

Political Science 273
The Politics of Russia
Fall, 2005

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Russian politics in 2005, despite the passing of over a decade since the collapse of communism, remains in some turbulence. During the last years of the Soviet period, under Gorbachev, Soviet adherence to a political system characterized by Marxist-Leninist dictatorship and an economic system characterized by a command economy was replaced by a commitment to glasnost, perestroika and democratization. One unintended component of the changes was increasing articulation of nationalist aspirations among the many "nations" of the U.S.S.R. Ultimately, that push proved to be the most powerful of the many forces unleashed during the Gorbachev era.

That nationalism led to the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and its replacement by 15 independent states. Although most of them are in the Confederation of Independent States (CIS), the nominal successor to the USSR, cooperation is limited, and a number of them have relationships varying from very tense to violent.

The leadership of newly independent Russia has introduced a nominally democratic system. One of the thrusts of this course will be to determine to what extent, and in what ways, Russian politics are genuinely democratic.

That leadership has also moved to transform the command economy to a market one. This effort has had serious negative consequences. While the supply of some goods has risen, their prices have risen so high that few can afford them. Thus, while some have prospered, the living standard of most citizens has declined. Most American economists and many Russian reformers assume that these phenomena are temporary side effects of the transition to a prosperous market economy. Others fear, however, that these are likely to be relatively long-lasting phenomena.

Although many changes are perceived by citizens as positive, the decline in the standard of living and a dramatic rise in crime are not. Opposition to these developments is growing. An attempted coup against reformers during the summer of 1991 failed and, as a consequence, led to a hastening of the process of reform: the collapse of the Union, the (temporary) destruction of the Communist Party, and the (temporary) triumph in Russia of "democrats" and free marketeers. Resistance by the post-communist legislature to the Yeltsin government's reforms led in the fall of 1993 to an unconstitutional dissolution of the legislature, and then to a brief armed struggle between its supporters and the Yeltsin government, supported by the army. The triumph of the reformers was followed by efforts to legitimize their rule: a referendum ratifying a new constitution, one with significantly increased presidential powers and significantly reduced legislative ones and new legislative elections, in which anti-reform forces, however, won more seats than pro-reform legislators. In the years since, opposition to the government's economic program, and to its attempt to hold Chechnya in the Russian Federation by force, contributed to the victory of anti-government parties in the December, 1995 parliamentary elections. The Communists were, for a time, the largest party in the legislature.

In presidential elections in 1996, however, to everyone's surprise, Yeltsin won re-election. As the new constitution grants disproportionate power to the president, the Yeltsin administration continued economic reform, if at a somewhat slower pace. At the end of 1999, Yeltsin resigned, with Vladimir Putin, his Prime Minister, assuming power as his constitutional successor. Putin then won the presidential election of March 2000 and won re-election last year. Although he, too, described himself as a reformer, many regard his policies as moving Russian politics away from democracy and back toward authoritarianism.

During the semester we will examine the historical roots of the present situation. We will try to determine the character of the social, economic and political dynamics which are shaping contemporary politics in an effort to understand why Soviet politics are as they are, and how they are likely to evolve.

In our study of Russian political phenomena, the structure of the semester is designed to reflect as accurately as possible the unsettled state of Russian politics. We will do this through structured student participation in debates as well as through class discussion. Active participation will be an important component of the class and will be rewarded in the final grade.

Books to Buy

Timothy J. Colton and Michael McFaul, Popular Choice and Managed Democracy: the Russian elections of 1999 and 2000

Dale R. Herspring, Putin's Russia: past Imperfect and future uncertain

Peter Kenez, History of the Soviet Union from the Beginning to the End

Richard Sakwa, Russian Politics and Society

Lilia Shevtsova, Putin's Russia

The New York Times

Writing Assignments

The format of the course is designed to encourage participation. Despite the relatively large size of the class, discussion will be emphasized. In addition, there will be six debates during the semester, with each student participating in one of them, and producing a paper based on his/her presentation. Finally, there will be both a mid-sem (due Oct. 14) and a final take-home examination in this course. Grades will be based on the papers, active participation in discussion and debate, and the exams.

Reading Assignments- Date by which the assigned reading is to be done.

THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

- Aug. 26 - Brief Introduction
- Aug. 29 - Kenez, Chs. 1-2
- Aug. 31 - Kenez, Chs. 3-4
- Sept. 2 - No Class
- Sept. 5 - Kenez, Chs. 5-6
- Sept. 7 - Kenez, Chs. 7.8
- Sept. 9 - Kenez, Chs. 9-11

- Sept. 12 - Debate 1 – The USSR’S Totalitarianism is Built into Marxism-Leninism
Sept. 14 - Herspring, Ch.1; Sakwa, Chs. 1 -2

THE POLITICAL HISTORY OF CONTEMPORARY RUSSIA

- Sept. 16 - Shevtsova, Chs. 1-2
Sept. 19 - Shevtsova, Chs. 3-4
Sept. 21 - Shevtsova, Chs. 5-6
Sept. 23 - Shevtsova, Chs. 7-8
Sept. 26 - Shevtsova, Chs. 9-10
Sept. 28 - Shevtsova, Ch. 11
Sept. 30 - Shevtsova, Chs. 12-13
Oct. 3 - Debate 2 – Putin Is Committed to Democracy (Russian version) and a Free Market

POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS: THE STATE AND GOVERNMENT

- Oct. 5 - Sakwa, Chs. 3-4
Oct. 7 - No Class
Oct. 10 - Herspring, Ch. 3; Sakwa, Chs. 5-6
Oct. 12 - Sakwa, Ch. 8
Oct. 14 - MID-SEM EXAM DUE

MIDSEM BREAK

THE RUSSIAN PEOPLE AND POLITICS

- Oct. 24 - Sakwa, Ch. 7; Colton and McFaul, Ch. 1
Oct. 26 - Colton and McFaul, Chs. 2-3
Oct. 28 - Colton and McFaul, Chs. 4-5
Oct. 31 - Colton and McFaul, Chs.6-7
Nov. 2 - Colton and McFaul, Ch. 8
Nov. 4 - No Class
Nov. 7 - Debate 3 – The Political Party System is Well-on-its Way to Consolidation
Nov. 9 - Debate 4 - The Russian People Have Meaningful Ways to Influence Politics

THE CENTER AND THE REGIONS

- Nov. 11 - Sakwa, Chs. 9-10
Nov. 14 - Sakwa, Ch. 11; Herspring, Ch. 12

A MARKET ECONOMY?

- Nov. 16 - Sakwa, Ch. 12; Herspring, Ch. 7
Nov. 18 - Herspring, Chs. 8-9

STATE AND SOCIETY

- Nov. 21 - Herspring, Chs. 4-5
- Nov. 23 - Sakwa, Chs. 13-14
- Nov. 28 - Debate 5 – After Some Hesitation, the Russian Economy
is Becoming a Successful Market Economy
- Nov. 30 - Herspring, Ch. 6

FOREIGN POLICY

- Dec. 2 - Herspring, Chs. 10 & 13; Sakwa, Ch. 15
- Dec. 5 - Herspring, Ch. 11; Sakwa, Chs. 16-17

DEMOCRACY?

- Dec. 7 - Sakwa, Chs. 18-19; Herspring, Ch. 2
- Dec. 9 - Sakwa, Ch. 20; Herspring, Ch. 14