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Discourse and strategic continuity from Gorbachev through Putin

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ABSTRACT

Discourse analysis reveals that Mikhail Gorbachev as General Secretary and his successors as Russian presidents have practiced a shared strategy of metaphorical – not spatial – centrism that has gradually slid the state from dictatorship toward democracy. Preservation of a political center for himself and his successors to occupy made it necessary for Boris Yeltsin to dismantle the USSR if elections in Russia were to continue. At the same time, for each successive exponent of this centrist strategy, an attempt to practice democracy without the repellent flaws of electoral fraud and political repression would forgo the strategic advantage of occupying the political center.

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Between the end of 1988 and the end of 1993, twin developments transformed Russian politics. In December 1991 a Russian president suddenly renounced suzerainty over territories to the west and south that had taken a series of potentates two centuries of campaigning to conquer. Beginning with a decision by the Communist Party's Central Committee in December 1988 to authorize election of a novel Congress of People's deputies the following March, the exercise of ultimate political authority gradually shifted from a Politburo chosen by self-appointment, ratified by its members' chosen appointees sitting in the Central Committee, to a president and legislature chosen by a universal adult franchise in contested elections that incumbents might lose. Even though fraud and manipulation marred those elections from the very start and ultimately spread across Russia to the degree that evicting the incumbent became implausible (Mikhail et al., 2009; Myagkov et al., 2009), still the electoral defeat suffered by the president's supporters in the contested election for the State Duma in 1993 was as stunning as the withdrawal from the conquered territories.

Here I explore these twin developments' interdependence. The connection lies in a strategic innovation associated with Mikhail Gorbachev. It might be summed up as discarding a discourse addressed to communist cadres and inaugurating a discourse addressed to the populace more generally. This strategic innovation has been obscured by a general view, common in Russia as it is abroad, that Russia's transformation reveals Gorbachev's failure. More nuanced than most, Daniel Treisman (2011a, 24) still asks: "So what went wrong? Of course, for those who value democracy, civic freedoms, and nuclear disarmament, much went right. Still, Gorbachev aimed to reform communism, not to bury it." Stephen Hanson (2010) concurs with earlier assessments that Treisman remains too nuanced. Especially for those who value democracy, Hanson argues, an incipient democratic project has produced nothing more than a facade subverted by electoral fraud and conducted with contempt for whether voters see through the illusion. Frustration of the democratic prospect owes to the absence of any Russian political figures able to enunciate an ideology capable of committing enough activists to sacrifice themselves for the proposition that all adult Russians deserve their votes to count equally.

But does "failure" sum up Gorbachev? Any answer depends on knowing what Gorbachev intended, which has remained a major concern of scholarship (Breslauer, 2002, 22–40). If Gorbachev intended not to reform but to transform the Soviet

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Union, his strategy worked. Treisman never tells how he knows that Gorbachev intended only reform. Hanson (2010, 251, 254), who calls for "taking individuals' subjective beliefs far more seriously in causal analysis," implies that their beliefs are knowable for the reason that "most individual actors really do mean what they say."

Hanson's proposal to rely on what people say engages a much broader issue. Is speech saying or doing? J.L. Austin (1962) posed this question by contrasting "constatives" to "performatives." His contrast has recently entered discussion of what happened to the Soviet Union in the work of Alexei Yurchak (2006, 21–25), who argues that late Soviet discourse witnessed a transformation of constatives into performatives that undid the Soviet state by emptying it of meaning. Yet Yurchak gets Austin's argument just backward. While Austin did begin by framing the contrast, it was merely a ploy to demonstrate that no such contrast was sustainable (Levinson, 1983, 231). All utterances are performatives. The effects an utterance can produce may include drawing a listener's attention to some feature of the surrounding world – acting as a constative – but the effects are invariably more encompassing. As the speaker may or may not intend the whole range of meanings achieved by the utterance, it does not reliably disclose the speaker's subjective beliefs.

