

Critically evaluate scenarios for Russia's future: Liberal Democracy vs. Authoritarian

Russia currently is an anomaly, using an authoritarian and democratic hybrid system. Since the fall of the Soviet Union it has followed a path towards certain democratic ideals, but not developed into a western style liberal democracy like the examples of Spain, Italy, Poland, the Czech Republic or Eastern Germany have. Despite intense pressure from the west, Russia has maintained authoritarian principles, forging a rather unique, and strong, position in the international community. Western analysers have applied the term 'managed democracy' and have optimistic scenarios and theories for Russia's future, pointing to historical factors to prove that Russia may be on a path to a western style Liberal democracy, but lagging behind in terms of modernisation, which (the lag theory suggests) it has been for centuries. It seems perhaps for the moment the Russian federation has followed an independent path, a system of governance to rival Liberal democracy even, but what is the likely outcome for Russia?

The modernisation theory is one of the key arguments that its followers use to suggest that Russia will eventually 'catch-up' with the west. This places the industrial nations of the west at the peak of the modernisation process and identifies stages of development towards this goal. It is a generalising theory which categorises a state into traditional, transitional or modern phases of progress. What is useful about the theory is that certain similarities can be drawn between how states develop; this can then be used to interpret and predict development. The problem is that there is not a universal pattern which can be applied to all states; some adopt certain characteristics that have traditional elements and modern elements, which are labelled as 'transitional states' with the expected eventual outcome being the move to a western model. These transitional states though are able to function in competition with the west and even become affluent with no movement to western models in sight. For example: the People's Republic of China, Saudi Arabia and Israel, all of these have significant international power and do not follow the western example despite major economic and military development. This theory must be carefully applied because it looks at development from a very western perspective, comparing the subject to examples in the West, when it must be noted that the west developed under very different conditions to other states.

It has been argued that the Russian revolution was a diversion from the modernisation theory path. Malia (1999) argues that Russia was on a conjoining path with the west and if the First World War had not happened then Russia may have followed Britain, France and the USA down a similar path. The proof for this is based around the fact that the first Dumas was setup before its Prussian counterpart and so perhaps without the revolution Russia may have been westernised. However it must be noted how instability was rife in the twentieth century and that many European powers fell to politics of the far right and left, so to presume that Russia would have been unhindered by these problems and on a similar path to the west, if the First World War was avoided, is a big presumption.

Also it has been argued (Mali, 1999, P412) that Western liberal democracy is the final solution for ideology, that since its triumph over communism, it is likely to be the only remaining route for Russia and indeed other states to eventually take, "The end of history" as it has been named (Fukuyama, 1992). But the intellectual movement that

backs up Fukuyama's argument, failed to foresee certain events that changed the course of the Middle East and even western liberal democracy since this theory was devised. For example, the current recession has led economic actors to reconsider previously certain assumptions of free trade ideals and the war on terror has made western governments impose certain laws that can hinder democratic principles (Patriot Act in the US, terrorism legislation in the UK) which are a regression of modernisation. It is not inevitable that Russia will completely democratise because the assumption of democracy being the only system left available to it is debatable. Kitching (2006) argues that the type of modernisation theory Fukuyama's theory depends on is out dated, because external factors can limit modernisation in a country, the exploitation from imperialism and colonialism are both factors contributing to hinder African and Middle eastern nations from modernisation for example. In Russia the external pressures such as border disputes, failed diplomacy with the west, terrorist action and war could all hinder the modernisation process.

But there are also other problems with the assumption of eventual western modernisation. Gitelman, 2005 suggests that institutional reform and cultural reform need to be in place before a state can move to adopting more democratic principles, he quotes Zimmerman: "If the institutions are right, political culture follows, rather than drives, successful institutionalisation...Change the institutions, change the political culture."(Zimmerman, 1995, p631) The example of Germany after the First World War gives a clear show of how modernisation may not be maintained if all of the right conditions are not in place. Gitelman builds the argument that after the First World War, only the institutions were changed and it was not enough to "overcome that country's, (Germany's) authoritarian heritage" (Gitelman, 2005). The Political culture in Russia is not at present behind full westernisation which is why there was no back lash when Putin made authoritarian consolidations to perestroika reforms.

The German example has been used by other commentators to try and predict what may happen in Russia. After the Second World War in Germany, troops were left in place (amongst many other contributing factors) and the overseeing of cultural change was possible, which was also the case in Japan. Russia will not have the direct influence of Western troops to implement changes. Plus, geographically, culturally and ideologically, Germany was closer to the West when reform began, then Russia has ever been. Another suggestion about Russia's future has grown from Germany's Weimar republic, the 'Weimar Russia' theory. It is hinted that Russian Democracy may fall through the election of an extreme right wing President, legitimately elected, that may take Russia down another dictatorial path. Richard Sakwa (2008) sees this theory as "instructive but not wholly appropriate"(Sakwa, 2008, p474), he suggests that the world today is very different from the Weimar republic's time and that governments are bound by economic interdependence, human rights legislation and NGO's that raise the threshold of toleration for an extremist reaction to negotiate. Also Russia having just overcome 70 years of dictatorship would be "unlikely to embrace another so soon" (Sakwa, 2008, p475). Whilst this scenario may be unlikely, authoritarianism in governance could increase without a dictatorial right wing government in place.

