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Russia's "Impressionable Years" and Putin's Inheritance

KEY MESSAGES

- **In Russia, where the early transition's economic pain was not alleviated by the same emotive high of "liberation and independence" experienced elsewhere in post-communist Europe, the drop in support for liberal economic and political values was comparatively steep and enduring**
- **Evidence from the Integrated Values Survey (a combination of the World Values Survey and the European Values Study) demonstrates that Russians de-prioritized democratic freedoms and increased their support for an interventionist state in the economy between 1990 and 1995**
- **The "values gap" that grew dramatically in the early 1990s between Russians and post-communist citizens elsewhere in Europe has persisted through the most recent wave of the Integrated Values Survey**
- **This pattern – a "values gap" that opened in the early 1990s and persisted to the present day – is observable among men, women, and across different age cohorts**
- **Within Russia, the degree to which regions' electoral support for Boris Yeltsin dropped between the 1991 and 1996 presidential elections explains more illiberal attitudes in the most recent wave of the Integrated Values Survey**

Just over three decades ago, a new era appeared to have dawned in Europe: The Cold War had wound down, the Soviet Union's empire had broken apart, and democratic capitalism stood poised to sweep aside ossified communist systems. History, however, as we should have known, neither quickly nor completely turns a corner. The past can linger on in profound and complex ways. In Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, formal structures of governance may have abruptly changed, but communism still cast a long shadow. Its anti-market and anti-democratic ethos, for one, endured in the worldviews of many post-communist citizens into the twenty-first century (Pop-Eleches and Tucker 2017).

Though its legacy would endure, communism's disappearance as a governing system, was greeted, broadly speaking, with relief and jubilation across Eastern Europe and most post-Soviet successor states. In Russia, however, its collapse, in conjunction with the break-up of the Soviet Union, resonated differently: "What was initially celebrated [elsewhere]

as liberation and independence ... was mourned in Russia as a loss of territory, population and global stature (Krastev and Holmes 2019)." Even in the first half of the 1990s, one could find ample evidence that Russians were rueing the Soviet Union's break-up and losing faith in the proposition that greater freedom would bring about a better society. In 1994, the country's leading independent pollster released data showing that 75 percent of Russians thought that the disintegration of the Soviet Union had brought more harm than benefit, whereas only 8 percent thought the opposite. A solid plurality, moreover, felt the introduction of multi-party elections had resulted in more bad than good (Levada 1996).

To a degree that surprised rulers and ruled alike, the exit from communism was accompanied by a not insignificant amount of pain and dislocation. Per capita income plummeted and inequality soared. As a consequence, public support for the de-statization of the economy and the democratization of the polity waned across the region, but perhaps nowhere more so than in Russia. There, the economic shock of the early transition was not cushioned by the sorts of national narratives of "liberation and independence" that buoyed populations elsewhere (Brudny and Finkel 2011; Krastev and Holmes 2019; Gaber et al. 2019).

As communism endured in the beliefs and attitudes of the peoples that lived through it, so, we hypothesize, did the potentially wrenching experience of leaving it behind. In Russia, where the economic pain was not alleviated by the emotive high of "liberation and independence" experienced elsewhere, we suspect that (1) the early drop in support for the transition era's liberal project was greater than in other post-communist countries and (2) any illiberal turn in worldviews in those initial post-communist years reverberates into the present day.

In this note, we present and interpret evidence from the Integrated Values Survey (i.e., a combination of the World Values Survey and the European Values Study) consistent with these two hypotheses. Between 1990 and 1995, relative to citizens in other post-communist economies, Russians' attitudes on fundamental questions of economics and politics became markedly more illiberal. In just five years, in a manner that stood out in a region becoming more aware of the limitations of democracy and markets, Russians in the early 1990s increased their support for an economically interventionist state and de-prioritized political freedoms. Evidence from the most

recent wave of the Integrated Values Survey, moreover, shows that the attitudinal gap that opened up between Russia and other post-communist successor states over two decades earlier has remained stable. The illiberal turn that Russia took in the early 1990s has endured.

