Post Soviet Union Democracies

Michael Opperman
The splintering of the Soviet Union could be seen as another significant political science insight, along the same lines as Putman’s analysis of Italy after power was given to the regions in Italy. All the countries from the former Soviet Union had similar political organs and shared a history that spanned for nearly seventy years. After the fall of the U.S.S.R., they developed different political institutions, interacted with different countries, and became self-reliant, affecting these newly sovereign states in different ways. These nations followed different paths to various degrees of democracy, illuminating and illustrating what are important factors in democratic development in new states.

With a Freedom House rating of not free, Russia has been derailed on the path to democratic reform after the collapse of the U.S.S.R. While there have been elections, two-thirds of those elected came from the United Russia Party, while the rest have been from other parties supported by state-run media sources. Russia also suppresses those in Chechnya trying to break away from the Kremlin rule. Freedom of religion is another problem for those in Russia, where only a group fifteen years or older can be considered a “registered religion” in Russia. (freedomhouse.org)

Much of Russia’s undemocratic slide can be attributed to three factors: natural resource wealth, its subsequent economic “privatization” after the fall of the Soviet Union, and history of oppressive regimes. Russia is quickly becoming the largest source of new oil reserves in the world. Much like other countries rich in oil, a select few individuals own all the rights to this sought after resource. After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, technocrats within the Communist Party, the KGB, and the Soviet Youth League were well placed to divide up the country’s premiere businesses and resources
amongst themselves. These “oligarchs” become the major informal power players of the new Russia. They did this by oppressing the populace to keep their power. (wikipedia.org)

The oppression and serfdom of the Russian populace existed on a national scale from the beginning of the Romanov family rule in 1612 until its end in 1917. During this long period of time, much of the populace worked for landlords and were denied basic human rights, creating a vertical landlord/peasant relationship; the landlord is in the position of providing basic needs to the peasants. This system was seen yet again during the Soviet era when Stalin and subsequent leaders came to power and denied basic human rights to their people, enforcing a dependant relationship between citizen and State. (wikipedia.org) This made it nearly impossible for horizontal bonds of trust between average Russians to form. An authority would provide services and basic needs to a freedom repressed society were strictly enforced throughout most of Russia’s history. Without trust, average citizens would be reluctant to cooperate or bargain with their comrades, making democracy and its reforms hard to sustain. These basic relationship ideals and proficiency are needed for a democracy to be able to sustain itself and only help to encourage a democratic outlook on government. (Putnam 183)

The Baltic states, Estonia, Lithuania, and Latvia, have emerged as the most productive and democratic of the former Soviet states. They are all democracies, and are considered free states by Freedom House with a score of one. Freedom House’s official reviews of these countries consider them to be the least corrupt countries in the former Soviet Union, respecting freedom of religion, speech, press, assembly and association.
They each have a freely elected parliament, independent judiciary, and prime minister. (freedomhouse.org)

Estonia’s success can be easily traced to its past democratic ways. Before its forced annexation by the Soviet Union, Estonia was a strongly democratic nation, though a part of Russia at one time. Estonia abolished serfdom in 1816, which helped bring education and rights to the masses and eventually led to Estonia seceding from and fighting a war of independence against Russia in 1920. Following its victory, Estonia established a Democracy that lasted until Soviet occupation and annexation in 1940. This history of freedom only made it easier for Estonia to return to democracy upon regaining its liberty from the Soviet Union in 1991. It also has strong economic ties to its European neighbors and to the world, having joined the World Trade Organization in 1999 and the European Union in 2004. (wikipedia.org)

Lithuania is also a well defined democracy. The country has a freely elected legislator, neutral judiciary system, and a dual head executive. Lithuania, much like the other Baltic States, can trace its strong democratic ideals to its previous democratic history between occupations by foreign powers. Before World Wars I and II, Lithuania had a functioning, democratically elected legislature. It was also the first country to become independent after the collapse of the Soviet Union, leading the other Baltic States in a relatively bloodless protest against the Soviet Union known as the “Singing Revolution”. This was a revolution led by people singing traditional Lithuanian songs, which were repressed by the Soviet puppet government and officials. Also, like the other Baltic States, it is a member of both the WTO and the EU, fueling its economy and solidifying its democratic institutions through influence from other powerful democratic
countries. It should be noted that though, Lithuania supports rights like those of religion, press, and association the country and its officials have frequently had problems with corruption and with reports of police brutality. (wikipedia.org)

Latvia, like Estonia and Lithuania, is a well established, post-Soviet Union democracy, and still uses the constitution that was made in the democracy formed after World War I. Latvia is also a member of the WTO and EU, supporting its economy and fortifying its economic traditions. (wikipedia.org)

Receiving a rating of six from Freedom House, Belarus is one of the many former Soviet Republics that are not on track to becoming a fair and free democracy. The recently elected president, Lukashenka, had a disputed and, according to many foreign observers, altered election vote. His regime has frequently been accused of harassing the press, with dissenting views either being completely ignored or scrutinized as criminal offenses. Even religious freedoms are being oppressed, as an amendment in 2002 allows the government to censor religious groups. (freedomhouse.org)

