

Social Capital and Political Support for Democracy and Autocracy in Moldova

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I propose a national survey research project to monitor and compare the influence of social capital on support for democracy and autocracy among the mass public of Moldova. Empirically, my project builds upon the earlier waves of the New Democracy Barometer surveys conducted in Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova, Armenia, Georgia, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Conceptually, it draws upon the multi-dimensional and multi-level notions of political support developed especially by David Easton (1995) and others (Klingemann 1999; Dalton 1999; Rose 2001, Shin 1999) on the one hand and the notion of social capital developed by Putnam (2000) and applied within this research area by Christian Haerpfer (2005). Theoretically, it is predicated on the congruence theory that democratization follows the logic of reducing the incongruence between the citizen demand and institutional supply of democracy (Inglehart and Welzel 2005).

Specifically, my project is designed to monitor the impact of social capital on both normative and practical support for the principles and practices of democracy and its alternatives and generate a comprehensive, balanced, and dynamic account of political transformations taking place in Moldova from the perspective of the mass citizenry experiencing those changes on a daily basis. My project will also be able to identify the distinctive features of social capital in the form of horizontal-informal social capital and in the form of vertical-formal social capital as well as the political transformations in Moldova as compared to other geographical regions.

The main research questions are analyzing the existence of a correlation between levels of social capital and successful democratization, between levels of social capital and support for democracy and finally, between levels of social capital and support for democracy as an ideal form of regime (Dowley and Silver 2002). The working hypothesis is that high levels of social capital at the individual level are associated with high levels of political support for democracy, even if the overall extent of social capital might be comparatively low. I have chosen Moldova as a country, because after my comparative and longitudinal research on social capital and political support in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus since 1992 (Haerpfer 2002), I would like to test the research outcome concerning these 3 Slavic post-Soviet states with Moldova, which is partly Slavic and partly Balkan with Romanian language. In addition, I would like to measure the impact of divisions between Russian speakers and Romanian speakers upon political support for democracy or autocracy. My thesis in that context is that there are different regional patterns regarding the relationship between social capital and political support for democracy and autocracy in Slavic post-Soviet countries in comparison with Balkan post-Soviet countries. This type of study has never been done before. Moreover, the public opinion data from my project will assist democratic reformers and policymakers to devise effective strategies for orienting the citizenry toward democracy away from authoritarianism.

Conceptually, the previous NDB (New Democracy Barometer) surveys relied on the notion of political support. Pippa Norris (1999) has identified five different objects of political support ranging from political community through principles, performance, and institution of regime to political actors. Of these political objects, the previous NDB surveys dealt with political support mostly at the level of regime principles. The surveys were designed to identify those who believe that democracy or its alternatives is the best (or ideal) form of government. Focused on the principles rather than practices of regime, political support at this regime level was normative or idealistic in its nature and thus offered a partial account of mass reactions to political transformations, either democratic or authoritarian.

According to the NDB surveys conducted in 1996 and 2002, the proportions of idealist democrats increased in seven out of eight post-Soviet countries between this period of six years. As of 2002, idealist democrats constituted more than half their electorates. Russia was the only post-Soviet country with a minority of idealist democrats (47%). The proportion of these democrats was the largest in Georgia (81%), followed by Armenia (71%). In terms of the magnitude of increases in normative support, Ukraine registered the highest rate of 10 percentage points between 1996 and 2000.

To measure support for non-democratic regimes in principle, the NDB asked respondents to rate the desirability of civilian dictatorship, expert rule, and military dictatorship. By combining responses to these three questions, an index of normative support for authoritarianism was constructed. The overall normative support for non-democratic regimes in the eight post-Soviet countries decreased over the 1996-2002 period by 11 percentage points from 29 to 18 percent. With the exception of Belarus and Armenia, all other countries experienced decreases in authoritarian regime support. The most dramatic decrease took place in Georgia from 33 percent in 1996 to 8 percent in 2002.

To measure realist regime support, the NDBs asked respondents to rate on a 10-point scale their current regime from two different time perspectives: at the time of the survey and in ten years from that time. According to this index of realist regime support, popular support for the existing regimes in Georgia, Ukraine, Moldova and Armenia declined substantially between 1992 and 2002. This pattern of declining regime support in the four countries contrasts sharply with that of rising support in other post-Communist countries in Central and South-East Europe (Mishler & Rose 1999). This collapse of public support for the current political regime contributed to the 'revolutions' in Georgia and Ukraine. Between 25 and 30 per cent of the national electorates support the current regime in Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan in 2002, which indicates the weakness of political legitimacy of these political systems.

