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CASE STUDY: RUSSIA

Russia is an important case study for students of Comparative Government and Politics because it provides an example of a former communist country undergoing democratic change. Because Russia was once a part of the powerful Soviet Union, is still a nuclear powerhouse, and is powerful in the former Soviet region, observers have turned to Russia to observe its reform process. Political change in Russia has not been gradual, as it was in the United Kingdom, but rapid and tumultuous. The country transitioned to both a democratic constitution and a market economy in a short period of time. This left the country with drastic structural changes that needed to be addressed in order to govern a population that was more accustomed to the stability of communism. Moreover, elected officials and wealthy business owners are products of the Soviet system. The Unity Party controls most facets of governing and the state has become more centralized. Vladimir Putin, a former KGB officer, served eight years as President and then became a very powerful Prime Minister under the presidency of Dmitry Medvedev. Are democratic changes being followed by a type of democratic reversal? Keep these thought-provoking questions in mind as you study Russia.

KEY TERMS

Communist Party
democratic centralism
duma
Federation Council
five-year plan
glasnost
Liberal Democrats
mixed presidential
parliamentary system

nomenklatura
oligarchs
perestroika
politburo
secretariat
shock therapy
soft authoritarianism
Union of Right Forces
Unity Party

KEY CONCEPTS

- Russia was once part of the Soviet Union, the largest collection of communist states. Today, it has a democratic constitution but is not necessarily a democracy.
- Russia's communist past has had an enormous impact on governing today.
- Russia under Boris Yeltsin attempted rapid democratic reforms that have had a lasting impact.
- Russia has a mixed presidential parliamentary system.
- The Russian political system today lacks legitimacy, as it did under the Soviet Union.
- Vladimir Putin initiated many policies that centralized power in Russia.
- The future of democracy is uncertain in Russia, and Russia appears to be moving away from democracy and toward "soft authoritarianism."

THE BASICS

Russia is the world's largest country in area, but it is only half the size of the old Soviet Union. Russia has a federal system and a diverse population, which includes several separatist movements. Perhaps the most well-known group that has demanded independence from Russia is the Chechens. Russia had a communist system when it was part of the Soviet Union. Currently, Russia has a democratic constitution featuring a mixed presidential parliamentary system, with the president heading the executive and the prime minister heading the legislature. Many parties are allowed to form and run; however, the Unity Party is currently dominant. Russia is a developing country with a declining population. Life expectancy and GDP are nowhere near the level of a developed country such as the United Kingdom. The government also faces tough challenges in tackling significant environmental problems.

RUSSIA'S COMMUNIST PAST

To fully understand Russia's current challenges, it is important to review some of its political history. Russia's democratic constitution was only adopted in 1992. Most of those in power today lived under communist rule, and its traditions have not worn off easily.

The Soviet Union was a union of communist states. Communist states only allow one party, the Communist Party, to run the government. The Communist Party ran under the principle of democratic centralism in which debate was tolerated only among the party elite. Once a policy decision was made, however, no further dissent was allowed; citizens lacked basic freedom of speech. The *politburo* was the top decision-making body. Its members would hold secret votes on policy matters and then publicize their decisions in the government-owned press. The secretariat was the government executive branch that carried out all policy decisions. Any position in government was limited to members of the Communist Party. Membership in the party, however, was strictly limited to approximately 5

percent of the population. Candidates for government positions had to be on the *nomenklatura* or list of officially sanctioned names in order to be considered.

Russia under the Soviet Union also had a *command economy*. This means that the government owned and controlled all aspects of the economy. Private enterprise and private ownership of the means of production were illegal and punishable. The central government controlled all prices and wages and planned what would be produced. Traditionally, this was done in the form of a *five-year plan*, which dictated all production. The command economy spurred industrialization for a time but eventually led to economic stagnation, caused shortages of products, and created an economy that lacked consumer choices.

Under the communist system and the command economy, Soviet citizens did not live free lives. Under Lenin and Stalin, not only was speech restricted, but citizens were also forced to work where the central government dictated. Agriculture was collectivized and mechanized, and priority was given to industry in order to enhance the military capacity of the state. Education was centralized to ensure growth in the numbers of skilled workers and scientists. The government under Stalin murdered many who were opposed to its policies and punished those who dissented from the party line. These were called purges. In the meantime, the government built up the military and a nuclear arsenal, making the Soviet Union a world power.

