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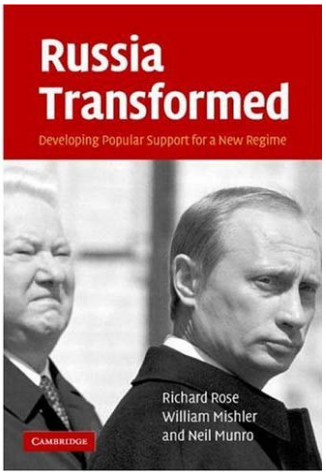
Book Review



Title: Russia Transformed: Developing Popular Support for a New Regime

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Post-communist transformation of Russia is a popular topic of research in political science/international relations. This book conceives 'transformation' as the creation of a fundamental discontinuity in the institutions of a society. Whereas an election can change the people and party in control of government while leaving its institutions intact, transformation changes the very structure of government. Hence, transformation differs from political reform: it is not an alteration of institutions to make the political system work better; it is a disruption of institutions that replace one political system with another. Transformation is an abnormal condition of society, because it involves fundamental changes in its central institutions.

The authors study 14 New Russia Barometer surveys which have been conducted between 1992 to 2005 by Levada Center, the well-known, not-for-profit survey research institution in Russia. They use these surveys to determine how transformation in Russia following the end of the Soviet Union has been perceived by ordinary Russians.

States live and transform in peculiar ways. Political transformation is most evident in the dissolution and creation of states. While at any given point in time the boundaries of states are fixed in international law, with the passage of time the boundaries of states expand or contract, new states emerge and some disappear from the map altogether. Even if the boundaries of a state remain intact, the political regime – the state's central institutions linking governors to governed – can be transformed. Indeed, all post-Communist states have had a regime change within the lifetime of a majority of their citizens, and many have had changes in their territorial boundaries too.

Unlike a political transformation, an economic transformation can occur even without a fundamental change in the state or the regime. The Soviet legacy to the new regime was the need to transform a non-market economy into a market economy. The Yeltsin administration's efforts to privatize state-owned industrial assets in the 1990s were undermined by the absence of a private sector.

The experience of Russia is extraordinary because transformation has occurred simultaneously and abruptly in three different dimensions of society – the state, the political regime, and the economy. It thus differs from a society in which transformation has been a process of evolution and each step has occurred at a different period in its history.

In the past century, Russia has twice gone through a treble transformation, namely of the state, the political regime, and the economy. The first upheaval followed the 1917 Revolution that ended the tsarist empire. Lenin created a state with new boundaries, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), and a Communist regime with the goal of transforming the minds as well as the behavior of its subjects. Stalin's regime transformed a backward economy into an industrialized non-market economy, in which the commands of the Communist Party and the plans of bureaucrats decided what should be produced.

The second transformation began when Mikhail Gorbachev tried to reform the Soviet regime in the late 1980s. However, the unintended consequence of *glasnost* (openness) and *perestroika* (restructuring) was another treble transformation that Gorbachev aptly characterized as beyond any Russian's dreams or nightmares. At the end of 1991, the Soviet Union dissolved into 15 independent states. In place of a one-party regime with a totalitarian vocation, there is now a regime in which elections offer a variety of choices and people have freedoms previously denied them.

The authors posit that Russia's post-1991 transformation – hereunder referred as 'transformation' – was a crash course in political re-learning; it changed people's lives as well as changing their system of government. Some changes were for the better and some for the worse; for example, the new regime immediately delivered freedom from a repressive party-state, but it also created treble-digit inflation and job insecurity. When post-1991 transformation commenced the average Russian was middle-aged and settled in his or her way of life. The Soviet regime was the only regime most Russians had ever known. Transformation disrupted the collective norms and institutions by which individuals had learned to order their lives.

This book seeks to determine the extent to which Russians have developed support for the regime that has filled the void created by transformation. As noted above, this is done by drawing on a unique source of evidence: fourteen New Russia Barometer nationwide surveys of public opinion from 1992 to 2005. The analysis shows that Russians not only differ in their evaluation of the current regime; they also disagree about what should or could replace it. Given these differences, the book's second object is to explain why some Russians support the new regime while others do not. Since opinions have fluctuated both up and down since 1992, the third object is to understand how the passage of time has altered attitudes. The dreams that people had at the start of transformation have been replaced by the experience of its consequences. While many Russians find the new regime falls far short of their hopes and ideals, most who are not prepared to give it positive support are nonetheless resigned to accepting it as a lesser evil.

The central thesis of this book revolves around an understanding of the development of regime support that can be achieved only by taking the importance of time into account. When a dynamic challenge leads to disruption and political transformation, both subjects and the political elite are forced to adapt. Initially, people do so on the basis of experience of the past or hopes and fears about the future. With the passage of time, individuals can evaluate the regime on the basis of its actual political and economic performance. The understanding of the dynamics of regime change requires a typology of regimes that elites can supply. The authors classify regimes according to two criteria: whether the rule of law is respected and whether elites are accountable to the populace through free elections. They opine that Russian Federation has become a plebiscitarian autocracy holding elections without the rule of law. The Federation's early years were turbulent as political elites tried to create new political and economic institutions and a new state. Since Vladimir Putin became president in 2000, however, the direction of government has been much more orderly and controlled, a process that has emphasized the autocratic rather than the plebiscitarian character of the regime.

The New Russia Barometer surveys from the early 1990s provide a bottom-up view of Russian society at the start of transformation. Notwithstanding lifelong indoctrination, the values endorsed by most Russians were freedom, openness, the unity of Russia, and Christianity. But amidst the turbulence of transformation, Russians also had immediate mundane concerns, such as queuing for hours to get bread and waiting for weeks or months to get paid at work. Skills learned in Soviet times helped Russians to cope with the turmoil of transformation. It also taught Russians to be patient.

According to evidence provided from 14 years of New Russia Barometer surveys, Russians consistently disagree when asked whether they approve of the current regime – and the percentage giving support goes up and down. There is a similar pattern of disagreement about the endorsement of alternative regimes such as dictatorship by a strong man or the return of the Communist system.

Sociologists, whether Marxist or not, explain political attitudes as a reflection of differences in social structure. However, Russians consider social structure as having little influence on how they evaluate the new regime and its alternatives.

Having lived under two different regimes enables Russians to evaluate the new regime as better than its predecessor or as a lesser or greater evil. Regime support can also reflect whether institutions are seen as trusted or corrupt, and whether the president's policies are approved or not. The influence of political values and performance is considered in these surveys as substantial, and sometimes changes with the experience gained through the passage of time.

The New Russia Barometer surveys' set of economic indicators show not only how much the economy matters for regime support but also which economic conditions, national or household, are most important. Further, the surveys indicate that the passage of time has created a political equilibrium in which many who disapprove of the economic and political performance of the regime are nonetheless resigned to accepting it.

The transformation of Russia suggests that popular support for a regime is inherently open to shocks. Considering the question what could disrupt the political equilibrium that has emerged in the Russian Federation, the authors opine that generational and social changes can have little impact on the equilibrium of support in the foreseeable future. Russians see their society as facing risks, such as an HIV-AIDS epidemic or a civilian nuclear accident. However, this would undermine political support only if the regime were blamed for a disaster. The immediate challenge to the regime's equilibrium of support is the term-limits rule that will require President Putin to hand over control of government to a successor in 2008 or amend or bend the constitution. The response of ordinary people to the president's actions will show the extent to which Russians continue to support whatever regime the political elite supplies.