Belarus’ repression involves two factors- its history of oppression and domination by foreign powers, and its present economic state. From 1795 to the beginning of World War I, Russia was the primary power in control of Belarus. During this time, there were significant strides made by Russian authorities toward the “Russification” of their territories. In Belarus, this meant the criminalization of the Belarusian language, culture, and religion in favor of all things Russian. During German occupation in World War I, Belarus declared itself an independent country, which lasted until Russian reoccupation and Polish incursion after World War I. Belarus was then divided into two parts, one belonging to the newly formed U.S.S.R., and the other to Poland. These newly divided
halves experienced more nationalistic strategies of change from their new owners. This division of Belarus ended after Russian reoccupation at the beginning and after World War II. With all these countries fighting to control Belarus, its people have had few opportunities to strengthen their national identity. Without this time to keep, let alone evolve, a national identity, there is little feeling of togetherness within their country, which is necessary for democracy. This has fostered a state of mutual distrust between citizens, the opposite of what is needed in democratic societies, where cooperation and understanding is the cornerstone. (wikipedia.org)

Belarus also suffers from little to no real economic independence, relying heavily on Russian subsidies and raw materials. With an economy that was primarily dependent on agriculture, and nearly a quarter of its land area made uninhabitable by the 1986 Chernobyl accident, it is not exactly hard to understand Belarus’ economic hardships. With such a struggling economy it is hard for a middle class, another hallmark of a well established democracy, to develop in Belarus. (wikipedia.org)

Moldova, receiving a score of four on the Freedom house report, is one of very few former Soviet Union states to be caught between democracy and totalitarianism. They have democratic elections and constitutionally guaranteed rights, and do enjoy some freedoms. Moldova, though, has had its share of troubles. This country suffers from heavy government corruption, subjecting journalists to fines for writing the “wrong” things, religious groups have to be recognized, and reports of harsh discrimination against the Roma minorities in the country. (freedomhouse.org)

Moldova consists of several small regions that joined together over time, starting in the 16th century. The country was free and generally in the same state as it was at the
end of World War I. The Soviet Union forcibly annexed the country in 1940 and forced all administrative authorities from the country as it began moving ethnic Russians into the country and ethnic Romanians out. Moldova began the slow march to independence in 1989, starting by endorsing Moldavian nationalistic ideas and laws. Moldova’s economy is heavily dependent on agriculture and Russian fuel, due to Moldova’s limited mineral wealth. After taking these factors into consideration, it is easy to see where Moldova’s mixed identity comes from. While it has a history of independence and citizens depending on one another, Moldova lacks a strong economy. While able to sustain democratic ideals, it is hard for Moldova to develop a middle class, which would benefit the most from those ideas. While slowly moving towards democracy, Moldova’s population does not apply much pressure to sustain its democratic goals. (wikipedia.org)

Ukraine, much like Moldova, is stuck between being a full-fledged democracy and clinging to its Soviet ideals. Freedom House gave Ukraine a rating of four, “partly free”, citing its nonviolent change in government in 2004 due to public protests. Until this so-called “Orange Revolution”, much of the Ukrainian population was repressed and not offered equal treatment. It was this public and wide spread protest that led Ukraine to become a truly democratic state. (wikipedia.org)

Ukraine was founded by peasants fleeing Polish serfdom. Over the years, Ukraine adopted more Russian traditions and ideals, especially those of the Russian Orthodox Church. Ukraine is also quite rich in natural resources. With a wealth of resources and strong ties to Russia, Ukraine almost seems unified with Russian. This feeling of concurrence has led much of Ukrainian political decisions to be influenced by the
Russian state. Recently, though, Ukraine has started to stand on its own politically.

(wikipedia.org)

Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Azerbaijan all have such similar histories and governments that they can generally be grouped together. With the exception of Kyrgyzstan, which was rated partially free and only slightly better then the other countries, all of these countries have been labeled as not free, and most were given sevens, the lowest score from Freedom House. None of these countries have had a change in leader or any democratic change, all have restricted freedoms of the press, and all enforce strong support of the government (freedomhouse.org).

These countries’ shared history can explain why they have turned out this way. These countries were all part of The Great Game, a conflict between Russia and Great Britain that lasted from 1813 to 1907. The Great Game involved Britain and Russia using diplomacy, exploration, and espionage to gain control of this region. This constant fighting and exploitation by more powerful nations led these countries to become dependent upon them. This abuse by Russia and Britain led to strong vertical ties of unity, not horizontal ones, as the countries constantly experienced. When these countries eventually became independent, it became easy for a few powerful figures in the country to dominate the weaker citizens, who would be dependent on them for their needs.

(wikipedia.org)

Armenia was labeled by Freedom House as partly free and given a rating of four. This rating stems mostly from the high number of irregularities in the elections from 1995 on. Some freedoms are repressed in Armenia some as well. The press is continually
guided by the national government. Most Religions tend to be respected, with exception being the Jehovah Witnesses in the country (freedomhouse.org).

