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**TITLE: MUSCOVITE RESPONSES TO POLITICAL  
RHETORIC: 1992-1993**

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**THE NATIONAL COUNCIL  
FOR SOVIET AND EAST EUROPEAN  
RESEARCH**

***TITLE VIII PROGRAM***

1755 Massachusetts Avenue, N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20036

PROJECT INFORMATION:\*

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COUNCIL CONTRACT NUMBER: 808-25  
DATE: January 13, 1994

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*\* The work leading to this report was supported in part by contract funds provided by the National Council for Soviet and East European Research, made available by the U. S. Department of State under Title VIII (the Soviet-Eastern European Research and Training Act of 1983). The analysis and interpretations contained in the report are those of the author.*

## Muscovites' Responses to Political Rhetoric, 1992-1993

Richard D. Anderson, Jr.

### Summary

Results of experiments conducted in Moscow in October 1992 and repeated in October-November 1993 show that Muscovites' preference for democratic over communist political speech significantly diminished from 1992 to 1993. Although the 1993 results confirm the 1992 findings that Muscovites respond more favorably to texts of speeches from the democratic period than to texts of speeches from the period of communist rule, the effect is significantly attenuated, and in 1993 positive attitudes are present in the responses to speeches from the Brezhnev era, when these attitudes were virtually absent in 1992. These results provide evidence of a reevaluation among Muscovites from 1992 to 1993 of the relative merits of communist versus democratic rule. Although the city of Moscow remains a stronghold of the democrats, enthusiasm for the democrats has observably diminished even among residents of the city where democrats enjoy most support. The defeat suffered by Russia's Choice (the democratic bloc) in the December 12 election is visible in these results.

These conclusions are drawn from an experiment designed to investigate the impact of political speech on transitions to democracy. Like other undemocratic regimes, Soviet communists discussed politics in a special language distinguished from the vernacular by a restricted vocabulary and an unusual syntax. Use of this special language was justified by the claim that the vernacular -- and, by implication, its bearers -- was inadequate for competent discussion of political issues. Consequently texts in the undemocratic language should be experienced by speakers of the vernacular as denigrating to them and as obscuring political issues, and an experiment was conducted to test the hypothesis that speakers of the vernacular should be more likely to respond with expressions of offense and of meaninglessness when cued with undemocratic texts than when cued with democratic ones. If people respond more favorably to democratic speech, an end to the insult implied in undemocratic speech may be one gain that helps to sustain support for democracy during the economic hardships that ordinarily accompany transitions from authoritarian rule.

In the experiment, random samples of Muscovites were shown texts of political speeches from four periods -- the Brezhnev period up to 1983, the early Gorbachev year 1986, the late

Gorbachev year 1989, and the Yeltsin period (1992 speeches tested in October 1992, and 1992 and 1993 speeches tested in October-November 1993). Each respondent was shown one text; in 1992 four texts in each period were shown to ten respondents per text, for a total of 160 respondents, while in 1993 six texts per period were shown to ten respondents each for a total of 240. The texts were edited to remove the identity of the speechmaker, and some very long ones were shortened by removing blocks of paragraphs. The sample was controlled for age, occupation, education, and sex. The results were coded by native speakers unaware of the research design, and the coding proved highly reliable: the interrater coding scores (kappa) for two independent coders were never less than 0.8 for any variable, and often above 0.9.

Table 1 (page 3) presents the  $f$  values and the associated probabilities for eight categories of statements found in the responses. The  $f$  value measures the dispersion of the observations in the cells of a cross-tabulation between the four periods and a negative, neutral, or positive evaluation on the variable (with the exception of the variable "cliche," for which the evaluation was binary: present or absent). The probability measures the likelihood of obtaining such a dispersion by chance on the assumption that the underlying probabilities of obtaining observations in all cells are equal. The higher the  $f$  value, the greater the difference in responses among the periods. For example, the  $f$  statistic for the variable "affect" in 1992 indicates that the cell for negative affect in response to texts from the Brezhnev (first) period contained many more responses than the cell for negative affect in response to texts from the contemporary period, while the cell for positive affect in response to the Brezhnev-era texts contained many fewer observations than the cell for positive affect in response to contemporary texts. (The 1993 values for "democrats only" will be discussed below).

