International Political Science

Teaching Democratic Principles in a Traditional Russian University: Fomenting a Quiet Revolution

Barbara Ann Stolz,[1] *U.S. General Accounting Office*

American scholars and average citizens alike are bombarded daily with images of Russia's experiment with democracy—conflicts between President Yeltsin and the Duma, the nationalistic tirades of Zhirinovsky, the brutal killings by the new Mafia, and the glamorous life of the young nouveau riche. Quiet democratic revolutions are, however, taking place all over Russia. One of those "quiet" revolutions is occurring in some Russian universities. Among the participants are the American scholars who come to Russia under American-sponsored exchange programs, a fact not unobserved by program opponents on both sides of the Atlantic. As a 1994–95 Fulbright Lecturer in American government in the Politology[2] Department of Yaroslavl State University (YSU), I was a participant-observer in a quiet revolution.

Although each scholar's experience is unique, many of the challenges I experienced were not uncommon. To be an educator, rather than simply a relater of information, it was necessary to communicate simultaneously on three levels—the concrete, the conceptual, and the attitudinal. Describing the roots, evolution, and current operation of American political institutions, including their positive and negative aspects, essentially involved communicating concrete and factual information. Explaining the concepts underlying democratic government, such as choice and participation, presented a greater challenge because of the application of these concepts and the consequent negative associations in the Russian context. The attitudinal level presented the greatest challenge. I found that most of my students idealized the American experience and viewed the future of democracy in Russia as hopeless. Addressing these concerns placed me, somewhat uncomfortably, in the role of educator-as-change agent. In Russia the role of visiting educator-as-change agent is not limited to professors of political science. It was, however, in performing this role that the critical links among teaching about democracy, the process of democratization, and the significance of confronting with my students the barriers we encountered was most evident.

Context: The University and My Objectives

Yaroslavl State University is one of eight institutions of higher learning in Yaroslavl, a city of almost 700,000 people founded in 1010 and situated approximately 150 miles from Moscow on the Volga River. Like many urban universities the buildings and departments of the state university are scattered throughout the city. As the state university, under the old regime, YSU was supported by party resources and sought the "best and the brightest." Today, the university is financially strained and some of the old-line faculty remain in positions where they can impede change.

In 1994, YSU's Politology Department was three years old. The program reflected the efforts of the department's dean, a former party leader whose wife was a member of the Senate and is now in the new Duma, to develop a social science program in the university. Since the undergraduate program is five years and each department has a set program of study for its students, the three-year-old Politology Department included only students in the first three years of their university program. There was no preplanned five-year course of study for the department. Rather, the program seemed to be evolving. Courses were taught by the dean, visiting American professors, and former professors of philosophy and history, including several old and new hard-line communists. The dean was aware of the need to have courses in methodology and policy analysis, but these were only being discussed.

I arrived in the department in September 1994, having been assigned through the Fulbright in Russia Program. My decision to apply for this program had grown out of a concern, based on two earlier trips to Russia, that many Russians did not understand the distinction between capitalism and democracy and were blaming the problems of the new capitalism on democracy. Their image of life in the United States and the fruits of democracy was often based on the soap opera, *Santa Barbara*. The positive effects of democracy were expected to be immediate—a year, two years, was a long time. The confusion between politics and economics and the expectations of democratic government, to my mind, did not bode well for the future of Russia's experiment with democracy. My objective in applying for the Fulbright lectureship was simple (naive)—I wanted to reach out to the new political scientists, those I believed to be the key

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to Russia's political future—and offer them a grounding in the theory and realities of democratic government. To carry out this objective, I proposed to teach two semester courses—A Survey of American Government and The U.S. Congress: Structures, Processes, and Research. My intent was not to idealize American democracy, but to use the American experience to illustrate the complexities, problems, and national variations (rooted in political culture, history, and psychology) of democratic government and governance, as well as the positive achievements.

What greeted me at YSU was not only an often perplexing academic environment, but also a microcosm of Russian society in the midst of change. My students, among the brightest I have taught, came from the second- and third-year classes. They had been educated in the traditional Russian education system, which relied on rote learning and communal study practices. Since I was to teach both courses to these students, I decided to present the courses sequentially, beginning with the more concrete introduction to American government and then moving to a more analytical approach in the Congress course. This was the first and perhaps the easiest of the adjustments I made.

