**Russian Political Culture & Participation:**

**Apathetic Engagement Among the Keenly Disillusioned**

1. **Russian Political Culture: Keenly Disillusioned**
   * Russian efforts, such as they were, towards liberal democratic political culture failed.
   * Russia is caught between two worlds geographically and politically.
   * What do Russians want?
     + 70% regret the breakup of the USSR
     + 55% would like a return to the Brezhnev Era
     + 63% says the government respects their personal freedoms
     + 73% say the economy is bad; only 25% blame the government
     + 62% would support the return of state-owned industries (Pew)
     + They want what all people want: the opportunity to get rich without being exploited by the rich. They want an even playing field.
   * James Gibson’s study of Russian political culture draws three conclusions:
     1. People want democracy so long as it benefits them personally
     2. Russians are concerned with majority rule more than with minority rights
     3. Young, educated, and urbanites are more likely to support democratic values
   * **History Matters**: “Power to the People” has cried wolf
   * **Faith Matters**: Russians tend to see democratic values as remote and unattainable. They are cynical about authority figures. They are even cynical about Putin who enjoys 70 - 80% approval ratings.
   * **Perception Matters**: Russians tend to associate democratic reform with the dissolution of the USSR, the breakdown of economic order, and the deterioration of safety nets.
   * **Institutions Matter**: to what extent is the Russian system structurally predisposed to creating a liberal democratic political culture?
   * **Leadership Matters**: Democratic culture cannot thrive so long as Oligarchs, Mafiosos, Plutocrats, and Putin continue to consolidate power.
2. **Political Socialization**
   * The Soviet model of political socialization was akin to the PRC
     + Democratic centralism
     + Propaganda
     + “Mass movements”
   * Education: from class struggle and international solidarity to deifying the rich and ultra-nationalism
   * Media: promotes nationalism while monitoring Eastern Europe
   * Russian Orthodox Church is reasserting its role
   * Russian agents of socialization send mixed messages:
     + Freedom, democracy, and equality
     + Order and stability
     + Russia for ethnic Russians
3. **Political Participation: Apathy & Engagement**

* Russia is a large, diverse federal state. Political participation varies by region, resources, opportunities, etc.
* Rules of articulation have not yet been established in Russia. Putin capitalizes on that opacity.
* Political Apathy
  + In the absence of competing ideologies, many Russians accept a one-party system under Putin and United Russia.
    - Not because United Russia is beloved or because Russians feel as though they are part of the party.
    - Not because people see Putin as fair and honest.
    - Many (most?) ordinary Russians don’t care who controls politics. They want to be left in peace to work for their own survival/enrichment.
  + The average Russian prefers to ignore politics and delves deeper into their own personal, everyday endeavors.
  + 72% of Russians say they do not feel protected from abuse by police and other law enforcement agencies.
  + 80% agree, year after year, that "ordinary people cannot influence decision-making in Russia."
  + Perhaps apathy has played a paradoxically positive role, marginalizing the radical Communists and Ultranationalist Neofascists.
  + Perhaps the predictability of elections during the Putin years *causes* apathy.
* Political Engagement:
  + Russians are political animals. They debate…endlessly.
  + They watch TV and read newspapers.
  + 85% use the internet. 2019 Sovereign Internet Law prevents users from accessing content that the authorities deem unwanted. 83,000 sites blocked in first 2 years. A 2020 law outlaws VPNs and other proxies. HRW is deeply concerned.
  + Voter turnout…

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Parliamentary Elections** | | | |  | **Presidential Elections** | | | |
|  | Turnout | Majority Party | % Duma Seats |  |  | Turnout | Winner | % |
| 1995 | 64% | CPRF | 22 |  | 1991 | 75% | Yeltsin | 59 |
| 1999 | 62% | CPRF | 24 |  | 1996 | 70% | Yeltsin | 54 |
| 2003 | 56% | United Russia | 38 |  | 2000 | 68% | Putin | 53 |
| 2007 | 64% | United Russia | 64 |  | 2004 | 64% | Putin | 72 |
| 2011 | 60% | United Russia | 49 |  | 2008 | 70% | Medvedev | 71 |
| 2016 | 48% | United Russia | 54 |  | 2012 | 65% | Putin | 65 |
| 2019 | 52% | United Russia | 50 |  | 2018 | 68% | Putin | 78 |

1. **Civil Society**

* Russian civil society strives to develop because citizens need to organize and cooperate beacuse the government fails to serve them.
* Putin resists civil society.
* Russian Union of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs (RUIE)
  + Most powerful interest group in Russia. 1000 major firms, private and public.
  + Goals: subsidies and protection, contract and law enforcement, deregulation, low taxes, opportunities for foreign trade, WTO membership (2012).
  + RUIE arbitrates between government and business. They have Putin’s ear. But Putin is in control. He once shunned RUIE by not meeting with them for almost a year.
* Federation of Independent Trade Unions of Russia (FITUR)
  + Weak compared to RUIE; Poorly adapted to free-market.
  + Successor to Soviet All-Union Central Council of Trade Unions
  + 30 million members; 95% of union workers belong to FITUR
  + Unsuccessfully combatting deteriorating wages.
  + FITUR is nominally independent of governmental control and is committed to fight for workers’ rights. In practice, the clientelism inherent in Putin’s Russia renders FITUR weak.
* League of Committees of Soldiers’ Mothers
  + Started in 1989 when 300 women protested Gorbachev’s decision to end student deferments from military conscription
  + Fight against hazing and soldier labor in construction battalions
  + Chechen Wars: visited wounded soldiers, freed POWs, clarified casualty statistics
* Dissernet
  + An informal network to originally founded to expose corruption and to expose academic dishonesty.
  + Found that 1 in 9 members of the Duma earned academic degrees with plagiarized theses.
  + Their corruption mission dwindled. But they still focus on academic misconduct.
* Rusini.org - provides training and crowdsourcing resources for grassroots initiatives, focusing on Russia’s regions.
* Association of Russian Lawyers for Human Rights
* All-Russian Society for Environmental Protection
* Center for Business Ethics and Corporate Governance

1. **Putin’s War on Civil Society**
   * 2012 law compels a wide range of organizations to register as "foreign agents". Russian civil society has resisted with admirable solidarity. Not a single organization complied.
     + Russia sued 10 organizations and threatened to sue others for failure to register. LGBTQ+ rights organization Coming Out won the case filed against them.
     + In the heat of the Ukraine crisis, a 2014 law allows the government to place NGOs on the "foreign agents" list by fiat.
     + Amnesty International, a "foreign agent", monitors this.
   * According to a meeting of NGO leaders at a recent Salzburg Global Seminar, Russian CS faces two fundamental and interrelated challenges:
     + "[It is] difficult for Russian NGOs to reach broad segments of the population, who remain mired in a submissive and paternalistic relationship with the state.”
     + NGOs struggle to cope with deepening levels of repression of those exercising their rights as citizens."
2. **Conclusions**

* No history of democracy. But history is not destiny.
* Election turnout is good. So…?
* More political party competition might increase political participation.
* Print and internet is still mostly free.
* What might a post-Putin era look like? Maybe just a matter of time…