

Crafting Democracy

How Novgorod Has Coped with Rapid Social Change

NICOLAI N. PETRO



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Спокойной и уверенной любви
Не превозмочь мне к этой стороне.
Ведь капелька новгородской крови
Во мне, как льдинка в пенистом вине

A calm and confident love for this land
I will never overcome.
A tiny drop of Novgorod blood
Is in me, like a shard of ice in frothy wine.

ANNA AKHMATOVA

an untitled poem from her collection *Belaya staya* (1917)

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NOTE ON STYLE

I have followed the transliteration system of the Library of Congress, with some minor exceptions. Both hard and soft signs have been omitted. When a soft sign appears in the middle of a word preceded by a vowel, however, it has been replaced by a *y*. The letters *ю* and *я* are transliterated as *yu* and *ya*. Otherwise, established English usage has taken precedence in the spelling of common Russian words and proper names. When citing translations and quoting from them, I have preserved the original transliteration. All other translations are my own.

CRAFTING DEMOCRACY



INTRODUCTION

In 1996 the J. William Fulbright Scholarship Board afforded me an opportunity to teach comparative politics in Russia. My family and I chose to spend our Fulbright year in Novgorod the Great (Veliky Novgorod), the capital city of a sparsely populated region about the size of West Virginia, best known for its folklore and medieval churches.¹ Two-thirds of the way from Moscow to St. Petersburg, this ancient town in Russia's heartland seemed like the ideal place to immerse ourselves in the country's culture and history. Although I specialize in contemporary Russian politics, like most scholars I actually knew very little about life outside of Moscow or St. Petersburg. We researched the area as best we could, but found that most information about the region was decades out of date, so we hardened ourselves to the prospect of facing numerous difficulties adjusting to daily life there.

After reading scores of apocalyptic press accounts about Russia's imminent collapse, however, the last thing we expected to find was an oasis of social and economic tranquility. Even in 1996 there were almost none of the chronic delays in government pension and salary payments that plagued other regions, and the local elite seemed to have a common agenda that the national elite clearly still lacked.

By the end of our stay, I had gathered enough statistical evidence to confirm that something very unusual was indeed going on. Between 1995 and 1998, while Russia's Gross Domestic Product was declining by 2.7 percent annually, Novgorod's regional domestic product grew by 3.8 percent annually.² Since then industrial production in the region has

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continued to grow at twice the Russian average, and official unemployment hovers at 1 percent.³ Average monthly wages in the region have risen spectacularly (17.8 percent in 2001 and 19 percent in 2002 *after* inflation), while the number of families living below the poverty line has dropped to its lowest level in a decade.⁴ During the latter half of the 1990s, foreign investors, who generally shunned the Russian countryside, poured money into this region at a per capita rate second only to Moscow, creating almost twenty thousand new local jobs in the process. Today, more than a quarter of the region's factory workers are employed by foreign companies, and are paid, on average, three times more than their domestic counterparts.⁵

Novgorod has been a political trailblazer as well. While local self-government has been a dead letter in the rest of Russia, Novgorod enacted its own legislation on local self-government in 1994 and became the first region in Russia to hold elections for every level of government, from village elder to governor. Whereas the growth of nongovernmental organizations in Russia peaked in the late 1990s, the Novgorod region has continued to register scores of new civic organizations annually, reaching a level of per capita civic activism and private entrepreneurship that rivals areas of Western Europe.⁶

By the end of the 1990s a few journalists and scholars had begun to notice that peculiar things were happening in Novgorod. While lavish in their praise of the "Novgorod model," however, none could venture any explanation for such an unexpected transformation in a region that *Ekspert* magazine rated sixty-third out of Russia's eighty-nine regions in investment potential.⁷ Analysts seemed to be missing something crucial about the very earliest stages of democratic development, something that set Novgorod apart from its neighbors.

This book is my attempt to identify that difference and explain its significance for democratic development. It is divided into two parts. The first part identifies the weaknesses of current approaches to democratization and explains how analysts easily overlooked evidence of democratic development in Novgorod. In chapter 1 I sift through the many conflicting definitions of democratic development, settling on "democratic consolidation" as the standard to apply to Novgorod because it is the most demanding. I argue that shifting the focus of democratization from the nation-state to the regional level improves the reliability of evidence gathered in support of democratic consolidation.

