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Expect the Unexpected When Learning the Scholar's Craft

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I was supposed to be a lawyer. That's what my parents had told me; I was good at arguing, I liked school, and I was really interested in politics. But something went terribly wrong (or right, depending on your perspective) and my professional life took another path into political science and specifically the study of the Soviet Union and then Russia. Try as I might, by my sophomore year at the University of Toronto, I couldn't get my mind off of the changes happening in the Soviet Union at the time (in the mid-1980s). In March 1985, Mikhail Gorbachev had become General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and was a Soviet leader of a very different sort. He popped out of limousines to shake hands with people lining the streets of the European cities he visited, he spoke of reconstructing the Soviet system in a program he called *perestroika*, and he threw the doors open to Soviet society, politics, and history in the ensuing years under "*glasnost*" or openness. Suddenly, the Soviets seemed human, maybe even friendly, and to me as a Canadian, their weather, sports, and outdoors were familiar. No longer would we need to drill for a nuclear attack by hiding under our desks in school (true story), as Gorbachev proceeded to sign arms control and then reduction agreements with presidents Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush.

These transfixing events, coupled with a chance class with one of the emerging stars of the field of Sovietology, Timothy Colton, changed my career plans. He had just written *The Dilemma of Reform of the Soviet Union*,¹ thoroughly documenting the economic, social, demographic and political ills that had befallen the USSR by 1986. Yet, in an excellent demonstration of the importance of contingency in times of great political upheaval, he concluded that for all of its problems, the Soviet Union was in no danger of collapse. He was not alone, of course, in failing to predict the Soviet collapse only 5 years later – that was the prevailing view within the USSR, the U.S. government, and among academic analysts. Tim had an infectious enthusiasm for the study of the Soviet system; he and Peter Solomon, a scholar of the Soviet legal system, urged me to apply to graduate school and to Harvard in particular, where Colton was moving to lead the Russian Research Center (later the Davis Center). In his first few years at Harvard, Colton brought in a cohort of doctoral students, and I was especially fortunate to be part of this incredibly bright and creative group, (dubbed "Colton's kids" by some of us) which included Fiona Hill (Brookings), Dan Treisman (UCLA), Anna Grzymala-Busse (Stanford University), Pauline Jones (University of Michigan), Alexandra Vacroux (Davis Center, Harvard University), and Henry Hale (George Washington University), to name a few.

My cohort's graduate experience could hardly have had a more inauspicious beginning – the Berlin Wall fell in November of 1989, as the initial group began our first semester. That altered the plans of some of us to study changes in the Communist parties of eastern Europe, or the Communist International system of trade, since, suddenly, none of these things existed anymore! Two years later, we would also have to nimbly refashion or else completely toss out our dissertation topics as the contagion of Communist collapse spread to the Soviet Union itself in December 1991. As we adapted our research plans to

¹ Timothy J. Colton, *The Dilemma of Reform in the Soviet Union* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 1984).

these truly revolutionary conditions, several of us had to cycle through prospective dissertation topics since not infrequently the focus of an initial project would simply vanish or was in such a state of transition that it would have been difficult to write something meaningful or enduring given the pace of change. Jean Oi, who is now my colleague at Stanford, but then an assistant professor at Harvard wisely counseled me against taking on a comparison of the Chinese and Soviet transition processes since I would have needed to acquire both languages while simultaneously studying systems in great flux. This turned out to be excellent advice at the time, but I am now, thirty years later, working on a project on Sino-Russian relations today.

