

WHY IS RUSSIA STILL AN AUTHORITARIAN STATE?

(OR, WHAT WOULD DE TOCQUEVILLE SAY?)

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Paper prepared for American Political Science Association,
Washington D.C., 2-4 September 2005.

Abstract

This paper uses Tocqueville's approach in his *Democracy in America* (1835) to analyze the absence of democracy in Russia in 2005. We find that conditions and morals are vital to explaining the duration of autocracy in Russia, yet these factors are often overlooked in Western analysis of contemporary Russia - specifically, the condition of vulnerability to foreign attack, and the moral role of religion. Tocqueville's institutional analysis concurs with mainstream thinking about the importance of rule of law and associational activity, but diverges with respect to the virtues of a mixed system of government.

“There are at the present time two great nations in the world, which started from different points, but seem to tend towards the same end. I allude to the Russians and the Americans....The American struggles against the obstacles that nature opposes to him; the adversaries of the Russian are men. The former combats the wilderness and savage life; the latter, civilization with all its arms. The conquests of the American are therefore gained by the plowshare; those of the Russian by the sword. The Anglo-American relies upon personal interest to accomplish his ends and gives free scope to the unguided strength and common sense of the people; the Russian centers all the authority of society in a single arm. The principal instrument of the former is freedom; of the latter, servitude. Their starting point is different and their courses are not the same; yet each of them seems marked out by the will of heaven to sway the destinies of half the globe.”

Alexis De Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 1835.

INTRODUCTION ¹

To explain why contemporary Russia has an authoritarian political system is really not very difficult. Given Russian history, the puzzle is to explain why so many people, inside and outside the country, thought that Russia was in transition to liberal democracy between 1985 and 2000. That belief was held by a *majority* of Western observers, and it was the official interpretation of developments shared by both the Russian and US governments.

One interesting starting point for explaining Russia's political trajectory is the framework adopted in Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* some 170 years ago, in which he provided a profound and prophetic analysis of the structural underpinnings of American democracy. Tocqueville also famously predicted that America and Russia would rise to dominate world politics, given their vast resources under the control of a quasi-European state. (See opening quote.)²

During the Cold War, it was quite common to see studies written by Americans that compared and contrasted Soviet and American society – it was a natural outgrowth of the military-political rivalry between the two systems. The genre ranged from Hedrick Smith's dissection of daily life in *The Russians* (1976) to Paul Hollander's comparison of Soviet propaganda and American advertising.³ However, the comparison has fallen out of favor in America since 1991. Russia is now so widely reviled as the “other,” a potage of poverty, crime, corruption, and extreme terrorism, that books are no longer written comparing Russia with the USA. At the same time the genre has revived in Russia, with books explaining “Why Russia is not America.”⁴ The transition debate does include some studies comparing political values in Russia and the US, though it is more common for Russia to be compared to transnational indices of democracy, corruption etc.

¹ This paper is a first draft. I benefited greatly from conversations about Tocqueville with Stephen Engel.

² On Tocqueville and Russia, see Martin E. Malia, “Did Tocqueville foresee totalitarianism?” *Journal of Democracy* – vol. 11, no. 1, January 2000, pp. 179-186; I.G. Gross, *The Scar of Revolution: Custine, Tocqueville, and the Romantic Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

³ Hedrick Smith, *The Russians* (New York: New York Times Books, 1976); Paul Hollander, *Soviet and American Society: A Comparison* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978).

⁴ Andrei Petrovich Parshev, *Pochemy Rossiya Ne Amerika* (Why Russia is not America), (Moscow: Krymskiy Most, 2000); Sergei Chugrov, *Rossiya i Zapad: Metamorfozy vzaimovospriyatiya* (Russia and the West: Metamorphoses of Mutual Perception), (Moscow, 1993).

This paper takes a somewhat different approach. Rather than directly compared the US in 2005 with Russia in 2005, we will try to take some ideas from Tocqueville's analysis of America in the 1830s and see what light they shed on the prospects for democracy in Russia since 1991.

Tocqueville divided the relevant factors shaping American democracy into three: historical and geographic conditions; the prevailing public morals; and the ruling institutions. Tocqueville was not deterministic: he recognized the constraints of history and geography, but also gave ample room for human agency in choosing to live by certain moral codes and creating certain institutions. France and America had experienced revolutions as a result of which new moral codes and political institutions were brought into being, so Tocqueville did not see history as a vice. (He was not a believer in "path dependency.") At the same time his approach was deeply sociological: he does not dwell on contingency, or the chance sequence of events, nor he does he over-emphasize the role of leadership. (His is not a "Great Man" theory of America's founding.)

