

# Elites and the Diffusion of Foreign Models in Russia

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Globalization has sparked renewed interest in the diffusion of ideas and norms across boundaries. Although much work has focused on diffusion at the macro-level and on the groups that transmit ideas, few researchers have studied the cognitive processes of political elites as they weigh the merits of various foreign-inspired models. Drawing on a series of original, in-depth interviews with Russian parliamentarians and high-ranking bureaucrats conducted in 1996, this paper makes two contributions to the study of individual-level borrowing in the Russian context. First, the openness of Russian elites to foreign borrowing is investigated; despite the public rhetoric about Russia's uniqueness, a substantial number of Russian elites are willing to borrow from foreign experience – particularly from models of European welfare capitalism. Second, three explanations of why policy-makers prefer to emulate some countries rather than others are tested – because they are similar to their own country either geographically, historically or culturally (comparability); because they have geostrategic prominence (prestige); or because they excel economically and/or politically (performance). Comparability and prestige are found to be of lesser importance than performance to Russian elites when considering the merits of various foreign models. Given that Russia closely approximates a most-likely case for validating explanations stressing comparability, this suggests that the array of foreign ideas that could become part and parcel of Russia's transition process is probably wider than is usually assumed. It also implies that, in general, the regional dimension of diffusion plays a smaller role than previously theorized.

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Globalization has eroded barriers to the free flow of information and accelerated the spread of ideas across boundaries, thus sparking renewed interest in the diffusion of ideas and norms. Researchers studying diffusion as a macro-level phenomenon have traced the spread of policies, ideas or decisions across boundaries (Majone, 1991; Starr, 1991); investigated the factors that facilitate policy transfer (Orenstein, 2001; Walker, 1969); analyzed the changes to policy innovations as they diffuse (Hays, 1996); assessed the strength of diffusion theories against competing explanations (Hale, 2000; Rohrschneider, 1996); and examined the conditions of effective institutional transfer (Jacoby, 2000). Others, adopting an intermediate-level perspective, have focused on the mechanisms by which (or the groups through which) ideas diffuse and their impact on public policy; they may approach the issue from different perspectives, but they all contend that transnational advocacy groups, epistemic communities, transnational social movements, networks of policy entrepreneurs, or policy communities are vehicles for the cross-boundary spread of ideas (Coleman and Perl, 1999; Evangelista, 1999; Haas, 1992; Johnson, 2001; Keck and Sikkink, 1998; Khagram *et al.*, 2002; Tarrow, 2002). Although such groups can include state actors, by and large the focus is on communities of experts and activists that pressure the state on policy issues from the outside.

In contrast, relatively few researchers have looked microscopically at the 'receiving end' of these policy pressures – the individual policy-makers who are, after all, the targets of transnational activists. Although many stress the importance of ideas and learning in policy formation, little is known about the cognitive processes of political elites as they weigh the merits of various foreign-inspired options. How receptive are decision-makers in a given state to the transmission of foreign ideas? Why do policy-makers turn to some countries and not others for ideational inspiration? How do civil servants and elected politicians evaluate the various properties of foreign models?

This theoretical gap is noteworthy because, although some norms (such as democratic ideals) may seem to diffuse almost effortlessly (Muravchik, 2002), the actual implementation of policies based on those norms requires the passage of legislation or the promulgation of rules by political leaders. So it behoves us to take a closer look at elite-driven emulation – those instances when officials or policy specialists are attracted to the experience of a foreign country when evaluating policy alternatives (Hoberg, 1991, p. 110).

After reviewing the theory, definitions and methodological considerations that inform this study, I pursue two lines of inquiry at the level of the individual policy-maker. First, I investigate the openness of Russian elites to foreign borrowing and show that, despite the public rhetoric about Russia's uniqueness, a substantial number of Russian elites are willing to borrow from foreign experience – particularly from models of European welfare capitalism. Second, I test three explanations of why policy-makers prefer to emulate some countries rather than others – because they are similar to their own country either geographically, historically or culturally (comparability); because they have geostrategic prominence (prestige); or because they excel economically and/or politically (performance). I find that comparability and prestige are of lesser importance than performance to Russian elites when considering the merits of various foreign models. Given that Russia approximates a most-likely case for the comparability explanation, this suggests that the array of foreign ideas that could become part and parcel of Russia's transition process is probably wider than is usually assumed. It also implies that, in general, the regional dimension of diffusion plays a smaller role than previously theorized. I conclude by elaborating on the implications of these findings for both diffusion research and our understanding of contemporary Russia.

