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Russia

Popular Claim Making in Socialist and Post-Socialist Russia

Topic of Research and Countries Visited

The aim of this project is to understand how democratic reform in post-socialist Russia has altered the way ordinary citizens make claims on authorities. I investigate changes in claim making through a comparative content analysis of “letters to the editor” from two Russian localities before and after the collapse of the Soviet Union. I was in Russia collecting these letters for a three-week period.

Relevance and Contribution to the Field

Studies describing Russia’s democratic experience are often confined to prominent protagonists of the transition. The project, by contrast, seeks to answer the question: how have ordinary post-socialist citizens participated in the changes of the last decade and a half? The project builds on previous research examining the relationship between popular claim making and democratization. Research in this line of inquiry shows that popular claim-making activities, such as petitioning and demonstrations, facilitate democratization by creating a space for deliberation between governmental agents and ordinary citizens. Although popular claim making in Russia is often addressed in opinion polls and analyses of voting behavior, there is very little research on the content of these claims and how claims get expressed publicly.

The project also builds on research examining the distinctive role of letter writing in popular claim making during the Soviet Union. In the repertoire of claim-making activities, more collective forms, such as protests and marches, had been co-opted by Soviet authorities to express agreement with the regime. Soviet authorities also did not tolerate those collective performances expressing disagreement with their activities. Thus, personal letter writing and petitioning to newspapers and other elites became one of the acceptable avenues of public expression for ordinary citizens. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, letter writing has continued to occupy an important role in popular claim making because citizens have not actively used other avenues of participation in contentious and institutionalized politics.

Summary of Approach and Research Methodology

The primary data source for this project was the central newspaper archive of the Russian State Library in Khimki. Unfortunately, this archive only had its city newspaper fund open this summer and its regional newspaper fund was closed for renovation. I frequented the State Historical Public Library in Kitai Gorod instead to access the regional newspapers.

I compare two cities with divergent transition experiences: Tambov and Novgorod. I also compare two distinct periods of time: the Yeltsin years and the late period of stagnation during Brezhnev’s rule. I selected the main local newspaper that had a regional status in the Soviet federal structure for both cities during the Brezhnev period. I choose the main city newspaper and the main regional newspaper in each locality for the Yeltsin years. I also selected every letter to the editor except those written by elites and journalists.

Summary of Research Findings and Preliminary Conclusions

Based on my prior research, I underestimated the overall number of letters in this project by

around half. For the Brezhnev period, there were more letters than I had anticipated. The Soviet state apparently used newspapers as a forum for ordinary citizens to express their wishes because publishing such letters indicated authorities were taking into account the concerns of the citizenry. There were fewer letters and more diversity in how many letters newspapers were published during the Yeltsin than Brezhnev years. Part of this is simply a reflection of the diversity in the media during this period which translates into more variation in editorial styles.

There was also some ambiguity about what constituted a “letter to the editor.” Many letters published in newspapers were excluded because they posed technical questions, such as how to access state benefits, which seeds worked best in the soil, etc. Many of these “letters” simply posed a single question with a name below it. Letters sent to newspapers were also excluded when they were narrated by journalists in sections devoted to providing information about where citizens can turn to for help or reporting the actions of local elites in addressing the concerns of citizens. These letters may only have snippets of the letters interspersed with the language of the journalists.

It is difficult to offer a summary of the findings and preliminary conclusions beyond the sampling itself because this phase of research only covered data collection. Transforming these letters into a machine-readable format – let alone data analysis, has yet to begin. But, I can offer a back-of-the-envelope estimation of what I collected. In terms of differences between the Soviet and post-Soviet periods, there was a perceptible shift in the metric of achievement that citizens used to judge authorities from a more to a less ideologically-driven set of principles. As for the differences between the trajectories of the two cities, I have yet to notice any systematic differences. All of this will undoubtedly change once data analysis begins. For much of the research I was entirely focused on collecting a sample of letters from the newspapers.

Suggestions for Future Research

In the next phase of the project, I will transform the letters into a machine-readable format. One option is scanning the photocopies I have into a computer so I could use a software package to analyze their content. This however is dependent on whether the scanning technology has good enough character recognition of Cyrillic and whether the software can work with Russian. A less precise option is simply working with Excel while analyzing the letters.

Whatever option I choose, a further step will be developing an appropriate coding scheme to compare the letters from each town and period of time. I already have a preliminary coding scheme I developed on a set of letters to the editor. This scheme includes characterizations of the authors, targets, topics, aims and actions of the letters. This will change after I sift through the letters from other towns and periods of time. Most likely, I will have to look at some letters from each town and period of time before settling on coding scheme. A coding scheme appropriate to one period of time might not capture the relevant dimensions of the letters from another.

Recommendations for US Policy Community

Polities can have in place the formal institutions of democracy and hold polls that elect leaders to those institutions, but continue to have relationships between citizens and elites that hinder democratization. These citizen-elite relationships are not only expressed in organizational structures, such as political parties and civic associations, but also supported by a culture that facilitates exchanges within those structures. The way citizens publicly express themselves about how they think elites should rule reveals the character of the polity citizens both currently occupy and would like to occupy in the future. Such a “bottom-up” perspective and cultural focus will likely facilitate a deeper understanding of democratization processes than promoting formal democratic institutions and following the words and deeds of elites.