Society as an Actor in Post-Soviet State-Building

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Abstract: Post-Soviet societies are similar in the asymmetry that defines various groups' access to resources and power and in the multiple salient cleavages that hinder collective action. These post-Soviet civic groups differ from civil society organizations in Central Europe in the absence of a strong unified social movement that can negotiate with the regime, their tendency to act as a conservative force, and the lack of intellectual leaders who can formulate a positive unifying agenda for the future. The result is that post-Soviet societies are vulnerable to state manipulation and ineffective in resisting authoritarian policies of state rulers.

The final years of the Soviet Union were marked by the startling proliferation of societal actors and major popular mobilization in various Soviet republics, including the Russian Federation.[1] Although some scholars noted a decline in civil society activities in the first post-Soviet decade, more recent studies point to the particular relevance of societal actors either for the outcomes of competition among political elites or for the sustainability of a political regime.[2] A number of new studies analyze

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[1] Mark Beissinger. 2002. *Nationalist Mobilization and the Collapse of the Soviet State*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

[2] For the accounts of a declining civil society activity see Marc Howard. 2003. *The Weakness of Civil Society in Post-Communist Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Laura Henry. 2006. "Shaping Social Activism in Post-Soviet Russia: Leadership, Organizational Diversity, and Innovation." *Post-Soviet Affairs* 22:2 (April-June): 99 – 124. For the relevance

various mechanisms that the post-Soviet authorities employ to co-opt civil society or establish indirect control over its activities.[3] Some scholars warn that such social engineering may even raise the likelihood of a societal explosion further along the road.[4]

While many authors point to variations in the strength and roles of societal actors in different former Soviet republics, this article pieces together common characteristics that various post-Soviet societies exhibit. It then contrasts these characteristics with those of societal actors in some socialist regimes of Central Europe in the run-up to 1989. My argument is that post-Soviet societies represent a diverse array of groups malleable to manipulation by the state due to their preference for short-term benefits, salient cultural or historic cleavages, and disjointed values. These societies have the capacity to emerge as transformational actors only through sustained social mobilization driven by a set of common long-term interests and shared beliefs.

In developing this argument, I adopt Joel Migdal's view of society as a mélange of social organizations that may be "heterogeneous both in their form and in the rules they apply."[5] This includes formal organizations organized around a particular set of issues and more flexible informal networks that persist through personal relationships between their members or emerge spontaneously in response to particular events.

Post-Soviet Societies' Common Characteristics

The fall of the Soviet Union broadened autonomous space for the activities of societal groups without a serious threat of repressive intervention from the state. In fact, the unprecedented weakness of state institutions in the early post-Soviet years provided a favorable opportunity structure for the greater involvement of society in state-building processes. In some instances, as in Russia or Georgia in the early 1990s, this resulted

of societal actors for political competition or regime change, see Graeme Robertson. 2010. *The Politics of Protest in Hybrid Regimes: Managing Dissent in Post-Communist Russia*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press; Scott Radnitz. 2010; *Weapons of the Wealthy: Predatory Regimes and Elite-Led Protests in Central Asia*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press; Valerie Bunce and Sharon Wolchik. 2011. *Defeating Authoritarian Leaders in Post-Communist Countries*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

[3] James Richter. 2009. "Putin and the Public Chamber." *Post-Soviet Affairs* 25:1 (January – March): 39 – 65; Graeme Robertson. 2009. "Managing Society: Protest, Civil Society and Regime in Putin's Russia." Slavic Review 68:3 (Fall): 528 – 547.

[4] Elena Chebankova. 2009. "The Evolution of Russia's Civil Society under Vladimir Putin: A Cause for Concern or Grounds for Optimism?" *Perspectives on European Politics and Society* 10:3 (September): 394 – 415; Henry Hale. 2006. "Democracy or Autocracy on the March? The Colored Revolution as Normal Dynamics of Patronal Presidentialism." *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 39:3 (September) 305 – 329.

