

An Excessively Bleak View of Russia?

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David Satter

Darkness at Dawn: The Rise of the Russian Criminal State

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David Satter is a former Moscow correspondent for the Financial Times and the Wall Street Journal. He is currently a senior fellow at the Hudson Institute, a research fellow at the Hoover Institution, and a visiting scholar at the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies. This book is very effectively informed by the author's extensive firsthand experience in Russia as well as his broader perspective on what is happening during the tumultuous transformation that is taking place in the Former Soviet Union.

Satter has a very bleak view of what is transpiring in Russia. With extended reference to concrete examples, the author makes a compelling case that Russia has in fact become "criminalized," and that there is little hope for major improvements any time soon.

Satter's basic argument is that Russia lacks a moral foundation. As a result, people tend to define "liberty" as, in affect, a license to do whatever they can get away with.

When communism collapsed in the Soviet Union it was not replaced with a new set of workable values. Instead, according to Satter, the young "reformers" assumed that in order to bring down the old system there would have to be a period of "lawlessness" during which some people would ignore all the rules and become very rich. This would then lead to a more settled/stable system based on "private property" and the "profit motive." The lawless period was regrettable—but necessary.

According to Satter, contrary to the expectations of the "reformers," the lawless period has become entrenched. In this connection, he argues that a major hallmark of the "do what you can get away with and don't worry about the consequences" approach is a nearly complete disregard for individual human life. As evidence of this, he cites, among a number of examples, the series of bombings of apartment buildings in the fall of 1999 and the handling of the Kursk submarine disaster in August 2000.

In a contribution to Johnson's Russia List (#7284, 11 August 2003) Kirill Pankratov forcefully argues that these examples don't prove Satter's case. With regard to the Kursk accident, Pankratov points out that other recent accidents took more lives than were lost on the submarine, including the Concord plane crash and the terrible fire in the Austrian Alpine tunnel, both of which occurred during the same time period that the submarine

was sunk. Pankratov argues that both the latter two cases included significant technical shortcomings and human error, but no one claimed that these accidents were symptoms of the failure of the French or Austrian societies. He then, very logically, goes on to point out that if the most modern American submarine ended up in serious trouble, even if the Russians were in the best position to help, asking for their assistance wouldn't be the first thing the American Navy would think of.

With regard to the apartment bombings, Pankratov argues that Russian authorities didn't need any additional reasons to begin the second Chechen war in view of the growing lawlessness in Chechnya (e.g., the growing number of kidnappings for ransom of many hundreds of Russian citizens, including high level officials) and after the Chechen attacks had begun on Russian forces in Daghestan. He further argues, in effect, that if the alleged attempted bombing in Ryazan was in fact masterminded by the Russian security service, we have to assume that they have been able to keep the lid on the cover up much more effectively than they were able to execute the operation to begin with.

There is more to Pankratov's criticism of Satter's argument. The main point is that Pankratov very effectively demonstrates the weakness of basing one's argument pretty much exclusively on a series of examples. It is always possible to come up with counter examples and alternative explanations. In addition to his examples, Satter needs some more systematic information in order to be able to present a more convincing argument.

No one can deny that Russia has an abundance of problems, many of which are very serious. In addition to the "criminality" Satter focuses on, these problems include a tendency on the part of many people to believe that the government should "do something" to solve their problems, with the result that they don't take the initiative to get things done themselves.

For example, there is a branch of an American-based "service club" in Vladimir that doesn't want to get involved in any project in an area that they see as the "responsibility of the City Administration." This includes an effort to upgrade some outdoor basketball courts. As a result, it will not be possible to apply for a "matching grant" for this project from the organization's international office. The members of the Russian club are taking this approach even though it is clear that young people very much need something to do in the summers—besides drink beer, smoke, and get into trouble—even though the City has a number of facilities that can be upgraded for much less than it will cost to build from scratch, and even though it should be clear that the City government has a large number of priority needs to meet on a very limited budget. (This is the kind of project that service clubs would not hesitate to get involved in here in the States.) Quite a few Russians still expect the government to do more than even an honest, well managed government with a decent budget can reasonably be expected to do—and, for the most part, Russian government at all levels is not setting any records for either honesty or efficiency, and there is a serious shortage of funds. The government's shortcomings and problems shouldn't result in nothing being done.

