

PERCEPTIONS
JOURNAL OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

June - August 1998 Volume III - Number 2

THE DEMOCRATISATION PROCESS IN RUSSIA

ESRA HATİPOĞLU

Esra Hatipoğlu is Research Assistant at The European Union Institute of Marmara University.

Transition and consolidation can be regarded as two different aspects of the democratisation process. Within this context, transition represents the time period which begins with the breakdown of the old authoritarian regime and ends with the establishment of a relatively stable political system. Consolidation, however, is somewhat different from transition because it refers to the achievement of a change in attitudes and substantial support for the new system, which requires a relatively longer period of time. The aim of these two is also different. The former aims at the creation of a new regime, whereas the latter aims at stability and the perpetuation of the established regime.¹

For the sake of simplicity, transition and consolidation processes are generally analysed in comparative perspectives, both at intra-regional and inter-regional levels, in order to identify the divergences and convergences in the democratisation processes of different countries: i.e. Southern European and Latin America countries. Due to the differences in the preconditions and socio-economic structures among the countries aiming for a democratisation process, although it may be a little risky to stretch the term transition as it was exposed in Southern Europe or Latin America to Russia or other countries, to predict the likely outcomes we also have to start to analyse the democratisation process in Russia in comparative perspective by identifying similarities and differences with Southern European countries and then to come to a conclusion.

There are some variables, on which many scholars agree, that affect both transition and consolidation. The factors that are laid out in Table I are derived from Linz, Stephan and Gunter's comparative analysis² of various countries experiencing a democratisation process. According to their argument, the variables which affect both transition and consolidation are: the nature of the previous non-democratic regime, the problem of simultaneity, the question of stateness, the strength of hierarchical or non-hierarchical military, the question of who initiates and controls the transition, timing of elections, the style of constitution making and international influences. According to the scholars above, there are three aspects of democratic consolidation: structural (no significant reverse domains of power should exist which could hinder some public policies to be determined by democratic means), attitudinal (a strong majority of public opinion in favour of democratic principles) and behavioural (no significant national, social, economic and political actors challenging the regime).³

APPLICATION OF TRANSITION THEORY TO RUSSIA

Since the events which took place in Russia have some similarities to the events that happened in various Southern European countries, we will try to explain the democratisation process in Russia using some of the concepts and hypotheses generated from the earlier experiences of those countries.

In line with these scholars' arguments, the nature of the previous non-democratic regime is the first variable that affects transition and consolidation processes. It is important to classify previous political systems in questioning the democratisation process. Although they have created a five-part typology of political regimes, in the analysis of the Russian case we will base our arguments on their

comparison of authoritarian and totalitarian regimes. This can be summarised as follows:⁴

Authoritarian regimes

- limited political pluralism
- quite extensive economic and social pluralism
- a much more autonomous above-ground private sector
- a greater amount of cultural activity
- leaders emerge from groups that have some power and legitimacy
- most of them do not have ideologies Post-Totalitarian Regimes
- much more social pluralism than in totalitarian systems
- much discussion of a second culture or parallel culture
- the institutional pluralism emerged out of previous totalitarian systems
- very few developed secondary organisations
- elites are often recruited from single party
- an important ideological legacy that can be ignored

Russia, in this context, can be regarded as a very early post-totalitarian regime, whose leaders had enormous power in contrast with the authoritarian regimes in Southern European countries. Today the social structure of Russia is made up of fragmented social and political groups which provide a very unsure footing for the growth of democratic political institutions. Civil society is also unorganised and its further development faces various problems, such as the low level of political participation and the readiness of the people to give up liberty for the sake of order. In today's conditions there is a tendency to label Russian society as an oligarchy, or rule of the few. Vladimir Shapentokh also defines in his article⁵ the four aspects of today's Russian society as oligarchic, criminal, authoritarian and liberal. By oligarchic, he refers to the wealthy, including the heads of some powerful financial groups and oil and gas monopolies, who have important relations with both the government and the criminal organisations. He describes the organised crime and shadow economy as important dimensions of criminal Russia. By authoritarian aspect, he stresses the tendency and intention of the leaders and bureaucracy to rule the country in an authoritarian sense. On the other hand, he designates the desire of a segment of the establishment for parliament, independent courts, free media and private property in Russia as the liberal aspect of Russian society. He insists on the weaknesses of the liberal aspect and sees today's Russian government as a product of the compromise among the largest economic groups over the distribution of the power. Thus, according to him, the existing Russian government does not work efficiently due to corruption and Yeltsin's need to balance the existing power relations and his frequent personnel changes.