At the beginning of 1991, however, I was resolved to study regional-level Communist Party organizations in the fashion of Merle Fainsod's classic *How Russia is Ruled* – a book that used archives from the region of Smolensk that had been captured initially by the Nazis in the Second World War, and that had been discovered by U.S. Army Intelligence units at the end of the war.² That archive detailed how the Communist Party organization actually governed on the ground and proved invaluable to understanding the mature Stalinist system of governance. By 1991, Gorbachev's *glasnost* and *perestroika* policies had enabled far greater access to Russian provincial governments, and our understanding of how party organizations were adapting to his massive reform programs was pretty limited. A rapid decentralization was also occurring throughout the Soviet Union from the federal center, not only to the republics of the Soviet Union, but also within them, to regional party organizations. Federalism was a familiar and fascinating subject to me since as a Canadian I had grown up watching Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau renegotiate the terms of Canada's federation. Everything appeared to be in place for someone to write a dissertation on that issue in the reforming Soviet Union.

But just as I began my first tentative forays into this topic in the summer of 1991, including drafting grant applications to support my travel to the Soviet Union, the coup attempt of August 19-21 against Gorbachev by a drunken cabal of his own Politburo members forced another change of plans. Although they ultimately failed to unseat Gorbachev, his nemesis and newly elected president of the Russian Republic, Boris Yeltsin, succeeded where they had fallen short. When Gorbachev returned to Moscow from his Black Sea dacha where he had been under house arrest during the coup, Yeltsin was clearly in control – not just of a sovereign Russia, but of most of the institutions of Soviet government. He also banned the existence of the Communist Party on Russian soil. All of this caused a serious re-think of many a dissertation at the time, including mine. Local Communist parties were pretty much gone, and they were far less interesting to study than what succeeded them – elected local governments, and eventually elected governors too. As was the case with most of us in Ph.D. programs at the time, we had to move from studying Soviet autocracy to what seemed to be an emerging Russian democracy. To make matters even more challenging, where there had once been a Union of fifteen Soviet Socialist Republics, by January 1, 1992, there were fifteen new countries whose leaders had varying commitments to open systems of politics and economics.

These processes, which happened in real time, made for a very challenging research environment. But they also opened up a whole host of new things to study that were previously inaccessible, new techniques to master (econometrics, game theory) with which to analyze newly available data, and even new fields to establish with unwieldy names: post-Soviet studies; post-Communist studies; and “transitology.” Although the new environment presented us with a number of opportunities and obstacles, it was incredibly exciting. Our cohort of now post-Soviet researchers could move our field more firmly into the realm of truly comparative politics. How would Russia's development in the 1990s be similar to or distinct from that of not only democratizing Eastern European countries, but also to previous Latin American cases of transition, Western European democratic development, and even African and American cases?

My dissertation morphed into a study of local governments in Russia and how they dealt with the chaotic change around them. How well could they actually govern – provide public goods and services to their communities – in tumultuous times? Would they all fare equally poorly or well, and if there was variation, what could explain it? At Harvard, I was especially fortunate to continue working with Colton, but also to add Robert Putnam and Celeste Wallander to my dissertation committee. Putnam was just completing his masterful study of governance in Italy, *Making Democracy Work*:

² Merle Fainsod, *How Russia is Ruled* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963).

Civic Traditions in Modern Italy.³ In that landmark book, Putnam had taken advantage of a natural experiment in social science – a reform of regional governments that he had been able to track over a period of twenty or so years – and tried to understand why regions of northern Italy were able to govern better after the reform than those in southern Italy. Using a mixed-methodology research design, Putnam established metrics of good governance, compared them across Italy's regions over time, and then interrogated a series of hypotheses to explain the patterns in the data showing the north/south variation in governing capacity. Since I was a lowly graduate student, my study in four regions of Russia would necessarily be more modest than Putnam's landmark project in Italy, but I too had stumbled into a natural experiment in local governance.

