Russia and the Other Former Soviet Republics in Transition
LESSON 4: SOCIETY, CULTURE, AND THE ENVIRONMENT UPDATE

More than a decade after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the societies and cultures in the fifteen states that once made up the U.S.S.R. remain in transition. In some countries, artistic expression, press freedom, religious beliefs, and other social and cultural freedoms have reemerged, but in many states the transition has been problematic. This update focuses on five of the issues discussed in *Russia and the Other Former Soviet Republics in Transition*: social safety nets, health and health care, religion, the media, and crime.

The End of the Safety Net

The economic turmoil of the 1990s greatly undermined social safety nets throughout most of the region, and countries continue to struggle in their recovery. As a result, middle classes have been decimated, the number of homeless people has grown significantly, and many people remain deprived of basic medical care.

A recent example from Russia helps paint the picture. In 2004, a controversial welfare reform bill in Russia eliminated the remnants of Soviet-era state benefits, such as free public transportation, free medicine and utilities, and subsidized housing, for pensioners and the poorest Russians. It replaced them with small cash payments, sparking mass anti-government demonstrations across Russia. Protesters argued that the cash handouts did not compensate for the lost benefits. As a result of the protests, President Vladimir Putin promised to increase spending on social services, and the government raised some state pensions, but the adjusted benefits still do not keep up with the rising cost of living. Given such examples, many people in the former Soviet Union fondly remember the relative security and stability of the Soviet system.

The Deterioration of Health and Health Care

Even during the Soviet era, the health of Soviet citizens and the Soviet health-care system did not compare to other developed countries. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the newly independent former Soviet republics have often found themselves unable to support massive and inefficient health-care systems. Even today, the health care infrastructure remains in disrepair across much of the region, and low-paid medical personnel extract bribes for services and medicine that are supposed to be free of charge.

The worst health-care situation is in Turkmenistan. In 2005, former President Saparmurat Niyazov closed all hospitals and dismissed all health-care workers outside the country's capital, bringing the country to the brink of a health-care disaster. Many easily treatable diseases became deadly, and Turkmens often illegally crossed borders to neighboring countries to seek medical treatment. The new President Kurbanguly Berdymukhamedov, who came to power in February 2007, has promised to fix the situation. However, in his first few months in office he did not take any actions.

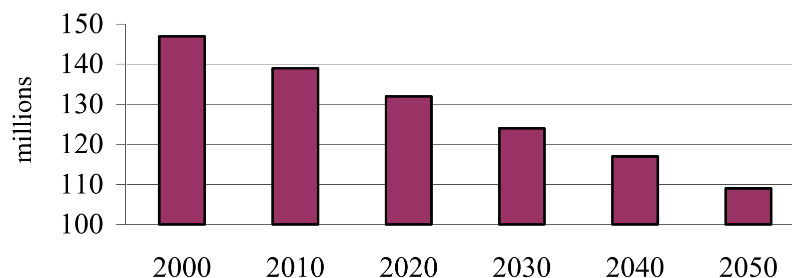
In Russia, the deteriorating health-care system, low safety standards, pollution, poor road safety, drug use, and high alcohol and tobacco consumption are the main causes of high mortality and morbidity rates. Male life expectancy in Russia is only fifty-nine years, a level comparable with sub-Saharan Africa.[1] A 2006 study of male deaths between the ages of twenty-five and fifty-four showed that an astonishing 38 percent of these deaths were due to alcohol abuse.[2] Previously controlled infectious diseases, such as tuberculosis, hepatitis, syphilis, and pneumonia, have seen a resurgence. Also, the rapid spread of HIV/AIDS presents a dire health threat. It is projected that up to 10 percent of the Russian population could be infected with HIV/AIDS by 2020.[3]

In an attempt to address the worsening social situation, in 2006 the Russian government launched a new program called National Projects, which aims at improvements in the areas of agriculture, education, housing, and public health. Within this program, the government allocated $4.6 billion in 2006, and more than $6 billion for 2007.

The weak health-care system, spread of infectious diseases, high mortality rates, and low birth rates have contributed to an alarming decline in Russia's population. It is estimated that the country's population will shrink to below 110 million by 2050 (see Chart 1). This represents a serious threat to Russia's economic development and national security. In May 2006, Russian President Vladimir Putin prompted parliament to adopt a ten-year program to stop the population decline. Among the proposals are subsidies and financial incentives for families to have more children.

Chart 1

Russia's Projected Population



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2007.