Though partially free, Armenia had a mixed history of democratic reforms. Before its lands were captured by the Russian Empire during World War I, Armenia was controlled by the Ottoman Empire. During this period, the Ottoman Empire slaughtered the intellectual population out of fear that they were conspiring with the Russians. Russian rule lasted from the capture of Armenia until the fall of the Tsar in 1917. Armenia also started a war with Turkey after World War I, in which it lost much land. In 1920 the country was overtaken by the Soviet Union. Armenia gained its independence after the fall of the Soviet Union. Armenia’s recent history has involved a war for land with Azerbaijan. A peace treaty was brokered in 1994, and heavy international influence has kept the region relatively stable since then. (wikipedia.org)

Examining Armenia’s history, one can see that Armenia does have some of the basic foundations of democracy. The main problem in Armenia is the war with Azerbaijan. This is ostensibly the most destabilizing force of the new democracy, as war usually encourages the existence of a strong executive and the sacrifice of individual rights in favor of safety.

Georgia was rated by Freedom House as partly free and given a three. They have had a successful change of government and have a constitution that guarantees basic human rights. The freedom of the press and freedom of religion are supposed to be respected by law, though members of nontraditional religions are often intimidated and harassed by officials of the law.
Georgia does have a history of democratic values. After the Russian Revolution, it declared its independence and held parliamentary elections. Though it had difficulty with its neighbor Armenia, it remained independent until the Red Army invaded in February of 1921. After the Soviet Union fell in 1989, Georgia became one of the first Soviet States to seek independence. Though it became independent early, it was still not entirely stable. There was a great deal of infighting between different factions in Georgia; several regions sought independence from Georgia, several leaders were assassinated, and a civil war broke out that lasted until 1995. It was not until 2002 that a stable government was elected. With these insights from Georgian history, we can see that it has many democratic traditions, but many different factions within the country still have to be reconciled. Theoretically, Georgia could have a democratic future, if these factions resolve their differences (wikipedia.org).

There are several other plausible explanations that might explain the progress to democracy in the former Soviet Union besides their histories. One of the most obvious is the Resource Curse, especially with countries that have oil and natural gas. Countries where oil is a major resource and an important export would have the most authoritative and repressive regimes, as those in power might gain most of their government’s revenue by controlling this expensive and sought after resource. They could then use this extra revenue to enact social programs that make the population further reliant on them. (Luong and Weinthal 385) It might also be theorized that regimes with oil are encouraged to be authoritative. More developed, democratic countries would interfere little with them as to not affect the price of oil, and therefore not affect their own economy negatively. Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Kazakhstan would then be prime examples of
the Resource Curse. Each of these is a primary producer of oil, natural gas, or both (wikipedia.org). Just like many other countries that primarily produce oil, they are virtual dictatorships, with a very strong executive running the country.

The age of the state could also be a factor. A majority of states that existed before the USSR -Bulgaria, Romania, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania- scored better than their newer state counter parts -Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia. (Roeder 861) This can been seen in the relatively better ratings, or higher number of “free” and “partly free” ratings obtained from Freedom House by the older states and in the relatively poor ratings obtained by the newer states (freedomhouse.org). These restored states could have most ethnic and social problems resolved or reconciled, or have a comparatively more homogenous society compared to the new states. The older states could also be benefiting from nationalistic feelings that hold the society together when confronting democratic change or ideas. This would cause there to be less tension and less competition for power in the reestablished states than in the newer states, where there is little history and little national pride. This would cause less friction in the old state’s government, allowing democracy to be sustainable.

Lijphart, in a separate paper, discussed possible government institutions and styles that could be advantageous to ethnically diverse societies. Lijphart suggests that elections should be by proportional representation and also be straightforward and simple, which would be easier for these new democracies to handle (Lijphart 100). Next, Lijphart suggests the executive branch should be of a parliamentarian style, meaning it would consist of a cabinet of many people who would give decisions by consensus. The
constitution should also specify that the cabinet be made up of equal amounts of the country’s ethnic groups (101). This would also prevent stalemate and fixed terms of office (102). Lijphart next suggests that the government be a federal system giving autonomy to regions with a relatively high homogeneous makeup. (104) After all of these suggestions from Lijphart, it is notable that countries that are ethnically diverse, most of the post-Soviet countries, and have enacted some of these suggestions are more stable than those that have not. The post-Soviet countries that are semi-presidential systems - Ukraine, Moldova, and Romania- did fare better with Freedom House then their presidential system counterparts of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Azerbaijan. The parliamentary systems of Estonia, Lithuania, and Latvia scored the best. It is obvious to conclude that the system of government that does not encourage a strong executive branch and promote consensus decision making work best in the ethnically diverse populations of the former Soviet states.

Though the countries that were formed after the collapse of the Soviet Union provide some insight into what makes democracy work, they also show the inconsistencies and multiple factors that are readily apparent in political science. From an observation of these states, it is apparent that previous history, present democratic institutions, and having just the right amount of national resources are the major factors that have led to the outcome of these states.
Bibliography


