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Thesis Prospectus: The Middle Class and Democracy in Post-Soviet Russia

Following the fall of Communism in Russia in 1991, there was a general sense in the West that a genuine opportunity existed to transform Russia into a western-style country both economically and politically. The Russian Federation's constitution – ratified in 1993 – was designed to usher in a new era marked by a respect for the rule of law as a means of creating and preserving a liberal democratic form of government. Since then, many academics in both Russia and the West have worried about a gap between promises of civil freedoms and practical realities. On its face, Russia possesses the institutions – popularly elected executive and legislative branches as well as an independent judiciary – to consolidate democracy. In just the last year however, concerning events have taken place including: the perceived rigging of both parliamentary and presidential elections, legislative crackdowns on protest movements, and increased restrictions on Non-Governmental Organizations. I propose that one of the fundamental reasons the illiberalization of Russian politics has been and is being tolerated is that no independent middle class exists which can effectively muster broad popular support in favor of liberal democracy.

My hypothesis of a connection between the middle class and democracy in Russia is an outgrowth of an apparent contradiction in public opinion polling data. According to polls, most Russians simultaneously have a low opinion of the current state of Russian democracy (Pew Research 2011) and a favorable opinion of President Vladimir Putin (Levada Center 2012). This dichotomy suggests that Russians place a higher priority on some goal other than democracy. One likely candidate is economic well being, and in fact polling data shows that 75% of Russians

believe a strong economy is more important than good democracy (Pew Research 2012). Such an attitude seems indicative of economically insecure, lower income Russians who are willing to tolerate a diminution of civic freedoms in exchange for economic stability. This leads to my ultimate hypothesis that transforming such low-income citizens into an independent middle class is a key requisite for the establishment of a stable, liberal democracy.

My research seeks to follow the development of democracy in Russia from *perestroika* until the present and explore the gap between institutional promises and true, liberal democracy as both a political and socio-economic phenomenon. In particular, it looks for evidence of a link between a robust middle class and sustained democratic liberalism using the Russian Federation as a case study. My approach is in contrast to the new institutionalism school of thought which posits that political institutions are central to a country's political situation - for example the formation and consolidation of democracy (March & Olsen 1984, 2005) (Shugart & Carey 1992) (Linz & Valenzuela 1994) (Norgaard 2001) . My research does not contest the well documented influence of institutions on national political outcomes. Instead, it seeks to expand the focus of democratization theory to account for the impact of the socio-economic makeup of a country on its politics.

The significance of my research lies in its ability to potentially forecast the political trajectory of the Russian Federation as well as identify the factors which are most likely to alter that trajectory. Once the factors most pivotal to the health of liberal democracy have been identified, they can be observed and measured. These observations can then be used to more confidently predict emerging trends of Russian democracy. Those factors can also be used to create criteria which could lead to alternative scenarios in the future. From an academic

standpoint, this is useful in furthering a detailed understanding of democratic development in non-Western countries. From a political standpoint, an understanding the root factors preventing the consolidation of democracy in Russia is critical for formulating effective policy proposals. The link between the middle class and democracy is also relevant to intelligence interests as it is intimately connected to forecasting the future of one of the largest geo-political powers. An inquiry into the true foundation of democracy in Russia is thus not only an academic exercise but also a relevant practical concern.

Concepts and Theories explained

To set the stage for my research it is first necessary to explain several important concepts and theories upon which my research will draw heavily. Perhaps the most fundamental term to be expounded upon is Democracy. In his work *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, Schumpeter argues that democracy is the means of making political decisions in which the people themselves decide issues by electing individuals to carry out their will (Schumpeter 1976). Significantly, this includes the ability to evict politicians who do not conform to this will (Schumpeter 1976). Political Scientist John May has provided a related definition which notable for its clarity and coherence. According to May, Democracy is defined by responsive rule; or in other words a correspondence between the government's actions and the desires of the governed (May 1978). There are auxiliary mechanisms which contribute to the administration and maintenance of democracy such as suffrage and elections, but at its root democracy merely refers to governance in accordance with the will of the populace (May 1978).