Putnam assisted with my research design, although I contended with vastly different conditions than he had faced in Italy. Russian regional governments were only just beginning to function; few provinces in Russia had ever been visited by a western researcher and few of their governing officials would be open to my interviews about their work, I feared. Colton, however, had established some initial contacts in two provinces of Russia where I could begin. I was looking for variation in the regions that I selected for the study so that I could “test” the hypotheses explaining variation in government performance that Putnam's book and other studies of comparative political development put forward.⁴ Although I was trying to be as socially scientific as possible in my selection of regions (not selecting cases on the dependent variable, and trying to ensure variation on possible explanatory variables like economics, geography, and political orientation of the government), in the end, I had to also bring in the feasibility aspect of gaining access to various regions as I narrowed down my list of cases. This might be a good lesson to the beginning researcher – don't let the perfect be the enemy of “the best I can do, given what is available to me,” but be sure to acknowledge the limitations of the findings as a result.

As I reflect on the field research I did in four rather different provinces of Russia, and the travel I undertook on trains and planes around that vast country by myself, often hauling my own food in case of food shortages, and the various stomach ailments that I endured, I probably would have advised my own child against undertaking anything similar. At the time, however, it was fabulous and the ability to watch and document the changes around me was exciting. In the end, my results became the book, *Local Heroes: The Political Economy of Russian Regional Governance*.⁵ The argument of that study is that those regions that had essentially been company towns, and where newly formed regional governments worked closely with the huge and highly sectorally concentrated industries in their particularly provinces, were able to keep governments going while the central government in Moscow essentially fell apart. The book ended with a warning though that, while this sort of close collaboration between the state and dominant economic actors could be beneficial in the short term, in the longer term it could transform into collusion, and a lack of pluralism in political and economic development as local economic actors increasingly captured local government and kept potential external competitors out. Unfortunately for Russia, over the ensuing 10-15 years, this is exactly what happened in many provinces. So, although those governors and regional parliaments that cooperated with one another and the dominant economic actors of their regions were “local heroes” in the

³ Robert Putnam with Robert Leonardi and Raffaella Y. Nanetti, *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

⁴ This is a truly vast literature, but see some early classics that were especially influential as I considered a research design in the early 1990s included: Seymour Martin Lipset, “Some Social Requisites of Democracy,” *American Political Science Review* 53 (1959): 79-84; Dankwart Rustow, “Transitions to Democracy: Toward a Dynamic Model,” *Comparative Politics* 2:3 (April 1970): 337-363; Barry Weingast, “The Political Foundations of Democracy and the Rule of Law,” *American Political Science Review* 91:2 (June 1997): 245-263; Adam Przeworski, and Fernando Limongi, “Political Regimes and Economic Growth,” *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 7: 3 (Summer 1993): 51-69; Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba, *The Civic Culture: Political Culture and Democracy in Five Nations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963); Robert Dahl, *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972); Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).

⁵ Kathryn Stoner, *Local Heroes: The Political Economy of Russian Regional Governance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997)

short term, in the longer term they planted the seeds of collusive cronyism and closed systems of government that served personalistic interests rather than the public good.

In the course of finishing *Local Heroes*, I became increasingly interested in the degree to which regional governments cooperated with or defied the federal government back in Moscow. This was a huge problem for Yeltsin as he tried to forge a new federal Russian state and establish a balance of power between the regions and the central state amidst a mad scramble for control over valuable resources that lay far beyond the capital. There were no real political parties either to bind the weak Russian state together; the legal system was in its infancy; and there was little enforcement of the new and often contradictory laws governing federalism. This led to my second book, *Resisting the State: Reform and Retrenchment in Post-Soviet Russia*.⁶ As with *Local Heroes*, here too I was drawn to a mixed methodology of interviews with regional political actors, surveys, and use of primary source documents to test various hypotheses that might explain which provinces tended to defy the central state, and under what circumstances.

