

POLITICAL LEADERSHIP AFTER COMMUNISM

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Abstract: Political scientists have paid little attention to the role of leadership. This article suggests a way to think systematically about leaders' contributions in the former Soviet Union by examining their ability to achieve their own goals and the impact they have. The fifteen countries provide a wide range of variation on the dependent variable.

What have we learned about political leadership in the post-communist world? It is fair to say that it is not as much as we have picked up about a host of other ordering issues, among them political economy, institutional design, ethnic conflict, and public opinion and elections. Considering the significance of the magnitude of the topic, we have not learned nearly enough.

There are students of post-communist politics who tend to accept the importance of the theme and those who, embracing structural approaches, tend not to. A majority in the scholarly community fall into the former camp. "Leadership matters," is how they often put it. "It matters a lot. Why, just look at Gorbachev's role, and also Yeltsin's, and then there is Putin, and [fill in the blanks]." However, the majority have seldom thought leadership important enough to make it a primary object of their research. Leaders have figured in a handful of serious political biographies, in naturalistic roles in many studies of other topics, in several studies of ideas in politics, and in all manner of op-eds du jour. These contributions aside, I

would submit that we have put together rather little by way of cumulative knowledge. I am hard pressed to identify a single major project that has delved systematically into the leadership factor across leaders and situations, working from hypotheses to investigation and then inferences.

To be fair, the discipline of political science generally finds leadership a notoriously hard phenomenon to investigate. This is said to be so for a variety of reasons: individual leaders are idiosyncratic; they do not sort into neat boxes or lend themselves to generalization; firsthand testimony about their lives and performance in office is often unreliable because it is self-serving, either pro or con the subject; leaders invariably share the stage with numerous other players and forces, which gets in the way of figuring out who and what count the most.

If nothing else, leadership after communism gives us the gratifying “variation on the dependent variable” that methodologists embrace as the cornerstone of systematic research design. Sticking to the constituted leaders of governments and states in the post-Soviet fifteen states alone, one has to marvel at a phenomenon that runs the gamut from Turkmenbashi to Landsbergis, Gamsakhurdia, and Medvedev. To all appearances, there is a wider spread of results here than for more thoroughly explored processes such as economic transformation, state building, and identity politics. The question becomes: can we with confidence link these observed outcomes to observable inputs and draw conclusions about causation?

It helps to begin with broadly defined tasks that political leaders everywhere address. Three of these stand out in the canonic literature.¹ First, leaders mold the agenda of political discussion and debate. Second, they assemble and manage action coalitions at the elite and state-institutional level. Third, unless they are tyrants who rely exclusively on repression, they cultivate a mass constituency below. This in turn entails some willingness to take popular preferences into account—to follow one’s followers, as James MacGregor Burns puts it.²

For political leaders operating in the immediate aftermath of communism, experience showed that these universal assignments took on a particular coloration and were more arduous than would be the case under other circumstances. Agendas and goals prove to be exceedingly

¹ See especially Bryan D. Jones, ed. 1989. *Leadership and Politics: New Perspectives in Political Science*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas; Morris P. Fiorina and Kenneth A. Shepsle. “Formal Theories of Leadership: Agents, Agenda Setters, and Entrepreneurs.” In Bryan D. Jones, ed. 1989. *Leadership and Politics: New Perspectives in Political Science*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas; Robert C. Tucker. 1995. *Politics as Leadership*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press; and Richard J. Samuels. 2003. *Machiavelli’s Children: Leaders and Their Legacies in Italy and Japan*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

² Burns. 2003. *Transforming Leadership: A New Pursuit of Happiness*. New York: Atlantic Monthly Press.

hard to shape when their conceptual building blocks, and the very language in which they are expressed, are in flux and up for grabs. Many in the first cohort of post-communist leaders were, of course, senior members of the last cohort of communist leaders, meaning they had to find a way to part with the verities of their lives up to that point. The herd-like acceptance of the discourse of “democracy” and “independence” in the early 1990s was superseded by the sometimes opportunistic adherence to notions of national revival, development, Euro-Atlantic civilization, and so forth. As for peak-level coalitions, they are elusive and unstable when most potential participants have one foot in the past, no less than the supreme leader has, and when “snowflake” affiliations predominate, subject to melting and reconfiguration as the political climate fluctuates.³ Likewise, the masses are not conducive to mobilization when their preferences are even more inchoate than those of the elites, when well bounded social interests do not exist or barely exist, and when disillusionment with the early results of the transition has begun to settle in.

To these three variations on the classic challenges of leadership must be added a fourth. It is that post-communist leaders have no choice but to try to construct the institutions, practices, and norms that will structure and legitimate their activity, and to do so in circumstances that have for some time been pushing the preexisting machinery toward dysfunction and collapse. Vladimir Putin’s frank reference in October 2011 to how he “tightened the screws” in Russia in the early 2000s presupposed that the screws and screwdrivers were already in existence, albeit in flawed form—presumably through effort of his predecessor, Yeltsin, and Yeltsin’s collaborators. It is an open question just how much leaders after communism, country by country, have borrowed from one another in designing the institutions in which they have nested.⁴

Returning to the dependent variable, the sheer range of outcomes suggests this is a puzzle ripe for causal analysis. Under what conditions, one might ask, will leadership type A tend to prevail, and under what conditions can type B or C be expected to prevail? To take this road, though, we need a good sense of what types A, B, C, etc., consist of.