During my third lecture I confronted my most difficult challenge—the hopelessness of many of my students about their futures and the future of their country. Learning about the hope, possibility, choice, and responsibility associated with democracy and democratic government became part of our shared experience. We learned, together, not only from the texts and lectures, but by trying to exercise the concepts in the classroom and the university as we confronted barriers to our quiet revolution.

Barriers to Change

Within the university, and in particular the Politology Department, I experienced problems illustrative of organizational, social, and cultural barriers to change (Zaltman and Duncan 1977, 61–89). Many of the faculty and administrators resisted the changes occurring in the university, which were indicative of the changes in the society at large. My students were more willing to embrace change, but sometimes their previous educational experiences posed barriers to their understanding alternative educational approaches, as well as democratic principles. And, the American professor also had to confront her own academic ethnocentrism as a barrier to change. Although the organizational, social, and cultural barriers discussed in this paper were not necessarily the most serious of those I confronted at YSU, they seem the most relevant to understanding the barriers to achieving a Russian democracy.

Organizational Factors: Fiefdoms and Authority

"Feudal bureaucracy" aptly describes the political structure and dynamics of YSU and the Politology Department. That is, within a hierarchical organization with established positions, chains of command, and rules, there were mini-fiefdoms. Accomplishing any objective—securing access to a Xerox machine, securing a Xerox machine, or obtaining a satisfactory course schedule—was the result of using contacts through informal networks. The rector held the reins of power in the university and the dean in the department. In the classroom, the professor was king or czar—that is, unless student performance was poor, then the professor was to blame.

At YSU, divisions existed within departments, between academic departments, and between academic departments and the international department. The international departments are a holdover from the communist area. These departments, which are responsible for international faculty and student exchanges, operate independently of the academic departments. The dean of the YSU Politology Department and the head of the international department intensely disliked each other. Within the Politology Department, the dean and the senior faculty member, an old-line communist of 75 years who was married to the department's vice dean were always in conflict. Each had his supporters. The conflicts involved such typical university issues as changing the name of the department and permitting a particular student to participate in an exchange program.

These conflicts also affected the experience of visiting professors. Illustrative of the effects of such conflicts was the department's initial refusal to provide me with an interpreter for my lectures. Prior to my arrival in Yaroslavl, my contact in the Politology Department had told me that my students would understand English. That message was reinforced by the dean who instructed me to lecture in English and the students would understand. After the first lecture—of more than three hours—I realized that most of the students who had studied English had not followed the lecture, and a third of the class had not studied English. It was clear to me that the proposed approach would not work. When I voiced my concerns to my department contact, I was told that permitting me to lecture without an interpreter was the compromise reached between the communists in the department who did not want me to lecture and the dean who had invited me. The effect of this decision, however, was to make communication between my students and myself nearly impossible.

Another aspect of the hierarchical conception of the university was the role of professor. Within my classroom I was told I was "king." The content of the course, discipline within the classroom, grading, were mine to determine. The dean supported me. But, upon reflection, I realized that this approach did little to teach my students about democratic process and reinforced their preconceptions of the omnipotence of authority figures.

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Social Barriers: Group Norms and Solidarity

Traditional Russian education is characterized by rote learning and communal learning—students work together, and success is class success. The effects of this approach were evident in my students' work. The approach also impeded the students' understanding of democratic concepts such as individual participation and freedom of choice.

Typically, a Russian professor reads lectures, and the students repeat this information in their exam, usually given orally at the end of the semester. My students worked very hard to learn what I taught, but were better able to respond to factual than analytical questions and lacked basic research skills. When I asked students for comparisons between the American and Russian systems of government, most expressed identical views about the Russian system—the same views as the department dean. The dean was the authority figure; I was an authority figure. We must be right, or at least that was how the students responded.

Probably the greatest difference between Russian and American students is the cohesiveness of the class. From their early school years, the students study together, share and compare notes, and approach their assignments as a group. At the university, this class identity and cohesiveness continues. My politology students, for example, went through their program as a group according to their academic year, taking the same classes and having student leaders who were treated as the spokespersons for the class.