I present this evidence in chapter 2, where I measure Novgorod's success across three well-established categories of democratic development: the construction of a new constitutional order, the level of economic development, and the quality and quantity of voluntary associations. To minimize the problem of subjective judgment, I apply three

additional measures of progress within each of these categories: (a) behavioral changes within the elite; (b) structural changes in government; and (c) attitudinal changes among the populace. Presenting the evidence in this way allows the reader to track the region's progress along multiple measures and shows that, by any measure chosen, democratic consolidation is well under way in Novgorod.

In chapter 3 I look at several popular explanations for regional differences in Russia and find that none of them explains Novgorod's success or, for that matter, the equally dramatic political and economic stagnation of Novgorod's neighbor, Pskov. This conceptual failure is rooted in the reluctance of development analysts to take regional cultural identity seriously and suggests that we need an approach that values regional identity on its own terms, rather than simply as a fraction of national identity.

In the second part of my book I suggest that culturally based approaches do just that and, therefore, provide a better explanation of democratic development. I end by looking at how the Novgorod elite used local myths and symbols to manage rapid social change in the region.

In chapter 4 I explain why cultural analysis is ideally suited to understanding both the emergence of regional identity and the roots of social change. During periods of social turmoil, when institutions collapse and calculations of benefit lose their predictive value, people's core beliefs are undermined. Seeking to restore stability, people turn to what is most familiar to them—local cultural traditions. These traditions are generally overlooked as resources for political transition because their impact on politics is hard to measure. The study of key cultural symbols, however, allows us to trace the impact of culture during social and political transitions. After reviewing the rich tradition of symbolic studies in the social sciences, I suggest that it can be even further refined to provide the basis of a theory that explains rapid social and political changes. In chapter 5 I identify Novgorod's key cultural symbols and their political meaning, and then trace their influence on the policies and attitudes of the past decade.

In chapter 6 I show how Novgorod's elite used the key symbols of Novgorod's past to create an environment receptive to economic and political reforms. By systematically contrasting Novgorod's heritage as a medieval trade center and cradle of Russian democracy to Moscow's heritage of political and economic centralization, they redefined reform as a return to the values of a better and more prosperous Russian past. Embracing a positive political myth rooted in Russia's past eased the shock of cultural discontinuity, broadened the social constituency in favor of reforms, and contributed to much higher levels of confidence in local government. The result is the remarkable level of economic and democratic development the region displays today.

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Such a finding has obvious implications for democratic assistance (and not only in Russia). In the concluding chapter, therefore, I discuss the need for a new, culturally based approach to democratic assistance. Novgorod is an excellent test case because it is a poor region in a country widely considered to be totally lacking in democratic traditions. Its unexpected success suggests that democratic assistance programs that graft key cultural symbols onto reform initiatives are likely to yield results faster than programs that give priority to exclusively Western-style institutions and training programs. Although the latter are indispensable for long-term democratic stability, too early an emphasis on such cultural “imports” typically results in new democratic institutions being labeled as foreign, thus heightening public animosity to reform.

To avoid any misunderstanding, let me say at the outset that I do not regard Novgorod as a mature democracy. Its significant accomplishments, however, have received far too little recognition, in part because current democratization strategies focus too much on structural change and not enough on the conditions needed to make these changes stick. For the rule of law, free markets, and fair elections to gain broad public support, they must *first* make sense within the local cultural tradition. The conscious use of symbols in crafting and implementing reforms helps people make that connection.

It is my hope that the inspiring story of Novgorod’s regional democratic development will encourage scholars and practitioners to look more carefully at the very earliest stages of democratic transition so as to appreciate both the potential for democracy that is inherent in every culture and the tools that can unlock it.

PART I

SHIFTING THE FOCUS

CHAPTER 1

DEFINING DEMOCRACY

THE MANY MEANINGS OF DEMOCRACY

As one of the oldest forms of government, democracy has often been defined as much by what it is not as by what it is. Authors of antiquity often contrasted democracy—the authority of the “common people”—to tyranny—the illegitimate rule of a single individual. For Aristotle, however, a democracy was more than simply the mathematical expression of the majority. It was where the free-born and poor could share in the control of government.¹ A certain equity was presumed essential to democratic governance. Thus, early on two distinct strands emerge in democratic discourse. One stresses the opportunity for broad popular participation in political life, while the other argues that a true democracy must create not only the opportunity of a political life but also greater social equality. These two strands lead to very different ways of measuring democracy.

