

Can Putin Rebuild the Russian State?

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During his first year as president, Vladimir Putin has repeatedly declared that the rebuilding of the Russian state is his very highest priority. Indeed, on this score there is now a remarkably widespread political consensus among Russian liberals, nationalists, and former Communists: all agree that the Russian central government must find some means of enforcing its own laws in order to reverse the nation's prolonged decline in the post-Soviet period. Prominent Western analysts and advisors, too, proclaim that successful state-building in the Russian Federation is the prerequisite for sustainable political and economic development--as well as the only means of attaining reliable control over Russia's stockpiles of weapons of mass destruction. But on the question of how a future strong Russian state might be built, elite opinion in both Russia and the West remains vague and contradictory.

I argue here that three common approaches to the problem of Russian state-building are wrong: Russia cannot create a strong state simply by implementing market reforms, by promoting nationalism, or by reestablishing political dictatorship. Instead, the effectiveness of government policy in the future will be determined by the degree to which Putin or his successors can recruit reliable officials who genuinely feel that it is their duty, and not only in their interest, to act in accordance with official institutional norms. Given the current orientations of the four political groups from which state officials might be drawn--the oligarchs, the governors, political parties, and the security services--the Russian state is likely to remain weak in the near to medium term. In the longer run the outlook for Russian state-building is potentially more promising--but for this potential to be realized, both Western and Russian policymakers must defend Russia's fragile democratic institutions.

How Not to Build the Russian State

During the early years of post-Communist transition, policymakers tended to assume that Russia's rebirth would be best guaranteed through the introduction of economic reforms. A decade later, analysts continue to debate the relative merits of "shock therapy" versus "gradualism" in marketization. What is less commonly noted is that very few post-Communist countries have proven capable of implementing any formal economic policy with much consistency--especially among the non-Baltic former Soviet Republics. Post-Soviet elites have discovered that economic laws issued in legislatures often have little

effect on the day-to-day conduct of business. Negative phenomena like widespread barter, interference by local "mafias," wage and tax nonpayments, asset stripping, corruption, and capital flight have been pervasive problems both for "gradualist" countries like Ukraine and initially rapid reformers such as the Russian Federation.

Increasingly, both Russian and Western analysts have therefore come to the conclusion that the weak states bequeathed to post-Soviet republics from the Leninist past are themselves a major obstacle to economic reform. If so, however, current governmental attempts to implement tax reform, to break up state monopolies in the energy sector, or to maintain balanced budgets--however sensible and well-intentioned--are unlikely to generate the positive economic results predicted in theory. As long as the Russian government remains unable to enforce basic property rights dependably and consistently, direct investment in the Russian economy is bound to be limited, market activity will be driven into the informal underground sector, and even the positive effects of renewed economic growth will be undermined by correspondingly high levels of capital flight. In short, a stronger Russian state may well be crucial to successful market reform--but market reform is unlikely by itself to generate a stronger Russian state.

If good economic policy by itself is not sufficient to strengthen the Russian state, might not appeals to national pride have a more salutary effect? This, at least, has been one of the major themes of President Putin's early presidency. Clearly, Putin's vocally nationalist posture during the early months of the second Chechen war played a major role in increasing his political popularity. His campaign for the presidency in 2000 emphasized the importance of a "pragmatic patriotism" that would replace the widespread cynicism of post-Communist Russian society. More recently, Putin has called for the restoration of the Soviet national anthem--with new non-Communist lyrics--to build Russia's sense of national identity. No doubt these patriotic appeals from the president are heartfelt and sincere, as first-hand observers as diverse as Communist leader Gennady Zyuganov, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, and Mikhail Gorbachev have attested.

