Putin’s Nation Building Project and the End of Russia’s Transition: Implications for Europe and Global Democracy

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PANEL 2:
The Democratic Beachhead: Ukraine and the Future of DDRL

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Kathryn Stoner
Memo for CDDRL 20th Anniversary Conference, November 4, 2022

If Ukraine is the beachhead for European democracy and security, then Russia is the vanguard of modern autocracy. Its devolution into a repressive, personalistic and internationally aggressive autocracy was almost certainly not the goal Mikhail Gorbachev (who died in September 2022) had in mind when he took over as the last General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1985, launching perestroika and glasnost shortly thereafter. It was also not likely the outcome Boris Yeltsin, Russia’s first elected president, intended when he named Vladimir Putin his preferred successor in December 1999. Yet under twenty-two years of Putin’s leadership, Russia has devolved from open, even fractious politics in the late 1980s and through the 1990s, to a highly repressive, personalistic autocracy that threatens not just its neighbors, but decades of peace in Europe. The implications for Europe and global democracy are decidedly negative, as we are seeing in Ukraine currently.

The trajectory of the descent into ever-hardening authoritarianism under Putin was at first stealthy, and accomplished through incremental erosion -- increased incidents of appointed political offices rather than freely elected ones, gradual curtailment of media freedoms, and replacement of what was already a fragile system of rule of law with a clear rule by law – wielded against wayward oligarchs in the early 2000’s, and then opposition figures with increased brutality in the last 5 years.

Political and economic modernization programs rebounded somewhat after 2008 when Putin castled positions of President and Prime Minister with the loyal (and now maniacally nationalist) Dmitri Medvedev. But after Putin’s return to the Kremlin in 2012, the downward trajectory in civil liberties, tolerance of opposition politics in all but the narrowest of terms, further restrictions on independent media and strict oversight of courts returned with greater intensity. The assault on the liberal opposition accelerated dramatically in 2020 with the jailing of Alexei Navalny, subsequent crackdowns on public demonstrations against Putin’s regime, and ultimately by December 2021, the closure of human rights group Memorial, founded in 1987 during Gorbachev’s perestroika campaign.\(^1\) In the weeks and months that followed Russia's invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, virtually all independent Russian media sources closed or moved into exile. There were severe fines and then further jailing of anyone who criticized the “Special Military Operation,” in Ukraine. Russian civil society was largely crushed. In short, the modernizing and liberalizing experiment that was seeded by Gorbachev, and that sprouted under Yeltsin, withered, and has now died under Putin.

\textit{What happened?}

How did the vision of a more open form of politics at the time of the Soviet Union’s collapse in December 1991, almost exactly thirty years later end with a far more closed political system than existed when Gorbachev’s reforms began? In short, how did Russia’s modernization project – one

\(^1\) Gorbachev himself publicly appealed to the Office of the Russian Prosecutor General to withdraw the lawsuit that would liquidate Memorial on November 18, 2021, see https://www.gorby.ru/prescenter/news/show_30300/.

Memorial shared the 2022 Nobel Peace Prize for its work on documenting human rights abuses in the Soviet and post-Soviet periods. Gorbachev himself was awarded the Nobel in 1990.
that began with such promise -- end so definitively three decades later in economic isolation, and a domestically repressive and internationally aggressive autocracy?

What lessons does Russia have for the study of comparative political and economic transition? What went wrong? How did Russia get so terribly lost in transition? I will not attempt to answer these questions very thoroughly here (I think there is a book project in that). Nonetheless, I will attempt to shoot down a few tired theories, present some hypotheses and posit some poorly developed ideas as to why such a massive reversal took place in such a relatively short period of time.

Why We Should Be Surprised: Domestic Conditions Favored Political Modernization

Historians tell us that perhaps we shouldn’t be surprised that Russia has reverted to autocracy. Given Russian inexperience with liberalism, late industrialization, and 70 years of communism, we should ask not why Russia’s transition failed, but why it should have succeeded in the first place. Statistically too, as Barbara Geddes and co-authors have noted, most autocracies transit to different forms of autocracy not representative, accountable governments.²

Yet, there are exceptions (South Korea, for example) and Russia after the Soviet collapse had many of the ingredients deemed theoretically important for economic and political development that should have given it reasonable odds of success. In 1992, as the reform era dawned under Yeltsin’s presidency, politics were competitive and politicians seemed committed to the processes and institutions of representative government, especially following the 1993 reformulation of the Duma and Constitution.