Consistent with this latter finding, we use geographic markers in the most recent wave of the Integrated Values Survey to show that, within Russia, the drop in a region's electoral support for Boris Yeltsin between the presidential elections of 1991 and 1996 strongly predicts its degree of illiberalism in 2017. On balance, where faith in the politician who launched marketization and democratization declined most dramatically is where we continue to observe the greatest skepticism for his liberal project. The pattern laid down in the early 1990s persists.

RUSSIA'S "IMPRESSIONABLE YEARS" AND PUTIN'S INHERITANCE

Both ethnographic evidence and "harder" social indicators suggest that the first half of the 1990s was a "critical juncture" for Russia (Gaber et al. 2019). After peaking in 1989, Russian per capita GDP slid into a protracted decline. Neither perestroika, Mikhail Gorbachev's partial reform measures, nor Boris Yeltsin's big push to liberalize the Russian economy, achieved their aim, at least in the short to medium run. Both leaders presided over economic free-fall and social collapse. According to the World Bank, between 1990 and 1994, real GDP per capita fell by 35 percent, and life expectancy declined by 4.4 years.

Ethnographers and sociologists underscore how disorienting those years were for Russians. Arriving to carry out interview-based research in 1998, Russia's post-communist economic nadir, Shevchenko (2008, 39–40) describes a society as having settled into a state of routinized emergency: "The stability [prevailing only a decade earlier], predictable (although modest) incomes, relative social equality, and personal social security ... [had given way to a] time of

rampant crime, social polarization, and insecurity, both in terms of personal situations and of the larger political and economic realities."

And yet she finds that by the late 1990s, the "crisis" (krizis) of the decade's first half had become normalized. By 1998, the pain of the earlier emotional gut punch had passed and the pathologies of post-communism – corruption, economic uncertainty, frequent political shake-ups – had "ceased to surprise." "Could it be," she wonders, "that the shocks of the late 1990s simply faded in comparison with the magnitude of economic and political turmoil that preceded them?" Acknowledging that the answer could be "yes," she concludes that the late 1990s were not unusual. The late Soviet and early post-Soviet years, however, were. Those were the years of the true disruption; those were the years that shook Russians up the most. Parsons (2014) would likely agree. In her ethnographic study of Russia's mortality crisis, she points to how the economic turmoil of the early 1990s, by disrupting individuals' ties to a long-standing social order, produced not only shorter-term material, but also longer-term psychological, hardships.

To presume that the exit from communism would similarly disrupt the psychologies of citizens elsewhere in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union would risk eliding an important distinction about Russians' experience. As Shevchenko (2008) puts it, "Russian citizens faced a rapid restructuring of social forms ... unaccompanied by a legitimating rhetoric of national liberation ... As a result, post-socialist Russians experienced [those years] as a form of betrayal and loss." When Putin, in 2005, famously described the collapse of the Soviet Union as "a major geopolitical disaster," he was only giving voice to a sentiment held by a solid majority of Russians. Russians had, after all, occupied positions of privilege in both the Soviet Union and the socialist world, more generally. As the Soviet external and internal empires dissolved about them, Russians may have been uniquely prone, when confronted by acute economic hardship, to fall back on illiberal "Soviet values."



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Drawing on a retrospective survey administered in 2006, Pyle (2021) shows that many Russians continued to bear scars from their life experiences, particularly in the labor market, in the early 1990s. Their individual fates during those “impressionable years,” when so much was so new for so many, forged their thinking as to the fundamental economic and political values that animated Russia’s transition away from communism. The same survey data, moreover, reveal that relative to the citizens of other post-communist nations, the emotional weight of those years, their capacity to transform lived experiences into enduring lessons, was particularly great for Russians.

Much has been written of late about the successes of neo-authoritarian regimes generally, and Putin’s government specifically, in exploiting control over television and other media to mold popular attitudes (Guriev and Treisman 2022). While not disputing the power of state propaganda in the hands of a popular dictator, we would highlight that in some very important respects, the Russian worldview in the Putin years remains quite consistent with that of Russians in the mid-1990s.