CONDITIONS

Russia lacks nearly all the usual prerequisites for a successful transition to democracy. In its long history there is no experience of democracy, nor cultivation of civil society, to draw on. Two centuries of the Mongol yoke were followed by 500 years of the most oppressive autocratic rule in Europe, followed by 75 years of Soviet totalitarianism: the most innovative and deep-rooted system of authoritarian rule the world had ever seen.

De Tocqueville's America was an ex-colony whose very existence was an expression of self-rule and rebellion against a central state. In contrast Tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union that succeeded it were both empires, an "empire-state" whose national identity was forged not in self-rule, but in ruling over others. (Russia in 1917 was 44% ethnic Russian, the USSR in 1989 was 53% Russian.)

On the other hand, Russia shares with America the experience of being **born out of revolution**. The Soviet Union emerged from a revolutionary overthrow of the existing authorities in 1917, and today's Russian Federation came out of a quasi-revolution in 1991 whose slogans were democracy and sovereignty. However, from a Tocquevillian perspective the revolutions of 1917 and 1991 have more in common with the experiences of France in 1789 than America in 1776,

being associated with a regrettable collapse into anarchy rather than a positive affirmation of a new community. Russian public opinion itself is rather ambivalent over whether 1917 and 1991 should be seen in positive or negative terms.⁵ In contrast in the US 1776 continues to be regarded as an unadulterated good.

True, Russia was not itself colonized or under lasting foreign occupation (since 1480). But this may be a liability rather than an asset, in the sense that among former colonies, experience of British rule positively correlates with democratization. And among former empires, US military occupation was instrumental in the introduction of stable democracy in Japan, Germany and Italy.

Tocqueville stressed America's **freedom from foreign attack** (a "nation without neighbors") as creating a space for a free society to develop. Russia's experience is quite the opposite: centuries of coping with foreign invasion were followed by the Cold War: which was a decades-long institutionalization of vulnerability to total destruction. This fear of foreigners did not disappear with the dissolution of the USSR. The Soviet Union lost the Cold War, and in the wake of that defeat many Russians felt their country was weakened and even more vulnerable than before. From their perspective, all of Russia's *recent* enemies remained in place after 1991, from NATO to China; while *old* foes were stirring (Poland, Turkey) and *new* ones were rising (radical Islam). The men in charge of Russian security after 1991 were all born and bred during the Cold War: it was unrealistic to imagine that their fundamental assumptions about the character of the global system would change overnight.

However, although Russia had been "defeated" it still possessed the nuclear arsenal that had guaranteed its security during the Cold War. This led Russia's leaders to believe that its place as a superpower was assured, that it could and should be a rule-maker and not a rule-taker in the international system. Even Yeltsin, who was making firm overtures to the West, wanted Russia to be respected as an equal by the US. Under Putin, the contradictions in Russia's position became sharper still, with Moscow resisting international pressures to embrace democratization when the latter was seen as weakening the Russian state.

⁵ For example in a 2002 survey, 27% gave a negative assessment of the October 1917 revolution, 33% said it "gave a push to socio-economic development," and 27% said it opened a new era. Levada Center Press Release, 5 November 2002, <http://www.levada.ru/>. Opinions about August 1991 were more negative. In a July 2005 poll, only 10% saw the events as a democratic revolution, saw them as a "tragedy for the

This belief in Russia's character as a great power is shared by the other leading countries. The US pressed the IMF to continue lending to Russia despite its disregard for loan conditions, and welcomed Russia into the G8. China officially acknowledges that Russia's military and space technology mean it still deserves recognition as a great power. European leaders are perhaps the least inclined, philosophically, to see Russia as a great power. But in practical terms, their own lack of military muscle makes them unable to challenge Russia's military presence in places like Moldova and Georgia; while Europe's dependence on Russian oil and gas also constrains their behavior.

In terms of **economic circumstances**, Russia does have the vast land and resources that Tocqueville saw as giving America better living conditions, and fewer social conflicts, than Europe. However, the economic preconditions for democracy have changed since the time of Tocqueville. Post-industrial and internationally integrated economies are now the most developed, and most compatible with democracy. From the Soviet period Russia inherited an economy that was predominantly industrial, with 20% of the workforce still engaged in highly inefficient and loss-making agriculture. These traditional economic sectors are held together by state subsidies and by hierarchical, patriarchal social relations.