Let me put forth a parsimonious scheme. As I see it, post-communist leadership is most fruitfully assessed in terms of what leaders accomplish, not principally how they go about accomplishing it (although the latter is also worth exploring). The bottom line is: when all is said and done, what difference do leaders make? This difference can

³ This metaphor was effectively introduced in Chrystia Freeland. 2000. *Sale of the Century: Russia’s Wild Ride from Communism to Capitalism*. London: Crown Business.

⁴ The very fact that eleven of fifteen post-Soviet states have presidential and semi-presidential constitutions implies that borrowing has been very common.

be measured on two discrete dimensions.

The first, which I call effectiveness, relates to what leaders do to fulfill their own goals.⁵ Does the leader succeed in carrying out the goals he has set for himself? Judgment is required in sizing up those goals, since politicians are not always candid or clear in enunciating them, and since they will often evolve over the course of the person's political career. Nonetheless, it should be possible to get a general picture of what the leader is trying to accomplish—creating one yardstick against which the end point can be measured. The second yardstick, which I term impact, bypasses the actor's subjective intentions and fastens on objective results. Whatever he wished to do, has the leader actually changed the world, and by how much? Change here must be measured against both the status quo ante and counterfactual states of the world which would likely have come about absent the leader's actions. “Change” might thus be “no change” in practice—the buttressing of a status quo that otherwise, had the leader not been there to intervene, would have crumbled. “Change” may also be unintended change, contrary to what the political actor wished to happen when he put his shoulder to the wheel.

Crossing effectiveness with impact, we get a set of possibilities something like the matrix in the admittedly impressionistic Table 1 below. I dichotomize post-communist leaders into ineffective and effective categories, an oversimplification that is nonetheless useful. For impact, I group them into low- and high-impact players, but this time with an intermediate, ambiguous category.

Table 1. Leadership: Effectiveness and Impact

	Ineffective	Effective
Low Impact	Yushchenko, Shushkevich	Ilham Aliyev
Ambiguous Impact	Kuchma, Medvedev	Yeltsin, Kravchuk, Saakashvili
High Impact	Gorbachev, Bakiyev	Putin, Otunbayeva, Nazarbayev, Lukashenka

Viktor Yushchenko, the president of Ukraine from 2005 to 2010, seems the prototype of the ineffective, low-impact leader. As president,

⁵ Western scholars and governments have been especially interested in the progress leaders make toward the establishment and consolidation of democracy. But this is far from the only goal post-communist leaders pursue, and must be seen against a background of numerous, competing goals. For a fair number of post-communist leaders, democracy has been either something to ignore or something to fight.

he neither achieved his own self-set objectives nor changed Ukrainian society, for better or worse; in 2010 he was defeated for re-election by the same individual whom he had defeated in the Orange Revolution of 2004, and while doing so finishing far behind the prime minister with whom he had waged a power struggle for almost all of the intervening period. Stanislau Shushkevich, the main leader in Belarus in the early 1990s, might also be pigeonholed here. Vladimir Putin (joined in my imagination with Roza Otunbayeva of Kyrgyzstan, Nursultan Nazarbayev of Kazakhstan, and Alyaksandr Lukashenka of Belarus) stands at the opposite corner of the table. Until the electoral cycle of 2011–12, at least, Putin was both effective, in terms of accomplishing his chosen objectives, and high-impact in terms of changing Russia. Mikhail Gorbachev (a late-communist if not exactly post-communist leader) combined low effectiveness with high impact—albeit many of the outcomes he brought about (in particular, the collapse of the Soviet Union) were far from the ones he had intended. A multiplier effect for Gorbachev was the magnitude of the country he governed. After December 1991 none of the successor states could rival the defunct Soviet Union, and consequently no post-Soviet leader is likely ever to match Gorbachev in world-historical impact.⁶ Ilham Aliyev, the president of Azerbaijan since succeeding his father, Heydar Aliyev, in 2003, has arguably been high in effectiveness (his main declared goal having been stability) but low in impact (Azerbaijan is a somewhat more affluent version of what Aliyev, Sr., bequeathed him but otherwise very similar, and it remains a small and relatively inconsequential place). The ambiguous-impact categories are slipperier. I deem Ukraine's Leonid Kuchma and Russia's Dmitrii Medvedev to be ambiguous in impact but ineffective in terms of realizing personal goals; Boris Yeltsin of Russia, Viktor Kravchuk of Ukraine, and Georgia's Mikhail Saakashvili seem to fit in the effective/ambiguous impact box.

If there is anything to this sketch, leadership scholars would need to refine it and work on a reasonably rigorous and reliable coding scheme. Two big jobs would then need to be done. The first would be to ascertain what causes are conducive to these observed effects. Are some leaders more effective than others, or higher in impact than others, because they are especially skilled at articulating a vision and shaping the agenda, at building upper-echelon coalitions, at motivating the masses, or at piecing institutional instruments together—or at some discernible combination of these bits? To what extent does leadership agency govern outcomes, as weighed against structural variables and systemic tendencies? Are

⁶ I am grateful to Stephen Hanson of the College of William and Mary for underscoring this point in comments on a draft of the paper.

ineffectiveness and low impact associated with any different action configuration by these same criteria? If unfavorable background conditions overwhelm some leaders, as nationalist protest did to Gorbachev in 1990–91, was the situation ever retrievable through action by the leader?

The second mega question to pose is about the medium- and long-term trends. Presumably there will come a time, as communism recedes into the past, when the adjectival phrase “post-communist” will cease to be meaningful as a qualifier for the noun “leadership.” In much of East Central Europe, that watershed has probably been passed. In most of the post-Soviet states, I do not sense that it has. Am I right? If so, how much longer will the post-communist dispensation continue? And how will we know that it is gone?