To predict the possibility of a consolidated democracy in Russia, we must first assess the presence or absence of a political culture compatible with the emergence of a stable democracy. In this respect, Edward Keenan asserts the persistence of Muscovite political folkways which involve political orientations based on traditional patterns of centralisation, bureaucratisation and risk avoidance, even in today's Russia⁶. Stephen White also lists the distinctive characteristics of traditional Russian political culture as the absence of institutions for communicating popular demands, and the highly centralised and unlimited authority, and stresses the continuity in Russian political culture⁷. This continuity is still valid since even today Russians are ready to transfer all power and authority to a strong leader. We also do believe some aspects of the continuity thesis in the Russian case that emphasises the importance of Russian history, political culture and the effects of a Marxist-Leninist ideology in the creation of today's Russian civil society and argue that, with its unorganised complex organisations and associations, today Russian political society very much resembles a movement society such as described by Steven Fish.⁸

Also due to the characteristics mentioned above, it is much easier for Russia to initiate a transition period than to build a viable democratic system. There were various short-lived attempts at democratisation in Russia in 1905 and 1906. Concerning this problem, together with all other approaches, the modernisation theory is also used to explain the Russian case. However, Richard Sakwa stresses the inefficiencies of this theory because, according to him, Russian modernisation is

not identical to the Westernisation of the country. He says the problem in Russia is not underdevelopment but misdevelopment, both in economic (causing great environmental damages through production; having inappropriate technology and wasting resources) and political (having bodies that carry the same name as those in the West, like political parties with a very different content) spheres. Thus, Russia should modernise its society to adapt itself to changing conditions. However, since modernisation includes the destroying of the old, this destructive aspect then could undermine the support for democracy and make the consolidation phase in Russia more difficult.⁹

On the other hand, as one of the characteristics of post-totalitarian regimes, the absence of organised pluralism in Russia hindered this kind of “pacted transition.” After the collapse of the USSR, the rules of the game were not defined. Thus, almost everything was open to criticism. The non-existence of a consensus on the organising principles of society and the economy further fostered uncertainty and impeded consolidation of the democratic system. In this sense, according to Michael Mc Faul’s observation, Russian transition can be regarded as a revolutionary transition in which the rules of the game are not pacted and consensus on the organising principles and civil society does not exist.

The political parties in Russia also have some problems in contributing to the democratic consolidation. Although there are many political parties in Russia, a viable multi-party system has not been established yet. The lack of confidence in any party structures, the legacy of the authoritarian culture, the lack of party traditions, the existence of rivalry and jealousy between the existing party leaders, the lack of strong parties rooted in economic and professional interests hinder the emergence of a viable multi-party system.

The media also cannot play its real role in the consolidation of democracy since it is not free enough to do so. Due to economic difficulties, newspapers have to get financial support from the state, which forces them to favour one side or to give up their objectivity. On the other hand, the direct control of the oligarchs over most of the TV channels and newspapers and the structures set up by the political leadership that aim at censorship also restrict their contribution to the establishment of a stable democracy.

The second variable is the problem of simultaneity which signifies the multi-dimensionality of the democratic consolidations. There are also some differences between authoritarian and post-totalitarian systems in this respect. In authoritarian regimes, due to the existence of a civil society, a state bureaucracy operating within professional norms and a relatively high degree of market economy, only the establishment of the democratic institutions are required. However in post-totalitarian regimes transformation of both political and economic systems are needed. In Russia, as some sort of a post-totalitarian regime, democratic consolidation is also complicated by the fact that Russians have to restructure their economy and change their political system simultaneously, in contrast with Southern European countries that had to deal with the creation of new democratic political institutions only. In contemporary Russia, the deterioration of the economy is causing instability, the attempt to change everything simultaneously leading to various problems. Most of the time, the creation of representative government based on popular sovereignty and rule of law contradict the challenge of economic modernisation. Since the economic conditions affect every person in Russia on a daily basis (increase in unemployment rate and cost of living and decrease in the availability of consumer goods), the support for the regime, and its survival, are highly dependent on the performance of the economy. Thus, the consolidation of democracy in Russia does not depend solely on its political transformation but to a large extent on its economic performance. Within this context, the persistence of economic problems like inflation, increase in the unemployment rate, the delayed wage and pension payments and the decline in social welfare system can undermine the popular support for democracy.

