

Post-Sovietology Blues: Reflections on a Tumultuous Decade

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It is generally agreed that Soviet studies was caught flat-footed by the collapse of the Soviet Union. Observers of the Soviet scene were trapped by a kind of groupthink: Institutions such as the Communist Party and central planning had existed for seventy-five years; hence the task of the academic was to explain how they worked. Critical thinking about the viability of the Soviet system only took place at the margins of the profession, on the political extremes of left and right.

More than a decade has passed since 1991. Have academics done a better job of analyzing the post-Soviet trajectory of Russia than they did studying the final years of the USSR? It would be hard to give an unequivocal “yes” in answer to this question. Events moved with bewildering rapidity, especially in the first half of the decade, and observers were constantly running to catch up. Developments in Moscow continually took Western analysts by surprise. Consider, for example, the following events. None of them was foreseen; even the possibility of their occurring was not widely discussed before they actually happened.

First, Mikhail Gorbachev, a career party functionary and dyed-in-the-wool Leninist, decides to introduce democratization. In trying to save the Soviet Union, he destroys it. Out of the blue, Gorbachev’s hard-line opponents launch the August 1991 coup—and then, bizarrely, prove themselves unwilling to shed blood to save their system. Contrary to all expectations, the Soviet Union is calmly and quickly dismantled by the communist bosses who had risen to rule each of its republics. Russia embarks on a program of radical market reform, even though the domestic interests lined up against such a program seem overwhelming.

Almost unnoticed, Ukraine, Belarus, and Kazakhstan become the first states in history to give up nuclear weapons. Uberdemocrat Yeltsin solves his separation-of-powers dispute with parliament, his former power base, by dismissing the Constitutional Court and sending tanks against the White House. (And this time, the tanks open fire.) The first democratic election in Russian history is won by a mad nationalist who favors irradiating Lithuania (Zhirinovskiy’s party scores

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23 percent in December 1993). A year later, the tanks roll again, into the hitherto ignored republic of Chechnya. Westerners are shocked to discover that the privatization that they so warmly welcomed has been hijacked by corrupt ex-communist elites and Mafia bosses. A slick and expensive media campaign resurrects Yeltsin from political oblivion, helping him to go from a 3 percent approval rating to electoral victory in less than six months.

The August 1998 economic crash proves that Russia has achieved neither fiscal nor monetary stability, nor does it have a functioning banking system. Then comes the millennium surprise: Yeltsin resigns, becoming the first Russian leader in history to voluntarily relinquish power. Yeltsin's hand-picked successor is a virtually unknown seventeen-year KGB veteran, who surprises the West by becoming very popular among Russians. Again confounding expectations, Putin embraces market reform and at least the rhetoric of democracy, while pursuing a strongly pro-Western foreign policy.

Not only were these developments baffling at the time, but they remain, for the most part, unexplored and enigmatic. It is a struggle to find a few books or articles on each of these phenomena that offer a really profound analysis.

It was, understandably, difficult for researchers to keep pace with the developments in real time, as they occurred. Graduate students in particular—the workhorses of primary research—were in a quandary. The gestation cycle of a doctoral dissertation is at least five years, so doctoral students who focused on the hot topics of 1989 (such as miners' strikes or the USSR Congress of People's Deputies) found their subject long since buried by the avalanche of history come dissertation-defense time, five years later.

Who Lost Russia?

Chastened by their failure to foresee the Soviet collapse, and by a decade of shattered illusions and false predictions, many ex-Sovietologists fell to arguing among themselves over who got Russia wrong. In a sense, this was nothing new. The old Sovietology had itself been heavily politicized, divided between a minority who saw the USSR as an "evil empire" and a majority who saw it as an alternative path to modernity, for better or worse. Recall that up until the Soviet collapse it was professionally risky for academics to use the term "totalitarianism" when talking about Russia.

The dramatic fate of Russia in the 1990s could not fail to produce strong responses among observers of developments there. But although they were useful for stimulating discussion, one cannot help thinking that these debates generated more heat than light.

Much of the writing on Russia in the 1990s was marred by needlessly partisan polemics. For some, Yeltsin was an evil genius who had destroyed Russia in his ruthless drive for power. To his defenders, Yeltsin was the father of Russian democracy, who had dismantled the largest and most nuclear empire in history, in a process that could have been a lot more bloody than it was. There was a similar polarization with regard to the economic transition: either the market and the West could do no wrong, or they could do no right. Nobody seemed to be stak-

ing out the middle ground in either of these debates. At least, if they were, nobody was paying any attention to them. Thankfully, amid the fray some Sovietologists managed to preserve their objectivity and continued to ply their trade of close institutional analysis. One thinks, for example, of Thomas Remington's continuing work on the Russian parliament, Eugene Huskey's on the presidency, or Ellen Mickiewicz's on the all-important television.