In the 15 years since 1991 the Russian economy has become more internationally integrated, with trade leaping from 10% to 25% of GDP. But this integration has been driven by the export of oil, gas and metals, leaving Russia prone to the "resource curse." International experience suggests that resource dependency tends to distort the country's economic development, shrinking its manufacturing sector, but also makes it more prone to authoritarian politics since it is easy for a small ruling elite to capture the revenue flow from resource exports. The term "resource curse" was unknown in Tocqueville's day, but he was clearly aware that the slave-owning, staple-exporting economy of the South was far less conducive to democracy than the family farms and manufacturers of the North.

Are there any conditions that are conducive to democracy in Russia? Most of the social infrastructure for modern life is in place.⁶ It has a **highly educated**, literate and urbanized

country" and 43% characterized them as "the usual elite struggle for power." Levada Center Press Release, 18 August 2005.

⁶ In 2002, out of 177 countries in the UN Human Development Index, Russia placed 57th. It ranked 28th for education (88% school enrollment and 99.6% adult literacy); 60th for GDP per capita (\$8230); and 116th for

population, with a high degree of gender equality in terms of women's ability to access education and the labor market. However very low life expectancy, especially for men (58 years) points to serious social pathologies (social despair, the shock of transition) which do not augur well for democratization.

Tocqueville stressed America's advantages in being **free of a landed aristocracy or an established Church**. This gave it a head start in providing a foundation of social equality both in material conditions and in status ranking, at least outside the South. The Soviet Union did not have a landed aristocracy or Church, to be sure. Its official ideology proclaimed social equality, income differentials were compressed, and it was difficult to acquire wealth. However the Communist Party hierarchy was firmly in place, according a graduated ranking of political status with accompanying privileges.⁷ This nomenklatura system was more egalitarian than 19th century France, but it could not be said that it was as open and equal in spirit as 19th century America.

Perhaps the strongest argument in favor of Russia's democratic prospects is that of **living standards**. Tocqueville understood that the abundance of land and corresponding higher standard of living in the U.S. was highly conducive to democracy. In Russia income per capita hovers close to the \$5,000 threshold that correlates with the transition to stable democracy in most countries in the post-1945 world. (In terms of PPP, Russian income was close to \$5,000 per head in 1990, fell to \$3,000 by 1997, and has since recovered to about \$8,000.) GDP has grown at 5-7% per year since 1999, driven in large part by the boom in world oil prices. If this continues for another decade, then Russia's democratic prospects look fairly promising. But that perceived stalwart of democratic stability, the middle class, is largely absent. The old Soviet middle class (highly educated, state-employed professionals) has almost disappeared, and in its place a new middle class is only slowly emerging.⁸ Income inequality has ballooned since 1991, and is now very high by international standards (decile ratio of 13:1), but this is not necessarily a barrier to democracy (witness India and Brazil).⁹

life expectancy (66.7 years). It dropped from an aggregate score of 0.813 in 1990 to 0.771 in 1995, recovering to 0.795 in 2002. <http://hdr.undp.org/statistics/data/>

⁷ Mikhail Voslensky, *Nomenklatura: The Soviet Ruling Class* (New York: Doubleday, 1984).

⁸ Harley Balzer, "Russia's middle classes," *Post-Soviet Affairs*, vol. 14, no. 2, April 1998, pp. 165-86.

⁹ The Gini coefficient went from 0.26 in 1991 to 0.409 in 1994. T.Yu. Bogomolova and V.S. Tapilina, "Ekonomicheskaya stratifikatsiya naseleniya Rossii v 90e gody," *Sotsiologicheskie issledovaniya*, no. 6, June 2001, pp. 32-43, p. 32.

Ethnic homogeneity was not a prominent issue in Tocqueville's explanation of American democracy. America was a new community built on a shared identification with republican values, and at least until the Civil War the "people" were more important than the "nation". But in the modern world ethnic fragmentation is seen as a potential challenge for democratic consolidation – although there are some outliers, such as India, where ethnic fragmentation has not been a barrier to liberal democracy. With 79.8% of the population ethnically Russian according to the 2002 census,¹⁰ Russia does not seem prone to the sort of ethnic polarization which has undermined democracy in places from Sri Lanka to Lebanon.

About 8% of the population are Moslem. The Moslems of the middle Volga (Tatars and Bashkirs) have lived under Russian rule for 500 years and seen reconciled to their situation as a minority within the Russian state. Among the Moslems of the North Caucasus, however, the Chechen quest for independence has triggered a brutal and ongoing insurgency. Some would argue that this has fatally undermined Russia's chances for democracy by legitimating Putin's accession to power in 1999.