(click here for enlarged version of chart)

The Resurgence of Religion

For the most part, promises of religious freedom in the region have been kept, and religion continues to enjoy a resurgence. In Russia, the constitution guarantees religious freedom; however, in 1997 the growing activities of foreign missionaries caused legislators to pass a restrictive law on religion. This law defines Russian Orthodoxy, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and Judaism as Russia's only traditional religions, and limits the activities of other religions. Leaders of the "non-traditional" religions, such as Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons, have to register their groups with the government every year for at least fifteen years before obtaining accredited status. During this time, they cannot publish, proselytize, or teach religious material.

Since the passing of the law, members of many minority faiths have experienced harassment, and the government often denies entry visas to foreign religious workers. While some see this law as an effort by the Russian Orthodox Church to create a religious monopoly, Russian Orthodox Patriarch Alexy II has argued that other religious groups have greater financial resources and are trying to divide the Russian people.

Since President Vladimir Putin took power in 2000, relations between the Russian Orthodox Church and the government have become strikingly closer. On numerous occasions, Putin has emphasized the need to reunify all Russian lands under Russian Orthodoxy. The state officially observes Orthodox holidays, and many politicians, including President Putin, regularly attend church services and appear alongside Alexy II at public events. The Russian Orthodox Church even held a blessing ceremony for Putin immediately after his presidential inauguration.

Islam is the second largest religion in Russia, with about 20 million adherents concentrated mostly in the the Tatarstan and Bashkortostan republics, as well as in the Caucasus region.[4] Since the end of the Soviet Union, Islam has prospered. Hundreds of new mosques have been built, including the first mosque in the Kazan Kremlin since the sixteenth century. In 2003, during his visit to Malaysia, President Putin declared Russia "a Muslim power," and expressed his hope that Russia could play a major role in Muslim global affairs.

In Central Asia, the revival of Islam has also been a relatively peaceful process. However, since the mid-1990s there has been an increase in Islamic fundamentalism. Poverty, high unemployment, proximity to the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, and governmental repression have helped to stimulate a number of radical Islamic organizations. For example, in Uzbekistan, the authoritarian government represses religion, sometimes arresting people for simple religious devotions. As a result, many people have joined extremist groups. One of them, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), is fighting to overthrow the Uzbek government and establish an Islamic state. The IMU also aims to control the Fergana Valley, which for most of its history was a single ethno-cultural region, until divided between Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan by the Soviets. The IMU fought with al Qaeda and the Taliban in the 2001 Afghan war against U.S. and allied forces, and claimed responsibility for a series of bombings in 1999 and 2004 in the region. Nevertheless, due to the defeat of the Taliban in 2001, as well as ongoing repression by the Uzbek government, the IMU has been weakened, with many of its leaders either killed or detained.

It is important to note that militant Islamists represent a small minority within a tolerant Muslim populace of the former Soviet Union. In countries such as Tajikistan, where the government tolerates some degree of political opposition, societal enthusiasm for militant goals is limited.

The Role of the Media

The free and independent media have played an important role in the democratization of some former Soviet republics, particularly the Baltic states and, recently, in Ukraine and Georgia. However, in most former Soviet republics, governments have increased their control of the media and imposed severe restrictions on journalists.

For example, in Russia, the government has taken control over all major television stations, most radio stations, and most of the print media. In 2001, it acquired control of the station NTV by charging owner Vladimir Gusinsky, an independent media magnate, with embezzlement. In 2002, it closed the last independent television station, TV-6, arguing that it was losing too much money. In 2006, the Russian media subsidiary of the state-controlled natural gas giant Gazprom acquired the daily newspaper *Kommersant*, which was described as “one of the last bastions of the independent media.”[5]

Free press advocates have accused the government of using intimidation and political pressure to silence critics. After the tragic takeover of a school in Beslan by Chechen rebels in September 2004, the Russian parliament passed a bill that limited the media’s ability to report on terrorism and government responses to it. Now, before reporting on Chechnya, the media have to obtain the Kremlin’s approval. International observers criticized the media for their biased promotion of certain parties during the 2003 parliamentary elections, and for slanting their reports to favor Putin during the 2004 presidential election. In April 2006, the Russian parliament passed a law requiring stricter registration of domestic and foreign non-governmental organizations (NGOs), which will allow the government to restrict NGOs’ freedom of speech. The only independent source of information in Russia is the Internet; however, only 16 percent of the population uses it on a regular basis.[6]

Journalists in Russia often receive government instructions on their reports. Those who do not comply and try to cover stories independently on topics, such as the war in Chechnya, corruption, and anti-government protests, are fined, fired, harassed, brought up on libel charges, or even killed. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists, thirteen journalists have been murdered in contract-style killings during the seven years of President Putin’s tenure.[7] The 2006 murder of Anna Politkovskaya, who campaigned against corruption and the war in Chechnya for several years, sparked international protests. Prior to her murder, she was threatened, imprisoned, and poisoned. Most of these crimes against journalists remain unresolved. Even foreign journalists who attempt to report on sensitive topics are often harassed, detained, and forced to leave Russia.

