Political Succession in Russia

CREEES was pleased to host the 32nd Annual Stanford/Berkeley Conference on Russia, East European & Eurasian Studies on Friday, March 7, 2008. This year’s conference “Political Succession in Russia” was held in the immediate aftermath of the March 2nd Russian Presidential Election that resulted in the election of Dmitry Medvedev as the third President of the Russian Federation. Conference panelists put the recent election results in historical perspective and considered what they might signify for the future of Russia and the world.

John Dunlop, Interim Director of CREEES and Hoover Institution Senior Fellow, served as host and moderator of the daylong conference held in the Stauffer Auditorium of the Hoover Institution. The morning panel featured historians and literary scholars discussing political successions of the medieval, Tsarist and Soviet periods. The two afternoon panels were composed of political scientists and social science researchers analyzing the recent Russian Presidential Election from a variety of perspectives. Yuri Slezkine, Professor of History and Director of the Institute of Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies (ISEEES) at UC Berkeley, delivered the closing remarks.

Proceedings of “Political Succession in Russia” may be viewed online at FORA TV, a public affairs web portal partnered with C-SPAN. Visit the CREEES website homepage for quick links to streaming video of lectures and discussions of the conference panelists.

CREEES and UC Berkeley’s ISEEES co-sponsor the annual Stanford/Berkeley Conference. The first joint conference was held in Berkeley in 1977, and since then the conference has alternated location each year between the Berkeley and Stanford campuses. The next joint conference (topic to be determined) will be held on the Berkeley campus on Friday, March 6, 2009.

This conference was made possible, in part, by US Department of Education Title VI funding.

Panel One: Political Successions of the Medieval, Tsarist and Soviet Periods

The first panel at the 2008 Stanford-Berkeley Conference “Political Succession in Russia” focused on the history of such successions prior to the fall of the Soviet Union. Presenters included Monica White (post-doctoral Humanities Fellow in the Stanford Slavic Department, 2007-08, and Assistant Professor of Russian Studies, University of Nottingham), Harsha Ram (Associate Professor of Slavic and Comparative Literature, UC Berkeley), Robert Crews (Assistant Professor of History, Stanford), and Amir Weiner (Associate Professor of History, Stanford). CREEES director, Gabriella Safran (Associate Professor of Slavic Languages and Literature) moderated.

In the first talk, Monica White discussed the Russian transition from Communism in light of the country’s medieval historical roots. In doing so, she reassessed the legitimacy of appealing to the historical precedent of Russian autocracy as a reason for the failure of the consolidation of democracy in contemporary Russia.

Harsha Ram, who delivered the second talk, spoke on the political valence of the verse of the great Russian Romantic poet Alexander Pushkin. Ram analyzed poems that revealed the poet’s intimate and often problematic relationship with the Russian political system. He also discussed Pushkin’s interest in and reflections on the nature of dynastic succession in Russia in the 19th century.

Robert Crews discussed monarchy and the drama of succession in imperial Russia. His talk contextualized the legacy of Russian President Vladimir Putin within the history of monarchy as a regime type in Russia. He first described the mechanics of Russian monarchy and then described how the general historical principles of the institution of Russian monarchy relate to Putin’s regime and the succession of President Dmitry Medvedev. Crews, moreover, underscored the critical role that foreign powers have played in the succession games in Central Asia and how the familial, dynastic succession in these regions differs from the situation in which Putin finds himself. Crews also compared the concept of dynastic succession to the state of contemporary American presidential politics.

Amir Weiner, who gave the final presentation of the morning panel, spoke on Stalin’s successors and the Communist Party in 1953. Affirming that the legacy of Tsarism is very much alive in Russia today, he analyzed the relevance of the 1953 succession to contemporary politics.

Panel Two: The Putin-to-X Succession, Part I

The second panel featured panelists Pavel Podvig (Research Associate, Center for International Security and Cooperation, Stanford), M. Steven Fish (Professor of Political Science, UC Berkeley), and Kathryn Stoner-Weiss (Associate Director of Research, Center on Democracy, Development, and the Rule of Law, Stanford). Kenneth Jowitt (Professor of Political Science, UC Berkeley and the Pres and Maurine Hotchkis Senior Fellow, the Hoover Institution) served as moderator.

Pavel Podvig began the discussion with a presentation on the changes and continuities in the Russian military industry. He analyzed the effects of trends in military and government interaction on the Putin administration and the future Medvedev administration. “The military industrial complex is very strong and resilient,” he asserted, “but it is not impossible to change it.” These concluding remarks brought a hopeful tone to the discussion of the future of the Russian military industrial complex.

Kenneth Jowitt, Pavel Podvig, M. Steven Fish, Kathryn Stoner-Weiss

Steven Fish posed the seemingly unanswerable question of why Russians have chosen autocracy. He followed this up by asking whether or not a possibility for change exists within the current situation. He emphasized that we know very little about popular opinion: we know that Putin is very popular, yet this still does not explain the popular embrace of autocracy as a system. He outlined the connections between oil politics and the collapse of democratic principles, and spoke on the weakness of state capacity as another reason for the increased acceptance of autocratic principles. From what we know now, he pointed out, Russia had a 55 percent chance of failing in its pursuit of democracy just because of structural factors.

Kathryn Stoner-Weiss analyzed the potential legacy of Putin’s policies for the Medvedev administration.

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administration. She demonstrated the overwhelming extent to which Medvedev has relied on Putin for political stability and continuity as the legitimizing factor for his own presidency. Furthermore, she explained that the increase in GDP has been falsely attributed to the consolidation of autocracy as embodied in the Putin presidency. This, she continued, would be likely to influence the policy goals of Medvedev as well. Potential problems for Medvedev include: high expectations for his abilities and accomplishments, expectations for the maintenance of economic growth, and the issues of rising inflation (nearing 10 percent this year), social welfare, and corruption.