### **Theoretical Perspectives on the Selection of Models**

Scholars have made great strides in demonstrating how diffusion happens at the macro-level – in determining which countries or sub-national units are more likely to adopt policy innovations (Walker, 1969); whether ideas, norms or policies diffuse in regional patterns (Kopstein and Reilly, 2000; Mooney, 2001); and the reasons why certain states are viewed as attractive models (Coates, 1999). Implicit in much of this work are assumptions about how the potential model is viewed by the borrowing state. Yet decisions about the utility of foreign lessons are fundamentally ones made at the micro-level: an individual policy-maker weighs the merits of incorporating a given idea from another locale and ultimately decides whether that

policy should be emulated.<sup>1</sup> What compels such an individual to regard a given region as a potentially viable model?

Three perspectives can be identified in the diverse literature that addresses this topic. One of the most prevalent explanations stresses *comparability*. In her study of political learning in Latin America, Bermeo asserted that ‘events in what one might call reference states are an especially important source of political learning’ and that nations become a ‘point of comparison for political actors in another state’ because of geographic proximity, cultural similarity and/or a shared history (1992, p. 283). Weil likewise emphasized comparability in the spread of democratic values across countries, suggesting that “‘demonstration effects’ probably flow most effectively among ‘reference groups’ of countries that believe their conditions are comparable’ (1993, p. 198; see also Brown, 2000, pp. 186–8). For instance, Spain’s democratic transition was an influential example for Argentina, and Argentina’s democratization, in turn, encouraged democratizers in Uruguay, Brazil and Chile (Huntington, 1991, pp. 102–3). In the social-movements literature as well, scholars have emphasized the importance of ‘activist-adopters’ identifying with ‘activist-transmitters’ (McAdam and Rucht, 1993; McAdam *et al.*, 2001).

Geographic proximity is usually highlighted as being a particularly important dimension of comparability. This is because policy-makers are said to be reassured by what is nearby and therefore familiar; interactions and communications across adjacent states are likely to be dense; economic and social problems in a given region may well be similar; and/or states have a tendency to compete with their neighbors. In many cases, such as Latin America’s Southern Cone states, geographic proximity and cultural similarity are generally overlapping qualities. But what about those instances (for example, India and Pakistan, or Estonia and Russia) when neighboring states may differ greatly along cultural, linguistic or religious lines? In such cases, one scholar has argued that ‘social psychological proximity’ trumps geographic propinquity in stimulating cross-national policy transfer; for example, policy-makers in the UK often ignore Ireland and France in favor of the US, Canada and Australia when searching for public-policy lessons (Rose, 1993, pp. 105–7).

A second explanation of why individuals view certain states as exemplars relates to the connection between *performance* and legitimation (Weil, 1993, p. 198). Certain positive aspects of state performance – such as economic growth or the absence of domestic unrest – raise the attractiveness of a foreign model and legitimate policy-makers’ efforts to transfer its features to the home country. For example, during deliberations of the Legislative Committee of the Estonian Supreme Council in late 1990 over institutional reforms, one speaker referred to the stability of parliamentary regimes to make his case for a parliamentary system:

The Committee members locked horns on whether the prime minister should be able to call for new parliamentary elections in case of a vote of no confidence. The committee vice-chair, physicist Peet Kask, referred to Arend Lijphart’s *Democracies* (1984) to document the fact that almost all stable parliamentary regimes (with the exception of Norway) do give the government such power. However, most of the committee members

still felt such power was 'undemocratic' and the experience of stable democracies was irrelevant to Estonia's special conditions.  
(Taagepera, 1991, p. 480)

This emphasis on performance is also evident in a study of diffusion in Brazil, which reported that Brazilian parliamentarians tended to emphasize the relevance of high-achieving nations more than culturally similar countries when debating the merits of presidential versus parliamentary forms of government (Elkins, 2001).