[5] Joel Migdal. 1988. *Strong Societies and Weak States: State-Society Relations and State Capabilities in the Third World*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 28.

in increased polarization and produced violent conflict due to the lack of social consensus about the country's future path. Countries exhibiting a broader societal agreement, like the Baltics or Belarus, experienced a quicker consolidation of new political regimes, albeit along different trajectories. Yet in other instances, notably in Central Asia, the society's passivity turned the state-building process into a bargaining game between central and regional leaders with minimal societal involvement.[6]

Furthermore, early post-Soviet societies were characterized by extensive internal asymmetry in the distribution of resources, with actors linked to political patronage networks dominating all others. While communism may have destroyed old status inequalities, its collapse quickly helped to create new ones in those countries where partial reforms created a new class of *nouveaux riches*.[7] Comprised of rent-seeking business groups acting in alliance with state elites—either old nomenklatura officials or emerging post-independence leaders—the members of this new class acted in concert to maximize their profits at the expense of the rest of the society. The nature of relations between business groups and state officials varied depending on their relative strength from outright predation or capture to mutual dependencies. In most instances, this alliance not only produced economic mismanagement and the frequent pilfering of state resources, but also prevented post-Soviet countries from undergoing institutional and political transformations by entrenching old elites in power.[8] In contrast to the 1990s when business groups universally acted to protect the status quo, in the second post-Soviet decade some of them became influential advocates of political change. The first major cracks within the business-state alliance emerged in the early 2000s when business groups in several countries became strong enough to challenge the state. Seeking a more stable legal order or better access to the spoils of power relations, some business moguls openly funded the opposition and sought to replace some members of the ruling elite. This resulted either in a crackdown by the state, as in the case of the Yukos affair in Russia, and survival of the political elite, or in electoral revolutions and political elite turnover. As a consequence, countries like Belarus or Uzbekistan, which managed to centralize control over all major economic assets in the 1990s, have been characterized by elite continuity and few genuine challengers. By contrast, the more decentralized economies of Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan

[6] Pauline Jones Luong. 2002. *Institutional Change and Political Continuity in Post-Soviet Central Asia*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

[7] Jeffrey Kopstein. 2009. "1989 as a Lens for the Communist Past and Post-communist Future." *Contemporary European History* 18:3:289 – 302.

[8] Joel Hellman. 1998. "Winners Take All: The Politics of Partial Reform in Postcommunist Transitions." *World Politics* 50:2 (January): 203 – 234.

created independent source of funding for aspiring political challengers.[9] Still, even in Ukraine the largest business groups resisted political liberalization, while the region with the highest concentration of industrialists and entrepreneurs became a stronghold of the establishment candidate.[10]

Opposition political groups, in turn, proved critical in resolving society's coordination dilemma and became focal points for joint resistance to authoritarian regression by various social groups. The centrality of credible opposition elites also explains why fraudulent elections became a rallying point for disgruntled societal groups. While many observers of electoral revolutions at the time rushed to view them as an indication of civil society's maturity and strength, the outcomes of these events and attempts to replicate them elsewhere in post-Soviet space demonstrated that societal actors have minimal impact without the elite's participation. In those instances when opposition elites were either weak (Russia, Kazakhstan) or prevented from participation all together (Belarus, Azerbaijan) major social mobilization never materialized.

Contrasts with Central Europe

Moreover, none of the successful electoral revolutions were preceded by or produced a sustained and organized social movement that could restrain the new authorities and impose its own agenda. The absence of Solidarity-type grass-roots organizations capable of independent mobilization and consistent bargaining with the government has been one of the distinct characteristics of post-Soviet societies. This absence contrasts with the experiences of some Central European states, particularly Poland, where rebellious civil society pushed democratic reforms forward.[11] Lack of strong societal pressure can explain the subsequent failure of some post-revolutionary regimes to deliver on their promises, as happened in Ukraine, or their return to a more authoritarian style of governance, as in the case of Georgia and Kyrgyzstan.

Another factor that makes some post-Soviet societal actors qualitatively different from those in Central Europe is that they acted more often as a conservative force than an agent of change. Civic activists—workers, writers, scholars, and students—pushed for greater political and economic liberalization by socialist regimes in communist Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Poland. By contrast, paternalistic attitudes and a longing for centralized decision-making persisted in most post-Soviet societies, often turning

[9] Scott Radnitz. 2010. "The Color of Money: Privatization, Economic Dispersion and the Post-Soviet Revolutions." *Comparative Politics* 42:2 (January): 127 – 146.

[10] John Gould. 2011. *The Politics of Privatization: Wealth and Power in Postcommunist Europe*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers.

[11] Grzegorz Ekiert and Jan Kubik. 1999. *Rebellious Civil Society: Popular Protest and Democratic Consolidation in Poland, 1989–1993*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.

them into the backbone of hybrid regimes. The growing popularity of nationalist parties in Russia and western Ukraine indicates that this conservative trend may take a more radical turn. Even in those cases when societal actors supported a democratizing agenda, as in Ukraine or Georgia, public preferences were still either too polarized or too fickle to enforce a major political change.