The third variable is the question of stateness which is connected with the questioning of the legitimacy of the state. According to Linz, Stephen and Gunter, who listed these factors in their analysis of transitions, if there is a group which seeks to establish its own nation-state, and if there is some degree of ethnic complexity within the concerned state, then the consolidation of

democracy becomes a very complex problem. In this context, we are all fully aware of Russia's growing centre-periphery problems. The conflict between central authority and the regions stem from some economic (share of tax revenues, subsidies to Moscow and conflicts over pricing of goods) political (making policies and power-sharing) and ethnic (territorial disputes and traditional hostilities) problems. Thus, the absence of a clear national identity is still creating tension between democracy and order. The democratic consolidation is also weakened by these nationalist aspirations because most of the Russians indicate that they prefer national unity and the maintenance of order over democracy.

For the fourth variable, the strength of hierarchical and non-hierarchical military, we can simply say that in Russia the military lacks the legitimacy to intervene directly in politics. Although the USSR was regarded as a highly militarised state, the military was always under civilian control. Thus, the USSR never had any military interventions, in contrast with most of the Latin American countries. Today almost the same civil-military relations scheme is valid in Russia, which can be regarded as an advantage in the emergence of a stable democracy. However, the increase in the dissatisfaction of both the officers and the soldiers with the government in solving their problems may create various problems between the Army and the government in the near future.¹⁰

For the fifth variable, concerning the group or leaders who initiate and control the transition, we can say that the role played by the political elite has been substantial in initiating the changes in Russia. There are also official attempts to consolidate democracy in the country. Most of the time, all these activities are even labelled as democracy from above.

In assessing the style of constitution making in Russia, we can start from the establishment of a Constitutional Commission in June 1990. Together with the drafts that were prepared by that Commission there were also other alternative drafts, with one prepared by the Communists, one by a group of legal experts from the Saratov University Law Faculty, one by Sergei Shakharai, Yeltsin's then legal adviser, and one by both Sobchak, mayor of St. Petersburg and Sergei Aleksev from 1990 to 1992. In the end, no compromise was reached and the President put forward his own more presidentialist constitutional draft in April 1993, just before the referendum. However, the Constitutional Commission rejected it in May 1993. Communists then prepared another version of their constitution. The main problem here was over the power sharing between the parliament and the President. In the end, the problem was solved when Yeltsin dissolved the legislature and suspended the existing constitution. Then the Constitutional Assembly was reorganised and prepared a new draft constitution establishing a strong presidential system. This version was approved by Russians at the December 1993 referendum and became Russia's first Constitution.¹¹ Thus, to conclude, we can argue that constitution making became an instrument in the struggle between the reformers and the conservatives.

Concerning the political institutions (form of government), the 1993 Russian Constitution creates a strong presidency without any division of responsibilities and competencies and without checks and balances that could prevent the abuse of executive power. The Constitution also does not provide any effective government in which the problems that could arise due to the struggle between the parliament and the president could be solved. The Constitution also has some features that contrast with the federal structure of Russia. In this sense, the Russian Constitution is regarded as a mixture of the American and French models, neither a pure presidential system as in the USA, nor a quasi-presidential system as in France. Thus, in Russia, the presidency was strengthened to create a strong executive role in the implementation of reforms. Here, although the aim was to undermine the old social and political structures to create a framework for the growth of democratic institutions, the result became the emergence of some sort of an authoritarian democracy.

Concerning the judicial aspect, there were two attempts in the 1993 Constitution which could contribute to the consolidation of democracy in Russia; the recreation of the Constitutional Court as a supreme organ to review legislative and constitutional matters and the introduction of trial by jury in some limited number of regions of Russia. However, Russia still needs a real improvement in the operation of its judicial system.