I employ support for democracy as the core concept of the inquiry and examine its dynamics from multi-dimensional and multi-level perspectives. I will also take authentic support for democracy as citizen demand for democracy and examine the ongoing interactions between citizen demand and institutional supply of democracy.

Support for Democracy

A political system can become institutionally democratic with the installation of competitive elections and multiple political parties. These institutions alone, however, do not make a fully functioning democratic political system. As Rose, Mishler, and Haerpfer (1998, 8) point out, these institutions constitute nothing more than "the hardware" of representative democracy. To operate the institutional hardware, a democratic political system requires the "software" that is congruent with the various hardware components (Almond and Verba 1963; Eckstein 1966). Both the scholarly community and policy circles widely recognize that what ordinary citizens think about democracy and its institutions is a key component of such software. Many experts, therefore, regard the mass citizenry's unconditional embrace of democracy as "the only game in town" as the hallmark of democratic consolidation (Bratton and Mattes 2001; Diamond 1999; Linz 1990; Rose 2001).

There are several specific reasons why democratization can advance when ordinary citizens embrace democracy as “the only game in town.” Democracy, unlike other forms of government, is government by *demos* (the people) and thus cannot be foisted upon an unwilling people for any extended period of time; nor can it be installed by military intervention from abroad. As government by the people, democracy depends principally on their support for its survival and effective performance (Mishler and Rose 1999). Only those committed to democracy as the best form of government are likely to reject anti-democratic movements to overthrow the new democratic regime, especially during a serious crisis (Dalton 1999; Inglehart 1990, 1997). Moreover, when citizens confer legitimacy on a newly installed democratic regime, it can make decisions and commit resources without resorting to coercion. Therefore, there is a growing consensus in the literature on third-wave democracies that democratization is incomplete until an overwhelming majority of the mass citizenry offers unqualified and unconditional support for democracy (Fukuyama 1995; Diamond 1999; Linz and Stepan 1996).

Conceptualization

What constitutes support for democracy? In the literature on democratic political culture there is general agreement that popular support for democracy especially in new democracies is a highly complex and dynamic phenomenon with multiple dimensions and layers (Dalton 1999; Klingemann 1999; Shin 1999). Democratic support is a multi-layered or multi-level phenomenon because citizens simultaneously comprehend democracy as both an ideal political system and a political system-in-practice. It is a multi-dimensional phenomenon because it involves the acceptance of democratic decision-making as well as the rejection of democracy’s alternatives.

To ordinary citizens who lived most of their lives under authoritarian rule, democracy at one level represents the political ideals or values to which they aspire. At another level, democracy refers to a political regime-in-practice and the actual workings of its institutions, which govern their daily lives (Dahl 1971; Mueller 1999; Rose, Mishler & Haerpfer 1998). Popular support for democracy, therefore, needs to be differentiated into two broad categories: normative and practical. The normative or idealist level is concerned with democracy-in-principle as an abstract ideal. The practical or realist level is concerned with the various aspects of democracy-in-practice, including regime structure, political institutions, and political processes.

At the first level, support for democracy refers largely to a psychologically loose attachment citizens have to the positive symbols of democracy. Democratic support at the second level refers to favourable evaluations of the structure and behaviour of the existing regime (Easton 1965). As empirical research has recently revealed, there is a significant gulf between these two levels of democratic support (Klingemann 1999; Mishler and Rose 2001; Norris 1999). To offer a comprehensive and balanced account of democratic support, therefore, we must consider both levels of support, normative and practical.

Moreover, democratic support especially among citizens of new democracies involves more than favourable orientations to democratic ideals and practices. Citizens with little experience and limited sophistication about democratic politics may be uncertain whether democracy or dictatorship offers satisfying solutions to the many problems facing their societies. Under such uncertainty, citizens who are democratic novices often embrace both democratic and authoritarian political propensities concurrently (Lagos 1997, 2001; Rose and Mishler 1994; Shin 1999). Consequently, the acceptance of democracy does not necessarily cause rejection of authoritarianism or vice versa.

Measurement

Many national and international surveys have asked a variety of structured and unstructured questions to measure mass attitudes toward democracy-in principle and in-practice. To measure support for democracy-in principle, a set of four questions will be asked, including the two items the 2002 NDB surveys asked to tap its absolute and relative preferability as a political system. Two additional questions will be posed, one concerning the personal desire to live in a democracy and the other on the importance of living in a democracy to the quality of personal life. As the East Asia Barometer and New Europe Barometer surveys did, respondents will be asked to rate their desire to live in a democracy and its importance to personal well-being on a 10-point scale. Pro-democratic responses to these four questions are combined into an index to measure the overall level of normative support for democracy as a political system.