A third explanation focuses on *prestige*, which may derive from such features as a country's international standing, economic success or cultural appeal, among others. In his discussion of learning in the Latin American context, Weyland asserted that 'a policy innovation is more likely to turn into a model if it originates in a country of high status. Such a favorable image in turn arises from more advanced economic, social, and political development; historical tradition or cultural attraction; and an earlier leadership role in world affairs' (Weyland, 2004, p. 11). For example, Majone (1991) maintained that the economic and political power of the US explains its influence on regulatory policy-making in post-war Europe. In the context of the US states, the 'leader-laggard' diffusion model posits that states take cues from certain leading states, often irrespective of their geographical location (Berry and Berry, 1999, pp. 176–7).

## Definitions and Methodology

The diffusion literature is fraught with definitional ambiguities,<sup>2</sup> in part because it spans several disciplines and numerous issue areas. In this paper, I will restrict my focus to what is termed by some 'lesson-drawing' – when 'political actors or decision makers in one country draw lessons from one or more other countries, which they then apply to their own political system' (Dolowitz and Marsh, 1996, p. 344) – and by others 'emulation' – 'the utilization of evidence about a programme or programmes from overseas and a drawing of lessons from that experience' (Bennett, 1991, p. 221).<sup>3</sup> Although Rose defined 'lesson-drawing' in both spatial and temporal terms – as a search for lessons across territorial boundaries *or* in one's own past (1993, p. 21) – I use the term exclusively to refer to the cross-national borrowing of ideas. Also, most diffusion studies are concerned with specific programs or policies, but this study examines receptivity toward *general* models of political and economic development.

The data for this article are drawn from an original survey of political elites that I conducted in Russia between February and July 1996 in collaboration with the Russian Academy of Sciences' Institute of Sociology (Rivera, 2000; Rivera *et al.*, 2002).<sup>4</sup> Political elites are defined as parliamentarians and high-ranking civil servants, in keeping with a landmark study of elites in seven advanced industrial democracies (Aberbach *et al.*, 1981). This entailed drawing two subsamples for the national elites:<sup>5</sup> (i) a random sample of parliamentary deputies in the lower house of Russia's national legislature, the State Duma; and (ii) an interval sample of top-level bureaucrats working in all federal ministries except for those of Defense and Internal Affairs. As in the aforementioned landmark study, the bureaucrats directed departments, divisions or bureaus in federal ministries; were located in the nation's

capital; and held positions roughly one to two rungs below the minister. Eighty-three Moscow-based interviews were conducted in all, of which 45 were deputies and 38 were civil servants. Of the initial samples, 81.8 percent of the deputies and 74.5 percent of the civil servants were successfully interviewed. This produced response rates that mirrored, and in some cases surpassed, rates attained in other elite studies, including the research done in Britain and Italy by Putnam (1973, p. 15).

The interviews, lasting 52 minutes on average, included (i) a fully structured, tape-recorded interview covering a wide-ranging set of mostly open-ended queries; (ii) a battery of demographic questions; and (iii) a short, self-administered, written questionnaire completed by respondents at the end of the interviews. All were face-to-face interviews conducted in Russian, with the interviewing responsibilities divided between myself and a Russian colleague. In 98 percent of the cases, they were conducted in the respondent's office; and 69 percent of the time, no one other than the interviewer and interviewee was present.

## Debates over Russian Identity

Russia's national identity has been a widely debated and hotly contested subject for centuries. Since at least the seventeenth century, Russia has been struggling to define its relationship with the West and decide whether it should join it or follow a 'third road' – a distinctive path of development unlike that of other countries:

Almost every significant writer has had something to say on the question of 'the Russian idea', and the whole notion is central to the debate over Russia's path of post-communist development and the relevance of Western notions of liberal democracy to Russia. The Russian idea in one way or another suggests a unique path for Russia (Sakwa, 1994, p. 292).

Likewise, McDaniel defined 'the Russian idea' as 'the conviction that Russia has its own independent, self-sufficient, and eminently worthy cultural and historical tradition that both sets it apart from the West and guarantees its future flourishing' (1996, pp. 10–11). To adherents of this viewpoint – whether they are called Slavophiles, Eurasianists or simply radical nationalists – the embrace of Western institutions and practices would corrupt Russian society and erode its cultural distinctiveness.