For the effects of international influences, as in all other countries, the democratisation process in Russia is not merely a domestic process. In the post-cold war period, international actors and structures played an even more important role in the Russian case. Whitehead, in his article,¹² talks about different methods through which the international actors could affect the democratisation processes of other countries, including the conclusion of international treaties, increased economic and trade relations and the activities of NGOs. In this sense, he also defines three types of action in the promotion of democracy in another country; pressure on the existing government to democratise themselves, support for the existing democratic elements to consolidate and the maintenance of a firm stance against anti-democratic forces. The international actors, ranging from individual countries like the USA and most of the Western countries to many international organisations like EU, WTO, the IMF and NGOs, by using the above mentioned methods, affect the democratisation process in Russia. Especially in the institutional democratisation process, they exported their experience concerning the establishment of democratic institutions and elections. They also contributed financially in both economic and political transformation through debt relief and rescheduling, trade credits, humanitarian assistance and direct investment. Their influence appears to be greater in the economic and technical fields, but no one can underestimate their support for Yeltsin in political matters. They supported Yeltsin in nearly all cases that seemed to aim at democratisation in Russia. Even when Yeltsin disregarded the Soviet Constitution and disbanded the Soviet Union in December 1991, when he suspended the Russian Constitution and dismissed Parliament, when the army had bombarded the White House and when he suspended the Constitutional Court, he could get the approval of the West for the sake of consolidation of democracy in Russia. Thus, together with the support of the West, a special Russian route to democracy was established.¹³ To conclude then, we can argue that for a Russian transition the international scheme is more than supportive. On the other hand, Russia today is a member of the Council of Europe and tries to enter into contractual relations with the existing international and regional economic organisations like IMF WTO and EU, which forces Russia to adopt its standards to international ones.

From the analysis of all these variables, we can conclude that, although the Russian transition is a rapid and non-violent process, its consolidation seems to be lengthy, since the problems which were outlined by the scholars mentioned above, as obstacles to the consolidation of democracy, still exist in Russia. Although it is too early to talk about the establishment of a stable democracy in Russia, the achievements of Russia in this process should not be underestimated. Today we can all argue that Russia is now more free and more democratic than it had been earlier. Up to the present , there have been efforts at completing the building of democratic institutions and two presidential, two parliamentary and a series of regional elections were held in accordance with international standards. Thus, according to Rustow's distinction, Russia tried to complete the preparatory and decision phase in its transition but still has some difficulties in the habituation phase.¹⁴ However, these difficulties are not serious enough to turn Russia into a totalitarian regime, both due to the obligations imposed by the international community in general, and Western countries and the USA in particular, and due to its internal dynamics.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

BOOKS

Dallin, Alexander(ed.), Political Parties in Russia. (University of California, Berkeley, 1993).

Huntington, Samuel, The Third Wave: Democratisation in the Late Twentieth Century. (University of Oklahoma Press, London, 1991).

Lapidus, Gail (ed.), Russia-Troubled Transformation. (Westview Press, Boulder, 1995).

Lieven, Dominic, The Soviet Crisis. (Macmillan, London, 1992).

Linz, Juan (ed.), *The Politics of Democratic Consolidation: Southern Europe in Comparative Perspective*. (John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1995).

Mason, David, *The Rise and Fall of Communism and the Cold War*. (Westview Press, Oxford, 1992).

O'Donnell, G. & Schmitter, P., *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Southern Europe*. (John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1986).

O'Donnell, G., Schmitter, P. & Whitehead L., *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Comparative Perspectives*. (John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1986).

Prezeworski, Adam, *Democracy & the Market: Political and Economic Reforms in Eastern Europe and Latin America*. (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1992).

Rueschemeyer, D., *Capitalist Development and Democracy*. (Polity Press, Cambridge, 1992).

Sakwa, Robert, *Russian Politics and Society*. (Routledge, London, 1996).

White, Stephen, *Political Culture and Soviet Politics*. (Macmillan, London, 1979).

ARTICLES

A Symposium, “Is Latin America the Future of Eastern Europe?”, *Problems of Communism*, May-June 1992.

Almond, Gabriel. “Communism and Political Culture Theory”, *Comparative Politics*, Vol. 15, No. 2, January 1983.

Aron, Leon, “Russia Between Revolution and Democracy”, *Post-Soviet Affairs*, Vol. 11, No. 4, 1995.

Dankwart, Rustow, “Transitions to Democracy: Toward a Dynamic Model”, *Comparative Politics*, Vol. 2, No. 3, April 1970.

Fish, Steven, “The Emergence of Independent Associations and the Transformation of Russian Political Society”, *Journal of Communist Studies* Vol. 47, No. 3, September 1991.

Hahn, Jeffrey, “Continuity and Change in Russian Political Culture”, *British Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 24, No. 4, October 1991.

Herd, Graeme, “A first for Democracy, but Where Next”, *The World Today*, Vol. 52, No. 2, February 1996.