Some of the most important, event-tracking books of the past decade have been written, unsurprisingly, by journalists. The best of these do have an analytical structure. But journalists tend to be chroniclers rather than analysts: their role is to report what they have seen and heard. They tend not to spend much time establishing the historical and social context or discussing events and personalities that they did not themselves witness. Their books tend to be structured around their daily reporting notes, the material that did not make it into their published newspaper articles. And they tend to focus on dramatic, eye-catching themes as the organizing principle for their work—the triumph of capitalism, or its betrayal.

From Sovietology to Transitology

Sovietology was still warm in its grave when a new ruling "ology" arose: transitology. The 1980s had seen a wave of political and economic liberalization in Latin America, following an earlier surge of democratization in Spain, Portugal, and Greece. It was assumed that the lessons of transition in Latin America would be applicable to Eastern Europe. Hence debates over the political economy of macroeconomic stabilization migrated from Bolivia to Poland, and arguments over the relative merits of presidential versus parliamentary government shifted from a Latin to a Slavic frame of reference.

As explained in Francis Fukuyama's prescient 1989 essay, it was implicitly understood that "the end of history" had arrived. The only viable institutions for a modern society were market economics and liberal democracy. The task of Russia's leaders was to bring these into being as quickly and painlessly as possible. It was additionally assumed that the quicker the transition, the less pain there would be. The task of Western analysts was to explain these simple truths to the leaders and peoples of Eastern Europe, who were emerging blinking into the light of reason after decades in the darkness of the communist cave.

With the opening of Russia it became a lot easier for Westerners to conduct research there. Although the Sovietologists had spent years honing their skills—learning the languages, cultivating the contacts, figuring out which toilets worked in the Lenin Library—many of the new wave of transitologists dispensed with this apprenticeship. They relied instead on deploying the big guns of Western social science, using methods and concepts that had already, allegedly, proved their worth in studying other parts of the world.

It was relatively easy for Western economists and political scientists to hire natives to gather data, conduct surveys, and test their theories—all the more so because the international financial institutions and government agencies were willing to finance their research/proselytizing on a lavish scale. This influx of research was met with suspicion and resentment by some old-timers in the field

of Russian studies. The stage was set for a disciplinary denouement. The economists, accompanied by some political scientists of the rational choice school, were convinced of the universality of their theories. Their one-size-fits-all approach was challenged by historians, and political scientists of like persuasion, who insisted that the tide of globalization would break on the unyielding rocks of Russian culture.

Ironically, just at a point when Russia was undergoing socioeconomic change on a massive scale, there was renewed interest in studying the eternal verities of Russian history, as exemplified by Timothy McDaniel's popular book *The Agony of the Russian Idea*. A half-dozen books were written about the enigmatic and elusive character of Russian national identity, mostly looking back at Soviet and pre-Soviet times. Such studies raised more questions than they answered, since post-Soviet Russian national identity is very much a work in progress. (In fact, for most of the decade prior to Putin's arrival, it was hard to discern any work, or any progress, in national identity-building.)

The political scientists involved in the study of transitology were heavily influenced by prevailing trends in their discipline. Principal among these were a search for evidence of rational behavior and a quest for large N studies. Both of these are part and parcel of the assumption of a breakthrough to modernity: the idea that the contemporary world is governed by identifiable and rational patterns of behavior, with individual idiosyncrasies and contingencies averaged out by the iron logic of social behavior—a logic that can be charted with mathematical precision.

The first wave of political scientist research, at the end of the 1980s, consisted of large-scale surveys investigating civic values in Russian society. They were operating from the behavioralist assumption that democratic institutions would rest on a bedrock of democratic values. The initial findings were generally positive and optimistic; despite decades of communist indoctrination, Russians did seem to value personal freedom and civil rights. Some truths were, after all, self-evident.

But over time, some nuances in this position emerged. For example, while committed to democratic values in the abstract, Russians did not think very highly of the level of democracy they were actually experiencing. Second, value systems are complex. Russians were worried about the erosion of economic rights and the rise of crime and corruption. They were assertive of their own rights but not very tolerant of opposing views. Their desire for a strong leader was balanced by a corrosive suspicion of the state and skepticism about the law. Their proclivity for associational activity was weak, and there were few signs of an emergent civil society. These findings underlined the fact that the break-up of the Soviet Union and the transition to market democracy had been an elite-led, top-down affair in Russia.