In their recent book, *Putin v. the People*, Greene and Robertson (2019) write that “in prioritizing an aggressive foreign policy, Putin is responding to – and seeking the support of – a large constituency within Russia itself.” The findings of Alexeev and Pyle (2023) comport with this perspective. Drawing on three waves of the International Social Survey Program from 1995 to 2013, they show that relative to a diverse group of middle- and high-income countries, Russia’s population has consistently been characterized by an exceptionally blind and militant form of patriotism. They thus concur with the conclusion of Greene and Robertson (2019) that “we need to think not of Putin’s Russia, but of Russia’s Putin. We need to understand that Putin is not above the country; he is of the country, of its politics, its society, and its history.” A primary point of ours here as it was in that earlier article is that Putin did not so much create as inherit a population with an unusually illiberal worldview.

DATA

We use the Integrated Values Survey (IVS), a combination of the European Values Study (EVS) and the World Values Survey (WVS), both of which are large-scale, cross-national, and repeated cross-sectional surveys that include many questions replicated over several decades. Russia’s inclusion in the IVS commences in 1990. Our focus here is on three waves, which we refer to below using their WVS wave numbers: 2, administered 1989–1993; 3, administered 1994–1998; and 7, administered 2017–2022. The Russian surveys, specifically, were carried out in 1990, 1995, and 2017. For comparison purposes, we incorporate responses from the eleven other post-communist countries that par-

ticipated in the same three waves: Belarus, Bulgaria, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia.

We create variables from four questions that address attitudes towards fundamental matters of politics and economics, with each coded such that higher values represent less support for the liberal economic and political project that animated the transition away from communism.

Two questions explore preferences over the proper role of the state in the economy. Both ask respondents to place their views on a 1–10 scale, with “1” in the first question representing “private ownership of business should be increased” and “10” representing “government ownership of business should be increased.” The average across all respondents is 5.30.

The scale on the second question ranges from “1,” “people should take more responsibility to provide for themselves,” to “10,” “the government should take more responsibility to ensure that everyone is provided for.” The average across all respondents is 5.77.

We use two other questions to gauge the degree to which respondents attach importance to democratic freedoms relative to other possible social objectives. For both, respondents are asked to select from a list of four possible responses the ones that they consider their first and their second priorities. One question, prefaced by the statement that “[p]eople sometimes talk about what the aim of the country should be for the next ten years,” asks, “Would you please say which one of these you consider the most important?” The possible responses include: (1) “a high level of economic growth,” (2) “making sure this country has strong defense forces,” (3) “seeing that people have more say about how things are done at their jobs and in their communities,” and (4) “trying to make our cities and countryside more beautiful.” Respondents are then asked which of the four they consider second most important. We code their responses in the following way: “1” if their top priority is something other than response (3), “0.5” if their second priority is response (3), and “0” otherwise. The average across all respondents is 0.77.

The second question asks, “If you had to choose, which one of [these] would you say is most important?” The possible answers are: (1) “maintaining order in the nation,” (2) “giving people more say in important government decisions,” (3) “fighting rising prices,” and (4) “protecting freedom of speech.” Respondents are then asked which of the four they consider second most important. We code their responses in the following way: “1” if their top priority is either response (1) or (3) and their second priority is also (1) or (3), “0.66” if their top priority is either response (1) or (3) and their second priority is either (2) or (4), “0.33” if their top priority is either response

(2) or (4) and their second priority is either (1) or (3), and “0” otherwise. The average across all respondents is 0.63.

We simplify the data by using factor analysis to combine the answers within each of the two pairs of questions.¹ One “factor” derives from the questions that reflect greater preference for an economically interventionist state; the other “factor” comes from the two questions that capture a lower prioritization of democratic outcomes relative to other social objectives.

