

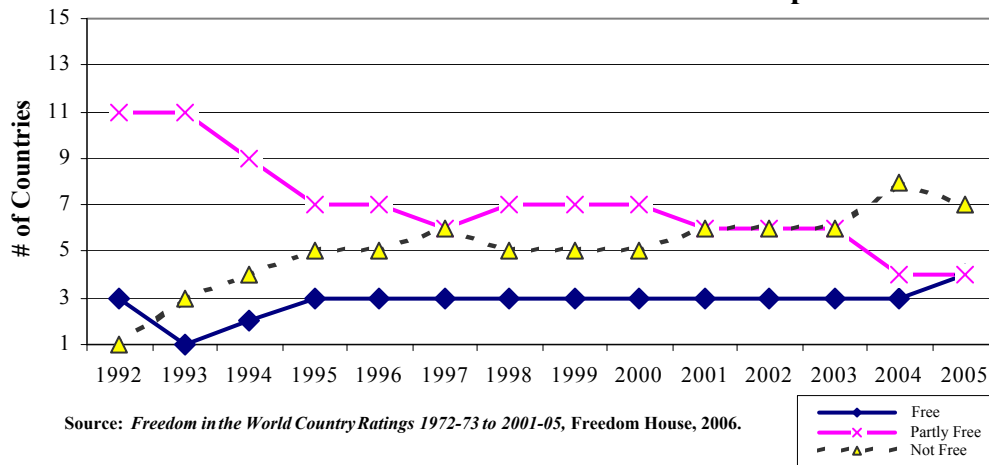
RUSSIA AND THE OTHER FORMER SOVIET REPUBLICS IN TRANSITION

LESSON 2: POLITICS AND GOVERNMENT UPDATE

By late 2006, the fifteen independent states that once made up the Soviet Union had adopted many forms of government, but political freedom and democratization had taken strong root only in the Baltic states, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. After the Orange Revolution in 2004, Ukraine showed some promise of democratization. In the other eleven states, governments ranged from semidemocratic to authoritarian (see Chart 1). This update provides an overview of the evolution of politics and government in the former Soviet republics from 1998 through mid-2006. It can be incorporated at the teacher's discretion into the Lesson 2 activities in *Russia and the Other Former Soviet Republics in Transition*.

Chart 1

Political Freedom in the Former Soviet Republics



(Click here for enlarged version of chart)

Russia

When the Soviet Union dissolved in 1991, Russia abandoned communism and claimed to embark on a path that would lead to a stable, democratic government. However, the path has proven to be rocky. Despite many real improvements, Russia's government continued to show signs of authoritarianism and instability. For instance, in just seventeen months between March 1998 and August 1999, President Boris Yeltsin fired four prime ministers and appointed a fifth, former KGB head Vladimir Putin.

In 1998, foreign banks and investors saw flaws in Russia's economy and pulled their money out of the country. This action contributed to the country's instability. Due in large part to public outcry against the hardships caused by economic reforms, the Communist Party won the most seats in the 1999 parliamentary elections. Other opposition parties also did well. Yeltsin's Unity Party came in second. Then, in December 1999, Yeltsin unexpectedly resigned, and Putin replaced him on an interim basis, thereby increasing the chances he would win the 2000 presidential election. Soon after winning the election, Putin took initiatives to restore effective state power, raising fears about his authoritarian tendencies. He strengthened the federal

government's control over the country's regional governors, who had been ignoring Yeltsin's decrees.

In late 2001, the Duma passed a Putin-supported law setting requirements for political parties to participate in elections. Putin's supporters claimed the law was needed to reduce Russia's two hundred parties to a manageable number, but critics said the measure limited opposing viewpoints. Then, in 2002, a Russian court ruled that the last independent television station, which had often criticized Putin, had to close because it was in financial distress.

In the December 2003 parliamentary elections, the pro-government United Russia Party won the most votes (37 percent). Together with its allies, it achieved an absolute majority, allowing it to change the constitution. This strengthened Putin's position before the presidential election in 2004, which he won overwhelmingly with over 70 percent of the vote. However, opposition and international observers claimed that the results of both elections were distorted due to a pro-government media bias.

