Paths to Uncivil Societies and Anti-Liberal States: A Reply to Shenfield

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It is gratifying to have Stephen D. Shenfield join us in considering the Weimar/Russia comparison worthy of serious thought. His comments are both empirically insightful and theoretically challenging. Like him, we believe that the discussion should be continued, if only because any satisfying analysis of political developments must involve reasoning by analogy.

Of course, as Shenfield’s comments imply, analogical reasoning has its potential pitfalls. Did we get the analogy right? Shenfield believes that in some ways we did but in other, more important, ways we did not. He agrees with two parts of our article—the similarity of the two cases in the weakness of their revolutionary breaks with the past and the strength of the international pressures to marketize their respective economies. It is on the third and crucial point of comparison where he takes issue with us. Shenfield agrees that Weimar-Germany had a highly developed system of representative parties and post-Soviet Russia does not. But he does not believe that the effects of this difference will necessarily prevent a creeping fascist takeover in the provinces and the infiltration of the Russian public bureaucracies, all of which could culminate in an Italian-style “march on Rome.” This is the thrust of his commentary and it one that is worth addressing.

The essence of our reply can be stated quite simply: we agree, in part. In the short run, it is certainly possible that anti-liberalism will grow in popularity, especially if global and domestic economic trends continue to develop in Russia as they have of late. In the medium run, it is even possible that anti-liberals may overcome their formidable collective action problems and capture the state. In the long run, it is even conceivable that a new Russian anti-liberal state might constitute the core of a renewed challenge to the global liberal order (or at least the new liberal order in East-Central Europe). Indeed we specifically mentioned these possibilities (Hanson and Kopstein, pp. 278–279). The genuine relevance of the Weimar example,

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after all, is what makes the analogy so interesting and worth pursuing in the first place. Would-be Russian Hitlers abound. They find an eager audience in many regions. We would therefore respond to Shenfield with a provisional agreement that the threat of fascism in Russia is very real.

There is, however, a great conceptual and political divide between the broad and diffuse appeal of fascism in the short run and what would have to transpire for Russian fascists to overcome their collective action problems—both organizational and ideological—and create a viable fascist state in the long run. Investigating the latter problem was the essence of our article. The absence of a stable system of representative parties in Russia, we continue to contend, suggests that only after a period of protracted civic development and institution-building in Russia could fascist rule be any more stable or effective than is the current, formally democratic, one.

In what follows we develop this argument more carefully, attempting in the course of addressing Shenfield’s observations to clarify what may have been ambiguous in our earlier article. In doing so, we do not mean in any way to diminish Shenfield’s important contribution to the debate. On the contrary, we will maintain that the thrust of his argument represents not a criticism of our work but rather an important elaboration of one implication of our thesis. But before we address this main point, we would like to turn briefly to several smaller issues raised by Shenfield.

DEFINITIONAL ISSUES

In defining the threat to liberal democracy we use the term “anti-liberal statism” as a general description of a range of possible organizational and ideological challengers. Shenfield questions whether this term is at once too broad, in that it conflates fascism and communism, which are very different animals, and too narrow, in that it supposedly excludes a party such as the Liberal Democrats, which does not include explicit anti-liberalism in its self-definition. Let us deal with the second point first. Of course we view Zhirinovsky’s LDPR as an anti-liberal party. The point is not whether a party’s name is explicitly anti-liberal but whether its programmatic statements and its leader’s speeches are. It is true that Zhirinovsky, in order to differentiate himself from figures like Zyuganov on the “left” and Barkashov on the “right,” occasionally defends “liberal” property rights and individual freedoms. However, these elements of his ideology are consistently subordinated to the greater geopolitical “mission” of establishing a “Russia” encompassing the entire Eurasian continent, in order once and for all to subordinate the peoples of the “south.”

This takes us back to the first point. We choose to use “anti-liberal statism” because in post-Soviet Russia neo-imperial and even nationalist ideologies are not the monopoly of explicit “fascists.” A careful or even casual reading of Zyuganov’s pronouncements, which are replete with anti-enlightenment moralism, provides sufficient proof for this assertion. Indeed, unlike in Weimar Germany, in the post-Soviet case ideological and political entrepreneurs have made several attempts to meld communism and fascism into a formula that could appeal to wide segments of society. For this reason, elements of the extreme “right” and the extreme “left” in Russia have tended to converge. Certainly there are important differences among Zyuganov’s “patriotic left,” Barkashov’s “national socialist right,” and Zhirinovskiy’s “centrist” (sic) ideologies. But from the standpoint of sustaining liberal democracy, what they share—their anti-liberalism and glorification of state power—is surely what matters most.