Yet there are reasons to doubt the long-term contribution of Putin's nationalism to the project of restoring effective governance in Russia. For all its sincerity, Putin's conception of "Russianness" has very little discernible specific ideological content. To be a "pragmatic patriot" does not appear to demand any particular individual sacrifices beyond a vague allegiance to the symbols of Russian state power. Meanwhile, concrete manifestations of Russia's continuing national weakness abound. The second war in Chechnya drags on as disastrously as the first; Russian military pride suffers through international embarrassments like the sinking of the Kursk; and important international issues in the Middle East and the Balkans are addressed with little or no Russian participation. Under such circumstances, Putin's nationalist symbolism is bound to appear increasingly hollow.

Given the lack of viable alternatives, Putin must be sorely tempted to try to rebuild the Russian state through more dictatorial means. Certainly Putin's vehement attacks on--and in some cases, the subsequent arrests of--critical journalists and unsupportive businessmen demonstrate a presidential penchant for suspending democratic norms. The

"Pinochet option" remains alive in Russian political discourse--and is occasionally floated in Western analytic circles as well.

However, the notion that Russia's state strength can be quickly restored by eliminating democracy is an especially dangerous myth. As the 21st century dawns, all the most powerful states in the world are electoral democracies. Even relatively successful autocracies, like the People's Republic of China, are experiencing increasing difficulty in making local political and business elites conform to the dictates of central policymakers. Indeed, attempts to impose autocratic rule in weak states are as likely to precipitate total state breakdown as to generate renewed state capacity--as the disintegration of the USSR after the 1991 August coup demonstrates. Problems with Russia's ethnic regions, with its fractured military, and with its semi-reformed economy would arguably all be greatly exacerbated by any effort to restore undemocratic rule from Moscow. Finally, a formal break with democracy would undoubtedly bring to a halt all remaining efforts by the Western powers to accommodate Russian interests--a development with unpredictable geopolitical consequences.

The Key to State-Building: Reliable Rule Enforcement

All three approaches to state-building analyzed above lack any direct analysis of whether, and how faithfully, official government rules are actually enforced in practice. Yet this, I would argue, is precisely the most important single factor determining state strength or weakness--in democracies and autocracies alike. Strong autocracies are those in which state functionaries consistently enforce the will of the ruling elite rather than use their power to build local personal fiefdoms. Strong democracies are those in which judges uphold the legal system rather than curry favor with local bosses, police enforce the criminal code fairly rather than fabricate offenses in order to maximize bribes, and legislators attempt to represent constituents rather than use their positions to further their own pecuniary interests. In both cases, generating some degree of genuine commitment by state officials to their regime's ideology--whether democratic or anti-democratic--appears to be crucial to successful state-building. Without this commitment on the part of state enforcers, official policies oriented toward democratic market reform or designed to reassert authoritarian hegemony are likely to be ineffective.

From this point of view, the long decline of Russian state capacity over the past few decades reflects the waning of genuine belief in Marxist-Leninist ideology among elites, and the failure of attempts to define a new ideology for Russia in the post-Communist period. Since the 1960s (at least), Soviet and Russian state officials alike have tended to act in terms of their short-term instrumental interests rather than in the interests of the larger institutions they formally represent. Unfortunately, this has made "principled" political behavior increasingly irrational for everyone: there is no personal or institutional advantage in enforcing laws that no one else recognizes as binding.

If the above analysis is correct, President Putin's task is a daunting one. To rebuild the Russian state, Putin must find some way to recruit state officials who will perceive

enforcement of state policy to be a moral duty and not merely a path to personal enrichment. However, it is not at all clear whether there is any powerful group in contemporary Russian society from which such reliable "cadres" might be drawn.

First, Putin could try to build the Russian state with the backing of "oligarchs"--that is, wealthy businessmen with personal connections to the Kremlin--using their resources to buy off potential opposition figures and to fill the Russian media with pro-regime propaganda. This, of course, will generate more of the same "crony capitalism" that was responsible for state decline in the Yeltsin era, even if this president happens to favor different oligarchs than his predecessor.