Such a view of political speech as performative rather than self-disclosing (Hill, 2000) promises to address a major issue in the theory of how dictatorship becomes democracy. Even if the resulting elections are grossly unsatisfactory, the Russian transition has witnessed a massive outpouring of collective action. Many millions of Russians have voted, many tens of thousands have joined demonstrations against the Soviet order, and some tens of thousands have recently resumed protests against electoral fraud in Moscow and other cities. Large numbers of Russians have voted or protested even though neither voting nor protest can be advantageous for anyone who decides what to do by comparing personal cost and gain. Whenever any political goal can be achieved only by many individuals acting jointly at a cost to each but each is sufficiently likely to receive whatever gain the joint action achieves regardless of whether the individual joins in the action, the choice to act costs every individual more than it is worth. The infinitesimal probability that any elector's ballot decides who wins in any large electorate ensures that voting is too costly for any individual contemplating private cost and gain to bother (Palfrey and Rosenthal, 1985; Owen and Grofman, 1984). If fraud eliminates even that infinitesimal chance, why anyone votes becomes even more perplexing. Radical uncertainty about the number of demonstrators frustrates even schemes as imaginative as that presented by Lohmann (1994) to construct a set of incentives in which the gain from protesting might exceed its cost in time, effort and danger for each protester. If the cost of voting exceeds its gain for any voter, still costlier but even less decisive protesting to secure a right to vote that no one will gain by exercising is even less plausible than voting.

Despite the personal disadvantages, many Russians continue to vote, and some have resumed protesting. As an approach to analyzing speech acts, discourse analysis can tell why. Although too often construed – as Risse (2000) laments – as rejecting the egocentric instrumentalism from the perspective of which collective action seems so odd, discourse analysis instead supplies the vital ingredient to making sense of voting and protesting. This ingredient is one act that discourse invariably performs. Discourse always causes both the speaker or writer and the audience or readership to infer their identity, and particularly whether that identity is shared. Consider this quotation found by Michael Gorham (2003, 22) in a newspaper published in the Soviet Union in1926: "He's speaking incomprehensibly – must mean he's a Bolshevik" (reported only in English, presumably representing *Govorit neponiatno – znachit, bol'shevik*). The speaker infers an identity from an utterance despite claiming, not necessarily truthfully, to have understood nothing of its meaning. In this case a political utterance prompts an inference of political identity, and it is an identity from which the speaker implicitly at least detaches the self. The speaker, about whom nothing is known, may of course actually be a Bolshevik criticizing ineffective agitprop, but the speaker constructs the self as unlike the Bolshevik being criticized.

Shared identity in turn explains collective action by its capacity to motivate those persons who infer that they bear it to accept costs that the self would otherwise reject, *if* acceptance of the costs discriminates against some bearer of an identity construed as opposite. This readiness to pay uncompensated costs to the self has been demonstrated repeatedly in experiments conducted with subjects across cultures, sexes and ages and is the topic of a very large literature (Brewer and Brown, 1998, 566–567). If discursive cues activate relevant shared identities, the infinitesimal probability of determining the outcome of a nationwide election need not discourage many potential voters from going to the polls. As Alexander Schuessler (2000, 54) writes about elections in the United States, "the voter votes Democratic not to effect a Democratic electoral victory, but to be a Democrat." Each experiment begins by presenting its subject one of a pair of discursive cues with no or minimal meaning outside the experimental setting, such as a red or white lab coat or the English pronunciation of the Greek letter delta or kappa. From this discursive cue the subject infers shared identity with other recipients of the same cue, even if they do not actually exist. "*Any* salient and situationally meaningful" cues stimulate the inference of shared identity that triggers discrimination against bearers of its opposite (Brewer and Brown, 1998, 559, emphasis in original). Before Schuessler's Democrat casts a vote to be a Democrat, an electoral campaign has supplied abundant mentions of a Democrat and of an opposing Republican, against the latter of whom anyone accepting the identity of Democrat becomes motivated to discriminate in the voting booth.

While performative analysis of discourse requires reconsideration of both what evidence to use and how to use it, that reconsideration looks more promising when one considers that no extant intellectual alternative addresses the dependence of both the Soviet dismemberment and subsequent Russian politics on collective action. Despite Elinor Ostrom's (1998, 1; emphasis original) singling out collective action as "*the* central subject of political science," collective action remains a gaping hole even in the most sophisticated studies of dictatorship and democracy. Whether concentrating on Russia or addressed more broadly, they deal with the paradox of collective action by dismissing it as irrelevant. Many just ignore it (Treisman, 2011a; Frye, 2010; Levitsky and Way, 2010; Gandhi, 2008). Some explicitly assume that the problem never arises (Boix,

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