The war in Chechnya has also threatened political stability in Russia. In late 1999, a wave of terrorist bombings exploded across the country, killing nearly three hundred people. Chechen rebels also launched attacks into Dagestan, an autonomous republic within Russia that borders Chechnya. These events led Putin to send troops back into Chechnya and initiate a massive bombing campaign. This offensive reduced Chechnya's capital, Grozny, to rubble and forced hundreds of thousands of Chechens to flee their homes. Although Russian forces occupied 90 percent of the Chechen territory, they were unable to subdue the separatist republic. In late 2002, the Chechen insurgents staged a series of deadly suicide bombings in Russian cities. In one of them, Chechen rebels took over a Moscow theater and held over eight hundred people hostage. Russian troops stormed the theater, using gas in an attempt to liberate the captives. All the terrorists and over 120 hostages were killed.

Seeking to end the war, the Russian government in early 2003 held a referendum on a Chechen constitution that would bind Chechnya to Russia. The government claimed that 96 percent of those who voted supported it. In October 2003, Akhmad Kadyrov, a local cleric loyal to Moscow, was elected president of Chechnya. However, in May 2004, Kadyrov was assassinated. In August, the republic held a special presidential election, and replaced Kadyrov with another Kremlin-backed candidate, Major General Alu Alkhanov. A series of terrorist attacks, all claimed by Chechen rebel leader Shamil Basayev, followed. For example, in August, suicide bombers crashed two passenger aircraft within minutes of each other after takeoff from Moscow. And in another incident, terrorists set off an explosion in a Moscow underground station and killed nearly one hundred people. On September 1, heavily armed militants seized a school in Beslan, North Ossetia, a province neighboring Chechnya, and took more than 1,300 people hostage. The three-day standoff ended in a hail of gunfire and explosions that killed 331 people, more than half of them children. Thirty-one of the 32 militants were killed. In October 2005, the Chechen fighters launched a major assault on several buildings associated with Russian security forces in Nalchik, capital of the North Caucasus Republic of Kabardino-Balkaria. Over two days, clashes between Russian forces and rebels killed more than one hundred people. The Nalchik attack, in which foreign Islamic fighters fought alongside the Chechen rebels, raised fears that a

decade of war had radicalized the Chechen insurgency, and that the Chechen conflict had spread to the entire north Caucasus region.

In the aftermath of the gruesome siege in Beslan, Putin took more controversial steps to consolidate the Kremlin's power, claiming it was necessary to fight terrorism and separatism. In 2004, he replaced Russia's directly elected governors with government appointees. In 2005, he signed into law a bill that ended elections of independent candidates for parliament, raised the threshold for parties to get parliament seats, prohibited parties from uniting into blocs ahead of elections, and allowed officials to bar foreign election observers. And in 2006, Putin signed a law restricting activities of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), many of which are involved in human rights.

These steps fueled debate about Putin's authoritarian tendencies. His critics maintain that he has been instituting autocratic policies in the tradition of previous Russian leaders. Despite this criticism, Putin's approval ratings remain high, reaching 77 percent in mid-2006.¹ His supporters see him as the president who brought the economy back, stabilized the government, raised people's standard of living, and is tough on terrorism. They contrast his rule with the economic chaos and political instability of Yeltsin's tenure.

The Other Slavic States: Ukraine and Belarus

In 2005, the other two Slavic states, Ukraine and Belarus, took different paths in their transition to democracy. Following the Orange Revolution, Ukraine became the first non-Baltic former Soviet state ranked "free" by Freedom House. Belarus, on the other hand, became even more repressive.

Ukraine. In 1999, Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma won a second term in the presidential election, which was criticized by international election observers as riddled with violations. The next year, he expanded his powers at the expense of parliament in a controversial referendum. Also in 2000, scandal rocked the government with the release of tapes allegedly linking Kuchma to the murder of a journalist critical of his regime. Calls for Kuchma's impeachment grew in 2001 after his supporters allied with the Communist Party and ousted Prime Minister Viktor Yushchenko, popular for his economic reforms and fight against corruption. Yushchenko then formed the opposition party, Our Ukraine, which won the most seats in the March 2002 parliamentary elections. However, Kuchma's party, For a United Ukraine, retained control of parliament through a coalition with independents. The international observers characterized the election as flawed, but an improvement from the 1998 election.