The historical justification for the modernisation theory in Russia comes from the great reform cycles, starting with Peter the great beginning the first cycle of reform. The principle states that for centuries Russia has tried to follow the lead of Europe's industrialised nations and made numerous big pushes to catch-up. It is this principle

which leads contemporary commentators to suggest that contemporary Russia is in another cycle of modernisation. The crux of this argument rests on whether or not Russia is likely to continue the modernisation path to westernisation and therefore further democratisation, or if traditional tendencies in Russian society towards strong government, the weak image of democracy and cultural separation from the west, a possible backlash after the fall of communism, are more likely to change the Russian path. It is important to monitor and examine these historical tendencies, but one factor that has always been present in these cycles is Russia remaining behind the Industrialised west. Despite periods of great change and development and military victories over European states, the general trend was Russia catching up to levels that Europe had already moved on from.

It has been argued that the current authoritarian trends in Russia's systems of governance are a cultural and historical 'continuation trend'. Hedlund (2006) suggests that this trend can be followed from the muscovite period, through the imperial state, the soviet state and up to the modern period with Yeltsin's era as a time of troubles and Putin's as a return to the muscovite "service state" (Hedlund, 2006, p776). This trend is called the Muscovite institutional matrix and continuity theory. This is supported by Shevchenko (2004) who in analysing the power base of the government notices how when the executive takes power away from the government and the government becomes operationalised "one can observe the revival of the old style institutional regimes" (Shevchenko, 2004, p180). When an executive begins to dominate the political process, the government becomes the civil service bureaucracy and this leads to a period of authoritarianism.

In watching the continuation of these trends, it is important to note the similarities between muscovite and modern Russia, to build a picture of the political culture and therefore the problems facing any democratising movements. The muscovite institutional matrix contains elements of unaccountable government, which can be seen in modern Russia with the weak civil society and repression of it through the civic chamber and other methods. Suppression of rights to private property is mirrored in the movements against the oligarchs and state consolidation of industries. The state being the main force of change is the most important similarity however, because without any public pressure towards further democratisation the state is unlikely to give up any powers it has voluntarily. These similarities between old and new Russia are important, but authoritarian trends in history are not determinate of the future, the examples of Spain, Italy, Japan and Germany show these can be overcome.

Russia may be in a period of transition currently, but the cycle theory tells us that this has been a constant process for centuries and mainly unsuccessful in its attempts to fully modernise to western standards. In previous attempts at modernisation Russia has had a need to do so, for example to compete with the west in economic and military terms and to protect her from the European powers. But at this stage in its history why would Russia need to completely mirror the west? The current pragmatic approach to western systems has taken the elements of capitalism and legitimacy of government that are useful for Russia to prosper. It could be argued that the remaining democratic procedural elements left to copy from the west are unnecessary, because as yet the people are not demanding it.

Some commentators argue that in order for states to move to democracy the wealth of a country is a crucial factor. If the state is unstable and the gap between the rich and poor

is large then the leaders of the country are unlikely to make a move towards reform or hand over power. However Russia is a fledgling capitalist economy, but already is positioned 9th in the list of the richest countries in terms of GDP purchasing power parity (CIA world fact book, 2009). Its commodity production is extremely strong and moves to increase the service sector in comparison with industry have been successful to the tune of industry 37% of GDP and Services 57.9%(CIA world fact book, 2009). Even though the global recession hit Russia particularly hard because of its dependency on the commodity supply sector, Russia is strong and continues to be a major player on the international stage, because of its huge land mass, strong military and growing economy. It is able to achieve a high international status without the democratic improvement and so the people may deem this change unnecessary.

We have so far looked at the historical and theoretical arguments around Russia's future, but what conclusions can be drawn from recent Presidents actions? Under the transition Presidency of Boris Yeltsin we saw the first characteristics of Russian presidential rule. The powerful leader image returned again to Russian politics, there was talk of Yeltsin being a "new Tsar" or "Elected monarch" (Nichols, 1999, 157). But as Nichols (1999) points out, "an elected monarch would not need to shuffle his ministers to keep his throne". The political pressure exerted on Yeltsin was evidence of change and it is interesting to note that the position of office, rather than the man, held the power. This period of rather chaotic transition was non-the less a step in the democratic direction, however the period to follow was to reverse many of these steps.