One of the first modern writers to attempt to find a way through this theoretical thicket was Joseph Schumpeter. Schumpeter defined democracy as “that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people’s votes.”² This simple formula, which equates democracy with electoral competition, has the great advantage of being based on an unequivocal act—voting.

Schumpeter influenced many subsequent democratic theorists including, most notably, Seymour Martin Lipset, who modified Schumpeter’s

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definition slightly to underscore the importance of stable political institutions. Democracy for Lipset is “a political system which supplies regular constitutional opportunities for changing the governing of officials and a social mechanism which permits the largest possible part of the population to influence major decisions by choosing among contenders for political office.”³ Lipset is probably best known for arguing that there is a strong correlation between democracy and economic development.⁴ The intensity of distributional conflicts within a society, he surmised, was bound to lessen with higher levels of income. This postulate has since become widely accepted, though debate still rages over whether it is democracy that leads to economic development, or vice versa.⁵

Another widely cited democratic theorist of modern times, Robert Dahl, identified three distinct types of democratic regimes: Madisonian, populist, and polyarchal. Madisonian democracies merely constrain the rights of majorities, populist democracies stress popular sovereignty and equality, while polyarchies focus on the social prerequisites of democratic order. Because polyarchies exhibit a higher degree of political contestation and inclusiveness, Dahl argued that they represent a more advanced form of democracy.⁶

These three authors are among the most widely cited representatives of what I call the “minimalist approach” to defining democracy. Beyond regular voting, minimalists tend to regard only economic success as important to democracy, arguing that popular support for government rests largely on the effective delivery of state services. The minimalist approach has the advantage of drawing a clear line between old and new regimes by applying a few simple criteria.

The minimalist approach remained popular throughout the 1980s, but as the number of democracies began to swell, the very simplicity that had once made it so appealing became suspect. For one thing, it seemed ill-advised to simply equate democracy with democratic procedures. This placed advanced democracies with extensive traditions of civic control over government on an equal footing with countries that had only fledgling institutions and tenuous electoral procedures. Surely, critics argued, the qualitative differences between such regimes meant more than their procedural similarities.

Minimalist definitions had made it relatively easy to quantify democratic progress, and this, in turn, had led to an intoxicating optimism about the prospects of democracy worldwide, indelibly associated with Francis Fukuyama’s article “The End of History.”⁷ But as the Latin American democracies that epitomized the “Third Wave” continued to display many authoritarian characteristics, despite having regular elections, that optimism slowly began to fade. Minimalists, it turned out, had no language with which to describe stable, but still incomplete, democracies.

DEFINING DEMOCRACY

As more and more nations struggled to make the transition to democracy, democratic theorists tried to come up with definitions that distinguished between incipient and more mature democracies. One study identified more than 550 definitional subtypes of democracy!⁸ This blizzard of definitions has forever buried the comfortable notion that democracy can be characterized as a specific set of conditions and has, instead, taught analysts to think of democracy as a process that moves through phases: first, from the end of authoritarian rule to democratic transition; second, from transition to democratic consolidation; and finally, from democratic consolidation to mature democracy.

In describing the first phase scholars often continue to rely on minimal definitions. This allows them to draw a clear distinction between the previous regime and its successor. During the second and third phases, however, scholars now look for more exacting measures by which to measure democratic development. In theory, distinguishing democratic transition from democratic consolidation should allow analysts to isolate the factors that are common to democratic development in all societies, without setting the standard so high that it excludes all but a handful of nations. As we shall see, however, these efforts have been only partly successful.

FROM AUTHORITARIANISM TO DEMOCRATIC TRANSITION

The first and most unambiguous phase of democratization is the end of authoritarian rule. It is the easiest to define because it begins with the end of a particular dictator's reign. In Chile this date is the election in 1989 of Patricio Aylwin to the presidency, formally ending the dictatorship of General Augusto Pinochet. In Poland it is the election in 1990 of Solidarity leader Lech Walesa to the presidency. In Spain democratic transition began in 1975, after the death of General Francisco Franco. And in Russia it began after the resignation of Mikhail Gorbachev on December 25, 1991.

Dating the end of an authoritarian regime generally arouses little controversy. Far more ink has been spilled trying to identify precisely what is meant by "democratic transition." Some scholars use it to describe the full sweep of transition from authoritarian rule to mature democracy, while others use it only to refer to the period from the end of the preceding regime to the onset of democratic consolidation. Because the former is simply synonymous with democratization, we shall be referring here only to the second usage.