The Chechen question relates back to Russia's historical legacy as an empire. The Chechens preserved memories of conquest in the 1840s (kept alive by their mass deportation in 1944) that continue to animate the Chechen resistance today. Tocqueville did not see America as an empire, or to the extent that he was aware of its imperial characteristics (in the crushing of the Native Americans) he did not see these activities as defining the essential character of the American polity.

MORALS

In the perestroika period Russians were fond of citing the Biblical experience of the Jews, who spent 40 years in the wilderness after they left Egypt. Only a fresh generation with no experience of slavery would be capable of building a new, free society. This has not happened in Russia. The accelerating pace of global integration meant they did not have the opportunity to stop history for 40 years. Rather than wandering in the desert, for the past 15 years the Russians have been frantically constructing a new society, with new social norms that were still heavily shaped by the

¹⁰ <http://www.perepis2002.ru/>

preceding Soviet society. (One can also note that they have been following leaders who are somewhat less inspired than Moses.)

The American revolution was driven by the **spirit of liberty** and the spirit of religion. Russians do have a certain anarchic affinity for freedom, and there were moments when the spirit of liberty was abroad in 1989-91, such as the televised debates of the first partly-freely elected congress in 1989. But these were fleeting moments: 1991 was more a collapse than a revolution. Even Russian liberals would probably agree that fear of repression was a more powerful motivator than an embrace of liberty. Even at the peak of mass mobilization in 1991, the crowds in Moscow were 200-300,000 strong – 3% of the population - and smaller still in provincial cities, where they took place at all. Contrast this with the millions that took to the streets in Poland, East Germany and Czechoslovakia.

A key difference is that in the U.S. liberty was closely connected to property. Not so in the Russian case, where property rights were dominated by the state (especially during the Soviet period) and notions of liberty were not connected to property rights, quite the opposite.

Even as early as the perestroika period, opinion polls revealed a surprisingly strong well of public support in the Russian population for civil and political liberties.¹¹ Some skeptics argued that these polls were too abstract, in that ordinary Russians did not see those values embedded in the actual practices and institutions of emergent democracy in Russia.¹² Over the course of the 1990s the rift between abstract acceptance of democratic principles and discontent with their practical realization in Russia grew more pronounced.

Religious values feature prominently in Tocqueville's account. ("It must never be forgotten that religion gave birth to Anglo-American society.") Protestantism cultivated a sense of equality and equal worth, and individual responsibility for one's own fate. In contrast, religion is largely absent from the story of the Russian transition. Over seven decades the Soviet state conducted a

¹¹ James L. Gibson, "A mile wide but an inch deep (?): The structure of democratic commitment in the former USSR," *American Journal of Political Science*, vol. 40, 1996, pp. 396-420; Timothy J. Colton and Michael McFaul, "Are Russians undemocratic?," *Post-Soviet Affairs*, vol. 18, no. 2, 2002, pp. 91-121; Jeffrey W. Hahn "Political culture in Yaroslavl' over time: How "civic"?" in Jeffrey W. Hahn, (ed.), *Regional Russia in Transition*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins Press 2001.

¹² James Alexander, *Political Culture in Post-Communist Russia* (New York: St. Martin's, 2000); Stephen White, Richard Rose and Ian McAllister, *How Russia Votes* (Chatham, NJ: Chatham House, 1996); Richard Rose and Neil Munro and William Mishler, "Resigned acceptance of an incomplete democracy: Russia's political equilibrium," *Post-Soviet Affairs*, vol. 20 (2004), pp. 195-218.

rigorous and largely effective anti-religious campaign against religion, in the mistaken belief that modernity requires the abandonment of religious values. This opinion is shared by many Western liberals, so religious values were usually absent from analysis of the prospects for democracy in Russia.

Religious organizations did not feature prominently in the Russian transition, in stark contrast to Poland or East Germany (where Protestant peace groups formed the core of the Leipzig protests). Indeed, in Russia they did not feature at all. The Orthodox Church was and is seen as a bastion of the state authorities, be they communist or post-communist. Since 1991 there has been a minor upsurge in religious identification and practice, but this is more a fashion than a spiritual revival, and has few political overtones – other than support for the Yeltsin-Putin regime.¹³ Religion has achieved political prominence only in the context of the negation of liberty – such as the embrace of Wahhabi Islam by some Chechen insurgents after 1996, and the 1997 Russian Federation law that cracked down on “non-traditional” religions, including Protestantism and Catholicism.