Huntington, Samuel, “Will More Countries Become Democratic?”, *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 99, No. 2, 1984.

Inglehart, Ronald, “The Renaissance of Political Culture”, *American Political Science Review*, No. 82, 1988.

Keenan, Edward, “Muscovite Political Folkways”, *The Russian Review*, Vol. 45, 1986.

Light, Margot, “Democracy Russian Style”, *The World Today*, Vol. 49, No. 12, December 1993.

Russell, Bova, “The Political Dynamics of the Post-Communist Transition: A Comparative Perspective”, *World Politics*, Vol. 44, No. 1, October 1991.

Shlapentokh, Vladimir, “The Four Faces of Mother Russia”, *Transition*, Vol. 4, No. 5, October 1997.

Terry, Sarah, “Thinking About Post-Communist Transitions: How Different Are They?”, *Slavic Review*, Vol. 52, No. 2, Summer 1993.

Terry, Sarah, Schmitter P. & Karl Lynn, "The Conceptual Travels of Transitologists and Consolidologists: How Far to the East Should They Go?", *Slavic Review*, Vol. 53, No. 1, Spring 1994.

Tolz, Vera, "Problems in Building Democratic Institutions in Russia", *RFL/Research Report*, Vol. 3, No. 9, March 1994.

Vainshtein, G., "The Authoritarian Idea in the Public Consciousness and Political Life of Contemporary Russia", *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics*, Vol. 11, No. 3, September 1995.

1 Russell Bova, "The Political Dynamics of the Post-Communist Transition: A Comparative Perspective", *World Politics*, Vol. 33, No. 1, October 1995, p.20, for various approaches in the analysis of democratisation processes see also Dankwart Rustow, "Transitions to Democracy-Toward a Dynamic Model", *Comparative Politics*, Vol. 2, No. 3, April 1970, pp. 335-338, Mason David. *The Rise and Fall of Communism and the Cold War* (Westview Press, Oxford, 1992), p. 118, McFaul Michael, "Party Formation After Revolutionary Transitions: The Russian Case" in *Political Parties in Russia* ed. by Dallin Alexander (University of California, Berkeley, 1993), pp. 7-28, Huntington Samuel, "Will More Countries Become Democratic?", *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 99, No. 2, Summer 1984, p.195, Przeworski Adam, "Some Problems in the Study of Transition to Democracy" in *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Comparative Perspectives* ed. by O'Donnell G., Schmitter P. and Whitehead S. (John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1986), p.56.

2 Linz Juan, Stephan A. & Gunter R., "Democratic Transition and Consolidation in Southern Europe with Reflections on Latin America and Eastern Europe" in *The Politics of Democratic Consolidation: Southern Europe in Comparative Perspective* ed. by Linz Juan (John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1986), pp. 77-123.

3 *Ibid*, p.79.

4 *Ibid*, pp. 82-83.

5 Shlapentokh Vladimir, "The Four Faces of Mother Russia", *Transition*, Vol. 4, No. 5, October 1997, pp. 59-65.

6 Keenan Edward, "Muscovite Political Folkways", *The Russian Review*, Vol. 45, 1986, pp. 115-184.

7 White Stephan. *The Political Culture and Soviet Politics*. (Macmillan, London, 1979), pp. 165-167.

8 Fish Steven, "The Emergence of Independent Associations and the Transformation of Russian Political Society", *Journal of Communist Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 3, September 1991, pp. 299-334.

9 Sakwa Richard. *Russian Politics and Society*. (2nd. edition) (Routledge, London, 1996), pp. 358-360.

10 Holloway, David & McFaul, Michael, "Demilitarisation and Defense Conversion" in *Russia-Troubled Transformation* ed. by Lapidus Gail (Westview Press, Boulder, 1995), pp. 202-203.

11 Sakwa, Richard. *Russian Politics and Society*. (Routledge, London, 1996), pp. 55-59.

12 Whitehead Laurence, "International Aspects of Democratization" in *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule-Comparative Perspectives* ed. by O'Donnell G., Schmitter P., Whitehead L. (John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1986), p.44.

13 Light Margot, "Democracy Russian Style", *The World Today*, Vol. 49, No. 12, December 1993, pp. 229-230.

14 Dankwart, Rustow. "Transitions to Democracy-Toward a Dynamic Model", *Comparative Politics*,

Vol. 2, No. 3, April 1970, pp. 337-338