The first thing to clarify is where transition ends and how we can distinguish it from consolidation. For some, transition involves the creation

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of new democratic institutions, while consolidation involves the legitimization of those institutions and the internalization of democratic behavioral norms.⁹ The key characteristic of transition then becomes the breakdown of old institutions and their replacement with new ones. As Doh Chull Shin puts it, "Transition . . . is considered to have ended when a new democracy has promulgated a new constitution and held free elections for political leaders with little barrier to mass participation."¹⁰

Others, however, argue that it is uncertainty about the prospects of democratic continuity that distinguishes transitional from consolidated democracies.¹¹ This approach suggests that a certain social consensus in favor of new institutions must exist as a prerequisite to consolidation. As Giuseppe Di Palma writes, "When agreement on democratic rules is successfully reached, the transition is essentially over."¹² Attempting to bridge this gap, Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan argue:

A democratic transition is complete when sufficient agreement has been reached about political procedures to produce an elected government, when a government comes to power that is the direct result of a free and popular vote, when this government *de facto* has the authority to generate new policies, and when the executive, legislative and judicial power generated by the new democracy does have to share power with other bodies *de jure*.¹³

It is also often argued that regimes in transition must progress fairly rapidly from authoritarianism to consolidation or risk "deconsolidating." This is because, as social tensions rise so does the temptation to revert to past practices.¹⁴ Many analysts therefore argue that rapid movement forward in the creation of new institutions is imperative for both social stability and democracy. As Guillermo O'Donnell has persuasively demonstrated, however, this has often not been the case in Latin America. Having thrown off previous dictators and adopted the basic characteristics of Dahl's polyarchies, many Latin American regimes have stubbornly refused to evolve into fully representative, institutionalized democratic regimes.¹⁵ They are, in essence, stuck in democratic transition.

Some theorists insist that such "delegative democracies" are unstable because they never develop a strict distinction between the public and private spheres. The fact that they survive for decades, however, suggests otherwise. To O'Donnell this stability indicates that democratic equilibrium can result not only from the creation of new, formal democratic institutions but also from a proliferation of informal institutions. When we say that such societies lack democratic institutions, he suggests, what we really should be saying is that their institutions are not necessarily the same ones we find in Western democracies.¹⁶

This concept becomes important as we try to understand what democratization means in Novgorod, for it suggests a wide array of possible definitions for democratic consolidation. Second, O'Donnell's analysis calls into question the unique role accorded to formal institutions and challenges the guiding assumption of many development practitioners that the creation of democratic institutions and procedures can, in and of itself, promote the social consensus needed for stable democracy. Finally, as if this weren't enough, he challenges one of the most important unspoken assumptions of modern democratization theory—the idea that all democracies exhibit certain universal characteristics that can be objectively measured. Our image of democracy, he suggests, is really a mental construct rooted in the culture and history of Western Europe and North America. It can therefore easily overlook alternate patterns of democratic development.

O'Donnell seems to suggest that the best theorists can hope for is a minimal definition of democracy. Attempts at further refinement run the risk of imposing inappropriate values and institutions on other cultures. These risks become apparent when we examine definitions of democratic consolidation.

FROM TRANSITION TO DEMOCRATIC CONSOLIDATION

This "second transition," as O'Donnell calls it, reflects society's movement from a democratically elected government to an institutionalized democratic regime.¹⁷ At this point, in Linz's widely cited definition, "none of the major political actors, parties, or organized interests, forces, or institutions consider that there is any alternative to democratic processes to gain power. . . . To put it simply, democracy must be seen as 'the only game in town' "¹⁸ This definition makes democratic consolidation dependent on the emergence of a new social consensus in which democracy becomes "routinized and deeply internalized in social, institutional, and even psychological life."¹⁹

Other definitions of consolidation emphasize the absence of antisystem actors and the loyalty of major political forces to the regime.²⁰ But while many scholars argue that profound social and cultural changes need to take place before democratic consolidation can occur, Philippe Schmitter views such changes as the result, rather than the cause, of specific structural changes in government.²¹ Richard Gunther and his colleagues even go so far as to say that the absence of fundamental disputes among significant political groups is more important to democratic consolidation than support for abstract democratic values.²²