I moved from my first real job at Princeton University to Stanford in 2004, and after finishing *Resisting the State*, the nature of my work changed to reflect the new intellectual environment in which I found myself. I had begun collaborating with Michael McFaul when I was still at Princeton and he was at Stanford, producing an edited volume on comparative lessons of post-communist transitions.⁷ He knew that I was leaving Princeton and for family reasons was looking to move to California. Happily, he and several colleagues at Stanford (including Stephen Krasner, Larry Diamond, Chip Blacker, and David Holloway) managed to create room for me at Stanford's Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies and specifically at a new research center they were creating at the time, the Center on Democracy, Development, and the Rule of Law (CDDRL). This, too, was a happy accident for me and my work. At Princeton I had held a regular faculty position in the Politics Department and what was then the Woodrow Wilson School for Public and International Affairs (now the Princeton School for Public and International Affairs). But at Stanford, I made the relatively easy decision to forgo a regular faculty appointment for a straight research line. This proved to be a good fit for my evolving interests. I had always been drawn to questions that had policy significance, and my new post at Stanford more or less required this kind of work. It also provided the opportunity to think more comparatively in my ongoing work on Russia. This led to some more co-edited and co-authored work with McFaul, including our book with Valerie Bunce, *Democracy and Authoritarianism in the Post-Communist World*, and also *Transitions to Democracy: A Comparative Perspective*.⁸

We also wrote many other articles and book chapters together, probably the most notable of which was for *Foreign Affairs*, "The Myth of the Authoritarian Model: How Putin's Autocracy Holds Russia Back" published in 2007 just before Michael went to serve in the administration of President Barack Obama in 2009.⁹ We argued that despite the rhetoric of President Vladimir Putin's regime, and the growth that had occurred in the Russian economy since 2003, Russia would have done far better had Putin's increasingly autocratic practices not inhibited foreign investment, seeded corruption, cronyism, and erratic governance. Shortly after the piece appeared in *Foreign Affairs*, we received an email from the managing editor indicating that the Soviet Embassy in Washington had contacted the journal to relay that, "The Russian President had read

⁶ Kathryn Stoner, *Resisting the State: Reform and Retrenchment in Post-Soviet Russia* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

⁷ Michael McFaul and Stoner, ed., *After the Collapse of Communism: Comparative Lessons of Transition*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

⁸ Valerie Bunce, McFaul and Stoner, ed., *Democracy and Authoritarianism in the Post-Communist World*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), and McFaul and Stoner, ed., *Transitions to Democracy: A Comparative Perspective*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013).

⁹ McFaul and Stoner, "The Myth of the Authoritarian Model: How Putin's Autocracy Holds Russia Back," *Foreign Affairs* 87:1 (January/February 2008): 68-84.

the most recent issue of the journal and found it not to his liking.” Someone had actually put the piece on Putin’s desk! Initially, McFaul and I thought that was great, but we then quickly wondered why the Russian Embassy was bothering to tell the journal about who had read the piece. The message seemed vaguely threatening. (In retrospect, it was a prologue to how McFaul would eventually be greeted in Moscow when he became the American ambassador there in 2012 and was the target of a ferocious Kremlin led propaganda campaign against him and many members of the Russian opposition to Putin’s rule.¹⁰)

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My position at Stanford also brought me into more direct contact with former and current policy makers from a host of countries in transition and in the United States government. My own interests have shifted as a direct result of changing intellectual environments and having new colleagues to stimulate fresh ideas and projects. For example, although I began my career as a comparative political scientist, I have drifted gradually into the realm of foreign policy and international relations, while still maintaining a fundamental interest in state capacity, performance and governance. I think these different strands of my work are on clear display in my newest book, *Russia Resurrected: Its Power and Purpose in a New Global Order*.¹¹ The project was sparked by a seminar at Stanford’s Center on International Security and Cooperation (CISAC) where the speaker, a former senior member of the United States intelligence community, drew a parallel between Russia and North Korea in terms of their capacities as global powers, likening their positions to being at the “little table” at a Thanksgiving dinner with the children, while the adults (meaning the United States, and China) were at the “big table.” “Russia,” he proclaimed, “wants to be at the big table, but they are just not.”