Liberal democracy is related to democracy, but begins to flesh out specific characteristics. Foweraker and Krznaric lay out a minimalist definition of liberal democracy as a system where

there is competition among a plurality of parties for power through free and fair elections (Foweraker & Krznicaric 2000). But liberal democracy involves not only the responsiveness of a government to its citizenry, but also a certain expectation of civic freedom. Bollen defines the measure of liberal democracy as, “the extent to which a political system allows political liberties and democratic rule” (Bollen, 1208). Political liberties are subsequently defined as the extent to which “people of a country have the freedom to express a variety of political opinions in any media and the freedom to form or participate in any political group.” In summary, liberal democracy consists of a society possessing a free media, unconstrained by undue government influence; multiple political parties which genuinely compete for control of the government in; free elections untainted by tampering.

Defining the middle class is a somewhat more complex task. Approaches vary from economic to socio-political and everywhere in between. A 2011 study by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences took the former approach and defined the middle class as individuals which spend between 30 and 37.3% of their income on food (Hairong 2011). In a more in depth of the American Middle class, Blumin proposes 5 factors which distinguish the middle class: Work, Consumption, Residential Location, Voluntary Associations, and Family Organization (Blumin, 11). Ian Scott's Analysis of the middle class in Zambia highlights the influential role of the middle class as members of “learned professions” also referred to as the managerial bourgeoisie (Scott, 1). The economic as socio-political nature of the middle class is best laid out by Alina Shakina in her analysis of the Russian middle class. She writes that “First, there is their economic independence. Second is their professionalism and the high self-esteem to which professionalism gives rise, their sense that they are important to their society. From this comes

the third feature: their clear sense of civic duty. All this makes it possible for the middle class to perform stabilizing social functions, similar to those that in the human body are performed by the spine” (Shakina, 28). The notion of the middle class as an independent force which can act as a check on the government is central to my analysis.

An understanding of existing theories of democratization is a necessary prerequisite to an investigation of the practical inner-workings of Russian democracy. Perhaps the most basic divide in democratization theory is between the elite oriented approach of O'Donnell and Schmitter and the modernization approach of Lipset. O'Donnell and Schmitter – along with others such as Kaufman and Przeworski – argue that a schism among the ruling elites is the most likely cause of a transition from authoritarianism to democracy (O'Donnell and Schmitter 1986). Lipset on the other hand argued that there was a correlation between how economically developed a country was and how likely it was to support democracy (Lipset 1959). In Lipset's view, economic development did not guarantee democracy, but strongly encouraged an environment in which it could develop (Wucherpfennig & Deutsch 2009). My analysis of democracy in Russia seeks to combine these two approaches. Elite agency may prove decisive as a catalyst for a transition to democracy, but economic development which supports the formation of a middle class can be considered a requisite for the consolidation of a stable, liberal democracy.

As my research is not purely a political consideration, it may also draw somewhat on the fields of Social Movement theory – specifically the Resource Mobilization model – and the theories of cultural and social capital. I borrow from the Resource Mobilization model of Social Movement theory to explain why a middle class is necessary to effect democratic consolidation. To paraphrase Diana Kendall, a social movement – such as the current protest movement in

Russia – needs more than just a common ideology to succeed. Without a substantial socio-economic base, a democratic opposition is unlikely to attain enough influence to achieve their goal of liberal governance (Kendall 2006).

My approach to question of democracy is significantly influenced by the work of Stephen Kotkin, author of *Armageddon Averted*, Richard Sakwa who wrote *Putin: Russia's Choice*, and Gordon Hahn, who has extensively studied the fall of the Soviet Union. There has also been some previous investigation of the link between the middle class and democratic liberalization. To highlight just a few academic works: Ronald Glassman's pair of volumes – *The Middle Class and Democracy in Socio-Historical Perspectives* and *The New Middle Class and Democracy in Global Perspectives* – Huber, Rueschemeyer, and Stephen's *The Impact of Economic Development on Democracy*, and Leventoglu's “Social Mobility, the Middle Class, and Political Transitions”.

Previous Scholarship

To briefly summarize Kotkin, the political transition after the fall of the Soviet Union was not one to democracy, but rather a transfer of power among the Russian elites (Kotkin, 107). There were later efforts such as those by Chubais to expand the pool of individuals with a stake in the political system (Kotkin, 130-136). Kotkin emphasizes the significance of such efforts by noting that the government's lack of roots in society left it vulnerable to exploitation by illiberal forces as has been observed (Kotkin, 146). Instead of focusing on the socio-economic reasons for this lack of connection, Kotkin instead faults Russia's political institutions for failing in this task (Kotkin, 170). Nevertheless, Kotkin recognizes the critical nature of rooting the state in organized social constituencies (Kotkin, 186).