Table 1: Measures of Difference in Muscovites' Response to Political Speeches from the Brezhnev, Early Gorbachev, Late Gorbachev and Yeltsin Periods

<u>Variable</u>	1992 (n=160)		1993 (n=240)	
	<u>f</u>	<u>prob</u>	<u>f</u>	<u>prob</u>
1. affect: democrats only	10.57	.0000	3.01 5.81	.0310 .0008
2. style	1.39	.2489	0.65	.5837
3. content: democrats only	10.52	.0000	3.74 4.87	.0119 .0027
4. interest: democrats only	5.80	.0009	4.80 7.92	.0029 .0000
5. realism: democrats only	1.22	.3053	2.93 2.37	.0343 .0747
6. trust: democrats only	13.39	.0000	4.74 5.79	.0031 .0008
7. relevance to experience: democrats only	18.65	.0000	10.98 11.35	.0000 .0000
8. cliché: democrats only	5.28	.0017	13.14 10.84	.0000 .0000

The first variable in Table 1, "affect," measures whether respondents said they liked or disliked the texts. In 1992 twenty-six of forty respondents expressed antipathy to the Brezhnev texts and the same number to the early Gorbachev texts, while only three and two expressed liking for these texts; positive and negative responses were even for the texts from 1989, and positives outnumbered negatives sixteen to nine for 1992 texts. By 1993, although more than half of the sample (32 of 60) remained hostile toward the Brezhnev-era texts, the number of positive responses had risen to one-fifth of the sample, and people were almost equally likely to respond with antipathy as with liking to speeches from the democratic period. Moreover, in 1992 moral outrage was a pronounced feature of the responses to texts from the Brezhnev and

early Gorbachev periods; while still occasionally found in 1993, it was significantly diminished both in numbers and in quality.

The second variable, "style," measured whether people responded positively or negatively to the style of the language in the text. This variable proved insignificant in both experiments, mainly because people usually eschewed comment on the texts' stylistics. The third variable, "content," measured whether respondents praised the texts for richness of content or criticized it for lacking content. The decline in the *f*-values shows that the difference between the earlier periods and more recent periods significantly diminished in 1993 relative to 1992 -- that is, 1993 respondents were either less likely to praise the democratic speeches for richness of content or less likely to criticize Brezhnev-era speeches for emptiness of content. The fourth variable, "interest," measures whether the respondent said the speech was interesting, expressed neither a negative nor a positive evaluation, or said it was uninteresting. Little change is observable here from 1992 to 1993; in both iterations of the experiment, respondents thought democratic texts were more interesting.

The fifth variable, "realism," refers to respondents' commentary on whether the plans or projects discussed by the politician had been or were likely to be accomplished in reality. Muscovites generally express skepticism about the ability of any political leader to fulfill promises. In 1992 there was no reliable difference between evaluations of the past success of communist leaders in achieving their declared objectives and the present likelihood that democratic leaders would or could fulfill their promises. In 1993 the variable becomes marginally significant, but the significance is entirely due to an especially unfavorable reaction to the realism of promises in texts from the early Gorbachev year 1986. *Muscovites in my sample are no more likely to think that Yeltsin and other democratic speakers in 1993 will fulfill their promises than they are to think that Brezhnev-era Politburo members did fulfill their promises. When one considers that Brezhnev's failures are already known, while Yeltsin's promises could still pan out, this result is stunning.* It also points to the common sense of Muscovites, whose skepticism about the capacity of the Russian government to achieve desirable economic or social outcomes is, in the view of many Western specialists, entirely justified.