After comparing Russian responses to those from other post-communist countries, we exploit regional location information in WVS Wave 7 to explore whether the decline in regional support for a liberal social order in the early 1990s explains more illiberal preferences in Wave 7. WVS Wave 7 respondents represent roughly three-quarters of Russia’s regions, with each region contributing on average about 30 respondents to the analysis.²

Our measure for a region’s drop in support for a liberal social order is the decline in its vote share for Boris Yeltsin between 1991 and 1996. Regional voting results come from the Electoral Geography project. For 1996, we use the results from the first rather than the second round because the 1991 election itself was the first round of a potential two-round election. Since Yeltsin garnered a majority in the first round in 1991, there was no need for a second. Another reason we do not use the second round of the

election in 1996 is that it was dogged by improprieties (Myagkov and Ordeshook 2008).

RESULTS

Table 1 presents rankings of post-communist countries according to how much their citizens embrace a state that plays a large role in the economy. In 1990, a year before the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russian respondents rank third in support for an economically interventionist state, behind both Poles and Belarussians. By 1995, they stand in the top position and remain there in 2017. Although the change in Russia’s rank between 1990 and 1995 is not substantial, the change in the numeric strength of their pro-statist orientation is. In 1990, the Russian index is only slightly higher than the average for the other countries in the sample. Between 1990 and 1995, the index jumps substantially. And between 1995 and 2017, it remains more or less stable.

We observe a similar pattern in Table 2. Russia ranks second across all three waves in terms of the degree to which its citizens de-prioritize democracy relative to other social objectives. However, the index measuring this attitude jumps for Russia from 0.02 in 1990 to 0.13 in 1995. In 2017, the index increases to 0.16, but the change compared to that in the early 1990s is quite modest.

Figure 1, by comparing Russians to the average across all the other post-communist countries, illustrates even more clearly that a large early-1990s shift in Russians’ attitudes preceded an extended period of more modest attitudinal change. This pattern certainly is suggestive of the possibility that Russians’ relative illiberalism in 2017 reflects more the gap that opened up in the early 1990s than any developments since that time. In other words, a possible reading of Figure 1 is that Russia’s illiberalism

¹ Factor analysis is a commonly used statistical technique to reduce the dimensionality of a set of variables while retaining as much of the original information as possible. We use Stata’s “factor” and “predict” commands to generate factor scores that estimate the underlying latent variable (the factor) that was extracted from the original variables.

² We are unaware of the degree to which the WVS in Wave 7 was designed to select representative samples of the population within each of the regions; we are also unaware of the degree to which WVS Wave 7 selected a representative sample of regions.

Table 1
Strong Preference for State Role in Economy

	Wave 2 1990		Wave 3 1995		Wave 7 2017
Belarus	0.21	Russia	0.18	Russia	0.17
Poland	0.14	Slovakia	0.15	Slovakia	0.08
Russia	0.08	Belarus	0.09	Latvia	0.06
Slovakia	0.07	Estonia	0.04	Poland	0.05
Lithuania	0.06	Hungary	0.02	Bulgaria	-0.01
Latvia	0.06	Latvia	0.00	Romania	-0.03
Hungary	0.02	Czechia	-0.07	Czechia	-0.04
Romania	-0.03	Poland	-0.08	Hungary	-0.06
Slovenia	-0.05	Bulgaria	-0.08	Lithuania	-0.11
Bulgaria	-0.05	Lithuania	-0.12	Estonia	-0.11
Estonia	-0.06	Slovenia	-0.15	Slovenia	-0.12
Czechia	-0.22	Romania	-0.22	Belarus	-0.13

Note: See text for description of variable that determines ranking.
Source: Authors’ own calculations.

Table 2

Weak Preference for Democracy

	Wave 2 1990		Wave 3 1995		Wave 7 2017
Romania	0.25	Hungary	0.16	Bulgaria	0.19
Russia	0.02	Russia	0.13	Russia	0.16
Hungary	0.02	Bulgaria	0.12	Romania	0.08
Estonia	0.02	Belarus	0.05	Belarus	0.08
Latvia	0.00	Romania	0.02	Lithuania	0.01
Czechia	0.00	Slovakia	0.00	Czechia	0.01
Slovakia	-0.01	Lithuania	0.00	Slovakia	0.00
Belarus	-0.03	Latvia	-0.02	Latvia	-0.07
Poland	-0.04	Poland	-0.07	Hungary	-0.13
Bulgaria	-0.05	Estonia	-0.08	Poland	-0.19
Lithuania	-0.05	Czechia	-0.09	Estonia	-0.24
Slovenia	-0.12	Slovenia	-0.31	Slovenia	-0.36