DEMOCRATIZATION IN RUSSIA

Democratic change in Russia began under the leadership of Mikhail Gorbachev. Gorbachev was thoroughly aware that the economy lagged behind the West and became motivated to initiate policy reforms. Gorbachev first initiated *glasnost* (openness) allowing for freedom of speech. Later, he initiated *perestroika* (restructuring), which led to privatization of many government-owned enterprises. This began the move away from a command economy. These new freedoms led to the breakup of the Soviet Union. While these reforms had some positive outcomes, they also had unintended consequences. *Glasnost* allowed pent-up hostility toward the repressive policies of the Soviet Union to be unleashed in the media. While Western countries value debate, this tradition had not been established in Russia, and the media became a dumping ground for complaints about everything bad in the country. *Perestroika* led to *shock therapy*, or rapid privatization of the economy, under Boris Yeltsin.

After the breakup of the Soviet Union, Russia was on its own in implementing democratic reforms. At the time, Boris Yeltsin was in charge of the Communist Party. Yeltsin and others began crafting a new constitution. While many leaders wanted democratic and economic reforms immediately, much disagreement arose over the nature and pace of these reforms. Some wanted to retain communism. While communism had been repressive and yielded poor economic results, it did have advantages, such as guaranteed employment and basic health care. It was also the only system most Russians had ever known. Because Russia had achieved worldwide prestige in Soviet times, many were reluctant to let go of the old system.

AP Tip

On the AP Comparative Government and Politics Exam, you may see the term *illiberal democracy*. An illiberal democracy can be defined as a country that has competitive elections but restricts civil liberties and civil rights. Immediately after Russia's first democratic election, political scientists labeled Russia an illiberal democracy. Vladimir Putin won his first election for the presidency against numerous opponents, and his victory had been by no means certain. However, after he was elected, many rights in Russia were suppressed. The subsequent election lacked real competition; whether Russia will remain an illiberal democracy is uncertain.

Once a new democratic constitution was drafted, two important referenda were held. One was on the leadership of Boris Yeltsin (whether Russian citizens wanted him as president); the other was on the new constitution. Although both of these referenda passed, voter turnout was extraordinarily low, and the majorities were not strong. This gave the new democracy a rough beginning and left it with a low level of legitimacy.

Since Yeltsin was the winner of the new presidency, he was able to proceed with shock therapy, though not easily. Fistfights erupted in the newly elected *duma* (lower house of the legislature) over this policy, and allegations of fraud and corruption abounded. Nevertheless, most of the former Soviet industries were sold at auctions. Each Russian citizen was given a voucher of 10,000 rubles to be used to purchase stock in these newly privatized industries. However, this amount was nowhere near enough to make anyone a major shareholder. Those able to purchase most of the former Soviet industries had been top Communist Party members. A small, elite group called oligarchs thus gained control of Russia's major industries, such as nickel and steel. To make matters worse, the new economy got off to a very shaky start. Hyperinflation broke out as did shortages of many essentials, leaving most Russian citizens far worse off than they had been under communism. On the bright side, the former black market for basic products was now an open market, allowing for small businesses to start.

In Russia today, there is a *market economy*, meaning that economic decisions are made by private citizens and companies, and prices and wages are determined by the laws of supply and demand. However, in Russia, a small number of oligarchs make many of the important economic decisions.

POLITICAL CULTURE

Ironically, the current Russian political culture is very similar to what it was under communism. The government now holds a low level of legitimacy as did the government under the Soviet Union. The constitution is not respected as a document that provides democracy.

Not surprisingly, many older Russian citizens long for the communist past that provided a sense of stability. Russians lack a strong civil society and a system of voluntary associations, which are critical to a functioning democracy. In short, political culture today seems to be a holdover from Russia's past.

THE RUSSIAN CONSTITUTION

The Russian Constitution provides for a national direct election for the president based on a two-ballot system. If a candidate does not win an absolute majority on the first round of voting, a runoff election is held between the top two candidates. Russia has a two-house legislature, with the upper house representing subnational governments and the lower house representing the general population. The legislature operates under parliamentary rules, with irregularly scheduled elections. The prime minister is selected by the president from the dominant party and must be approved by the legislature. If the legislature does not approve the prime minister, the president may dissolve the *duma* and call for new elections. The practical impact of these rules has meant that the president enjoys broad power to select a prime minister of his choosing and has power over a compliant legislature, because if the legislature rejects the president's choice of prime minister it is essentially putting itself out of a job. The president selects cabinet members from the legislature, but his appointees must then resign their seats.