Russia's identity was intensely debated by political elites during the Soviet era and has continued into the present (Chinyaeva, 1997). For example, during the perestroika era, one nationalist argued against Mikhail Gorbachev's economic reforms by asserting that the economy should be reformed 'in accordance with centuries-old Russian national traditions' (quoted in Brudny, 1998, pp. 218–19). In the post-Soviet period, Gennadii Zyuganov, the leader of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation, has taken the lead in arguing that Russia represents a unique civilization (Zyuganov, 1995, pp. 17–20). At times, Boris Yeltsin's government also raised the subject of the need for a unifying 'Russian idea' (Zubkova and Kupriyanov, 1999, pp. 324–5). It even sponsored a public contest to develop a unifying 'idea for Russia'. Yet despite the 'oceans of ink spent printing ruminations

about Russia's special path', the contest ultimately 'produced no winning pithy formula or catchy slogan' (Smith, 2002, p. 164).

However, this conflicted identity is not solely the domain of political leaders: 'Russians [in general] are more divided than ever about which direction their country should go: whether to embrace the West and its models, or to remain apart, wrapped in the solace of Russia's historical peculiarities' (Gordon and Bohlen, 1999, p. 1). In a mass-level public-opinion survey conducted in 2000, two-thirds of respondents stated that Russia was an integral part of Europe, while one-third identified themselves as 'Eurasianists' ('Rossiiskoe obshchestvo na rubezhe stoletii', 2001). Ponarin (1999), on the other hand, asserted that Russians feel distant and alienated from a global culture 'rooted in [a] North-European Protestant ethic and epitomized by US culture' (1999).

### Elite Receptivity to Foreign Borrowing

In the light of the long-standing emphasis on Russian uniqueness espoused in many quarters, we might expect that most elites in this study would eschew any explicit adoption of Western ideas – especially given the increasing anti-American sentiment of the 1990s.<sup>6</sup> This expectation is not borne out by my data. In response to the question, 'Could you name any country which could serve as a model for Russia with respect to its political-economic development?',<sup>7</sup> only 26.5 percent of the respondents (22 in all) were firmly opposed to borrowing from the experience of any country (Table 1).<sup>8</sup> I have labeled these respondents 'traditionalists', or those who believe that a foreign model of societal development cannot be transplanted to Russian soil. Russia is too unique a country to adopt formulaic policy prescriptions; rather, solutions should be found within the context of history and national tradition. In other words, Russia has its own path (*svoi put'*) that it must follow. As one bureaucrat stated: 'Foreign experience is hardly 100 percent – and not even something like 30 percent – applicable to Russia. It's too unique a country' (G-109).<sup>9</sup> Another civil servant put it this way:

I don't think that Russia should emulate another country. If you remember history, before World War I Russia was developing at a very high rate. Russia was able to provide everyone with bread and butter and meat and fur and so on ... Various kinds of standard approaches to transition won't work for Russia. (G-086)

The 'traditionalist' label was not applied just to those who objected to the *wholesale* importation of foreign models to Russia, since few policy-makers would advocate the transplantation of a model without any adaptation. Indeed, as Rose argued, 'differences in time and space normally make impossible a carbon copy of a program in effect elsewhere' (1993, p. 3). Rather, the essence of traditionalism as I have defined it is an unwillingness to seriously consider transferring *elements* of foreign models to the Russian case. Also included in this category are those who held up only Russia's past as an appropriate model.

When pressed to explain their reluctance to import foreign models to Russia, traditionalists did not proffer explanations that are prominent in the democratic-transitions literature. For example, although arguments about the uniqueness of

**Table 1: Elite Views of the Applicability of Foreign Models to Russia (n = 83)**

	<i>Percentage of respondents</i>
Traditionalists	
Offered no model because Russia is unique	19.3
Named a period in Soviet or pre-revolutionary Russian history as a model	7.2
	} 26.5
Pure voluntarists	
Named one or more countries that could serve as a model for Russia	38.6
Quasi-voluntarists	
Offered no model, but mentioned one or more countries with traits that Russia could learn from	20.5
Offered no model, but stated that Russia should appropriate the best from other countries	12.1
	} 32.6
Don't know/refusal	2.4
Total	100.1

the Russian transition from authoritarian rule often highlight the absence of an established market economy,<sup>10</sup> only one traditionalist discussed this issue explicitly (although another four traditionalists cited structural aspects of the Russian economy as an impediment to foreign borrowing). Political factors, such as Russia's weak political institutions, were also not prominent in the responses and were mentioned only six times.