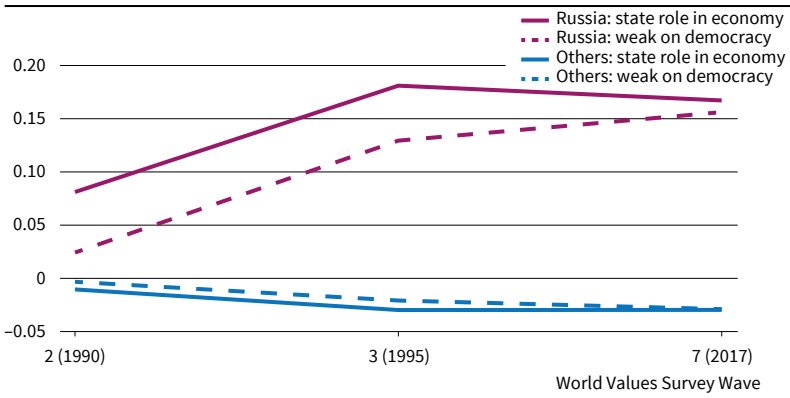
Note: See text for description of variable that determines ranking.
Source: Authors' own calculations.

under Putin, at least through 2017, is the outcome of an attitudinal shift that preceded his tenure as president.³

³ In unreported results, we explore whether the patterns observed in Figure 1 can be observed in distinct sub-groups of the population. In general terms, we observe the same patterns across both genders and across different generational cohorts.

Figure 1

Preferences across Time

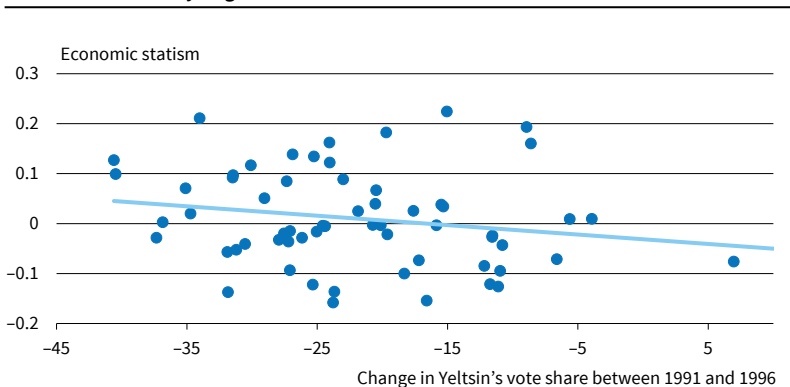


Source: Authors' calculations.

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Figure 2

Economic Statism by Region in 2017



Source: Authors' calculations.

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To explore this possibility further, we investigate whether a similar pattern holds within Russia itself. In other words, do attitudinal changes at the sub-national level in the early 1990s explain regional differences in illiberalism in 2017? Unfortunately, though we know the region in which respondents are located in Wave 7, we do not have that information for Waves 2 and 3. Instead, to assess the degree of early-1990s decline in support for the values that animated Russia's exit from communism, we use the decline in regional electoral support for Boris Yeltsin who fought his illiberal opponents for market economic reforms and greater democracy.

In line with the pattern in Figure 1, Figures 2 and 3 turn up evidence consistent with the crucial role of the "impressionable years." Respectively, they show that the decline in support for Yeltsin between the presidential elections of 1991 and 1996 explains greater illiberalism of WVS respondents in Wave 7. Circa 2017, regions in which Yeltsin's support dropped the most between 1991 and 1996 are, on balance, more supportive of an economically interventionist state and less likely to prioritize democratic freedoms over other social objectives.⁴

DISCUSSION AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

One reason for the early-1990s attitudinal shift in Russia could have been a backlash to the developments that followed in the wake of the Soviet Union's collapse at the end of 1991. WVS Wave 2 took place in 1990 when Russia was still a part of the Soviet Union and many respondents may still have held high