This cohesiveness manifested itself in ways that sometimes made it difficult for me to teach. In the classroom during the lectures, students would lean over and talk with each other. At first I felt angry, because I found such behavior rude and it disrupted my train of thought. The students' behavior required me to adjust my attitude, be patient, and teach my students about the different expectations of American and European professors. I tried to be a disciplinarian with a sense of humor, not always an easy combination. I talked to them about my difficulties with their behavior. We established ground rules. If a student started to converse, I would call him or her or signal with hand motions if I were in the midst of making a point. After I had gained his/her attention, the student would nod an apology and cease conversing. The approach seemed to be quite effective.

Barbara Stolz and Politology Students at Yaroslavl State University

Group cohesiveness also presented difficulties during the in-class written final exam, a new experience for my students who were accustomed to Russian oral exams. We had agreed that the final exam for the second course would follow a typical American exam form.[3] At the start of the exam I told the students that each was to complete the exam independently without consultation. They agreed. Then, repeatedly, one student or another would lean over and ask a neighbor for help. On these numerous occasions I would say "nyet." The offending student's reaction was surprise, followed by an apology with a smile. In these same circumstances many of my American colleagues have become angry; some have even gone so far as to tear up the student's papers. But, feeling a bit like Pavlov, I kept my temper and just tried to reenforce the different behavior pattern that we had agreed they would try.

Teaching about democracy meant confronting social barriers to change posed by the traditional Russian education system, but I was also forced to confront my own biases about teaching, my own *educational ethnocentrism*. Despite having been influenced by the teaching approaches of John Dewey, I initially failed to recognize the significant role that aspects of the traditional Russian education system, particularly the cohesiveness of the students, could play in teaching about democracy and group participation. The balance between individual participation and responsibility versus group participation and responsibility is difficult to teach, but a necessary part of the democratic process. The collective behavior that I had perceived as a barrier to teaching and change ultimately facilitated my teaching about group participation.

Cultural Barriers: Fatalism and "The One Right Way"

The belief that whatever happens is fated and the individual must adjust to it is deeply embedded in Russian culture. In his book, *Peter the Great*, Robert Massie described this aspect of the Russian character, asserting that:

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> Russians are preeminently a pious, compassionate, and humble people, accepting faith as more powerful than logic and believing that life is controlled by superhuman forces, be they spiritual, autocratic, or even occult. Russians feel far less need than most pragmatic Westerners to inquire why things happen or how they can be made to happen (or not happen) again. Disasters occur and they accept; orders are issued and they obey. This is something other than brute docility. It stems rather from a sense of the natural rhythms of life (Massie 1991, 54).

Teaching students about political choice and participation is difficult, but it is almost impossible when complicated by a sense of fatalism and the rule not to ask **why** things happen and **how** they can be made to happen. Trying to explain political efficacy and the public's responsibility to hold politicians accountable makes little sense in this context. During a session with my second-year students I asked them what they thought the future of democracy in Russia was. Their responses were depressing to me: We will turn into our fathers; we are meant to be slaves. We can't expect anything from our politicians. Public officials are tied to the Mafia; you can't get elected as an independent. They asked me what happens when people lose hope in their public officials and political system. My third-year students, on the whole, were not as pessimistic. But, generally, they too were not confident that democracy would succeed in Russia.

Stemming from the sense of fatalism is the expectation that whatever happens or whatever is given to an individual, group, or society is accepted. When I arrived at the university, I was told I would be teaching four hours consecutively on Saturday mornings, beginning at 8:30 A.M. I objected, arguing that in order to give the students time to read and digest the materials I needed the time divided. Moreover, most of the students could not remain for the full time on Saturdays because of family or job responsibilities. The administration's initial response was: Russian professors do it, and our students are used to it; that's just the way it is. I was expected to accept my teaching schedule.

Acceptance usually meant accepting that there was one right way. That one right way was often articulated as a rule. Such rules/right ways included how to make instant coffee or the best way to go to another city. "Best" was "the way we always have done it." The difficulty arose when you asked to go somewhere or do something that the individual you were asking had not done before. The answer was usually—"it can't be done," which meant, "I have never done it before." Watching faculty and administrators, in particular, it was clear that change or confronting a new problem was traumatic for some and the rules helped them to cope. These individuals strongly asserted the need for rules. The source of the rules was a strong centralized authority figure, e.g., in the university the authority figure was the rector. I learned to ask the students, who were less anxious, for help, rather than risk embarrassing, offending, or upsetting my colleagues.