Rather, many based their reasoning on the notion of Russian exceptionalism discussed earlier. For example, eight of the 22 traditionalists mentioned Russia's mentality (*mentalitet*) as constituting a serious obstacle to borrowing ideas, eight referred to its multi-ethnic and/or multi-confessional nature, nine named its long and/or distinctive history, and three mentioned its cultural traditions. Thirteen traditionalists pointed to Russia's unique geography as a barrier to the importation of foreign ideas – its climate, low population density, territorial expanse, abundance of natural resources or location between Asia and Europe. The following were typical traditionalist answers to the question of whether any country could serve as a model for Russia:

I think that on the whole there is no such country that can serve as a model for Russia. Russia is too original a geopolitical and national creation for a single country or system to serve as a model for imitation or even copying. (D-039)

Russia is a particular (*osobennaya*) country, a unique country. There are no analogues to it in nature or the world, so to speak ... All countries have their own special features. Germans have their own mentality and

Russians have their own ... Look, who has a history like Russia's? What country could possibly have such a history? (D-030)

Yet they were hard-pressed to identify the specific mechanisms by which these features (the harshness of the Russian climate, say) preclude the adoption of foreign models.

Apart from the traditionalists, almost three-quarters of elites in the sample were coded as either 'pure voluntarists' or 'quasi-voluntarists' (Table 1). 'Pure voluntarists', comprising 38.6 percent of the sample, were quick to name a specific country or countries that could serve as a model for Russia and usually gave a reason or two for their selection. For example, one pure voluntarist offered this comment:

Well, I think that Switzerland is a good model – and the Swedes are also good, well organized – even though one is a republic and the other is a monarchy. But we could borrow a lot from their governmental structures ... In Switzerland there are cantons, which are essentially analogous to the subjects of the Russian Federation. They have a very high degree of freedom and independence, and at the same time comply with federal legislation. (D-007)

Another had this to say about Japan:

I was in Japan for two weeks. Maybe my knowledge is very superficial, but in the course of interacting with my colleagues it seemed to me that Japan combines a rather high degree of labor organization with a well-developed market economy. There is also a highly developed sense of responsibility to fulfill one's obligations. This is evident not only on the part of business people, but on the part of large companies in their dealings with the government and vice versa. And at the same time, despite that type of society, there is extensive governmental control and centralization. (G-092)

Quasi-voluntarists fall somewhere in between the traditionalists and pure voluntarists, comprising 32.5 percent of the respondents. Along with the traditionalists, they believed that Russia's uniqueness limits the applicability of foreign models to Russia. Yet in keeping with a voluntarist mindset, they added that partial lessons can be gleaned from foreign countries and/or that Russia should seek to appropriate the best that world experience has to offer. Typical responses from quasi-voluntarists were as follows:

No, I can't name one country that we should blindly copy. First, Russia has its own historical roots, its own distinctiveness, and it's impossible to transfer various systems to Russian soil purely mechanically. Moreover, the results will be undesirable. We need to take all the very best that has been achieved in other countries. There should be no blind copying from a single country. (G-077)

Here I'm having difficulty [naming a model for Russia]. No, I'm afraid I don't see such an example. We are too original. We can take a lot from



the technical sharpness of the Americans and from the discipline of the Germans, but it is impossible to apply these fully to Russia. We should follow some kind of unique path, absorbing the best from the world community, from world experience. (G-072)

This distribution of results is important because it raises the possibility that, although the mass public is not necessarily of the same mind (Colton and McFaul, 2003, p. 21; Gorshkov, 2001), Russian elites may be more open to borrowing than their public rhetoric would suggest.<sup>11</sup> A significant corpus of political leaders (over two-thirds of elite respondents interviewed) expressed receptivity to importing ideas from abroad to Russian soil. Although Russian elites may promote the idea of their unique identity, lament the loss of their country's great power status and emphasize the desirability of a 'third road', most are in fact willing to set their rhetoric aside in the quest for workable solutions to Russia's problems, and perhaps even to enter into partnership with various transnational communities. Thus, the array of foreign ideas that could become part and parcel of Russia's transition process is probably wider than is generally assumed.