In terms of social readiness for change, Russia has had a well-educated population, and a mobilized society capable of taking to the streets by the tens of thousands (even as late as January 2020 in protest of Alexey Navalny’s imprisonment) to stand up against government policies over the years.

Following Adam Przeworski, Russia’s economic growth from 1997 (the first year of GDP improvement rather than decline since 1991), and especially between 2003-2008 should have put it at or above the threshold for transition to open government if that is a pre-requisite for democracy these days. And it was Russia’s new middle class that took to the streets in 2011 and 2012 to protest Putin’s return to the presidency, just as modernization theory would have predicted.

By 2003, Russia’s abundant natural resources increased in value dramatically in the early to mid 2000’s, and its economy grew rapidly. Yet, we cannot blame Russian re-autocratization on the resource curse.³ While its economic bottom line, including budget surpluses until the last 2 or so years, clearly benefitted from the sale and price booms of oil and gas on international markets for, Russia’s windfall from sale of its resource endowments did not (on its own at least) curse its political transition to democracy. Avoiding some of the traditional pathologies of the resource curse (high debt relative to GDP for example), Russian revenues from oil and gas sales were directed into a national wealth fund to pave over the inevitable boom and bust cycle of price volatilities of these resources on international markets. Similarly, Russia’s political economy avoided a bad case of “Dutch Disease” because it had inherited a real manufacturing base from the Soviet period, which

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was privatized, largely reformed and even profitable in many sectors, and while it didn’t produce consumer goods, it still made things like high tech weapons, heavy industrial machinery, and aluminum for example. Russia also had a reformed and productive agricultural sector (in contrast to Soviet era agricultural woes) such that by 2017, it had become the world’s leading wheat exporter, and a world leader in the provision of fertilizer – crucial to global agricultural output. Even under harsh sanctions in 2014, high levels of grand corruption, and a burgeoning form of crony capitalism, the Russian economy continued to limp forward.

We know, however, even if the culprit isn’t the resource curse alone, that political development relies on more than just economic growth and an educated and mobilized society. Although those variables can certainly help, they are no guarantee of a successful political transition.

External Causes?

So, beyond domestic socio-economic variables, perhaps external causes are to blame for the descent of Russia into autocracy? Was Russia under Putin a leader or a follower in the global transition to autocracy that seems to have begun around 2006? Certainly, it was not immune to the international factors that helped to bring about a reverse wave of global democratic transition that had rolled steadily onward beginning in Southern Europe in the mid-1970s and swept eastward after the collapse of communism. Factors like the global economic crisis in 2008, the ill-fated American war in Iraq that began a few years later, and the growing polarization within American politics culminating in the election of Donald Trump as president in 2016 have hurt American global leadership and its attractiveness as a democratic, tolerant and pluralist society to which to aspire. But by the time Trump entered the Oval Office, Russia under Vladimir Putin had already turned away decisively from the path of political liberalization anyway.

Others might point instead to a lack of international support for Russia’s transition in the 1990s. There was, after all, no corollary at the end of the Cold War for Russia and other formerly communist states to the Marshall Plan in post War Germany. The parallels between Russia in the 1990s and the reconstruction of Germany after the defeat of Hitler are rough at best, however. Post-Cold War Russia arose out of the ashes of a system of government and economics that failed fundamentally – communism. Communist leaders in Eastern Europe and the 15 states of the former Soviet Union (including most notably, Russia), were not pounded into submission and occupation in a hot global war; they were replaced in many cases by their own citizens through open elections and elite coups.

