. Rather it wants the state to preserve its privileges, protect its markets, and allow it

to continue to reap the windfall gains of privatization. And neither does it seem to care much about

democracy.

At the same time, privatization has contributed greatly to the popular conviction that marketization has

been deeply unjust: state assets were distributed disproportionately to insiders, to people willing to skirt

the letter of the law, and in many cases to outright criminals. Official corruption and the lack of fair and

enforced laws and clearly-defined property rights, have only contributed to this perception. As a result,

while there is a growing middle class in Russia, it is smaller, less democratic in orientation, and less

politically influential than it might have been without the state socialist tradition.

The greatest misstep the Yeltsin regime took was moving forward with economic reform without

addressing the need for wholesale, political renovation. There is a serious quandary that results in

concurrent democratization and marketization. It derives from the basic difference between a government

that strives to distribute power and status relatively equally (democratization) and an economy that

distributes property and income relatively unequally (capitalism) (Smitter 67). This obstacle is magnified

in Russian democratization with the fusion between politics and economics. Shevtsova writes ?reformers

cannot rest content with a rearrangement of relations among different institutions, but must strive to form

new political and economic system? (Shevstova 57).

Democratization and the Reinvention of Russian Government

An orderly exit from the Soviet past and progress towards stable democracy necessitates the development

of a state capable of effective governance. Tsarism and state socialism have provided Russians with little

experience with working governmental institutions, nor knowledge of how to coordinate the actions of

state agencies in pursuit of a common goal. As especially was the case with the early Gaidar economic

reforms, political compromise and coalition building were ignored in favor of policies designed for the

?public good.? The continued employment of Soviet-style politics by the Yeltsin regime bodes ill for the

establishment of consolidated democracy in Russia.

To begin the movement to a consolidated democracy, Russian government most promote new institutional

capacities and move towards more rational and pragmatic linkages between formal administrative

agencies and their functions. This is a sharp break away from bureaucratic malaise that characterized the

Soviet system. Important in this development is the fostering of economic movements outside the old

system (Shevtsova 56).

Shevtsova raises an interesting question of whether the ?collapse? of communism actually strengthened

the hand of the nomenklatura , especially on the regional and local level, by allowing them to gain a novel

claim of legitimacy as the leaders of new nations (Shevtsova 60). Along with this new found legitimacy

came access to the new found economic resources. It is of foremost importance that wealth not be

distributed solely among a small group of state officials and enterprise directors. Such actions could lead

to a continuation of patron-client and personalist relations that characterized the state socialist system.

But the separation between the public and private sphere is not clearly defined in Russian society. The

penetration and coerciveness of the Communist Party dulled the line between state and civil society. In

order to consolidate and strengthen the budding private sector, Russia needs to create an administrative

system that actively encourages its growth. Note my use of the word ?actively.?. Laissez faire policies are

not what the private sector needs to grow and develop into a true bourgeoisie. A true bourgeoisie in the

sense that economic opportunity and success is not achieved by simply being a former member of the

nomenklatura. But recent improvements show that the distribution of wealth is becoming more equitable.

Recent improvements in the privatization process, especially in dwellings, hold great promise for the

expansion of small-scale property ownership; an important step in consolidating private ownership. This

is along with a growing entrepreneurial spirit among less advantaged segments of the population,

especially the young (Fish 234).

To allow a government to actively encourage private, economic enterprise, political appointments must

move above the personal level. There must be a balance between the administrative and political roles of

the members of the bureaucracy. Shevstova writes on page 69 that Yeltsin ?has a habit of ranking

personal loyalty to himself far above professionalism when choosing appointees and subordinates.? The

clientelism of the Soviet era is alive and kicking in the Yeltsin government. To challenge this system, a

professional bureaucracy, one that is limited in its ability to intervene directly in the policy-making

process, must develop.

Another important component of democratization that Shevstova feels is missing from the current Yeltsin

administration is a lack of imperatives to build broad consensus and foster genuine communication

between leaders and citizens at large (Shevstova 57). Much of this can be attributed to the Communist

tradition that placed enormous authority in the local ministers. The autarkic, socialist system allowed

executive agencies to acquire many legislative functions. Communication with constituents and

consensus building was a unnecessary hassle. The real conflict existed within the decision-making elite.

As we will see later, elite conflict is still a major ingredient in the Yeltsin formula of power consolidation.

Shevstova call this lack of consensus building and communication a hangover from Leninism (Shevstova

57). Political power was restricted to a self-selected elite which iniated new personnel less for their

technical skills than their willingness to embrace Communist ideology or their relationship to powerful

party elites. This system of clientelism retarded and made irrelevant any development of modern,

responsive bureaucratic institutional arrangements. Consequently, today?s bureaucrats (and yesterday?s

communists) find it difficult to appreciate the need for compromise, power sharing, and local initiative.

This is precisely the problem Russia faces with Yeltsin. It is painfully apparent from his tenure as the

architect of Russia early transition period, that old habits die hard.

Yeltsin: Presidential Power and His Communist Tradition

A brief look at the Boris Yeltsin biographical sketch shows that he is truly a maverick who, on the eve of

Ol? Blue Eyes birthday (Sinatra that is; I think Yeltsin also has blue eyes), ?did it his way.? Rising

through the nomenklatura , gaining a reputation as a fearless reformer, Yeltsin found himself as a

member of the Politburo. Once again, Yeltsin proved an able and determined reformer, but an

estrangement between himself and Gorbachev set in when Yeltsin began criticizing the slow pace of

reform at party meetings, challenging party conservatives and even criticizing Gorbachev himself. Yeltsin

was forced to resign in disgrace from the Moscow party leadership in 1987 and from the Politburo in

1988. His Lazarus act is well documented. Just as well documented his tendency to become a political

chameleon, changing his colors to suit any political condition. He has been a communist boss, a reformer

within the communist system, a liberal slayer of communism and a nationalist warrior against

secessionism (Shevstova 69). While the American president may wear many hats, Yeltsin has traded in

his entire wardrobe numerous times over. He is truly a skilled political in-fighter, maneuvers he learned

from his Communist political education.