Second, Putin could try to rebuild the Russian state with the backing of supportive governors, using a "divide and conquer" strategy to isolate the few regional politicians who dare to challenge him. Indeed, we have seen this strategy used recently against Kursk governor Aleksandr Rutskoi. Ultimately, however, reliance on governors for state-building--in the absence of any alternative dependable political base--leads to Leonid Brezhnev-style quasi-feudalism rather than coherent and effective law enforcement, especially in a country as large as the Russian Federation. For this reason, Putin's emphasis has thus far been on curbing governors' political power rather than currying their favor.

Third, Putin could try to rebuild the Russian state by recruiting new state officials from the younger generation. This strategy has apparently been the inspiration for Putin's continuing attempts to build up the "Unity" party as an official "state-building party," comparable in function if not ideological orientation to the Leninist party organization of the Soviet past. Indeed, during Putin's first year widespread publicity has been given to lavish Unity party congresses in the Kremlin, and efforts have been made to found Unity youth camps parallel to those of the Soviet-era Communist Youth League. However, given Unity's transparently instrumental support of the Putin government since its founding just weeks before the 1999 parliamentary elections, the party is unlikely to inspire genuine self-sacrifice on the part of its membership. Like previous "centrist" parties in post-Soviet Russia, such as Gazprom Chairman Viktor Chernomyrdin's "Our Home is Russia," Unity is likely to disintegrate quickly and irreversibly once its official patron is no longer able to ensure that party membership pays off.

Finally, Putin could try to rebuild the Russian state by relying on loyal cadres from the security services and military. Putin's own KGB background tends to suggest such an approach; certainly his memoirs are replete with praise for the state-building role of the organization in which he made his early career. Public ceremonies such as the unveiling of a new monument to Yuri Andropov near the headquarters of the former KGB also signal the important symbolic role of the security services in Putin's political project. Even more telling was Putin's decision to promote personnel from the military and intelligence agencies to head six of the seven new "super-regions" designed to facilitate central control over Russia's vast territory. Yet a new Russian state built around officials from the security services is hardly likely to promote effective government in the longer run. To begin with, it is hard to imagine a genuine Russian democracy enforced primarily

by officials with a KGB or military background; a new Russia run by the "forces of order" would almost certainly degenerate into an ugly and uninspiring autocracy, with all the negative consequences for Russia's future discussed above. Moreover, the security services and military are hardly themselves a unified entity, as bitter public fights between leading military figures over Russian defense policy attest. An attempt to formally promote one branch of the military or intelligence services as the key state body would likely provoke even more serious personal and institutional splits. Perhaps for these reasons, Putin has chosen thus far to augment the influence of the security services within the formal constitutional framework of the 1993 Yeltsin constitution, rather than discard this framework altogether.

Conclusion

Can Putin rebuild the Russian state? The answer suggested by the analysis above is certainly negative in the short to medium run. None of the social groupings from which Putin might recruit key state agents--the oligarchs, the governors, the Unity party, or the security services--are likely to produce loyal cadres who can be relied upon to implement government policy as a matter of principle rather than expediency. As a result, the gap between formal state policy and informal political and economic reality in the Russian Federation is likely to remain a wide one--with negative consequences for civil society, investor confidence, and geopolitical stability in the Eurasian region.

However, in the somewhat longer run, the formation in Russia of a group of state officials sincerely oriented toward the enforcement of laws cannot be ruled out. As long as political life in Russia remains open enough to allow committed political activists to mobilize in defense of civic principles, Russia's flawed electoral democracy may yet engender a state more dependably oriented toward democratic norms. United States policy toward Russia must therefore abjure impatient demands for immediate political or economic transformation. Greater US assistance to grassroots movements aiming to strengthen press freedom, electoral accountability, and individual human rights in Russia could be of particular importance in building long-term public support for democratic institution-building. Political, military, and cultural exchanges between the two countries should be maintained and expanded. Above all, the US should avoid giving any intentional or unintentional signals supporting temporary suspensions of formal democratic procedures in the name of "state-building."