In Russia and beyond, Orthodoxy is seen as the least conducive to democracy of all the Christian denominations. Focusing on spiritual salvation than worldly deeds, it did not encourage the separation of church and state (something that enabled the church in the West to become an independent political actor), nor did it focus on the individual.¹⁴

Individualism (a word invented by Tocqueville) was central to his explanation of the American breakthrough, and it is deeply rooted in the Protestant tradition of an individual responsible for his or her own fate, through study of the Bible and without the mediation of priests. Russia is not a society devoid of prominent, and brilliant, individuals. It has more than its share of eccentrics, artists, holy men and anarchists. So the contrast with America cannot be reduced to black and white. But Russian individualism was not grounded in a system of property law,¹⁵ nor in a theological discourse, nor in a social contract to form a new society. The Protestant concept of the individual is above all tempered by a respect for the laws governing social life – which derive from God but are “etched in the minds of men.” The weakness of religious belief in Russia thus correlates with lack of respect for the rule of law.

¹³ Zoe Knox, *Russian Society and the Orthodox Church: Religion in Russia After Communism*, (London: Routledge/Curzon, 2004); John Basil, “Church-state relations in Russia: Orthodoxy and federation law, 1990 – 2004,” *Religion, State and Society*, vol. 33, no. 2, June 2005, pp. 151-164.

¹⁴ Peter Berger, “Christianity and democracy,” *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 15, no. 2, April 2004, 76-80.

¹⁵ Richard Pipes, *Property and Freedom* (New York: Vintage, 2000).

Protestant individualism was tempered by an urge to associate, which promoted awareness of common interests. Tocqueville's emphasis on the vigorous **associational life** of the early colonists has become a salient theme for contemporary political science, with the revival of interest in social capital.¹⁶ Much effort has gone into studying incipient civil society in Russia, and researchers were dismayed to find that Russians were reluctant to join organizations and to participate in public life beyond the act of voting.¹⁷ They had a low level of trust in public institutions, and in their fellow citizens.

Closer analysis revealed that post-1991 Russian society did consist of dense social networks, but these were based on friends and family rather than public associations such as political parties, charities, clubs, etc.¹⁸ Russian social networks were informal rather than formal, hidden rather than transparent, and based on manipulation and avoidance of state institutions. They had their roots in the networks of favors (*blat*) that evolved during the decades of central planning, when personal contacts were need to secure resources from state authorities, which controlled everything from political life to personal careers to food and housing. These networks were built on the principle of inclusion and exclusion – “our” people (*svoi*) and “theirs” (*chuzhnye*). “Ours” must be trusted and helped, “theirs” cannot be trusted and may be cheated with impunity. (“He who does not steal from the state, steals from his family.”) This attitude was corrosive not just of civil society, but of any concept of the rule and law, duty and the public sphere. It still prevails in Russia today.

It turns out that just as there is “good” and “bad” cholesterol, so there is good and bad social capital. Russia in 1991 had deep reserves of social capital – but of the “bad” sort; and this actually flourished in the 1990s, finding new opportunities and tasks in the burgeoning but unregulated market economy.

The Soviet state tried to compensate for the absence of public trust by stepping up bureaucratic monitoring and coercion. The post-Soviet state had neither the capacity nor the political will to

¹⁶ B Edwards, MW Foley, M Diani (eds.), *Beyond Tocqueville: Civil Society and the Social Capital Debate in Comparative Perspective* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 2001).

¹⁷ Marc Morje Howard, *The Weakness of Civil Society in Post-Communist Europe* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Al Evans and Lisa Sunstrom (eds.), *Russian Civil Society: A Critical Assessment*, (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, forthcoming 2005).

¹⁸ Alena V. Ledeneva, *Russia's Economy of Favours: Blat, Networking and Informal Exchanges* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

wholeheartedly embrace those authoritarian methods. Instead it turned to new “political technologies” of media manipulation and façade democracy, plus some old-fashioned patriotism and xenophobia.

INSTITUTIONS

Clearly, the odds were stacked against Russia becoming a democracy in terms of the geopolitical and economic conditions in which it found itself in 1991, and the moral universe it inherited from the *ancien regime*. Only a vigorous set of new democratic institutions could drag it into a viable civil society – a development that was possible to imagine, not least because of the strong shift in the international climate in favor of liberal democracy that accompanied the Soviet collapse. Unfortunately neither Mikhail Gorbachev nor Boris Yeltsin were able to build strong new institutions, their role was more that of destruction than construction. Absent strong institution-building from above, institutions were also slow to develop spontaneously, from below.¹⁹

Boris Yeltsin’s Russia was an unstable combination of anarchy and authoritarianism. Yeltsin’s priority was simple: to stay in power, to survive in that chaotic environment, and hopefully set Russia on a path to a better future. He ruled through a mixture of threats and compromise, adapting some old Soviet era institutions while closing others, and creating some new institutions on the spot. Powerful institutions that had ruled people’s lives for decades disappeared almost overnight – not only state structures such as the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and the State Planning Committee (Gosplan), but also institutions that shaped social behavior down to its roots, such as the Young Pioneers or the practice of queuing for goods. Some feisty if unstable new institutions sprang up in their place: an elected parliament and president, a burgeoning capitalist class, markets, a free press, and even (perhaps) a free citizenry.