This result is all the more compelling in the light of several additional surveys of Russian elites. Although the composition of the elite has changed since my study was conducted in 1996, elite opinion on the issue of foreign borrowing has been shown to be remarkably stable over time. For example, in two surveys of Russian foreign-policy elites (one conducted in 1995 and one in 1999), virtually identical aggregate responses on this issue were reported. Each time, 53 percent of respondents agreed that 'owing to Russia's history and geographical position at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, it should follow its own unique path', and about 40 percent believed that 'Russia should follow the path of other developed countries and join the world community, assimilating the achievements of Western civilization'.<sup>12</sup> (Since there was no intermediate position equivalent to my 'quasi-voluntarist' category, it is difficult to compare the aggregate distribution of responses to my own data.) In short, there was virtually no movement on this issue between 1995 and 1999. Another battery of elite interviews conducted in 1993, 1996 and 2001 also showed a general measure of stability on this issue.<sup>13</sup>

## The Swedish Model

Given that approximately two-thirds of the elites in my study would countenance some form of lesson-drawing, which regions of the world did they regard as the most promising? For the sake of clarity in answering this question, I focused on the 32 pure voluntarists in my sample – those who agreed that Russia's development might follow the path of a foreign model and named a specific country or region that could fulfill this role. Table 2 shows the countries named by this group in the order of the frequency with which they are mentioned. One notable result is the lack of interest among Russian political elites in regions or countries combining successful free-market economies and restrictive political systems (such as pre-1990 Chile and parts of South-East Asia). This is all the more telling given that the 'Pinochet variant' has been widely discussed in Russia;<sup>14</sup> business elites have expressed a preference for such models (Remnick, 1998, pp. 202–5); China was

**Table 2: Choice of Foreign Models by Pure Voluntarists**

<i>Country</i>	<i>Number of mentions</i>
Sweden	13
Germany	10
Japan	6
US	4
Canada	3
China, Chile, Finland, Switzerland and Denmark	2
France, Italy, UK, Austria, Poland, Yugoslavia, Czech Republic, Australia, India, 'Western Europe' and 'South-East Asia'	1

*Note: Respondents could name multiple countries.*

the favourite model of the Gorbachev elite (Lane, 1997, p. 872) and the interviews were conducted before the 1997 Asian financial crisis revealed serious underlying problems in Indonesia, among other South-East Asian states. Thus, using a separate data source, my study confirms a feature of Russian elite political culture that has been evident throughout the 1990s – a decided lack of enthusiasm for outright dictatorship, even when coupled with a free-market system (Zimmerman, 2002).

In contrast, advanced industrial democracies – primarily in Europe – are far and away the most attractive models for Russian elites. The models most preferred are not democracies with comparatively limited state involvement in the economy, such as the US; rather, the two countries mentioned most often (Sweden and Germany) are negotiated or consensual social capitalisms, where 'the political system entrenches a set of strong worker rights and welfare provision' (Coates, 1999, p. 651).

The clear favorite is Sweden. It was named by 13 respondents, several of whom remarked that 'socialism has been built there' (D-034, G-099). This affinity for the Swedish model was also favored by many in the Gorbachev period, such as the influential economist Leonid Abalkin (Smith, 1991, p. 257) and many members of 'democratic' groups (Lukin, 2000, pp. 231–2). Moreover, 'Gorbachev himself had a certain affinity for the Western European social democrats' and had great respect for Swedish Prime Minister Olof Palme (Evangelista, 1999, pp. 306–7). More recently, the former speaker of the Duma, Gennadii Seleznev, explained his preference for Sweden over China this way: 'The Swedish model is more interesting. And by the way, it incorporates many of the best features of the former USSR' (Nekhoroshev, 1996). In general, the preference for a comprehensive welfare state has a long history in the Soviet Union (Inkeles and Bauer, 1968; Bahry, 1993) and is evident in contemporary survey research on both elites and masses in Russia and other post-communist countries.<sup>15</sup> After Sweden and Germany, respondents favor Japan, which is also not a 'market-led capitalism' such as the US, but has been var-

iously termed a 'state-led' model of capitalism and a 'developmental-universalist' version of productivist welfare capitalism (Coates, 1999, pp. 650–1; Holliday, 2000).<sup>16</sup> Although it may be under strain in the West, European welfare capitalism is still the most preferred model for Russian elites.

But to what extent are these expressed preferences based on an informed understanding of the economic and political systems of foreign countries? Do elites really understand the essence of the models they are recommending? Although the time constraints of the interview situation made it difficult to probe the depths of respondents' understanding, the open-ended format of my question allowed me to assess in a limited way their knowledge of foreign systems – which can be characterized as moderate overall. Most pure voluntarists (43 percent) displayed a general understanding of the basic operation of the foreign countries they referenced, whereas another 32 percent offered only platitudes or extremely vague rationales for their choices. The remaining quarter covered in some detail, relatively speaking, one or more features of the target country – such as Sweden's agricultural policy or Germany's party system. In addition, a full 32 percent of the voluntarists mentioned foreign travel in their answers; this suggests that at least a third, and possibly more, had had first-hand experience abroad that shaped their selection of foreign models.