In 2004, President Kuchma completed his second and last term as president. In the campaign leading to the 2004 presidential election, pro-Western Yushchenko emerged as the main opposition candidate. He faced Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovich, who favored closer ties with Russia and was endorsed by President Kuchma and Russian President Vladimir Putin. The government's intimidation of the opposition and provocations characterized the campaign. In the election runoff, despite exit polls that showed Yushchenko with a clear lead, Ukraine's electoral commission declared Yanukovich the victor. The declaration, along with evidence of widespread election fraud, prompted daily street protests by close to 500,000 Ukrainians, who

demanded that Yushchenko be declared the winner. These protests became known as the Orange Revolution, named after Yushchenko's campaign color.

After twelve days of domestic protests and international pressure, Ukraine's Supreme Court dismissed the election results, ordering a rerun of the election. In December, Yushchenko easily won the election, receiving 52 percent of the vote over Yanukovich's 44 percent. Yanukovich reluctantly conceded defeat and resigned. Also, the Ukrainian parliament reopened an inquiry into Yushchenko's claims that his opponents poisoned him during the election campaign. Medical tests conducted by independent labs showed that Yushchenko's blood contained an extremely high level of TCDD, one of the most toxic chemicals.

Following Yushchenko's victory, the new president faced the daunting task of uniting the highly fractured country. Within months, the fragility of the coalition that had brought Yushchenko to power became apparent as infighting and allegations of corruption took hold. Also, opinion polls showed public dissatisfaction. Over half of Ukrainians said that Yushchenko's government had failed to fulfill campaign promises of tackling corruption, bolstering the economy, and moving Ukraine closer to European Union membership. In response, in September 2005, Yushchenko dismissed his cabinet, which was headed by a prominent figure of the Orange Revolution, Yulia Tymoshenko.

In March 2006, Ukraine held parliamentary elections hailed by the international observers as the most free and fair in the country's history. President Yushchenko's party finished behind the pro-Russian Party of Regions led by his former rival Viktor Yanukovich and Yulia Tymoshenko's party. After months of deadlock, a coalition of pro-Russian socialists and communists was formed. It nominated Viktor Yanukovich prime minister.

Belarus. Belarus, on the other hand, has been plagued by authoritarianism. President Alexander Lukashenko harasses dissenters, suppresses opposition, and has closed independent media. Indeed, since becoming president in 1994, Lukashenko has reintroduced many aspects of the Soviet life, including the Soviet-era Belarusian flag and anthem, the command economy, and the police state. In October 2004, Belarusian voters amended the constitution to allow Lukashenko to run for a third term in a referendum considered flawed by Western observers. Lukashenko has also pursued talks with Russia on an ambitious plan of unification. In 2006, the two countries signed a number of accords, including deals on social and medical services and easing travel. Both sides also made plans to adopt a single currency in 2008.

Following the 2004 popular upheavals in two post-Soviet republics, Georgia and Ukraine, Lukashenko intensified his attacks on civil rights activists. Then, in March 2006, Lukashenko received 82 percent of the vote in a presidential election described by international observers as flawed. The democratic opposition, unified behind a single candidate, Alexander Milinkevich, mobilized people for mass protests demanding a fresh vote. After several days, however, the riot police broke up the protests and arrested dozens of demonstrators. Although small in scale, the protests were unprecedented for Belarus.

The Baltic States

Democracy has taken strong roots in the Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania) since the collapse of the Soviet Union. In 2004, they became members of NATO and the European Union. Nevertheless, some challenges remain. Each country still needs to battle corruption, strengthen democracy and the rule of law, and better protect the rights of minorities.

Estonia. In Estonia, after the resignation of Prime Minister Mart Laar in 2002, the pro-business Reform Party and the Center Party formed a coalition under Prime Minister Siim Kallas. Power was transferred peacefully. It changed hands again following March 2003 general elections. After coalition talks, President Ruutel appointed pro-EU Res Publica leader Juhan Parts to be prime minister. When, in March 2005, Parts' government collapsed after a no-confidence vote by the parliament, center-right Reform Party Chairman Andrus Ansip became prime minister, leading a coalition of the Reform, Center, and People's Union parties.

