Russia’s Predictably Unpredictable Politics

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With Russia’s economy [sagging](http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/04/12/world/europe/russian-economy-tumbling.html), support for the government falling, and even Vladimir Putin’s sky-high [approval](http://www.levada.ru/eng/) ratings beginning to trickle down, there has been no shortage of speculation about political stability in Russia. Some argue that a collapse of the Putin regime is [imminent](http://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/putins_downfall_the_coming_crisis_of_the_russian_regime7006), while others are more cautious. A [survey](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russian-federation/2016-04-17/will-putin-regime-crumble) of experts in the most recent *Foreign Affairs* found that most believed that political change in Russia was not on the horizon, but there were dissenters and our ability to predict political events in Russia has never been great.

Given Russia’s prominence in global politics, it is essential to understand the potential for political change, but divining Russia’s political future is hard. It is a challenge not because of the supposedly inscrutable Vladimir [Putin](http://www.bendbulletin.com/nation/2878889-151/unraveling-the-inscrutable-putin), the [opacity](http://www.themoscowtimes.com/news/article/russia-places-127th-in-world-transparency-rankings/490786.html) of the political system, or the vagaries of the “[Russian soul](http://cambridgeglobalist.org/2015/06/08/the-significance-of-the-russian-soul-in-understanding-contemporary-geopolitics/),” but because our two most prominent arguments about political change make precisely opposite predictions about Russia.

First, the bad news. Political scientists often [argue](https://jhupbooks.press.jhu.edu/content/problems-democratic-transition-and-consolidation) that the nature of the current government helps predict the type of government that follows. Consider non-democracies. We often divide them into one-party governments like China, military governments, like Egypt, and personalist governments, like Russia. In personalist regimes, a single leader like Vladimir Putin rules over political parties and the military, determines who has access to high office, and has extraordinary influence on policy.

Each type of non-democracy tends to have distinct patterns of political change. For example, based on data of all non-democratic governments from 1946 until 2008, Hein Goemans [found](https://www.amacad.org/pdfs/policyTowardRussia.pdf) that personalist non-democracies like Russia were especially likely to experience rocky political transitions.

In personalist governments political change was much more likely to occur via non-constitutional means, such as coups or revolts, than through constitutional means. Seventy percent of personalist autocracies fell via this route versus 47 percent for military governments and 19 percent for one-party governments.

The rulers of personalist regimes also faced much worse prospects after leaving office. Eighty percent of personalist rulers ended in exile, jail, or below ground compared to 41 percent of leaders of military governments and 25 percent of leaders of one-party autocracies.

In their sample, the prospects for transition to democracy were also far dimmer for personalist governments. Only forty-nine percent of personalist autocracies were replaced by more democratic governments compared to 78 percent of military-led autocracies. Thus, personalist autocracies are especially likely to beget another non-democratic regime. To top it off, personalist regimes were more prone to international conflict than other types of non-democracies. None of this is reassuring for global stability.

However, another broad line of argument offers a more optimistic view of political change in Russia. Compared to other countries, Russia is too rich and well educated to be so non-democratic. A long line of research suggests that a country’s [income](http://www.princeton.edu/~cboix/endogenous%20democratization%20-%20world%20politics.pdf) and [education](http://economics.mit.edu/files/4465) levels are associated with their type of government.

The details about precisely how wealth and education are related to political change are debated. [Some](http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10887-007-9015-1) suggest that these factors work by generating a robust civil society that can counter state power and [others](http://voxeu.org/article/role-culture-democratisation) point to broad changes in social values and attitudes. Still [others](http://www.amazon.com/Democracy-Development-Political-Institutions-Well-Being/dp/0521793793) argue that while country wealth does not help bring down autocracies, when governments fall in wealthy autocracies for whatever reason the successor government is likely to be more democratic. There may be debate about how these factors work, but many argue that wealth and education are related to a country’s type of government.

On this score Russia’s prospects are more promising. At a GDP per capita of $25,411 measured using purchasing power parity, Russia is [wealthier](https://knoema.com/sijweyg/gdp-per-capita-ranking-2015-data-and-charts) than 15 of the 16 Latin American democracies. While measuring education levels is tricky, Russia [scores](http://www.usatoday.com/story/money/business/2014/09/13/24-7-wall-st-most-educated-countries/15460733/) very highly by most formal indicators. Education levels in Russia exceed those of all the Latin American democracies. This suggests that political change, however it comes to Russia, should lead to a more democratic alternative. Also in Russia’s favor are relatively high levels of urbanization and cultural/ethnic homogeneity.

To be sure, other factors may come into play, but are less likely to be decisive. Russia is oil-rich, but less so than many petro-states and it has the potential to develop other economic sectors. Economic inequality is high in Russia, but lower than in many Latin American democracies. And, perhaps most important, Russia’s pretensions to being a global power may complicate political change.

This is not to say that Russia is on the verge of political change. Indeed, the consensus of experts suggests that change is unlikely. But it does suggest that predicting Russia’s future is particularly challenging because both theories have merit. The danger is to blindly follow on. Instead observers should keep an open mind about Russia’s political future. It also suggests that whenever political change does come to Russia, it will have an outsize impact not just on global politics, but also on how we understand democratization. Stay tuned.