⁴ In simple bivariate regressions of average regional attitudes (first, with respect to economic statism, and second, with respect to the de-prioritization of democracy) on the change in Yeltsin's share in the presidential election between 1991 and 1996, the latter is a statistically significant predictor of the former at the 1 percent level of significance.

hopes for the transition to markets and democracy. Post-independence economic dislocation and political in-fighting likely dampened those hopes and soured the population on Yeltsin's liberal project. Indeed, in confirmation of the former, Natkhov and Pyle (2023) demonstrate that Yeltsin's support fell most dramatically between 1991 and 1996 in those sub-regional districts of Russia that were ex ante most vulnerable to market liberalization.

It is important to note, however, that the economic and political challenges of post-communist Russia were far from unique in the region. The countries in the comparison group here also experienced economic contraction and political in-fighting in the early 1990s. And yet Russia uniquely experienced a profound and enduring attitudinal shift. To sort out why, we believe it is important to return to what others have already highlighted. In Russia, the economic shock of the early 1990s was not cushioned by the sorts of national narratives of "liberation and independence" that sustained populations elsewhere in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union (Brudny and Finkel 2011; Krastev and Holmes 2019; Gaber et al. 2019). For Russians, almost uniquely, the economic shock was compounded by a shock to their national identity.

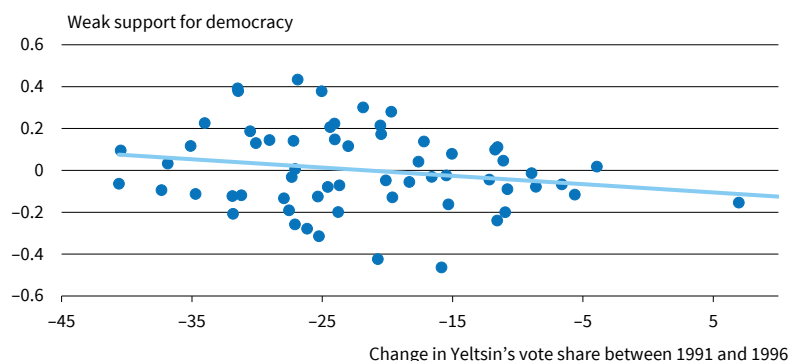
It is well known that soon after the turn of the century, Putin and his allies in the political and media elite began using the 1990s for political purposes as a kind of foil, referencing it as a decade synonymous with social disorder and economic collapse (Belmonte and Rochlitz 2019; Sharafutdinova 2020; Malinova 2021; McGlynn 2023). In using the 1990s for the purposes of a broader illiberal project, however, the evidence we provide here suggests that Putin et al. have been pushing on an open door. Russian society, primed by the economic and identity shocks of the early 1990s, Russia's "impressionable years," was already ready to be led in the direction that Putin chose to take it.

For policymakers, it is important to be clear-eyed about the Russia that eventually emerged from the Soviet Union's collapse. Should Putin somehow leave the scene in the near to medium term, the world would still be confronted by a deeply illiberal society, one whose core beliefs run very much counter to those in the countries to its west. Indeed, there is a strong case to be made that Russia's illiberalism is more Putin's inheritance than his creation.

The brutal and unprovoked invasion of Ukraine places in sharp relief the frustration of hopes held for Russia, both at home and abroad, just over three decades ago. Instead of becoming a more open and peaceful society in the aftermath of the Soviet Union's collapse, Russia quickly made an illiberal turn and, with time, became more bellicose and hostile to its neighbors. Putin's decision to invade a peaceful Ukraine in February 2022 has led to unimaginable suffering in the months since. He alone is responsible. And nothing that we have written here should

Figure 3

Weakness of Democratic Support by Region in 2017



Source: Authors' calculations.

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distract from that fact. Nor should anything we have written distract from the fact that many Russians do not support his illiberal regime. Indeed, even during the war, tens of thousands have courageously spoken out publicly against it. But, alas, Russia is a country of tens of millions and history's hand is heavy.

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