In 2000, Estonia adopted e-government, becoming the only government in the world using the Web-based document system. Ministers draft bills, vote, and sign the laws entirely online. In an effort to bring the government closer to the people, Estonia established an e-democracy Web site, which enables citizens to access all government bodies, comment on bills, and submit ideas for new legislations. In October 2005, for the first time, Estonians e-voted in local elections.

Latvia. Latvia's political scene has been characterized by high voter turnout and the participation of dozens of political parties. While this can be interpreted as a sign of a healthy democracy, it has generally resulted in rule by fractious and unstable coalition governments, a situation similar to that seen in Italy and Israel. In late 2002, a pro-business government headed by Prime Minister Einars Repse took power, but it collapsed in 2003. The next government, headed by Indulis Emsis, fell in 2004 after parliament voted against the 2005 budget. A new coalition government, led by Prime Minister Aigars Kalvitis, took office in December 2004. His government was Latvia's twelfth in thirteen years of independence, all center-right. As for the less powerful presidency, in 2003 the Latvian parliament reelected President Vaira Vike-Freiberga for another four-year term. She is a compromise candidate with no party affiliation and remains one of the most popular politicians in Latvia.

Lithuania. In Lithuania in 2003, Rolandas Paksas won the presidency, beating incumbent Valdas Adamkus, Lithuania's president from 1998 to 2003. However, in March 2004, parliament impeached and dismissed Paksas from office after a parliamentary inquiry found he had links to Russian organized crime. Adamkus then replaced Paksas. Following the 2004 general elections, in which no party won a majority of seats in parliament, Adamkus nominated Algirdas Brazauskas, a leader of the Social Democratic Party, to be prime minister. Brazauskas then formed a power-sharing coalition government.

The Central Asian States

Authoritarian rule predominates in Central Asian states. Social and political freedoms such as freedom of speech, the press, and religion are restricted, and elections have been marred by fraud and intimidation.

The September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in the United States and subsequent war in Afghanistan focused attention on Central Asia. These events had a dramatic effect on the region's political landscape as Central Asian states and the United States found mutual interest in the war on terrorism. The United States hoped its presence in the region would encourage progress towards democracy and improved human rights. However, improvements have ranged from modest to nonexistent, with only Kyrgyzstan making some progress.

Kyrgyzstan. In Kyrgyzstan, the jailing of opposition leader Azimbek Beknazarov led to protests in March 2002, during which Kyrgyz police killed six people. After more demonstrations, the government stepped down, but President Aksar Akayev stayed in power despite calls for his resignation. In February and March 2005, charges of widespread violations in the country's parliamentary elections triggered new street protests, later known as the Tulip Revolution. They culminated on March 24 when protesters took control of government buildings in the capital city of Bishkek and forced President Akayev to flee the country. Parliament approved opposition leader Kurmanbek Bakiyev as acting president and prime minister, and in July 2005, Bakiyev was elected president with 89 percent of the vote. Election monitors said the polls showed real progress in meeting international standards.

However, within months, the momentum behind the revolution began to wane. It had not overturned the results of the earlier fraudulent parliamentary election. Bakiyev has encountered resistance from parliamentarians, who block key legislations and hinder political and economic reforms. He also faced the growing influence of organized crime, political assassinations, and increasing popular unrest, as people became frustrated with a slow progress in reforms.

Kazakhstan. In Kazakhstan, President Nursultan Nazarbayev has held firm control since 1991. Elections have been flawed and opposition suppressed. In 2002, for example, the courts sentenced an opposition leader, Mukhtar Ablyazov, to six years in prison. In the September 2004 parliamentary elections, the pro-government Otan (Fatherland) Party won a plurality of seats, and most other seats were filled by allied parties. The only opposition candidate to win a seat refused it to protest election violations.

In August 2005, Kazakhstan's Constitutional Council ruled that presidential elections would be held in December 2005, a year earlier than expected, leaving opposition parties little time to organize. Ahead of elections, the government took steps to halt the trend of democratic "revolutions" that had appeared in the region by clamping down on international NGOs and independent media, and by shutting down the opposition Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan. In an election that failed to meet international standards, Nazarbayev won a third seven-year term with 91 percent of the vote. Murders of two prominent opposition figures in 2005 and 2006, vocal critics of Nazarbayev, stunned the nation. The opposition insists that both killings were politically motivated.