Putin's presidency, rather than expanding the scope of Democracy, was a clear period of solid leadership and power consolidation. Sakwa (2008) argues that the democratic aspirations of the perestroika years have been undermined by the end of Putin's presidency. The removal of popular votes for the regional governors, manipulation of electoral results and spread of state control over media outlets were all movements towards more power for the leader and less democratic scrutiny. However one important factor to remember is that this strength and dominant leadership was not an unpopular move. Putin enjoyed a 77% approval rating in 2006 (Angus-reid, 2006) and this suggests that the Russian populations concerns are with stability, leadership and direction rather than democracy and accountability. In contrast the turbulent and more democratic years of Yeltsin ended with approval rates in single figures in 1996 (times online, 2007). Public opinion is the most important non state element to watch, because with the state being the prime actor for change and no effective civil society for redress, it is only the people's actions remaining that could be a catalyst for democratisation.

However US president Barack Obama's "reset button" diplomacy is beginning to show some signs of improvement in the Russian public's opinion of the USA. Approval of the USA is up from 31% in 2008 to 54% in January 2010 (Moscow Times, 2010). Perhaps movements towards a better relationship with the west may encourage further cultural change and strengthen democratic institutions.

The current President Medvedev has laid down tell tale signs of what his administration is concerned with. The article "GO RUSSIA!" has some key elements that may be used to predict what Medvedev's directions and aims for Russia's future are. Three key areas of interest in the article are firstly Medvedev's encouragement for the individual to take more responsibility of their future and not rely on the state, "Our current economy still reflects the major flaw of the Soviet system: it largely ignores individual needs" (Medvedev, 2009). Secondly Medvedev wants to spread the scope of the Russian

economy and remove the "humiliating dependence,"(Medvedev, 2009) on raw materials, with a mind to create a strong Russian technology industry or "Russian Silicon valley" (Moscow Times, 2010). Thirdly, the open criticism of previous governments, with Medvedev commenting on levels of corruption and bureaucratic rule. These elements in his article are very encouraging for democratic proponents. Some elements in the article continue the authoritarian trends however; there is mention of military build up still in the rhetoric "Of course Russia will be well-armed. Well enough so that it does not occur to anyone to threaten us or our allies". There is also a concern with Russia being strong on the international stage and the absence of any language suggesting democratic reform is conspicuous.

If though, as mentioned earlier, the external influences are not great enough to encourage further democratisation, perhaps the slow building of institutions internally may hold the key. Boudoin argues that the constitutional court may hold out against the executive: "The Court remains relatively weak in the context of the reinforced authoritarianism" but "if Vladimir Putin wants to rebuild and reinforce state authority, he absolutely needs to rely on the Court, whose judicial review guarantees the respect of law and legality" (Boudoin, 2006, p697). In other words for the executive to remain legitimate in the decisions it makes, the constitution must be respected and therefore the legal system. Whilst this may only be for the benefit of the president rather than real reform, it gives the court a chance to build authority and become recognised, eventually in a position to challenge the executive, giving leeway for other institutions to do the same. However "As Valery Zor'kin wrote in 2003, 'legal sanctions cannot remain the only means able to weigh on the situation'. Evolution depends also on public actors" (Boudoin, 2006, p696). The court may provide a foot hold but many other actors are needed, such as civil society and cultural actors.

Russia is not alone in the current trend of representative democracies, moving more power to the executive from the legislature. In France, the UK and the USA, the legislature can become a side issue as the executive dominates procedures. In Russia and France this is also backed up by the constitution which gives Russian Presidents power to choose the Prime Minister and disband the parliament. The dual executive in the Russian system is very similar to the French method, where the president "both constitutionally and in practice enjoys a higher authority (then the prime minister)" (Brown, 2001, p49) This essentially leaves the Prime minister and the legislature in which he or she sits as a rubber stamp to the Presidents agenda. This is not a good sign for the future of democratic principles in Russia because the constitution backs up this domination by the executive. With this trend being common throughout the democratic world, the models of democracy in the west that Russia is presumed to be emulating, assume these characteristics as well.

In conclusion then Russia's future is uncertain, she has been successful with her current method of governance despite western criticism and the strength of the country alone will hold back any western affirmative action to impose reform onto Russia. The pragmatic approach that Russia has to western governing values is likely to dictate what it does next. Aspects that become unbeneficial for Russia will be dropped and new aspects tested, only when there is a need to do so. I expect that political reform in Russia will remain unnecessary for its government, which means Russia will concentrate on improving its economy and international influence. Winston Churchill's comments on

Russia seem to ring true still, "I cannot forecast to you the action of Russia. It is a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma; but perhaps there is a key. That key is Russian national interest." The national needs of Russia will dictate the policy, only when the people want political reform, can this actually happen and so far the strength of tradition, the need for a strong leader and early stage of democracy will limit the national attitudes in the short term. So despite some encouraging developments, Russia is likely to remain a hybrid system and perhaps the unique culture of Russia will prevent it fully westernising, but this author does not necessarily see that as a bad thing, as alternative thoughts and suggestions lead to development.

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