Elsewhere in the former Soviet republics, freedom of the press in 2007 is even more restricted. For example, in Belarus and Uzbekistan, no media freedom exists. These governments use libel and defamation laws as well as imprisonment to suppress the independent media. The media in Kazakhstan by law may not criticize the government. In 2002, the government there intensified its crackdown on media by harassing journalists, shutting down TV stations, and suspending independent newspapers. International observers reported that during the 2004 Kazakh elections, the government blatantly directed the media. Finally, Turkmenistan has one of the most repressive media environments in the world, with all media outlets being controlled by the state.

Positive news comes from the Baltic states, Georgia, and Ukraine. Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania are all now members of the European Union, and their governments respect the media and freedom of speech. Georgia’s media freedom has improved since the election of President Mikhail Saakashvili in 2004. And Ukraine has shown some positive changes since its 2004 “Orange Revolution.” During the previous regime of Leonid Kuchma, some twenty journalists critical of the government were killed. These murders included Gyorgi Gongadze, whose killing

was linked to Kuchma. But in 2005, Ukraine's new President Viktor Yushchenko signed into law amendments that lifted strict curbs on election reporting.

The Growth of Crime

During Soviet times, especially in the 1960s and 1970s, organized crime groups in the Soviet Union became intertwined with state officials as they profited from the expanding Soviet black market economy. In the 1980s, Mikhail Gorbachev's reforms weakened the power of the central government, thereby contributing to further expansion of criminal groups and their activities. Lawlessness in Russia peaked after the collapse of the Soviet Union, when the term "Wild East" came to be used to describe Russia's business environment. During this chaotic period, post-Soviet governments were unable to enforce laws, and criminal gangs swindled, extorted, and killed. Sometimes businessmen were forced to pay protection fees to more than one gang at the same time.[8] The reach of Russian organized crime also spread beyond Russia's borders, as demonstrated in 1999 when it was discovered that the Russian mafia used the Bank of New York to launder millions of dollars. In 2002, during an Italian-led operation against money laundering, investigators arrested fifty members of Russian organized crime groups in Europe and Canada, froze 300 bank accounts used to launder money, and seized $94 million obtained from illegal operations.[9]

When Vladimir Putin came to power in 2000, he moved to fulfill his election promise to fight corruption and strengthen the rule of law, significantly increasing salaries of public prosecutors and adding amendments to the criminal code outlawing human trafficking, a major enterprise of criminal gangs. However, the fight against corruption has been tainted by Putin's efforts to reign in the country's powerful economic oligarchs. Putin has used strengthened law enforcement capabilities primarily to pursue oligarchs who have challenged him. Thus, critics charge that the goal of these efforts is more to consolidate power than to curb corruption.

Despite progress, in 2007, Russia remains one of the most corrupt countries in the world, ranking 121 out of 163 countries surveyed in 2006 by Transparency International.[10] According to a 2005 survey by a Russian think tank, Russians pay more than $300 billion in bribes annually (a ten-fold increase since the last survey in 2001).[11] It is not unusual that business disputes are settled through contract killings. In May 2006, Russia's Prosecutor-General Vladimir Ustinov conceded that organized crime presented a threat to the country's national security. He said that many gangs were actively merging with businesses, state authorities, and even security forces.

Since 2005, human rights groups have also reported the rising incidence of racially motivated killings and other hate crimes in Russia. Some minorities report daily harassment on the streets, and media outlets report regular violent assaults against minorities. Most of these acts of violence are directed against people from Central Asia, the Caucasus, and Africa.

Organized crime and corruption have also been rampant in other former Soviet republics. In 1997, when the repressive Leonid Kuchma was still in power, Ukrainian Justice Minister Serhii Holovaty stated: "The distinction between organized crime and certain aspects of government activity is often indistinguishable."[12] In Central Asia, crime and corruption are fueled by the drug trade, which has boomed since 1991, as Central Asia has become the main transit route for opium from Afghanistan to Russia and Europe. The problem is acute in Tajikistan, with roughly

80 to 120 metric tons of heroin transiting the country each year.[13] Because the average monthly salary is $24 in Tajikistan, and 64 percent of people live below the poverty line, the drug trade will be a major source of income and employment for years to come.[14]

Organized crime in many former republics has also expanded into sex trafficking. Young women from the former Soviet Union are lured abroad with the promise of good jobs and then sold into sex slavery. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, thousands of girls and women, predominantly from Belarus, Moldova, Russia, and Ukraine, have been forced into the sex industry in Europe and the United States.[15]

For more recent information, please visit the timelines at www.southerncenter.org.

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