To measure attitudes to democracy-in-practice, again, a set of four questions will be asked. The three questions asked in the 2002 NDB surveys will be repeated to tap the perceived effectiveness of democratic governance in promoting and maintaining economic development, and its efficiency as a method of policymaking. In addition, respondents will be quizzed on whether democratic polity is capable of tackling the problem of political corruption, the most serious problem facing democratizing countries. Pro-democratic responses to these four questions are combined into an index to measure the overall level of practical or realist support for democracy as a political process.

Normative Support for Authoritarianism-in-Principle

Citizens of post-Soviet countries had lifelong experience with undemocratic rule prior to the break-up of the Soviet empire. Doubtless many of them remain attached to the age-old Communist authoritarian mindset. In view of the importance of early life socialization (Mishler and Rose 2002), the professed preferences for democracy among these citizens cannot be equated with unconditional or unwavering support for it (Dalton 1994; Finifter and Mickiewicz 1992; Hahn 1991; Inglehart 1997; Mishler and Rose 2001).

To determine whether citizens of post-Soviet countries still remain attached to the virtues of authoritarian political systems, a set of four questions will be formulated, each of which deals with a different type of authoritarian rule.

To distinguish authentic support for democracy from other types of regime support, I will consider levels of both normative and practical support for democracy and authoritarian rule. Support for democracy can be considered authentic when ordinary citizens show they view democracy as the only political game by endorsing its principles and practices whilst always rejecting those of its alternatives (Bratton et al. 2005, 91; Shin and Wells 2005, 99). This type of democratic support is differentiated from non-authentic or prototype, democratic regime support which is mixed with authoritarian orientations. Furthermore, this type of authentic support is equated with popular demand for democracy on the assumption that authentic supporters are the most likely to lead the democracy movement.

The Congruence Theory of Democratization

The movement toward more or less democracy, however, does not depend on the level of democratic demand from the citizenry alone; it also depends on the relationship between citizen demand and institutional supply. According to Inglehart and Welzel (2005, 187), “shifts toward more or less democracy follow the logic of reducing the incongruence between citizen demand and institutional supply of democracy.” The more citizen demand for democracy outstrips what institutions supply, the more likely political systems are to move toward more democracy. When citizens demand less democracy than institutions supply, political systems are likely to stagnate or move toward less democracy. When popular demand exceeds institutional supply, positive incongruence occurs for further democratic development. When the latter exceeds the former, negative incongruence occurs for democratic decay.

People demand more democracy when their institutions fail to meet their expectations. It is likely that the experienced level of democracy, not the actual level of democracy, shapes popular demand for greater democracy. I will next compare the levels of citizen demand and institutional supply of democracy in each post-Soviet country and determine whether its democratic supply and demand are congruent or incongruent. On the basis of this test of congruence, the post-Soviet countries that face the problems of low demand for democracy and that of low supply of democracy will be identified.

Survey Methodology, Sampling and Database

The main database to be produced by the proposed project will be an academic survey with 2,000 personal interviews representing a sample of the adult population of Moldova, 18 years of age and older. An accurate survey requires a sample representative of the population of the country as a whole. This sample will be drawn on a proportionate-to-population basis, stratified by region, town-size and urban-rural differences. The organisation conducting the survey will be the Independent Sociological Service ‘Opinia’, which has worked with, and for, the Principal Investigator (PI) before, in the period 2000 until 2003. There will be a pre-test of 100 face-to-face interviews in order to assess the quality and semantic clarity of the questionnaire. Not included in the sampling design will be prisoners, patients in hospitals and mental hospitals and persons living in the Trans-Dniester region, which is currently not under the control of the state of Moldova.

Within each city or rural area, primary sampling units will be drawn. The survey will be conducted within the framework of 64 primary sampling units in order to avoid confining interviewing to a few cities. The method used to select households will be standardised random route procedures. The random method to select individuals in households will be the nearest birthday of a member of the household to a given year. Substitution of respondents during sampling and fieldwork is not permitted. In order to reflect the languages spoken in Moldova, 68% of all questionnaires will be in Romanian language, 32% of all questionnaires will be in the Russian language.

If the respondent is not at home on 3 visits which will take place on different days and at different times, the next apartment on the route plan will be selected. There will be internal control by 'Opinia' and external control by the PI. The internal control will check 5% of all interviews, by contacting the respondents and asking them if they have been visited by an interviewer and about the type of survey.

The main outputs of the research in academic terms will be new findings about the relationship between social capital and political support for democracy on the one hand and for autocracy on the other. The main findings of this research project will be published in 4 peer-reviewed journals. Regarding non-academic audiences, there will be a press conference for media and public policy actors in Chisinau in March 2008 and a presentation at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars for media and public policy actors in Washington DC in March 2008.