Populism in Soviet Politics

A Soviet saying, popular two or three years ago, compared perestroika to the wind on the Siberian taiga: the tops of the trees wave, but on the ground all is still. “Only a small part of the political and intellectual elite was moving,” observed Moscow sociologist Yuri Levada, “and the people were sleeping,” as they had for many decades.

But today, that saying is out of circulation. The situation has changed drastically in the past year. Grass-roots interest and mass participation have erupted onto the Soviet political stage. Professor Levada, Section Chief of Theory at the All-Union Center for Study of Public Opinion, noted that for him and his colleagues, this is the most interesting process to take place “in the history of our country.” He shared some of the Center’s recent research on populism with Harriman Institute faculty, students and staff February 13, 1990.

Although populism emerged in the non-Russian republics perhaps a year earlier, the situation in the Russian center, “the heart of our society,” did not change until the spring of 1989. Levada traced this “awakening of the people” to the elections for the Congress of People’s Deputies and to the coal miners’ strikes. In the capital, the main factor in the campaign was Boris Yeltsin, whom Professor Levada dubbed “the first real populist leader in the country.”

Characteristics

Based on polling surveys from the beginning of 1989, Professor Levada identified three important traits of developing populism. The first characteristic is a strong negative attitude toward the ruling bureaucracy. In a survey last year, the Center posed the question: “What do you see as the main cause of our problems today?” Nearly forty percent of the respondents pointed to the bureaucracy as the number one enemy. (“Universal corruption” came in second, which is not surprising, since the two are closely connected.) Many recent instances of unrest and mass uprisings have been directed against local, party, military and central bureaucrats. Levada considers this anti-bureaucratism to be “populist” and naive because it blames individual bureaucrats. “The people who think in such a way don’t see the institutional pillars of bureaucracy,” he said. The real problem is one of institutional, not personal, totalitarianism.

The second important trait of Soviet populism is the desire for “a popular, strong leadership.” When asked in a survey about the best way out of today’s social crisis, almost fifty percent of the respondents called for “real order in society.” There has recently been much debate in Soviet magazines and journals over the need for an “iron hand” on Gorbachev’s part, although it is unclear what that would entail. According to the Center’s surveys, among some strata of the society up to thirty percent of the population was ready to support “strong-handed” leadership.

Widespread demands for equality are the third dominant characteristic of Soviet populism. These demands are directed on one level against high wages for the apparat and bureaucrats and, on the other, against “excessive” income for kooeratory, or private dealers. The appeals for egalitarianism are not merely “remnants of outmoded ideology” but are deeply-rooted in the people’s consciousness, particularly in today’s situation of low wages and fear of rising prices. According to surveys, over half the people feel uncertainty about their economic future. In this situation, the kooeratory have become a focus of hatred. To illustrate the popular mood, Levada described a survey in which respondents were asked to choose between solutions to the current consumer goods shortages. The first option was “free market and free prices” and the second was “centralized rationing of goods.” Only eight percent chose the free market, and more than sixty percent chose rationing.

Prospects for Populism

Levada outlined two potential outcomes to this resurgent populism. The first is progression toward “real, developed, educated, intelligent democracy.” Levada identified such figures as Boris Yeltsin, Yuri Afanasev, Guvriil
Popov and others in the Inter-Regional Group as “symbolic leaders of the most experienced democracy movement of our political setting.”

The second variant is development toward “some type of dictatorship under populist slogans.” This outcome is not uncommon, he claimed, in countries with less-developed democratic institutions. The political system takes the shape of “street democracy” or “direct democracy,” with an allegedly direct connection between the leader and the masses, but lacking democratic institutions. “These primitive forms are very dangerous, especially in a situation of massive shortages, universal national unrest, and growing feebleness of the central leadership.”

In fact, in the midst of widespread shortages and unrest last summer, a type of right-wing populism organized “from above” did emerge. The United Workers Front is one example. It is supported mainly by the party and trade union bureaucracies. Its slogan is “the fight against bureaucracy,” but Levada said that its intent is to attack the Gorbachev leadership and economic reform.

So far, however, this type of “conservative populism” has not caught on. The Center’s investigations suggest that only a small portion of the population — at most ten to twelve percent — support it. One tangible indication of its weakness is the poor performance of right-wing Pamyat candidates in last spring’s elections to the Congress of People’s Deputies. Also, in a survey question last year which asked who is the most eminent figure in world history, Stalin was named by only fifteen percent of the respondents. (Lenin was the most popular and Karl Marx came in second. Peter the Great and Pushkin beat out Stalin, who ranked eighth. Brezhnev fell behind Franklin Delano Roosevelt, tying with Aristotle. Khrushchev tied with Jesus Christ, but was ahead of Abraham Lincoln and George Washington.)

Levada discounted the potential for violent anti-Semitism. He claimed that while “deep ideological anti-Semitism” does exist in the Soviet Union, it enjoys little support in public opinion. Survey findings concluded that only two percent of the population (six percent in Moscow) concur with the view that Judeo-Masonic elements are responsible for the Soviet Union’s problems.

The democratic brand of populism is far more popular. In Levada’s view, this bodes well for the future of democracy in the Soviet Union. For example, one survey among striking coal miners revealed that of all the social institutions in the country the most popular was the Inter-Regional Group, which is considered to be relatively liberal and oriented to the West. To Levada, this data indicates the real possibility of the growth of “intelligent democratic trends.” In addition, it suggests that the historical gap between the “common-rank people and the upper-level intelligentsia” is narrowing. “Maybe today,” Levada said, “there is some possibility of overcoming the abyss.”

Reported by Lolly Jewett