Sakwa is more focused on the specific details of Russia's political development since Putin's first appointment as President in 2000. While arguing that Russia in fact represents a country transitioning to democracy, Sakwa acknowledges the historic instability and vulnerability of those democratic ideals. Sakwa is most concerned with the measures which have reduced political pluralism in Russia's to almost nothing. This includes heavy restrictions on political parties (Sakwa, 105) and Non-governmental Organizations. Perhaps most significantly, Sakwa mentions the emergence of a "state bourgeoisie" dependent on regime politics (Sakwa, 136). This is not an independent middle class – a managerial bourgeoisie – but rather a social group which may exhibit some characteristics of middle class life while providing social support for an illiberal regime.

Originality of Research

Building off of public polling data which shows most Russians prefer economic security to good democracy (Pew Research 2012), I have hypothesized that a key reason for the lack of democracy is the presence of an economically insecure, lower income population which significantly outnumbers the independent middle class. Much has been made among academics and politicians of Russians' desire for stability. Some have even gone as far as to erroneously suggest that the Russian mentality is predisposed to authoritarian rule (Baker & Glasser 2005) (Chen & Sil 2004) (Huntington 1996). This kind of analysis overlooks the impact of socio-economic class on the extent to which Russians are willing to exchange civil freedoms for guarantees of economic security. My research seeks fill that gap.

My research is further differentiated from previous scholarship by its combination of socio-economic and political elements to explain the political development of Russia since

perestroika. While other scholars have looked at the existence of a middle class in Russia – and many more have commented on the political evolution of Russia through the administrations of Gorbachev, Yeltsin, Putin, Mevedev, and now Putin again – I have not encountered academic research which combines these two phenomena. That is not to say that my research seeks to prove that the middle class shares a causal relationship with liberal democracy. Rather, by showing how the lack of growth in the middle class has historically corresponded with a failure to develop liberal political practices, my research adds another piece to the puzzle of understanding the many diverse factors which encourage or inhibit democratization.

Research Timeline

The first part of my research going forward will continue to focus on synthesizing previous scholarship regarding democratization theory, characteristics of liberal democracy, and the middle class as a socio-economic and political identity. This is an important step in building a foundation on which to base my own research and understanding of the inter-connection between these seemingly separate ideas. Concurrently, I will be gathering economic and social data to operationalize the term middle class into something which can be identified and measured. Additionally, I will be drawing on public opinion polling, media reports (both Russian and foreign), and scholarly works, to chart the history of liberal democracy as it has actually been realized in Russia since 1987. Following the collection of data, which I plan to complete by the second or third week of October, I will perform my analysis of the data which includes visually representing and comparing how the middle class and liberal democracy have evolved in Russia. As this is primarily a qualitative analysis, there will not be a significant amount of statistical analysis although I may draw on secondary sources for similar information.

My final analysis will be divided into 5 sections each representing a distinct time period. From Gorbachev to the fall of the Soviet Union sets the stage by describing the lack of both a middle class and liberal democracy during the waning days of the USSR. The second stage charts the period from Yeltsin's election to the presidency through mid-2002. I have termed that period the age of the oligarch because of the emergence of a new economic elite during this period which used this wealth to exert considerable influence on the political process while simultaneously using the political process to protect their wealth and influence. Putin's campaign against the Oligarchs as a class – exemplified in the prosecution of Yukos billionaire Mikhail Khodorkovsky in 2003 – constitutes the third time period. Dmitri Medvedev's four year stint as president is distinct because of his self-proclaimed liberal inclinations. Finally, Putin's return to power earlier this year in an apparently managed transfer of power represents the beginning of a new era; one which could constitutionally last until at least 2024.

By the end of the fall semester, I plan to have completed my analysis of the first 2-3 of these periods. At a minimum, I will have covered through 2002, and if possible I will have extended through the end of Putin's second term. Over Christmas Break, I will cover at least one chapter – either Putin's campaign against the oligarchs or Medvedev's “liberalization”. This will leave the final 1-2 chapters and a conclusion to be finished in the first month and a half of the Spring semester. Given my anticipated class schedule, that seems to be a reasonable task. This will leave several weeks for revisions before defending my final thesis.

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