Panel Three: The Putin-to-X Succession, Part II

The third panel consisted of three talks on current and future Russian politics and foreign relations delivered by Michael McFaul (Professor of Political Science, Senior Fellow at the Hoover Institution, and Director of the Center on Democracy, Development and the Rule of Law, Stanford), Gail Lapidus (Professor Emerita of Political Science, UC Berkeley and Senior Fellow Emerita at the Freeman Spogli Institute, Stanford), and Edward Walker (Associate Adjunct Professor of Political Science, UC Berkeley and Executive Director, Berkeley Program in Eurasian and East European Studies). The panel was moderated by Michael Urban (Professor of Politics, UC Santa Cruz).

Michael McFaul examined recent trends in foreign relations between America and Russia in his talk "Change and Continuity in US-Russian Relations." McFaul said that for approximately two decades before Presidents Bush and Putin took office, both Russia and the United States have shared the strategic policy objective of Russian integration with the West. By the end of the 1990s, however, this policy had faded and become exhausted.

President Bush decided that Russia was weak and insignificant, and should not be an important player on the international stage. The events of September 11th, moreover, created a false honeymoon between the US and Russia, as the two countries united in a common struggle against terrorism. As the war in Iraq became a major policy issue, however, Russia faded into the background; additionally, the democratic erosion in Russia created tensions between Putin and the West. Russia began to believe that it was strong enough to be unilaterally powerful – without integration or help from the West.

McFaul admitted that there are some fresh ideas for US-Russia relations among the candidates for the 2008 presidential election in the US, but that US-Russian relations will most likely continue under the next president without major policy shifts, though there may be new confrontations and tensions.

In her talk "Between Assertion and Insecurity: Russian Elite Attitudes under Putin," Gail Lapidus pointed out two features that have characterized the most recent years of the Putin presidency: an increased assertiveness about Russia's international influence and an extreme anxiety and insecurity about Russia's domestic stability. These have been manifested not only in international aggression but also in domestic assertiveness and the attempt to control all aspects of Russian society.

Russia's assertiveness has been a result, in part, of growing disenchantment with the Bush administration, differing opinions about the Colored Revolutions (the Orange Revolution in Ukraine and the Rose Revolution in Georgia, for instance), the awareness that Russia does not necessarily desire to emulate the West, and Russia's burgeoning influence as an energy superpower. The Russian government believes that its era of economic and political weakness is over, and a new assertiveness has been captured in the political idea of Russia as a "sovereign democracy." The emphasis on "democracy" is intended to dispute the charge that Russia is moving toward autocracy; meanwhile, the word "sovereign" conveys Russia's rejection of the West's tutelage. This new assertive conception of sovereignty has led Russia to challenge the norms and rules of the international arena, restrict the impact of international, legal, and economic bodies, break treaties, and justify new actions such as increasing state control of the media, oil, infrastructure, and other sectors of society.

Meanwhile, the Russian government is highly insecure about the state of domestic affairs in Russia, in part because of globalization, and in part because of increasing Western influence in neighboring states. As a result, Russia has increased measures to control society and returned to the discourse of "the enemy" in regard to the West. The image of a malevolent "enemy" is used to justify repressive measures against the public, eliminate checks on power, and limit political competition. These are measures, however, which undermine transparency and accountability, as well as the existence of civil society in Russia. As a consequence of these actions, corruption continues to flourish, and this is harmful to modernization.

In the future, Lapidus predicted that Medvedev, Putin's successor, will continue to emphasize stability and continuity in Russian government and society; increasing security and continued anti-Western sentiments will probably be part of his policy. However, in the long term, dissatisfaction among some elites concerning impediments preventing the improvement of conditions in Russia could spark change and even conflict in Russian society.

Edward Walker delivered the final talk of this panel "Base, Superstructure, and the Sustainability of Putinism." Walker, addressing the question "What can we expect to happen to Putin's legacy in the next eight years?", wondered whether the autocratic structure developed by Putin could survive, or if it would be undermined by factors such as a market economy or a growing middle class. He also emphasized that it is extremely difficult to make predictions about Russia because it is shrouded in uncertainty; the regime is weak institutionally and the policies and politics are opaque. Political practices changed a great deal under Putin, and informal practices and norms are very important, but the regime is still malleable.

Walker emphasized that there are many things about Russia and Russian politics that are uncertain or unknown, and these uncertainties and unknowns could prove to be most important. For example, we do not know the true nature of the relationship between Medvedev and Putin, or how they will share executive power, and if that will work. The public really knows very little about Medvedev in general. We don't know what will happen to the Russian economy, or if fate will smile or frown on Russia over the course of the next few years.

Walker also made several predictions about what can be expected over the course of Medvedev's presidency. He contended that we can expect that the regime's formal institutions will not change dramatically, the broad outlines of the economy will probably not change either, the Russian public and elite will remain "Statist" in their political orientation, corruption will be difficult to uproot, the North Caucasus will continue to be a trouble spot for Russia, Russians will remain cynical about politics, and the Russian state will continue to insist on its right to behave as a great power in the world.

Walker concluded that the main sources of instability in Russia do not come from below, but from inside the state itself. Although the unpredictable often occurs and there is great uncertainty about Russia's future, he is more optimistic about the possibility of positive changes developing in Russia.

The panel concluded with a question-and-answer period and an interesting discussion between panelists and audience members. Yuri Slezkin wrapped up the conference with his concluding remarks.

Monique Smith, Allison Glass, and Susan Skoda contributed to this report.