Lilia Shevstova is ardently critical of the decisions Yeltsin has made in the post-Soviet era. She lays

much of the responsibility for the politics of confrontation squarely at the feet of Yeltsin and his advisors

(Shevstova 58).

First, she debunks the idea that Yeltsin is a ?destroyer of the old system. Correctly, she considers him a

reformer who has not attempted to address the institutional hegemony held by the former nomenklatura .

His policies have resulted in the concentration of political and economic power in the hands of the former

communist elites. And she lists a number of Soviet era tactics, such as playing the members of

nomenklatura against one another, that still personify Yeltsin decision making (Shevstova 60). Yeltsin

still digs deep into his Communist bag of tricks when trying to consolidate his power.

The Presidential Revolution of 1993 signified a turn towards a more personalistic brand of rule for Russia.

Shevstova argues, and I would agree, that the Constitutional Crisis of 1993 was largely predicated on

Yeltsin attempting to outmaneuver his old Communist rivals, who had taken refuge in the legislature

(Shevstova 62). The supporters that Yeltsin lined up behind him for this insurgency upon the Supreme

Soviet were wildly divergent in their political orientations and goals. They included liberal reformers,

bureaucrats and pragmatists, statists and security officials, and extreme nationalists (Shevstova 63). This

motley crew testifies to the bizarre landscape that makes up Russian politics.

Yet it is that bizarre political landscape that Yeltsin appears to be most comfortable operating upon.

Yeltsin can consolidate and maintain authority because of the lingering sense of crisis that hangs over

Russian politics (Shevstova 65). The widely held belief that a successor would be a worse option and an

absence of any real alternatives has allowed Yeltsin to maneuver with impunity. The June presidential

elections present a clear example of this phenomenon. Even with horrendous economic and political

performance, Yeltsin still was able to defeat Zhyguanov, for the reason that the challenger was the pits, a

tired political retread. Shevstova refers to ?the fear, inertia, and disorientation that pervade Russia?

(Shevstova 65). Yeltsin has adeptly used these pathologies to create a system that Shevstova refers to as

?divide and conquer? (Shevstova 69).

So what are the dangers in Yeltsin?s brand of governing? There has been very little change in how things

are done under the Yeltsin regime versus the Gorbachev regime. The specific issues were addressed in the

previous section. Another important point to note is that there has been too much reliance on Yeltsin?s

personal prestige and charisma (Shevstova 64). Yeltsin operates outside of the nascent party system

because parties constrain leaders. He is not an institution builder but, as his policies have demonstrated,

he is a populist. His communist background has not made him adverse to resorting to extra-legal means

to achieving his goals. It is this procedural uncertainty, and reliance upon the ?man? and not the

?measures?, that create the greatest concern for the establishment of stable democracy.

The Crystal Ball

The problems that I have outlined in this paper do not bode well for the establishment of a stable

democracy in Russia for the near future. The literature on the subject contends that consolidated

democracy is not a likely option for Russia. Instead we are much more likely to see a ?unconsolidated?

democracy take hold in Russia.

Fish describes an unconsolidated democracy as a system that would include many of the basic elements of

democracy, such as elections and considerable civil and cultural freedoms (Fish 226). Yet we are unlikely

to see the establishment of durable and stable rules and institutions that are appropriate to their respective

social structures or accepted by their respective citizenries (Smitter 60). Because of the lack of any

credible alternatives to democracy, we are unlikely to see a regression back to authoritarianism. Yet if

appropriate reforms are not enacted, we are likely to see what is referred to as democracy by default

(Smitter 60). The basic rights of democracy will exist but ?regular, acceptable, and predictable

democratic patterns never quite crystallize? (Smitter 61). The 1993 Constitution excaberates this problem

by placing enormous power in the hands of the president, laying the groundwork for discretionary,

personal expressions of authority that contradict the needed objectives of broad based political

aggregation.

There has been growing disenchantment in Russia with the not only Yeltsin, the politician, but with the

institution of democracy itself. Public opinion show that most Russians evaluate democracy in negative

terms (Whitefield). This is the danger of having a politician also represent a movement. For a stable

democracy to take hold in Russia, Yeltsin and future presidents must not become institutions themselves.

The personalization of transition politics presents enormous difficulties by hampering the

institutionalization of necessary reforms.

Still, with all these problems that have been outlined, I feel that it is unlikely that we will see a return to

authoritarianism. Lilia Shevtsova concludes:

?Despite the shallowness of democracy?s roots and the continuous attempts by some in power to curtail

freedom, the obstacles to the establishment of a full blow authoritarian regime appear insurmountable.

There are just too many active and self-conscious interest groups, too many people who have become

accustomed to life in a relatively free atmosphere, too many competing elites, no united and effective

bureaucracy, and a military establishment that seems highly unlikely to rally behind any would be man on

horseback? (Shevtsova 70).

The character of the next regime will provide many clues to what the future of Russia might be.

Economic transformations are not sufficient conditions for the consolidation of democracy. I am not

optimistic that Yeltsin has either the proclivity or the longevity to engage in any sort of meaningful

political reform. If the next regime does not adequately address what, Smitter referred to as, the extrinsic

dilemmas facing Russia, then consolidation is very unlikely. These dilemmas include political graft,

privileged treatment of the elite, unequal distribution of wealth, and crime (Smitter 73). If they are not

dealt with the future of democracy will be bleak, indeed.

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