TITLE: RUSSIAN POLITICAL CULTURE IN A TIME OF TROUBLES
YAROSLAVL’ 1990-1996

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

RUSSIAN POLITICAL CULTURE IN A TIME OF TROUBLES
Yaroslavl' 1990-1996
by
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This paper addresses the issue of whether a political culture supportive of democratic values and institutions exists among Russians. It is based on three waves of replicate survey data collected in the ancient Russian province of Yaroslavl' from 1990-1996. The paper begins with a review of political culture theory. It then examines the available empirical literature for answers to five questions also addressed by the analysis of the data from Yaroslavl'. What is the level of support for democratic values and institutions in Russia? Have Russian orientations toward democracy changed since 1989? How has poor economic performance affected Russian support for democracy? What is the social base of support for democratic orientations? How has political participation changed over time?

The findings presented here indicate that support for democratic values and institutions has declined over the period 1990-1996. By almost all measures of diffuse support, including political efficacy, political trust, electoral commitment, and political interest, there has been an overall drop. Only for one variable, a multi-party system, did support remain the same. On more specific measures, erosion was also observable. Political participation declined, voters' willingness to believe the worst about their public officials grew, and attitudes related to economic and political reform policies hardened. It should be emphasized, perhaps, that support in some areas, notably efficacy, trust, and participation was fairly low to begin with, although not so very different from what is found in other industrial democracies at least in 1990.

At the same time, the given the turbulence in Russia during the period in question, one might have expected the shift away from democratic values to have been dramatic; this simply does not appear to be the case. Moreover, except for political trust and for attitudes toward economic reform, assessments of economic performance appear to be only weakly related to political orientations. These findings are consistent with other findings that commitment to democratic values and institutions remains largely unaffected by economic performance even for those adversely affected by the economic reforms. Socio-economic variables, on the other hand, are consistently related to political orientations, providing some evidence to sustain the view that modernization theory may account for the findings of support for democratic values among Russians. In every category, levels of education rather than economic well-being remain the single best predictor of support for democratic values and institutions. Finally, the fact that attitudes resistant to reform in Russia are often more likely to be found among older respondents suggests that inevitable demographic changes are likely to favor reform if those reforms aren't interrupted.
CONCLUSIONS

The aim of this paper was to contribute to an understanding of levels of support among Russians for democratic values and institutions. It was also intended to address the questions of whether there had been a decline during the period 1990-1996 in whatever support previously existed and, if so, whether any such decline was related to the economic difficulties Russia experienced over these six years. Another concern was how orientations are distributed among the population. Finally, the paper tried to explore how political attitudes might be related to political participation. Answers to these questions were offered based on an analysis of three waves of survey data collected at three year intervals in the Russian provincial capital of Yaroslavl’. It was hypothesized that erosion of support for both diffuse and specific indicators would be evident; that poor economic performance would explain the erosion; but, that socioeconomic status nevertheless would remain the best predictor of political attitudes.

The findings presented here uphold the hypothesis that support for democratic values and institutions has declined over the period 1990-1996. By almost all our measures of diffuse support, including political efficacy, political trust, electoral commitment, and political interest, there has been an overall drop. Only for one variable, a multi-party system, did support remain the same. On more specific measures, erosion was also observable. Political participation declined, voters’ willingness to believe the worst about their public officials grew, and attitudes related to economic and political reform policies hardened. It should be emphasized, perhaps, that support in some areas, notably efficacy, trust, and participation was fairly low to begin with; most Russians in Yaroslavl’ appear to be politically alienated and distrusting of those who govern.

Taken together these data provide little basis for optimism concerning public support for democracy. At the same time, support for this hypothesis needs to be qualified. First of all, similar questions in Western developed democracies in recent years have elicited similar levels of cynicism about politics. Moreover, the data do suggest that the erosion of support that has taken place is more true for the national level; attitudes toward local politics, at least in Yaroslavl’, have changed little and in some cases have even become more supportive. Finally, given the turbulence in Russia of the period in question, one might have expected a shift away from democratic values to have been dramatic; this simply does not appear to be the case.

In the second section of this paper we try to understand the factors that structure or underlie Russians’ political orientations. In particular, we expected that those who felt their economic situation had become significantly worse during the preceding three year period would be more likely to lose faith in democratic institutions. The evidence is mixed. There appeared to be comparatively little effect for the period 1990-1993 but the following three year period revealed a somewhat greater impact. However, except for political trust and for attitudes toward economic reform, assessments of economic performance appear to be only weakly related to political orientations. These findings are consistent with the conclusion offered by Evans and Whitefield (1995) that a “commitment to democracy remains even for those adversely affected by marketization” (P.510). Socio-economic variables, on the other hand, are consistently related to political orientations, providing some evidence to sustain the view that modernization theory may account for the findings of support for democratic values.
among Russians. In every category, levels of education rather than economic well-being remain the single best predictor of support for democratic values and institutions.

In sum, the evidence offered here suggests that Russians, at least for our sample, hold mixed feelings at best about the post-communist political order in their country. Clearly many feel alienated from the present system and have little regard for their politicians. At the same time there are positive signs. Support for local institutions seems steady. There is some evidence to suggest that party identification is beginning to emerge. Voting participation in national elections remains fairly high and people regard it as important, although other forms of participation are infrequent; overall, patterns of participation are not so different from what you find elsewhere. Furthermore the underlying structure of political thinking seems similar to what you find in developed democracies. The fact that attitudes resistant to reform in Russia are found mainly among older respondents suggests that inevitable demographic changes are likely to favor reform if those reforms aren’t interrupted. In the end, from the point of view of popular support for democracy, the opportunity for progress continues to exist. But it remains to be seen whether Russian leaders will squander this opportunity. The slow erosion described here suggests that supportive attitudes cannot indefinitely be taken for granted.

**TABLES**


Table 6. Attitudes Related to Political Reform in Yaroslavl’; 1993 and 1996 (in percentages).


Table 8. The Impact of Negative Evaluations of the Economy on Political and Economic Orientations: Yaroslavl’, Russia, 1996 (in percentages). (N=962)

Table 9A. Correlates of Political Culture in Yaroslavl’, 1990.

Table 10. Correlates of Attitudes Toward Political and Economic Reform, Yaroslavl’ 1993(N=1019); 1996(N=962).