This struck me as a rather uninformed comparison of Russia’s relative global influence by 2014 or so, and a potentially dangerous interpretation of its power if it translated into a policy of underestimating the extent to which Russia had recovered from the shock of the Soviet collapse in 1991. Although it was not at parity with the United States or China in terms of GDP, or the health and size of its population, for example, Russia still had the world’s biggest nuclear stockpile and was developing other tools to influence the decisions of other states in a host of geographic areas, and was, therefore, obviously nothing like North Korea in terms of its relative influence in global politics. In 2014 an updated Russian military seized Crimea from Ukraine, and in 2015 entered Syria on the side of Bashar al Assad. The Russian military presence there and the array of new weaponry it was using to defend Assad and fight the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) fundamentally changed the facts on the ground in Syria. The United States would no longer be a factor in how the conflict there would be resolved. Russia had seized the initiative and had also established its new gateway into the Middle East and gradually into North Africa, and later sub-Saharan Africa. By 2016, given Russia’s evident cyber and informational interference in the American presidential elections, the dangers of relying on traditional metrics of state power to understand Russian capabilities were even more obvious.

In light of all of this, *Russia Resurrected* developed an argument regarding how we think about power in international relations and why traditional metrics like relative GDP, population size, or military spending are not always the best ways to rank countries in terms of their actual capacities to influence global political outcomes. The book compares Russia since the Soviet collapse to the United States, China and the 28 European Union member states (pre-Brexit) on traditional measures like the health of its economy and people, and the size, spending, and weapons capabilities of its military, but also along other dimensions of power including geographic domain (*where* Russia is influential) and policy scope (or *how* Russia is influential in specific policy areas in which it is a particularly weighty actor).

I hope the book demonstrates that Russia may be doing a bit better than the outdated evaluation that our Stanford visitor had expounded in 2012. In fact, its economy, although shaky in many ways and still overly dependent on revenues from carbon exports, performed decently in some areas (it has a low debt to GDP ratio, and its other macro-economic indicators

¹⁰ For details on this, see McFaul’s memoir, *Cold War, Hot Peace: An American Ambassador in Putin’s Russia*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2018).

¹¹ Stoner, *Russia Resurrected: Its Power and Purpose in a New Global Order*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021).

are pretty good), although poorly in others, (it is not particularly innovative, underspending on things like research and development, and corruption remains a significant deterrent to foreign investment) for example. Its military has been much reformed and modernized since 2008, and its nuclear weapons updated. It has substantial cyber capabilities to disrupt the infrastructure and politics of its rivals, as the U.S. and its allies in Ukraine, Estonia, France, Germany and the UK, for example, have all experienced. But significantly too, since Putin's return to the Russian presidency in 2012, the Russian government is now *willing* to deploy its power resources far beyond its neighborhood and in policy areas beyond just carbon energy.

Russia Resurrected also shows my domestic policy interests in emphasizing that it is not Russian culture or historical destiny that pits Russia inevitably against the West. Rather, I argue, in understanding *why* modern Russia deploys its power resources we need to consider the particular type of personality-based patronal autocracy that has come to govern it and define its foreign policy decisions under Putin's long rule. Given the nature of the regime, I hope to show why Russia was a "good enough" power to challenge and sometimes foil the interests of the United States even though it possessed far less of almost everything. The implication of the study is that should the regime type change to a more open type of politics (as in the 1990's in Russia or even under Putin to at least about 2008, and under President Dmitri Medvedev until Putin's return in 2012), then the way its tools of global power are deployed would change as well.

More than three decades after beginning serious study of Russia, I still find the country's evolution endlessly fascinating. I feel particularly fortunate to have "caught the Russia bug" just as the country was embarking on its tumultuous new path away from Communism, although the story of where the journey ends is of course not over. The opportunity to document, understand, and ideally explain its twisting developmental course remains an ongoing challenge, but one that I still embrace after all these years. Who needs one more unhappy lawyer, anyway?

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