As for “orthodox internationalist communism” (Shenfield), one should perhaps distinguish it from “fascism” more carefully than we did in our article, perhaps by emphasizing the difference between fascism’s anti-liberal glorification of nation and empire, and Leninism’s equally anti-liberal emphasis on class struggle directed by a “party of professional revolutionaries.” However, making this distinction was not crucial to our argument; given the marginal importance of genuine Leninists in post-Soviet Russia, and the extremely low probability that Leninism in its original form could ever make a comeback in the post-Soviet context.

DOES WORLD WAR II MATTER?

We argued that one factor inhibiting the development of a viable mass-based fascist ideology and organization in Russia is the negative experience with the Nazis during World War II. Shenfield offers convincing arguments that Russians are remarkably ignorant of what fascism really was, what Nazism did, and what it might mean for a Russian to be a Nazi. Instead the term “fascism” is used as a general epithet. We agree. A few days spent in any Russian city (or in any US city) will provide any student with enough evidence that Russians (as Americans) do not have a very sophisticated understanding of the doctrinal differences between totalitarian ideologies. Zyuganov, Zhirinovsky, Barkashov, and other would-be Russian Führers often sound depressingly alike, and even the trained political scientist may have trouble analytically distinguishing between Nazis, fascists, communists, and nationalists in contemporary Russia.

Nevertheless, Shenfield himself, at a later point in his essay, maintains that one of the factors that may reduce the popularity of the Russian National Unity is its ideological reliance on “German Nazism.” But why would a Nazi form of anti-liberalism face greater challenges than any other form of anti-liberalism unless some lingering revulsion to German Nazism was out there in the culture at large? Moreover, if most Russians do not differentiate among varieties of fascism, does it not follow logically that this general cultural antipathy toward fascism will tend to undermine even those “fascists” who claim that their anti-Semitism, black armbands, salutes, and swastikas are of the “Russian” rather than “German” variety? Finally, even if it is true that the cultural “lessons” of the Nazi invasion of Russia are likely to fade over time, they are unlikely to disappear entirely. Rather, the cultural trend is best characterized as a movement from a
universal public loathing of fascism toward a confused and fragmented wrestling with contradictory emotions about it. The ability of ideologues to rally the emotions of the masses around fascist symbolism is surely less likely in such an environment than during the late Weimar periods when fascism was still untied and its promises of glory were still unshorned by Nazism’s legacy of utter moral depravity and military defeat.

FASCISM AND ECONOMIC PERFORMANCE

Shenfield maintains that economic prosperity or downturns at the global level may cut both ways, and will not be a good barometer for gauging levels of anti-system support. We find this section of his paper less compelling than the rest. Is he really trying to say that a good world economy cuts both ways, just as a bad one would? Returning to the Weimar analogy here may be instructive. Just as the Great Depression and cheap commodity prices did not actually help democrats in Weimar Germany, we expect that they would not greatly assist post-Soviet Russia. The net effect of an economic downturn may not be exactly calculable, but it is fairly certain that a drastic reduction in access to recessionary Western markets for Russian raw materials and (unfortunately still inferior) manufactured goods would certainly not bolster the appeal of market liberalism. Furthermore, a significant recession would surely limit the flexibility of Western governments and banks in extending credits and structuring terms of repayment, an event that would also undermine any putative Russian liberalism. Lack of EU integration might, as Shenfield argues, help the Russians return “a measure of economic cooperation with its neighbors to the West,” but it could also permit “reasonable” discussion of restoring the old empire.

Shenfield then moves to an interesting discussion of the relationship between relative prosperity and anti-system support in the regions. This is clearly a complex issue and Shenfield has made some fascinating observations. We wonder, however, whether the studies upon which he relies may have missed what can be termed the “regions within regions” effect. A recent study of Krasnodar (a region that Shenfield cites in his paper), for example, maintains that Krasnodar contains two distinct economic and political regions—a coastal one that supports Yeltsin and economic liberalism, and an agricultural hinterland that supports the communists (Magomedov, 1998). We wonder therefore whether the data are really as unambiguous as Shenfield suggests and whether they may need to be disaggregated further. The point here is that even within regions there may be more and less developed and westernized areas that any aggregate regional analysis may miss.

ALTERNATIVE PATHS TO POWER

The most important parts of Shenfield’s article, in our opinion, are the two sections on the regional factor and the non-electoral path to power.