Nor were their political and economic systems re-ordered due to settlement terms in a treaty. Russia, as the Soviet successor state, was not stripped of its military power as was Weimar Germany (another popular comparison); it was not punished under a heavy debt load imposed by Cold War victors – indeed some debts were forgiven, but most were paid off by the mid 00’s to early 2010’s. Until the global economic crash of autumn, 2008, in the five preceding years, Russia’s economy grew at an annual rate of about seven percent of GDP year on year – not exactly the Weimar scenario nor the situation of Germany immediately after WWII either.
Finally, some analysts will point to Putin’s background in the KGB to argue that inevitably, a leader with a background in Cold War espionage would inevitably lead Russia’s descent into autocracy. This perspective overlooks the early Putin, however, who did not always identify the liberal West as the enemy, nor use it to justify repression at home. Angela Stent and others have noted, that Putin was among the first (possibly the first) international leader to call former President George W. Bush on 9/11 and express his condolences. He also pledged to work with the US on global terrorism. And there were periods of close cooperation between Russia, the United States and the European Union throughout the 2000’s. Later, under Dmitri Medvedev’s presidency (and recall Putin was prime minister at the time, so clearly aware of what policies and negotiations took place), there was close cooperation between Russia and the United States in getting troops and supplies into Afghanistan through Russian territory. Beyond this, with Russia, the United States, Germany, and the UK signed the JCPOA regarding Iran’s nuclear program. Russia and the United States signed the New START strategic arms control agreement in 2011 and the Biden administration extended it in 2021.

This is far from an exhaustive list of the areas in which the United States and Russia had been collaborating by the spring of 2012 when Mr. Putin would again return to the Kremlin, but it is sufficient to demonstrate that he was not always adversarial in his approach to the West, nor evidently believed always – despite his KGB background -- that liberal democracy and cooperation with the West was bad for Russia.

From a soft to hard autocracy:
A parade of terminology to capture the spirit of “Putinism” has evolved in parallel with changes in the nature of Putin’s regime -- from “managed” democracy early in his second presidential term (2004-2008), then shortly after “competitive authoritarian,” with a political economy of “kleptocracy” and eventually, post 2012 a “personalistic, autocratic, conservative, populism,” or simply a “dictatorship.” Russia’s political system under Putin clearly didn’t start out as a repressive autocracy full-blown; rather, it hardened over time, and then fell off a cliff into a repressive form of autocracy with the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

The descent into deepening autocracy arguably began at the end of Putin’s second term as president in 2008, as he handed the presidency to Dmitry Medvedev. Medvedev, however, provided a pause and even slight re-liberalization of the system prior to Putin’s returning to the presidency in 2012. Announcing his return to the Kremlin in the autumn of 2011, Vladimir Putin was met not by popular enthusiasm, but by huge social protest. On the streets were precisely those sectors of society that had benefitted the most from the economic growth of the preceding years – middle class urbanites. And, as modernization theory would have predicted, following a notable improvement in

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4 Catherine Belton, Putin’s People: How the KGB Took Back Russia and then Took on the West, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux 2020), for example.
5 Angela Stent, Putin’s World: Russia Against the West and with the Rest, (New York: Twelve, 2019).
their material circumstances, here they were on the avenues of Russia’s largest cities demanding open politics and a “Russia without Putin.” Modernization theory explains this part of the story relatively well.

But, rather than leading to further democratization, this social mobilization led to deepening autocracy. It is precisely this kind of challenge from society that a kleptocratic patronal system cannot tolerate. The economy can modernize and marketize – to a certain extent – but people cannot be permitted to mobilize effectively against the regime.8

And so, a new phase of autocratization began soon after Vladimir Putin’s inauguration in the spring of 2012. First, as Putin’s personal public approval ratings declined, more mechanisms of social repression were introduced. These included amendments to laws regulating non-governmental organizations that were judged to be involved in political activities and that were accepting money from abroad, to re-register with the Ministry of Justice as “foreign agents,” – a politically charged term from the Soviet era associated in Russia with espionage. Since there were few alternative funding sources for many Russian NGOs, especially those whose activity was often focused on protecting human rights and freedoms from abuse by the state, this would effectively mean closure.

Second, the rule of law came down hard on protesters who had taken to the streets in the spring of 2012 to oppose Putin’s re-election. Accused of inciting violence, many young people who had themselves been victims of police brutality, were given long jail sentences. The leaders of Russia’s relatively small liberal opposition were frequently jailed even when legally demonstrating.