### Testing Explanations for the Choice of Models

So what drives the preference for Sweden and other advanced industrial democracies on the part of those Russian elites most receptive to foreign borrowing? In order to test the three competing explanations drawn from the diffusion literature (comparability, performance and prestige), I asked the pure voluntarists to explain their selections. Table 3 shows their answers. On the whole, these responses reveal findings that depart from the established wisdom. First, the prestige factor turns out to have been minimal in the calculations of Russian political elites. It was mentioned by only three respondents, one of whom commented that the US is an attractive model because the whole world has to reckon with it (D-011). Given the dramatic decline in Russia's status as a world power, the absence of explicit considerations of prestige in the responses is notable. It also contrasts with the late Soviet period, when US and Japanese economic models were preferred over other countries that might have had more relevance to the Soviet Union but had relatively low geostrategic significance (Moltz, 1993, p. 324).

Second, although the similarity of geographic, cultural or historical conditions is commonly thought to be the motor force behind the diffusion of ideas, comparability was not the primary reason given by Russian elites for preferring certain countries to others. Only four of the 32 pure voluntarists believed that a country's similar or shared history with Russia renders it a suitable model for Russia's development. For example, one civil servant drew the following parallels between Russia and both Japan and Germany:

There is a resemblance to Japan in terms of nuclear catastrophes and the accompanying massive ecological and social shocks. I'm talking about the atomic bomb dropped on Japan and the Chernobyl nuclear explosion,

**Table 3: Reasons for the Selection of Foreign Models by Pure Voluntarists**

	<i>Number of mentions</i>	<i>(%)</i>
<b>Performance</b>		
Economic productivity	11	} 32 } 70.3
Social-welfare system	11	
Combination of market economy with social protections and/or substantial government involvement	4	
Other economic features (e.g. successful reforms)	6	
Political features	8	
Cultural or spiritual features	3	} 13
Resolution of specific problems (e.g. environmental, ethnic, regional)	2	
<b>Comparability</b>		
Similar or shared history	4	} 16 } 25.0
Geographic proximity or similarity	4	
Cultural similarity	2	
Political or economic similarities	5	
General similarity	1	
<b>Prestige</b>		
National prestige	3	4.7
<b>Total number of reasons mentioned</b>	<b>64</b>	<b>100</b>

*Note: Respondents could name multiple reasons.*

the nuclear testing in Semipalatinsk, and the accident in the Urals ... With regard to Germany, I am referring to the problem of collapse. Germany was also in ruins as a result of military activity. It was able to get its economy together ... and revitalize its state – which now dominates Europe.<sup>17</sup> (G-059)

Only four elites referred to geographic comparability as their rationale for choosing a model, and just two mentioned a similar culture. For example, one bureaucrat pointed to Canada because of its similar northern climate and concomitant limitations on agricultural production (G-069), and another mentioned that the Finns are ‘northern people’ who possess the same way of thinking and habits as the Russians – in large part because Finland was once part of Russia (G-076). Additional specific similarities (such as a similar federal system or agricultural problems) were named by five respondents. Overall, a rationale for borrowing based on comparable conditions was expressed 16 times by the 32 pure voluntarists, constituting only 25 percent of all mentions.

This result is striking, given that Russia approximates a most-likely case for the comparability explanation because of its historical emphasis on a unique path of development. We might expect political elites in Russia, of all places, to restrict their range of focus to countries with parallel histories, cultures or traditions when selecting foreign models. In fact, as shown above, elites in this study by and large overlooked the one region that exhibits key shared features with Russia – a closely-linked history, a common homogenizing experience of Soviet-style socialism, and similar structural rigidities that complicate the ‘move to the market’. This region is, of course, Eastern Europe, and it is the region whose economic reforms were in fact the subject of intense study by Soviet scholars in the Gorbachev years (Bornstein, 1991). To be sure, as of 1996 only a few countries (notably Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovenia) had made significant economic progress, but the lack of attention even to them only underscores the point of my findings – when push comes to shove, Russian elites emphasize their *destination* more than their *starting point* when selecting a country to emulate, at least at the level of general societal development.