POLITICAL PARTIES

When Russia first implemented democratic reforms, the Communist Party was forced to reorganize since it would no longer be the only party. The Communist Party emerged with a new platform and ran candidates in the new democratic system. Under the first election, the Communists won more seats than any other party. Most parties formed platforms according to their views on economic reform. The Communist Party favored a slow approach to privatization, while the Union of Right Forces promoted a pro-market approach, for example. One party, the Liberal Democrats, led by Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, was a more radical nationalist party. Eventually, the Unity Party formed under the leadership of Vladimir Putin. Putin's party gained much power, in part because it successfully used state resources to advertise. While officially Russia has a multiparty system, the Unity Party has dominated most recently, and the Communist Party still wins seats in the *duma*. Other parties are based more on a particular candidate than on ideology and are fairly transient.

THE IMPACT OF VLADIMIR PUTIN ON THE RUSSIAN STATE

When Boris Yeltsin's term was up, it was uncertain who would lead Russia. Vladimir Putin emerged as a candidate, but many in the West were suspicious of his commitment to democracy, especially because he was a former member of the Soviet KGB (secret police). Never-

theless, Putin won the first election without need for a second ballot and did the same four years later. At the end of his second term, Putin handpicked Dmitri Medvedev as a candidate. When Medvedev won the presidency, he selected Putin to be prime minister. Many believe that as prime minister, Putin will continue to be an extremely influential leader.

As president, Vladimir Putin initiated many policy changes designed to make the Russian state operate more efficiently. Critics allege that these changes have strengthened the presidency too much and weakened Russia's system of federalism. First, Putin initiated a change to the way the Federation Council (upper house of the legislature) was selected. In the past, members were selected by direct election, but the president now appoints these officials. This virtually ensures their loyalty to the president, rather than to their regions. In addition, governors can be dismissed by the president for corruption. Both reforms caused Russia's political system to be more centralized.

The process of selecting members of the *duma* also changed under Putin's leadership. Once, the *duma* consisted of a mixture of proportional representation and single-member districts. Now there is strict proportional representation, but a party must win a high minimum threshold (7 percent) before it can obtain seats. The rationale for this system was to prevent the smaller parties from winning seats. In some countries, a proportional representation system leads to more parties holding seats in the legislature. However, in Russia, the party backed by Putin (Unity) began winning the greatest number of seats and beat the Communist Party.

Putin directed the government to purchase most of the media outlets. While the constitution allows for privately owned media, most of the TV, radio, and other media outlets are now government owned. Thus, the president can flood the media with positive messages about his policies and the Unity Party. Additionally, Putin restricted other civil liberties. For example, it is increasingly difficult to get a permit to demonstrate, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that offer social services have been essentially banished. Individuals who oppose government policies have been silenced. Independent journalists have vanished, arousing much international suspicion. One wealthy oligarch, Mikhail Khodorkovsky, who declared his opposition candidacy for the presidency, was imprisoned on corruption charges.

Under Vladimir Putin, Chechen independence activists became violent. Putin used the military to suppress the revolt and later held a referendum on Chechen independence. Because he manipulated the state media, the vote for independence failed.

ANALYSIS OF DEMOCRATIZATION

Although many observers have attempted to assess the state of democratic reforms in Russia, progress toward democracy is uncertain. While there is a democratic constitution in place, it receives little respect. Elections are held, and all adults are entitled to vote, but these elections do not have the level of competitiveness one would find in a developed democracy. Power has become more centralized in recent years, and the press is far from completely free. One positive sign is that there has been economic growth in recent years. While

outsiders are critical of Vladimir Putin, Russian citizens think very positively about him. Some political scientists believe that Russia has moved so far away from democratic reforms that it is now an example of soft authoritarianism, a system with tight government control and suppression of civil liberties without the extreme level of repression found in totalitarian states.

AP Tip

The AP Comparative Government and Politics Exam uses its own set of terms, which may or may not be the exact same words you have read in your textbook. For example, on the AP Exam, Russia is referred to as a “mixed presidential parliamentary system” while other texts will refer to Russia as a “semipresidential” or “hybrid” system. When you take the AP Exam, you may have to adjust to the terminology.

Multiple-Choice Questions

- Which of the following is the best definition of *democratic centralism*?
 - a system of government with democratic elections
 - a system of government with democracy among elite decision makers
 - an authoritarian leadership style
 - a command economy in which economic planning decisions are made at the center
 - a parliamentary system with democracy at the center
- Which organization was the most important policymaking institution under the communist system?
 - nomenklatura*
 - secretariat
 - Supreme Soviet
 - politburo*
 - General Secretary
- In a communist system, which of the following is the equivalent of the executive branch?
 - nomenklatura*
 - secretariat
 - Supreme Soviet
 - politburo*
 - General Secretary