Tajikistan. In Tajikistan, the government claimed in June 2003 that over 90 percent of voters supported an amendment to the constitution that let the president run for a further two consecutive seven-year terms. This change allows current President Emomali Rakhmonov to stay in power until the year 2020. In 2004 and 2005, the government increased its pressure on

dissidents ahead of parliamentary elections by arresting opposition leaders and cracking down on the media. The ruling party won practically all seats in the lower house of parliament in the February 2005 elections, which were criticized by international election monitors.

Turkmenistan. In 2006, Turkmenistan remained one of the most repressive countries in the world. An authoritarian president-for-life, Saparmurat Niyazov has created a cult of personality around himself. The country has one party, Niyazov's Democratic Party of Turkmenistan, virtually no opposition, and no independent media.

In 2002, after an alleged assassination attempt, Niyazov cracked down on both real and perceived opposition, jailing forty-six people. In the December 2004 parliamentary elections, the candidates had to be approved by the president, and no foreign observers were allowed in the country. As part of radical health care reforms, Niyazov closed all hospitals in 2005, except for those in the capital city of Ashgabat, and dismissed thousands of medical personnel. Civil rights activists accused him of shutting down public services in order to fund vast projects glorifying his regime. In an attempt to "protect Turkmen culture," Niyazov banned recorded music, opera, ballet, and long hair or beards for young men.

Uzbekistan. In Uzbekistan, the 2002 referendum extended President Islam Karimov's term from five to seven years until December 2007. Most international observers did not recognize the results of the vote, dismissing it as flawed. Karimov uses the perceived threat of Islamic militancy to justify his repressive approach to any opposition.

In 2004, suicide bombings and violent clashes killed fifty people. The government blamed Islamic extremists and launched a crackdown on religious dissidents, whom it sees as political rivals. Continued human rights violations led the United States to cut its nonhumanitarian aid to Uzbekistan. The human rights situation took another turn for the worse in May 2005 when Uzbek troops opened fire on a crowd of demonstrators in Andijan, who were protesting the jailing of local men on charges of "Islamic extremism." Human rights groups reported that as many as 1,000 people may have been killed, though authorities confirmed only 187 casualties. Following the unrest, Karimov's government imprisoned 150 people, expelled foreign press, and shut down NGOs.

The Transcaucasus States

Democratization and political reform in Transcaucasus states, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, have progressed slowly, with Georgia being a front-runner. All three have a long-term goal of becoming more integrated with the West. Armenia and Azerbaijan continue negotiating a settlement over a disputed region of Nagorno-Karabakh. There has been an uneasy cease-fire agreement between the two countries since 1994.

Georgia. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Georgia was perceived as having great potential to institute meaningful political and economic reforms. Instead it descended into inefficiency, corruption, and cronyism under President Eduard Shevardnadze. In 2001, the country's political problems deepened as protests erupted in the wake of a government crackdown on the media. Georgia's situation became even more difficult as several ethnic

movements fought for independence and as the war in Chechnya spilled into the country. Because Chechen rebels used bases and supply routes in Georgia, Russia bombed Georgian territory, killing Georgian citizens. In 2002, the United States sent two hundred Special Forces personnel to train and equip the Georgian military and to help Georgia reassert its control over the border with Chechnya. Although the program officially ended in April 2004, the U.S. military assistance to Georgia continues.

Public outcry over the November 2003 parliamentary elections triggered massive protests against Shevardnadze because the election was viewed as rigged. Mikhail Saakashvili, the leader of the opposition National Movement, led thousands of people in antigovernment protests and called for the president to step down. In what came to be known as the “Rose Revolution,” Shevardnadze resigned in late November, and in January 2004, Saakashvili won a landslide victory in the presidential elections. Saakashvili took on the task of restoring authority over Georgia’s separatist regions, rebuilding the country’s failed economy, and fighting rampant corruption. In early 2004, he restored Georgia’s control over the province of Ajaria by ousting Aslan Abashidze, a renegade leader who had ruled the region for over a decade. However, the political status of the breakaway provinces of Abkhazia and South Ossetia is still unresolved.