The essence of his analysis is that state and organizational (party and associational) power appear to be coagulating at the regional level, and the fact that local political elites do not have ties to countrywide parties has not prevented this from occurring. Given this fact, it is possible that fascist parties and organizations will create for themselves a strong regional base through elections and the infiltration of public bureaucracies. Shenfield has made an intriguing observation and posited a fascinating and frightening scenario. The key passage deserves to be quoted at length:

The possibility that fascists will gain power by other than electoral means remains to be considered, as does the possibility that individuals will win election as provincial governors who possess fascist convictions and connections but are not affiliated with any countrywide fascist political party. The essential core of the Weimar analogy is not thereby undermined. After all, what is the central concern of observers who are struck by the parallels between contemporary Russia and Weimar Germany: the possibility that fascists will come to power in Russia, or the nature of the means by which they do so?

These observations are very important. At first glance, they appear directly to challenge our contention that the present collective action problems are so formidable that a fascist takeover (electoral or otherwise) would probably have to wait for a period of protracted institution-building and civic development before it would be successful or stable. It is worth recalling that we do not rule out the possibility of an authoritarian takeover. Rather, we argue that the present collective action problems involved in exercising state power in Russia would render any authoritarianism just as unworkable or ineffective as the present formally democratic political institutions. In some ways, by arguing for the possibility of a gradual fascist mobilization at the regional level and regional elections that might culminate in a final fascist victory at the national level, Shenfield is making the same point that we do. Note, for example, his interesting use of the word “infiltration” in referring to a creeping fascist takeover of public bureaucracies. This is simply a pejorative word for something that might be considered a positive development if the infiltrators were members of a young liberals club. What Shenfield is speaking of is the gradual creation of an “uncivil society” that will use its social capital to take over the state. The point is that such a process will not happen overnight but will, as Shenfield himself argues, be gradual.

Thus we agree that it is possible that anti-liberal statism could take root at the local level in some Russian regions. Indeed, we argue repeatedly in our article that to be stable and effective, institution building, whether liberal or fascist, must be grassroots in nature. Even if a number of garden-variety fascists came to power at the regional level, however, it would still be necessary for someone or some entity to unite them at the national level, a Gauleiter of Gauleiters—in short, a Hitler—as the head of a national
party. This is something that has historically been very difficult to do because of the sheer quantity of fascist ideologies; fascists are ideologically promiscuous. Many local fascists are called but few are chosen to national leadership. The appearance of a viable national fascist ideology should not simply be assumed.

In short, Shenfield has outlined an important scenario in which fascists overcome the collective action problems of post-communism through regional local fascisms, culminating in a national push of sorts—which we agree is a possibility. But even the “march on Rome” scenario does not contradict our assertion that any stable outcome will require a protracted period of grass-roots institution-building. Indeed our macro-structural and developmental conditions remain a requirement even for Shenfield’s admittedly very different world of possibilities.

How does this analysis bear upon our basic argument that the absence of effective parties at the national level may have worked against the repetition of the Weimar scenario in the short run? It is important to recall that Shenfield essentially does not challenge our main thesis: that the presence of a highly institutionalized party system in an environment of post-imperial humiliation and high international economic pressure could serve to increase the prospects for fascist takeover. This point remains well worth emphasizing at a time when many commentators and policymakers appear to assume that the building of effective “state capacity” in Russia would automatically help to consolidate liberal democracy.

Perhaps more important, Shenfield obviously shares our basic concern that many analysts, given the genuine structural similarities between the two cases, do not take the “Weimar Russia” analogy seriously enough. As we emphasized in the concluding sentence of our essay, this is no time for Western complacency about the future of Russian democracy. Indeed, despite the weakness of Russia’s party system and civil society in comparison with that of Weimar Germany, it is certainly disturbing that the two anti-system parties led by Zyuganov and Zhironovskiy are, after two parliamentary elections, still institutionally stronger than any of their Russian competitors. Moreover, Yeltsin’s recent dismissal of Chernenygin and appointment to ministerial positions of prominent members of Yavlinsky’s circle certainly does not bode well for the further institutionalization of the two main moderate parties, Our Home is Russia and Yabloko. Given Shenfield’s important point that there are also disturbing signs of a consolidation of an “uncivil society” in some Russian regions, the prospects for stable liberal democracy in Russia might appear bleak indeed.

In the end, though, we fundamentally disagree with Shenfield that fascism in Russia can be consolidated without the formation of a genuinely institutionalized, national anti-liberal party inspired by a truly compelling ideological vision. In this respect, one of the most encouraging aspects of the contemporary Russian political milieu is the tired, unoriginal, and even farcical quality of post-Soviet Russian fascist ideologies to date. We are accustomed to emphasizing how terrible a problem corruption can be for