Third, and most significantly for understanding the acceleration and deepening of Putin’s autocracy, after 2012 no longer able to rely on the high economic growth from 2003-2008 to ensure social compliance, the regime sought a new legitimacy story. It was a narrative that would lean on the historical mythology of a great Russia that, as in centuries past, was once again under siege from a powerful enemy bent on destroying the Russian nation – not the Mongols this time, but “the West.” This national narrative was married with an appeal to Orthodox nationalist sentiments to protect Russian society from an overly permissive, liberal other. Although there is little evidence that Putin is much of a believer himself, as Steve Fish has noted, he “welcomes the opportunity to champion traditional morality, backed by religious leaders, whom he bankrolls and tasks with bolstering his moral legitimacy as well as his claim of embodying the national spirit.”9 Part of this new regime legitimacy story was that the demonstrations against Putin on the streets were the result of foreign influence. Western liberal ideas were not indigenous to the Russian nation, but were bad influences coming from “the West.” In addition to identifying “foreign agents” within Russian institutions themselves, now American, and European organizations that were engaged in the development of political parties were prohibited from operating within Russia. In sum, the popular mobilization that confronted the regime in late 2011 and 2012 initiated a change in strategy to more actively marshal segments of Russian society in favor of Putin’s rule.

Samuel Greene and Graeme Robertson demonstrate convincingly that Putin’s strategists aimed to demobilize opposition through the exploitation and activation of existing social “wedge” issues in

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8 Steve Fish makes a similar point in “What Has Russia Become?,” Comparative Politics, vol. 50, no. 3, at p. 331.
9 Fish, p. 329.
Russian society – specifically religion and gay rights. The regime’s strategists were able to use the Pussy Riot affair in February 2012 to further this agenda. Otherwise largely unknown among radical feminist protesters, the trio of punk artists performed an anti-Putin “prayer” (lasting about 30 seconds) on the altar of Christ the Savior Cathedral in central Moscow. They were quickly convicted of “hooliganism motivated by religious hatred” and sentenced to two years in prison camps. (The sentence of one of the women was suspended shortly after conviction when she apologized.) The real consequence of the incident, however, was the amount of national press coverage it received – especially on state owned TV networks, the preferred source for news of the majority of Russians. Public opinion consolidated quickly around the view that the performance was blasphemous to the Russian Orthodox church. The media coverage of the trial was unrelenting since, “the goal was to ensure that as many Russians as possible felt personally offended by what Pussy Riot had done.”

Soon after the women’s trial, a law was proposed in the Duma “On the protection of feelings of religious believers.” Support for the law, as well as another that was moved through the Duma not long after against the perpetration of positive images to children of the “gay lifestyle,” would serve to separate out a segment of the population who had supported the demonstration against Putin, from the opposition forces who had led the protests. A Pew Research Survey indicated that in 2013, 74% of Russians thought homosexuality should not be accepted by society, so in adopting laws that denigrated homosexuality, the regime was following rather than leading public opinion. Greene and Robertson argue that the use of religion and sexuality, “as wedge issues did exactly what it was designed to do: it widened the ideological divide between the pro-Putin majority and the oppositional minority in the country.”

Putin morphed into the protector of conservative values within Russia, and then globally. Russian national identity was presented to the population as distinctively illiberal, socially conservative, and non “Anglo-Saxon” in conscious contrast to the United States and the United Kingdom in particular. An imaginary attack on Russian culture by the liberal west justified a further assault on civil liberties and opposition in order to to root out foreign influence and all forms of support for representative democracy. Elections became even more controlled such that in the autumn of 2021, even the Communists – for twenty years a relatively loyal opposition to Putin – complained of widespread fraud. The media became more circumscribed and self-censored, and human rights organizations like Memorial were closed by the end of December.

The project of modernization that had begun 30 years before had come into conflict with this new nation building legitimacy story to justify Putin’s continued, uncontested rule – as explained by the head of the Duma (and Putin’s former deputy chief of staff) Vycheslav Volodin: “There is no Russia

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today without Putin.” And Russia with Putin will remain a domestically repressive, internationally aggressive deeply autocratic, nationalist state.

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