Azerbaijan. In Azerbaijan, President General Heydar Aliyev, a former KGB officer and first secretary of the Azerbaijani Communist Party, did little to initiate democratic reforms after the end of the Soviet Union. International observers characterized the 2000 Azeri parliamentary elections as completely flawed. In 2002, opposition leaders and international observers charged that a referendum that changed the constitution to allow Aliyev to transfer power to his son was fraudulent. Ilham Aliyev won a landslide victory in the October 2003 presidential election followed by violent protests of the opposition. The younger Aliyev moved quickly to consolidate his control by dismissing holdovers from his father’s administration.

The 2005 elections brought in a much more diverse parliament, with some opposition members and independents, but still more than half the seats went to members from the president’s party. Election observers say that although the vote showed some improvements in the democratic process, it fell short of international standards. Police used violence to disperse opposition protesters demanding a rerun.

Armenia. Democracy and reform fared no better in Armenia. The harsh living conditions in Armenia are reflected in the fact that during the first decade of independence, about half the country’s population fled the country. President Levon Ter-Petrosyan gained power in 1991 and ruled autocratically until he resigned in 1998 amid controversy over compromises on the disputed territory of Nagorno-Karabakh. In an election widely seen as fraudulent, Prime Minister Robert Kocharian then became president. Power struggles between Kocharian and parliament led to more political paralysis and economic decline. The situation worsened in 1999 when gunmen stormed the parliament, killing Prime Minister Vazgen Sargsian and other top officials. The opposition and many Armenians speculated that Kocharian orchestrated the assault to silence foes, but they failed to prove it. Kocharian then used the crisis to consolidate power and overcome several attempts to impeach him. In March 2003, Robert Kocharian was reelected president with 67 percent of the vote amid widespread charges of fraud.

Moldova

Despite fair elections and modest economic reforms, Moldova in 2006 was the poorest country in Europe, with a monthly salary of about \$102.² In 1999, Moldova's difficulties prompted President Petru Lucinschi to try to increase his power, arguing that only a strong president could bring political and economic stability. His efforts were rebuffed by Moldova's legislature. In 2000, Parliament changed Moldova from a presidential to a parliamentary democracy, with the president elected by parliamentary vote. After a period of political gridlock, new elections were held in 2001, with the Communist Party winning 71 of 101 parliamentary seats. The parliament then elected Communist Party leader Vladimir Voronin president. Thus Moldova became the first former communist country to return an unreformed communist to power.

Voronin has faced many challenges, including a weak economy, endemic corruption, high unemployment, and a large foreign debt. He also inherited problems with the separatist regime that controls the country's breakaway Trans-Dniester region. At first, Voronin promised closer ties with Russia, including a possible joining of the proposed Russia-Belarus union. This changed in 2003 after Voronin rejected a Russia-sponsored plan to turn Moldova into a federation and grant the breakaway Trans-Dniester region more autonomy as well as the power to veto legislation affecting the country as a whole. His decision followed mass protests and accusations that the plan would give Moscow too much influence. Voronin called for the West to help resolve the Trans-Dniester conflict.

In the meantime, Moldova has had little control over the Trans-Dniester region, where illegal trade, weapons proliferation, and human trafficking remain major problems. The relations with the breakaway region soured further in mid-2004, when the Dniester authorities closed six Moldovan-language schools. In response, Moldova imposed economic sanctions on the Dniester region, halted negotiations, and criticized Russia for actively supporting the separatist regime and perpetuating the stalemate.

In 2005, President Voronin was reappointed for a second term following the March parliamentary elections, which the communists won again. The elections were seen as fair by international observers. Since his new term, Voronin has become an avid proponent of Moldova's integration with Europe.

Bozena Radwanska-Zayac, Christopher L. Brown, Daniel S. Papp
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For information more recent than this update, please visit the timelines at www.southerncenter.org.

¹ Valentinas Mite, *Will Putin Pursue Third Term, Or Will It Pursue Him?* Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, June 14, 2006.

² U.S. State Department, Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs, "U.S. Government Assistance to and Cooperative Activities with Eurasia," January 2006, <http://www.state.gov/p/eur/rls/rpt/63177.htm> (accessed on June 26, 2006).