The sixth variable, "trust," measures whether respondents said they trusted or distrusted the speaker. A respondent could, and some did, say that they believed a speaker whose plans or proposals they considered unrealistic, and vice versa. *Although respondents in 1993 remained*

*significantly more trusting of speakers from the democratic period, the ratio of trusting to distrusting respondents reversed from 1992 to 1993. More respondents trusted democratic speakers in 1992 than distrusted them, while in 1993 more respondents expressed distrust than trust of democratic speakers.*

The seventh variable, "relevant to experience," measures whether respondents said the speech was or was not related to their everyday lives. Because the Russian "aktual'nost" can convey a meaning similar either to "actual" or to "contemporary," it is not surprising that more recent speeches seemed more "contemporary" than older speeches. However, speeches from 1989 were not evaluated as significantly less "contemporary" than speeches from 1992 or 1993. Again, the degree to which respondents evaluated speeches from the democratic period as more relevant to their daily lives than the older communist speeches diminished substantially from 1992-1993.

The eighth variable, "cliche," measures whether respondents did or did not say the text was typical of other texts from the same period. In 1993, more than three quarters of the respondents shown texts from the Brezhnev or early Gorbachev periods said that all such speeches were just alike; half the respondents viewing 1989 speeches made this claim, while only a third of the respondents who saw 1992-1993 speeches gave this response. In contrast to the other variables, the difference in responses to the earlier and later periods strengthened from 1992 to 1993. The claim that speeches are "all alike" indicates that political differences between speakers are obscure to the respondent, while the absence of this claim indicates that the respondent perceives political choices. As citizens' awareness of political alternatives is essential to democracy, a decline in perceptions of a cliched quality in political speech is necessary to a transition from authoritarianism to democracy, and the strengthening of this variable from 1992 to 1993 is a positive indicator that such a transition has been occurring.

On balance it seems unlikely that the diminution in Muscovites' preferences for democratic over communist speech is attributable to the selection of speeches. In 1992 the contemporary texts included two speeches by Yeltsin, one by former Moscow mayor Gavriil Popov (a democrat), and one by parliament "speaker" Ruslan Khasbulatov -- at the time, a centrist. In 1993, in addition to the texts by three democrats (Yeltsin, the Republican party leader Shostakovskii, and the Democratic Russia leader Lev Ponomarev) and one centrist (Vladislavlev, leader of the industrialists' party Renewal), the selection of speeches included two

by nationalists (vice-president Rutskoi and the writer Aleksandr Prokhanov) not represented in the 1992 selection. Responses to Rutskoi's and Prokhanov's texts were significantly more negative than to the other four. I therefore recalculated the statistics for the forty respondents who saw the democratic or centrist texts in 1992. The recalculation is reported as "democrats only" in the table. While this recalculation raises the measure of dispersion ("f") for every significant variable (except "realism"), for all variables except "interest" and "cliche" the measure of dispersion remains below the 1992 level. In other words, even when one removes the most disliked speeches from the contemporary group, Muscovites' preference for democratic over communist speech is still weaker in 1993 than in 1992.

Why are responses to political speech important? Transitions to democracy are costly to most people in terms of their material standard of living. In partial compensation, people stop being insulted by their political leaders, who move from a didactic speech, that presumes the leader's intellectual and moral superiority to the audience, to a persuasive speech that presumes the leader's parity with the audience. It may be that this effect is temporary: as memories of the insulting speech of the past recede with the continuing transition to democracy, people may value the difference between didactic and persuasive speech less. Or it may be that contemporary Russian democrats either failed to find or are losing the persuasiveness necessary for democratic speech to build popular support. Not too much weight should be placed on the trend in these results. The trend is based on observations taken at only two different times, and the second set of observations was made shortly after democratic rule had eventuated in gun battles in the streets of Moscow -- a circumstance that surely conduced to a more favorable reevaluation of the Brezhnev-era speeches. Nevertheless the trend is not promising.