Despite the surprising (but welcome) evidence of some commitment to democratic values in Russia, the actual course of democratic development was more rocky. Russia experienced a total of eight national elections (and two referenda) in eleven years, which yielded a rich body of data that was mined by enthusias-

tic psephologists. But they found themselves chasing a moving target. The changing political landscape meant that issue salience shifted radically from one election to the next, and the political party system was in a constant state of flux. Apart from the dinosaur Communist Party, the parties of the center and right formed and re-formed with dizzying speed.

Adding to the problem was the Russian parliament's relative powerlessness vis-à-vis the Kremlin apparatus: real decision making lay in the hands of unelected officials. It is difficult to predict how a "rational" voter should behave in such circumstances (when she watches on TV as the last parliament she elected is shelled into submission, for example).

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It proved difficult to develop sophisticated voting models that tracked voter behavior across different elections, except by making somewhat heroic assumptions about how different parties could be grouped into stable ideological blocs across time. This proved a challenge even in the more stable reborn democracies of East Europe. Even

there, the mix of salient issues around which parties crystallized varied from country to country.

Social scientists began to describe the developments of postsocialist Europe as an example of “path dependency.” This term refers to the fact that decisions taken in the initial phase affect subsequent developments in an irreversible way. This was, in effect, their way of acknowledging that contingency matters, that individual leaders can shape the course of events. In other words, that social science cannot displace the need for the chronicling of the unique series of events that are known, conventionally, as “history.”

Political scientists were stymied by their focus on institutions at a time when institutions were in constant flux. Sociologists and anthropologists were more comfortable dealing with phenomena such as corruption, power networks, and ethnic conflict than were traditional economists and political scientists. Political scientists seemed to start off by assuming that the rule of law or the independence of the media could be taken as a given. By the middle of the decade it was clear that these institutions were in fact very central to the political struggles being waged by political elites—through corruption allegations, control over the media, and other nefarious activities. The political polarization of scholarship over Russia meant that, to a regrettable degree, mainstream studies of democratization tended to downplay or ignore these phenomena, at least while Yeltsin was in power.

The arrival of Putin added another twist. Neither the left nor the right was very enamored of the Petersburg “Chekist,” so enthusiasm for tracking Russia’s tran-

sition to democracy was put on hold. In fact, coverage of politics under Putin has taken on a distinctly Kremlinological flavor, with dense narratives of factional struggles between rival clans in the corridors of power. But in sharp contrast to the cold war era, neither Western social scientists nor newspaper readers are particularly interested in these bizarre goings-on. Kremlinology has become an exclusively Russian occupation, published in the pages of the serious opposition newspapers and popular scandal sheets.

My *N* Is Bigger than Your *N*

Political scientists are taught to gather data that can be subject to statistical analysis, so the hunt was on for a large sample of cases. There was only one Soviet Union, of course—but out of the Soviet empire and Yugoslavia there sprouted twenty-seven independent countries, giving considerable scope for cross-national analysis. One could test for the correlation between liberalization and economic recovery, or the impact of parliamentary vs. presidential systems on the quality of democracy in a given country.

This produced some impressive work, such as Joel Hellman's 1998 *World Politics* article, "Winners Take All." Still, there seemed to be an obstinate lumpiness about the findings. Countries clustered into groups of winners and losers, with all the good things going together—democratic political institutions, market liberalization, economic growth. Explaining exactly why a given country emerged as a winner or a loser remained rather elusive. The fickle finger of History seemed to be edging back into the picture.

Within Russia itself, comparative political scientists were attracted by the fact that it is a huge country, carved into eighty-nine regions. A lot of data was available for these regions—information about everything from sewage hookups to votes for Gennady Zyuganov. (These two variables were negatively correlated, it turns out.) This opened the door to extensive statistical analysis.

In addition, the multiplicity of regions meant that there was scope for original fieldwork. It was hard to compete with well-funded national election studies, but a young, intrepid grad student could stake his claim on an uncharted frontier (is Mari-El taken?) and start digging. However, these scholars did not escape the big-*N* expectation, so they were often required to repeat their fieldwork in two, three, or four regions—and hope that they could wrap up their dissertation before the political landscape did another couple of 180-degree turns.