This lack of unity raises an important question about the impact of value structures on the behavioral patterns and political choices of post-Soviet societies. Self-expression values indicating high levels of social trust, tolerance, and proactive attitudes to life may be a critical pre-requisite for sustaining strong democratic institutions.[12] While prevalent in Central Europe, these values appear to be far outweighed by the preference for survival values in post-Soviet republics.[13] Moreover, the Eurasian imperial legacies express themselves in the culture of passive path-dependency, tolerance for corruption and double standards, therefore making electoral revolutions an aberration across post-Soviet space.[14] Similarly, the communist experience also destroyed traditional bases of communal solidarity in the societies without creating new ones outside of the party framework, which complicates collective action problems.[15] Hence, in order to become agents for democratization, post-Soviet societies have to undergo a major transformation in their core belief systems and attitudes not only to political authority, but also on the interpersonal level.

Furthermore, the capacity to change from within has been hindered by another common characteristic—a glaring lack of authoritative intellectual leaders. This absence made it difficult for societal groups to articulate a unifying alternative vision for their countries' future. The leading role of public intellectuals, such as Vaclav Havel, Adam Michnik, or Jacek Kuron in social movements in Poland and Czechoslovakia turned them into a credible political alternative, enhanced their moral authority and provided their participants with a strong sense of direction. By contrast, post-Soviet societal actors were often united in their rejection of particular policies or leaders rather than in a clear vision of the new order to replace them.[16] Moreover, the two post-Soviet decades produced few, if any, new public

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[12] Christian Welzel and Ronald Inglehart. 2008. "The Role of Ordinary People in Democratization." *Journal of Democracy* 19:1 (January): 126 – 140.

[13] Ronald Inglehart and Wayne Baker. 2000. "Modernization, Cultural Change, and the Persistence of Traditional Values." *American Sociological Review* 65:1 (February): 19 – 51.

[14] Taras Kuzio. 2011. "Political Culture and Democracy: Ukraine as an Immobile State." *East European Politics and Society* 25:1 (February): 88 – 113.

[15] Kopstein. "1989 as a Lens…" 298 – 299.

[16] Mitchell Orenstein and Katya Kalandadze. 2009. "Electoral Protests and Democratization Beyond the Color Revolutions." *Comparative Political Studies* 42:11 (November): 1403-1425.

figures of the moral stature that Andrei Sakharov, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn or Viacheslav Chornovil had in the Soviet proto-civil society. Those who gained prominence did so after their tragic politically-motivated murders, like Georgiy Gongadze or Anna Politkovskaya, or during politicized show trials, like Mikhail Khodorkovsky. The fact that decidedly apolitical figures, like journalist Leonid Parfenov, writer Boris Akunin or online activist Aleksei Navalny, were most trusted by post-election rally participants in Moscow, reflected the Russian society's search for a new type of leadership.[17]

Vulnerable to Manipulation

Despite all of their weaknesses, post-Soviet societies have proven to be relevant for the political process by affecting the policy choices of state elites. The model of the "managed society" and a hybrid mode of state-society relations were responses to state elites' anticipation of a potential challenge from below.[18] By advantaging various state-controlled social groups and ersatz movements, post-Soviet ruling elites intended to prevent society's concerted resistance to the state. This creates asymmetric equilibrium, in which some societal groups draw benefits from cooperating with the state, while others are chronically marginalized. As a result, the society becomes incapable of unified action even when the state acts against its interests and violates earlier commitments.[19] Partial cooptation of the society also lowers the cost of repression of disloyal groups.

Another mechanism state elites use to weaken societal restrictions is accentuating domestic ethnic or cultural divides through policies that disadvantage one ethnic or linguistic group and reward another. This practice has been particularly visible in countries like Moldova or Ukraine with lasting historical cleavages that were purposefully politicized by competing elites. Although such tactics backfired in Ukraine in 2004 by mobilizing one part of the society around a civic nationalism presented in anti-incumbent terms, it may have had a demobilizing effect in the 2010 presidential election by fracturing the country's democratic base.[20] As long as disagreements about history or cultural values dominate the political

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[17] Levada-Tsentr. 2011. "Opros na prospekte Sakharova 24 dekabrya," At http://www.levada.ru/26-12-2011/opros-na-prospekte-sakharova-24-dekabrya, accessed March 9, 2012.