Although Western commentators are rightly critical of the poor quality of Russia’s **democratic institutions**, in a broader historical context, the striking thing is how quickly many of the core institutions of modern democracy were put in place. Russia now has a federal structure, a written constitution, universal suffrage, and a directly elected president and lower chamber of parliament – things that we take for granted today, but that were novelties in Tocqueville’s time. Free media

¹⁹ Valerie Sperling (ed.), *Building the Russian State. Institutional Crisis and the Quest for Democratic Governance* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2000).

became an important agent of change in the Gorbachev era, but this positive trend went into reverse as the Kremlin and its oligarchic allies used the media to rally support for Yeltsin's re-election in 1996.²⁰ Putin completed the process by pushing out the independent-minded media owners in 2000. Putin also took steps to limit federalism, imposing legislative uniformity across Russia's regions; tightening central control of the state budget; and in 2004 abolishing elections for regional governors.²¹

The Russian presidency that was created by Mikhail Gorbachev was overshadowed by the elected Congress of People's Deputies. But under Boris Yeltsin it quickly evolved into a tyrannical institution with extraordinary powers over its political opponents – although the 1993 constitution ostensibly tried to create a semi-presidential system, along French lines, and Yeltsin was unable to attain control over the legislature.²² Ironically, it was Western support for Yeltsin – political and financial – that was crucial in enabling him to defeat his domestic opponents and consolidate his presidential regime. Some centralized bureaucracies of the Soviet era remained in place – most notably, the military, the security police, the procuracy. These could be used by the president to bolster his power – but they were not totally under his control.

The quality of Russian democracy probably peaked in about 1990, with the level of competition steadily eroding from election to election after 1996. During the Yeltsin period elections were regularly held, and while there may have been some fraud in some regions, the results generally reflected the will of the voters.²³ The situation deteriorated under Putin: elections were still held on time, but the restrictions on the political opposition were stepped up and after the 2003 elections Putin established fairly secure control over the parliament. In its rankings for 2004 Freedom House relegated Russia to the category “unfree”, grading it 6 for political rights and 5

²⁰ Laura Belin, “The Russian media in the 1990s,” *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics*, vol. 18, no. 1, 2002, pp. 139-61.

²¹ For an overview, see Lilia Shevtsova, *Yeltsin's Russia: Myths and Reality* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1999); Lilia Shevtsova, *Putin's Russia*, (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2nd ed. 2005).

²² Eugene Huskey, *Presidential Power in Russia* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1999); Timothy J. Colton and Cindy Skach, “The Russian predicament,” *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 16, no. 3, 2005, pp. 113-126.

²³ Richard Rose and Neil Munro, *Elections Without Order: Russia's Challenge to Vladimir Putin* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Timothy Colton, *Transitional Citizens: Voters and What Influences Them in the New Russia* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000); Michael McFaul, *Russia's Unfinished Revolution: Political Change from Gorbachev to Putin* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001).

for civil liberties (out of 7).²⁴ (That puts its political system *below* that of Afghanistan, Bahrain or Burkina Faso, which is somewhat arbitrary.)

Still, the Russian political system was still far from a personal dictatorship. Presidents Yeltsin and Putin faced numerous checks on their power. They had to contend with competing groups within the state bureaucracy; and with the several dozen independent-minded wealthy businessmen who controlled about one third of Russia's economy.²⁵ They were also constrained by the need to win elections (even with the help of fraud); to maintain a loyal majority in parliament; and to avoid popular protest by non-violent means.²⁶

Following the writings of Aristotle and Montesquieu, the Founding Fathers were convinced that the best form of government was a **mixed system** that dispersed power across different institutions that combined democratic, oligarchic and monarchical elements. In a sense, the contemporary Russian political system fits the bill. It has a quasi-monarch (the president); it has direct elections for the presidency and the State Duma; and it has reinvented "oligarchy" in the sphere of economic management.²⁷ There is little sign, as yet, of the emergence of a stable, closed ruling class, akin to the landed aristocracy that was for Tocqueville the major barrier to democratic rule. From 1997-99 the dominant fear was that Russian democracy would collapse into oligarchic rule, but the 1998 financial crash and the subsequent arrival of President Putin has laid that scenario to rest.²⁸ Nor has post-Soviet Russia yet developed an institutional structure equivalent to the old Communist Party of the Soviet Union that could reliably replicate the permanent suppression of democratic contestation.