Societal Implications of Barriers in the University

The barriers to change found in the university—hierarchical organization and networks, reliance on authority figures, emphasis on the group rather than the individual, fatalism, acceptance, and one right way are a reflection of Russian life. The belief that Russia needs a strong centralized authority to restore the order and establish the rules that were disturbed or destroyed by democracy has been frequently voiced by political pundits, journalists, and politicians, as well as average citizens. On a societal level the barriers to change observed at YSU present major obstacles to democratic change, particularly to the democratic values of political choice, political responsibility, and political participation.

Teaching Democracy by Course Content, Example, and Practice

To teach about political choice, responsibility, and participation, I had to confront these organizational, social, and cultural barriers. Four simple strategies seemed to be effective for at least beginning this process: teaching by example, teaching through practice, using course content as process, and using the familiar to achieve a different goal. Usually more than one strategy was used to teach about a concept; therefore, the analysis below is somewhat artificially structured. Most important to recognize, however, is that for the strategies to be effective a level of trust with the students must first be established or the discussions of democratic concepts remain informational and unrelated to their experiences.

Political Choice: Teaching through Content

Teaching about choice is difficult in an environment where choice has not been allowed, how and why are not asked, and there is one right way of doing things. I had the great fortune, unlike some of my American colleagues, to have some students—generally my student leaders—who were curious about change. Somehow they had learned the need to ask how and why, but they needed someone to ask. Not until the second course (week eight) and after my having had, in front of my students, a rather heated exchange with the dean over a question of methodology did my students voice their concerns to me. It was at this point, I believe, that my students and I developed a relationship and level of trust that allowed me to function interactively and therefore more effectively as educator-as-change agent. They, very clearly, did not perceive me as simply a relater of information.

My primary approach to teaching about choice was to use the course content to show how the same topic—the Congressional policy-

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making process—could be examined from different perspectives. After discussions with my students, we agreed that they wanted to learn how to analyze. We discussed the differences between inductive and deductive reasoning, when it was and was not appropriate to generalize, and how different approaches could be used to study the same question. We began to examine different approaches to the study of Congress and law-making. Among the approaches we discussed—comparing and contrasting assumptions, methods, evidence, and conclusions—were interest groups, disjointed incrementalism, symbolic politics, and non-decision making. At times I would make comparisons to communism, using my "resident student communist" to provide contrasting views. He learned to present and discuss his views, not just give speeches. And, as a group we were able to discuss choice on a theoretical level, in a nonthreatening way. For their exam, I asked my students to choose a framework, apply it to the Russian political experience, and discuss the value and limits of the approach for developing an analysis of Russian politics. They could use different frameworks, have different answers, and all be right—receive a good grade. In short, student participation in reorganizing the second course and the course content allowed for a discussion of choice and demonstrated that choices can produce positive results.

Political Responsibility: Teaching by Example

My conflicts over the scheduling of my courses and securing an interpreter provided an excellent opportunity to teach about political responsibility—taking on the system. In this case my primary approach was to teach through example. To my students I articulated the situation as one of responsibility—I was there to teach, and without an interpreter and with the proposed schedule I could not be effective. Therefore, I had the responsibility to confront the university—political system—and I expected the officials to respond. In hindsight, I was probably naive, but the approach worked.

With respect to the scheduling, after some discussion with the dean, securing support from the international department, and working with the department scheduler, I was able to come up with possibilities for an alternative schedule. I went back to my students to discuss the options with them, thus, not only showing them how I had dealt with the problem with the administration, but giving them the opportunity to participate in the decision-making process. Together my students and I worked out a more satisfactory schedule.

In order to secure an interpreter, I raised my concerns with the head of the international department after the department rejected my request. Mysterious forces succeeded in convincing the rector, the head of the university, that I needed an interpreter. I was given two explanations for his behavior: the head of the international department had spoken with the rector, and my students had protested to the rector because they could not understand the lectures. Traditionally, the former explanation would have been the only plausible one. Some of my students, however, had a very strong desire to learn or at least do well. Among my best students were six whose second language was German; they would have been required to sit through the lectures and complete the work. Therefore, it is quite plausible that at least some of the students were forced to not accept fate and to challenge the system.