On the positive side, both attitudes and behavior are changing—something that Satter seems to have missed. For example, again in Vladimir, parents with handicapped children finally quit waiting for the government to do something, and they formed their own very effective organization. In another case, a City-funded organization has gone well beyond what is required of it in an effort to provide effective psychological and counseling services to troubled kids, their families, and their teachers.

It is clear that the growing prosperity one can see on the streets and in the shops and restaurants of Vladimir is not the product solely of the boom in oil prices or any other artificial stimulus of the economy. Rather, in large measure it is the product of individuals looking for ways to make an honest living—and having increasing success.

For example, one individual I know who a few years ago was mainly complaining about how difficult life had become now has an increasingly successful business installing paving tiles and house painting. They did excellent work in both areas at the American Home that this reviewer has operated in Vladimir since 1992. Another Russian firm did an excellent job of putting a new roof on the Home, something that would have been unthinkable when the house was built eleven years earlier.[1]

One of Satter's major concerns, and a serious concern of a number of very well informed demographic specialists, is the ongoing decline in Russia's population, which it is feared could result in very serious long term problems. But even this may be turning around as more young couples become optimistic about the future and decide to start families. This could be a matter of chance, but two young couples I know recently had babies, the first to be born to acquaintances since the American Home was built eleven year's ago.[2]

While there are many serious problems and a great deal that needs to be done, there is a growing amount of positive information appearing in places like Johnson's Russia list, including information on the overall improvement in the economy.[3] In short, it would appear that David Satter is excessively pessimistic. However, his book is a very good read and should provoke thoughtful discussion in the classroom and elsewhere.

NOTES

1. For information on the American Home see: www.serendipity-russia.com.
2. See Olga Sobolevskaya, "Is Russia in for a Baby Boom?" RIA Novosti, October 1, 2003 (Johnson's Russia List #7348, 2 October 2003. This article ends with the following comments:

"Demographers believe that if Russia's economic upturn remains stable and the population's real incomes continue to grow (in 2002 they grew by 14 per cent), the birth-rate will continue to grow for some time. Russia is already witnessing the effect of the so-called postponed births. The generation of the 1970s has started feeling more confident and has decided to have children. Today's positive demographic trend is an echo of the

1980s baby boom: children born in those years are becoming parents themselves.”

For a negative view of this issue, see Mariya Kakturskaya, “Why Aren’t Russians Having Babies?” Argumenty i fakty, 23 July 2003 (JRL #7313, 5 September 2003).

3. See, for example, “IMF revises Russian growth forecast sharply higher,” Reuters, 18 September 2003 (JRL #7329, 18 September 2003). According to the report, the higher growth estimate reflects “stronger than expected momentum arising from strong real wage growth, favorable liquidity conditions in domestic financial markets, and increased access to international capital markets.”

There are admittedly a lot more “negative” articles in Johnson’s Russia List than positive. They cover everything from the increasing number of suicides to the poor state of the health of Russia’s children to corruption and inefficiency in the legal system among many other topics.

However, there do seem to be a growing number of positive trends—and the increased prosperity of an increasing number of Russians is obvious. In this connection, see Mark Medish, “Russia’s economic strength begins in the home,” Financial Times (UK) 22 September 2003. The article notes that “[a]n emerging Russian middle class has begun to assert itself with raw spending power. Retail turnover in 2003 may reach Dollars 150bn. Initially, the retail trend was strongest in food sales, but consumer durables are now increasing as a share of household spending. Domestic manufacturing has responded to this demand.”

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