Where modern Russian democracy would clearly disappoint Tocqueville is in the absence of **rule of law**. The rule of law was the unifying principle of American republicanism, but respect for the

²⁴ Robert W. Orttung, "Russia," *Nations in Transit 2005* (New York: Freedom House, 2005), at <http://www.freedomhouse.org>

²⁵ According to a World Bank study, 23 large firms controlled by 37 individuals accounted for 30% of Russia's GDP. World Bank, *From Transition to Development* (April 2004), www.worldbank.org.ru

²⁶ Thomas F. Remington, *The Russian Parliament: Institutional Evolution in a Transitional Regime* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001); Michael McFaul, Nikolai Petrov and Andrei Ryabov (eds.), *Between Dictatorship and Democracy. Russian Post-Communist Political Reform* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2004).

²⁷ Chrystia Freeland, *Sale of the Century: Russia's Wild Ride from Communism to Capitalism* (New York: Crown Business, 2000); Paul Klebnikov, *Godfather of the Kremlin: Boris Berezovsky and the Looting of Russia* (New York: Harcourt, 2000); Sergei Peregudov, *Korporatsiya, obshchestvo, gosudarstvo*, (Moscow: Nauka, 2003).

²⁸ Stephen Sestanovich, "Force, money and pluralism," *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 15, no. 3, July 2004, pp. 33-58.

law is starkly absent in the Russian case.²⁹ Contemporary Russia is far from the Anglo-Saxon notion of law as an independent system that can serve as a check on the political authorities. And despite Putin's invocation of a "dictatorship of law," it is even some way from a Continental *Rechtsstaat*, in which the state obeys its own laws (while not subjecting itself to independent judicial review). The Russian state has shown a cavalier disregard of legal constraints: from Yeltsin's dissolution of the Supreme Court in 1993; to the waging of the war in Chechnya; to the persecution of Yukos in 2003-5. The public correspondingly lacks faith in legal institutions – although polls show public support for the jury trials that have been steadily introduced across the country. The public disrespect for the law goes back to the Soviet period, and is connected to the weakness of a religious moral code.

Western transitology has devoted more attention to institution-building in Russia than to pre-existing conditions or morals. Institutions are perhaps more interesting, because they are the most amenable to human agency. But in the Russian transition, institutional development has taken second place to a more primitive struggle for political power, a process that still remains open-ended.

Transitology assumed that any developed society was ripe for democratization, and that democratic institutions could quickly be designed and installed. Russians themselves were skeptical on this score. Having been burned once by the experience of revolutionary transformation, they take a conservative stance on the malleability of human nature and social institutions. A popular Russian homily from the perestroika era was the tale of the English gardener. When asked how to produce such a perfect lawn, he replies "It's easy, just roll it every day for 300 years."

Were Tocqueville himself brought back to life and asked to comment on contemporary Russia, he would probably note both positive and negative features, and conclude that after 15 years it is far too early to say what will be the long-term character of Russia's polity. It draws attention to some features that tend to be overlooked in the current pessimism about the state of Russian democracy, such as the presence of oligarchic and monarchic elements (balancing out the dangers of populist majoritarianism). But overall the Tocquevillian perspective inclines one to be deeply skeptical about the possibility for the rapid introduction of democratic institutions in Russia.

²⁹ Peter Solomon and Todd Fogelson, *Courts and Transition in Russia: The Challenge of Judicial Reform*. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2000); Robert Sharlet, "Putin and the politics of law in Russia," *Post-Soviet*

CONCLUSION

Does it make sense to try to apply Tocqueville's approach to contemporary Russia? Tocqueville's analysis has stood the test of time as a brilliant dissection of some key features of the American political system. He was writing at a moment when America was just developing as a democracy – a stage not unlike Russia today. In the 1830s, of course, democracy was virtually unknown on the global stage, and America was an exceptional case. Now, at the dawn of the 21st century, democracy is the norm for developed, European countries, and Russia is the exception.