The interpreter problem was not, however, easily resolved. Initially, the solution reached was for my department contact to also serve as my interpreter. After a week, however, he developed ulcers; he feared the communists in the department would retaliate against him if he interpreted. The international department came to my rescue, assigning a fifth-year history student who had studied in the United States to assist me. This arrangement worked wonderfully. The lesson learned by my students and myself was that by taking responsibility for addressing our needs and confronting the system, rather than accepting, we succeeded in solving the problem to our benefit.

Political Participation: Teaching by Practice

One of my first lectures was on the importance of political participation and voluntary organizations in a democracy. Explaining the importance of political participation in a democracy, particularly the concept of voluntarism, to Russian students proved to be extremely difficult. The difficulty was caused not because of the Russian's lack of experience with voluntarism, but because the Russians had experienced forced voluntarism, particularly under Stalin's "weekend community service program." I am embarrassed to say that I was not aware of how these ideas might be received by my audience. Fortunately, my young interpreter understood the problem.

Here again, teaching through example and practice was a more effective approach than words. As mentioned in the discussion of political responsibility, my students did participate in the reorganizing of the class schedule. Moreover, we planned together the focus and approach to the second course. They articulated their needs, and I tried to organize the course to meet those needs.

Although I was slow to realize this, the group cohesiveness that existed among my Russian students was useful in teaching about participation and group action. Using the group's cohesiveness I had them participate in a group exercise, researching the answers to questions found in Congressional directories and other sources that had been provided through the Fulbright book program. The students who knew English were, of course, able to read the materials, but they worked with the non-English-speaking students. Each student prepared and turned in an assignment. The result of this exercise was that 30 Russian students knew that after the Republican victory in

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the fall 1994 U.S. elections, Al Gore was still president of the Senate; Jesse Helms would become the new chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee; and Newt Gingrich would replace Tom Foley as Speaker of the House of Representatives. Perhaps more important, however, was the excitement I saw when the students handed in their papers; working together, many had accomplished a task that they had initially complained was impossible.

Conclusions

Teaching as a visiting scholar in Russia today involves challenges and confronting many barriers to change. Scholars function as change agents just by their presence, although the precise impact of each individual may be hard to measure. After 70 years of communism and with few democratic traditions, democratic change in Russia is slow. To understand the democratic changes going on, however, one must look beyond Moscow, large cities, and government institutions. Quiet revolutions are occurring in other places, including the Russian universities. These small, quiet revolutions need support to be carried out successfully and in a way appropriate to the Russian culture and people.

In the area of education, exchange programs for scholars and students are an important part of this support. The exchanges are a two-way street—scholars and students traveling from the United States to Russia and from Russia to the United States. Moreover, as we support these programs, not only the Russians but we too change as a result of our increased understanding. Book programs provide support to the exchange programs and, in general, to the Russian universities. At YSU, and generally at Russian universities, library resources are extremely limited.[4] The books provided through the Fulbright program and the United States Information Agency to YSU were welcomed by the students, faculty, and administrators.

Personally, I hope that I was able to contribute in some small way to this change process. My students know more about the American system of government and democratic systems, but the real impact on my students and myself is hard to measure. I continue to correspond with students and staff at YSU through e-mail, have written letters of recommendation to American graduate schools for several students, gave the chairman of the YSU Politology Department a political scientist's tour of Washington, D.C., have assisted and will continue to assist visiting Russian students, and hope to return from time to time to lecture at YSU and other Russian universities. Our shared experiences continue.

Notes

1. The views expressed in this article are solely those of the author, not the U.S. General Accounting Office.

2. "Politology" is a Russian term for political science, but reflects a more "popular" less "scientific" conceptualization (1993 Encyclopedia, 188–189). Generally, courses taught in politology departments, such as that at Yaroslavl State University, include domestic and international politics.

3. The first part of the exam was closed-book with multiple choice and matching questions. Part two, an essay, was open-notes.

4. Moreover, students usually do not have their own copies of texts, but borrow them from the library for two weeks and share even those. During my semester in Yaroslavl, the Fulbright program provided over $1,500 worth of political science books in English, and the United States Information Agency program at the Embassy in Moscow contributed several additional cartons of political science books in Russian to the university.

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About the Author

Barbara Ann Stolz, a Senior Evaluator/Social Science Analyst at the U.S. General Accounting Office, was a 1994–95 Fulbright Lecturer in political science at Yaroslavl State University, Russia. She has published articles on Congress and criminal justice policy making and a book, *Still Struggling: America's Low Income Women Confronting the 1980's*.

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