A third factor explaining the attractiveness of regional studies was that it fitted into a rich and ongoing debate about the character of federal institutions worldwide. Russia inherited a federal structure from the Soviet Union, and it seemed to be getting still more federal, given Yeltsin's penchant for striking deals with regional bosses. One drawback is that, absent a rule of law, Russia significantly deviates from the classic model of a federal system as a shared sovereignty between two levels of government, adjudicated by independent judicial review.

These factors combined to produce a veritable tsunami of research on Russia's manifold regions. Most of this was a valuable net addition to our stock of knowl-

edge, since very little study had been done in and on Russia's regions during the Soviet era.

Markets Rule? Not Exactly

Economists did not have it any easier than political scientists in coping with the intellectual challenges posed by the Russian transition.

At first, things seemed to be going the economists' way. The Russian government was at least pretending to follow the admonitions of the IMF and World Bank. Reform policies were adopted (some were even implemented); the years passed; and Russia (Moscow, at least) was changing before one's eyes. But, worryingly, there was no sign of an end to the severe recession that began in 1990, and capital was hemorrhaging from Russia on a massive scale.

Economists operated on the assumption that markets could work their magic very swiftly. There was much rhetorical invocation of the virtues of the "invisible hand" (a phrase Adam Smith used only three times in his entire corpus of writing—and ironically, at that). Price liberalization and free trade would quickly reveal which of Russia's industries were competitive in the global economy. Privatization would rapidly shift assets into the most efficient hands. Create the opportunities and incentives, and a class of entrepreneurs would emerge who would then have a vested interest in creating the institutions needed for a modern capitalist economy.

It was a bootstrap theory of building capitalism, and it seemed to be working. There were sufficient nuggets of good news to outweigh the chorus of bad news, enough at least when it came to filling editorial page commentaries.

Then came the August 1998 crash, which shattered the illusion that the international community had a grip on the realities of the Russian economy. The very things for which the Russian government had been praised—ruble convertibility and the use of treasury bonds to cover the budget deficit—turned out to be their undoing. Most of the new financial conglomerates, the pride of the privatization program, crumbled like dust, leaving only the gnarled "state oligarchs" in their wake (such as Gazprom, the Central Bank, and the railways ministry). After turning in the best performance in the world in dollar terms in 1997, the Russian RMS stock market was the worst performer in 1998.

The World Bank and IMF continued to insist that if the Russian government had *really* followed their advice, then all would have been fine. But calls for transparency in corporate governance and a concern for corruption—issues that had been conspicuously absent from the international agenda back in 1992–96—now moved to center stage in their programs.

One can still find economists touting the potential of Russia as the next Klondike and fund managers greedily eyeing the 41 percent growth in the RMS stock market in the first half of 2002. But most economists became wary about making any authoritative pronouncements about what was happening in the Russian economy. At least one good thing emerged from all this. Economists and political scientists came away with a new respect for the complexity of the market economy and the challenge of developing institutions like rule of law and

freedom from corruption. Maybe next time around they'll even pay more attention to what the political scientists are saying.

Conclusion

The past decade has been fascinating for students of political science. Despite the collapse of interest in Russian language studies, student interest in Russian politics remains high. The flow of books published about Russia also remains quite substantial—much higher than the number of books about countries of comparable importance, such as Brazil or India. Still, it is not that easy to find good, balanced studies that provide true insights or a synthetic overview of Russia's experiences over the past decade.

It is still too early to get a true perspective on these events. And there are many important areas crying out for further study: the health crisis, gender relations, public administration, policy analysis, foreign policy decision-making, military reform, crime and punishment, and so on.

Humbled by a decade of false premises and shattered illusions, commentators today are understandably reluctant to venture predictions about Russia's future. After the August 1998 crash and the arrival in power of the rather sinister Vladimir Putin, Western social science seemed to lose interest in Russia, and it even lost faith in the transition paradigm.

If Russia is not in fact headed toward liberal capitalism and market democracy, as we know and understand them, then where is it headed? Is it going to regress—toward communism (unlikely) or toward empire (a distinct possibility)? Or is it going to stagnate, wallowing in its social pathologies, the eternal swamp so vividly captured by the Marquis de Custine's *Empire of the Tsars* back in 1839 and periodically rediscovered ever since?

In reality, history does not consist of only those three possibilities: movement forward, movement back, or marking time. Rather, most movement is sideways, branching out in unexpected directions, creating curious and unpredictable hybrids. Looking back at the past fifteen years of Russian history, the safest prediction is, Expect the unexpected.