It is up to the reader to judge whether this is anything more than an empty intellectual exercise. Of course there are severe limits to the exercise of “applying” Tocqueville's method to the Russian case. Tocqueville was not Aristotle: he was not proceeding deductively; drawing upon dozens of cases, to develop a general, logically grounded theory of political systems. He was proceeding inductively from a single case, or at least comparing two cases (the US and Europe).

You might say Tocqueville is irrelevant – that the world has changed since 1835, that giant bureaucracies like the KGB, or the welfare state, were unknown to Tocqueville, not to mention technologies like television. True enough. But many features of human society stay the same, and the American political system itself still operates within an institutional structure created 200 years ago, in an age without modern bureaucracy, technology etc.³⁰ Some of the key innovations of that time – a written constitution, rule of law, independent judiciary, individual rights, religious toleration, checks and balances, etc – are now being encouraged for other countries such as Russia. It behooves us to look back at the geopolitical, moral and sociological context within which those institutions emerged.

Writing in the 1830s, Tocqueville failed to foresee some important developments in American society: the emergence of a strong presidency and strong political parties; the industrial revolution and the rise of big corporations; and the role of money in politics, uniting these two trends. He only partly foresaw the cataclysm of civil war, although he did explore the differences between North and South and the conflicts they were engendering.

Affairs, vol. 17, no. 3, Jul 2001, pp. 195-234.

³⁰ Huntington rightly points out that most of these features actually evolved much earlier than 1787, in Tudor England, so the US constitution was enshrining a set of political practices that were already archaic. Samuel P. Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965), pp. 122-33.

What does the Tocquevillian reading of Russian politics overlook? What, in the words of Donald Rumsfeld, are the “unknown unknowns” that we are omitting? No observer of Russian society would fail to note the strong presidency, the rise of big corporations, and the role of money in politics. Under the influence of Western democratic experience, US political scientists have spent much of the past 15 years anxiously awaiting the arrival of a strong party system in Russia.³¹ Suffice it to say that they are still waiting.

In contrast to the American case, a civil war is unlikely to explode on the scene. This was a widely-discussed fear in Russia in the period 1987-96, but it has largely disappeared since the consolidation of Putin’s administration. This would have been an ideological war for control over the state apparatus between Leftist and Rightist forces, as were its precursors in 1918-21 and 1930-37. Now the only plausible civil war would be a widening of the Chechen insurrection to other Moslem regions of Russia: a bloody scenario that would however probably lead to the further consolidation of Russian society around its leader.

Many observers have warned of the emergence of a hard-line fascist regime, drawing parallels with Weimar Germany.³² However, that has not come to pass: there are fascists in Russia, but they are an extreme minority, no more visible than in any other contemporary European democracy. And such thinking has not influenced Russia’s leaders: Yeltsin was not Slobodan Milosevic, invading his neighbors; and Putin is not Aleksandr Lukashenko or Islam Karimov, jailing his opponents (not all of them, anyway).

Perhaps the most valuable conclusion from this exercise is that Tocqueville reminds us of the interdependence between these domains of conditions, morals and institutions. Foreign policy cannot be separated from domestic policy: the one feeds into the other. Western transitologists largely ignored Russia’s sense of wounded pride due to its loss of superpower status, and hence the willingness of the people (and the elite) to support a leader who would act to restore that pride, even at the expense of democracy. Likewise, by overlooking the vacuum in religious beliefs, outside observers were over-optimistic in assuming that associational life and respect for the law would quickly and almost automatically take root in Russia.

³¹ Henry Hale, “Why not parties? Electoral markets, party substitutes, and stalled democratization in Russia,” *Comparative Politics*, vol. 37 no. 2, January 2005. pp. 147-66.

³² Jeffrey Kopstein and Stephen Hanson, “The Weimar-Russia comparison,” *Post-Soviet Affairs*, vol. 13, no. 3, July 1997, pp. 252-283.

Figure One**A Tocquevillian Checklist for Russia 2005**Impact on democracy: *Negative* *Positive**Conditions*

Authoritarian past	XX	
Revolutionary legacy	X	
Vulnerability to attack	XX	
Former empire	X	
Ethnically homogeneous		X
Economic structure	X	
Living standard		X
Education level		XX

Morals

Lack of religiosity	XX	
Orthodox Church	X	
Sporadic individualism	--	--
Weak associational life	XX	
Equality of social status		X

Institutions

Strong president	XX	
Strong security forces	XX	
Weak rule of law	XX	
Elected leaders		X
Universal suffrage		XX
Checks and balances		X
Mixed system of government		X
Federal structure		X
Lack of free press	X	
Weak political parties	X	