[18] Robertson. "Managing Society…", 530.

[19] Barry Weingast. 1997. "Political Foundations of Democracy and the Rule of Law." *The American Political Science Review* 91:2 (June): 245 – 263.

[20] Taras Kuzio. 2010. "Nationalism, Identity and Civil Society in Ukraine: Understanding the Orange Revolution." *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 43:3 (September): 285 – 296; Lucan Way. 2005. "Authoritarian State-Building and the Sources of Regime Competitiveness in the Fourth Wave: The Cases of Belarus, Moldova, Russia and Ukraine." *World Politics* 57:1 (January): 231 – 261.

agenda, diverse societal actors will often prove powerless to coordinate against the state.

Finally, post-Soviet societies also proved vulnerable to the state's attempts to manufacture popular will along the lines envisioned by Joseph Schumpeter seventy years ago.[21] The combined effects of biased media coverage, editorial censorship, and careful political image-making, turn many post-Soviet media, particularly television, into a one-way communication tube intended to sell a particular state-approved political brand.[22] Rather than allowing it to serve as an information resource and an instrument of accountability, state elites brazenly use the media to shape public perceptions of political and economic realities. Virtualization of post-Soviet politics through Machiavellian political technologies and reliance on various party substitutes are further examples of states' attempts to manipulate public space and imitate the democratic process.[23] Although such manufacturing may not always work, it increases public indifference and disconnect from the political process. Given that political ignorance is often a rational response to costly information gathering, many in post-Soviet societies opt to be minimally informed and minimally involved.[24] The sense of inevitability about election outcomes that post-Soviet ruling elites create through hegemonic parties or Soviet-style mass gatherings depresses society's political learning and participation even further.

Conclusion

By neutralizing post-Soviet society as a veto player in the state-building process, ruling elites managed to design new state institutions in close proximity to their ideal points. In fact, most post-Soviet constitutional arrangements were imposed on the societies without any serious public involvement and legitimized through dubious referenda. In authoritarian conditions, referenda became useful instruments for falsifying public preferences. Alexander Lukashenko, Islam Karimov and Nursultan Nazarbaev used direct democracy to extend their terms or eliminate term limits and justify their continued rule. In other cases, as in Russia, Ukraine, or

[21] Joseph Schumpeter. 1950. *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*. New York, NY: Harper Perennial.

[22] Masha Lipman. 2009. "The Russian Media Scene: Industrial Rise and Institutional Decline." In Marta Dyczok and Oxana Gaman-Golutvina, eds., *Media, Democracy and Freedom: The Post-Communist Experience*. Bern: Peter Lang AG.

[23] Andrew Wilson. 2005. *Virtual Politics: Faking Democracy in the Post-Soviet World*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press; Henry Hale. 2005. "Why Not Parties? Electoral Markets, Party Substitutes, and Stalled Democratization in Russia." *Comparative Politics* 37:2 (January): 147 – 166.

[24] Anthony Downs. 1957. "An Economic Theory of Political Action in a Democracy." *The Journal of Political Economy* 65:2 (April): 135 – 150.

Georgia, key constitutional provisions regulating the powers and the length of the presidency were renegotiated strictly among elites, reducing society to the role of a passive observer.

　　　Post-Soviet experience demonstrates that without sustained societal involvement elite-driven attempts at democratic transition rarely produce stable democracy. At the same time, strong and persistent social mobilization in support of democracy requires a greater degree of cohesion among various societal actors and a shift in their dominant values.[25] Society may emerge as an actor in its own right only as long as all major social groups agree on the limits of state powers and see it in their interests to resist any transgressions from above.[26] This will require some groups to forego immediate benefits from cooperation with the state for the sake of long-term political rewards from greater autonomy. It will require others to downplay cultural or ethnic differences while pursuing a common goal of constraining state power. Finally, it will necessitate major investments in learning and organizing and innovative solutions to existing coordination problems between various groups. Still, only by being effective in counterbalancing the state can post-Soviet societies shape policy-making and institutional design closer to their interests, ensure political accountability and deter state elites from violating agreed limits on power. The only alternatives to this will be to keep producing inconsequential sparks of righteous anger or just quietly slide into oblivion.

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[25] Francis Fukuyama. 2011. *The Origins of Political Order: From Prehuman Times to the French Revolution*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

[26] Weingast. "Political Foundations…," 261.