Rather, the single most important criterion for emulation is the model country’s performance, especially in the economic arena. As Table 3 shows, respondents mentioned performance considerations 45 times, for a total of 70 percent of all mentions. Within this category, economic factors are paramount. Elites respected economic productivity and a comprehensive welfare system above all, as each feature received 11 mentions. For example, a civil servant working in the health-care field spoke highly of Finland’s social-welfare system, highlighting in particular the resources available to the elderly, such as hospices and medical facilities (G-088). Four respondents specifically drew attention to the combination of market economics with extensive social protections and/or government regulation. Along these lines, one deputy praised Japan for its ‘strong elements of both private enterprise and government regulation, as well as its ... numerous social guarantees’ (D-006).<sup>18</sup>

Political features again assume secondary importance to the economy in the calculations of political elites. Although the interview protocol asked respondents to name a model with respect to ‘political-economic development’, domestic political features were a performance consideration for only eight voluntarists. One of these individuals, a bureaucrat, admired the alternation of power between parties of the left and right in Germany (G-068).

## Conclusions

By probing beyond the macro-level approach to diffusion that often assumes elite consensus, this study develops a typology of individual-level responses to foreign borrowing that can be readily applied to other cases. It also demonstrates the utility of moving beyond a dichotomization of Russian attitudes into those favoring the broad-based importation of Western practices into Russia and those promoting a uniquely Russian past, and the benefit of searching for more nuanced elite views on this issue.<sup>19</sup> Next, it uses the Russian case to test competing explanations culled from the diffusion literature of why policy-makers turn to some states and not others for ideational inspiration. Although Russia is a most-likely case for the

comparability explanation, the data show that geographical, historical and cultural affinities are much less important to political elites than the model country's performance – especially in the economic area.

If Russians' stress on performance is symptomatic of a general trend, it has several implications for ideational politics. First, it challenges the assumptions of similarity that are 'built into almost all diffusion research' (Strang and Meyer, 1993, p. 491). It implies that the range of countries from which policy-makers might be willing to borrow will not be restricted to those with cultural, geographic or historical affinities. Accordingly, the array of policy solutions available to decision-makers will be broader than assumed, and array innovations will not necessarily spread along regional lines. A recent example of such a diverse borrowing strategy is the way in which conservative think tanks in the US have pointed to pension reforms in both Chile and the UK to justify their proposals for reforming social security (Béland and Waddan, 2000).

Second, my results can be contrasted with the research done by Weyland, which demonstrated that, in the search for foreign models, policy-makers are less likely to undertake a rational, comprehensive search for solutions than to resort to 'cognitive shortcuts' for processing information (2002, p. 11). In the Latin American context, the tendency for elites to rely on information that 'has a special immediacy and that is therefore on their mind' (the 'availability heuristic') manifests itself in strong regional diffusion patterns. But in the Russian case, elites were less enamored of models 'on hand' – those with cultural, historical or geographical similarities, or those with geostrategic prominence – than with countries that embodied success. (Yet on the other hand, the fact that a significant number of Russian elites mentioned countries to which they had recently traveled shows that the availability heuristic has some applicability.) The question for future research is whether cognitive shortcuts become more important to Russian policy-makers as they move from the consideration of general paradigms (as in my study) to specific policy areas (as in Weyland's).

### **Implications for Contemporary Russian Politics**

The results presented in this paper also shed light on the debates about Russia's identity that have endured during the presidency of Vladimir Putin. In a statement of his views released to the public in December 1999, Putin emphasized the need for a strong state and declared that Russia would not soon become a duplicate of, 'say, the US or Britain, in which liberal values have deep historic traditions'. He also recommended that Russia find its own path to genuine renewal without mechanically copying foreign models, and he warned of the dangers of experimenting on Russia with 'abstract models and schemes taken from foreign textbooks' (Putin, 2000). At the same time, Putin has made his preference for the West abundantly clear. He has repeatedly stressed Russia's affinity with Europe, on one occasion stating that Russia 'was, is and will be a European country by its location, its culture and its attitude toward economic integration' ('Putin Opens EU–Russia Summit', 2000). In a series of interviews in which he elaborated on his views, he rejected the idea of a special path for Russia and declared instead that 'we are a part of Western European culture. In fact, we derive our worth precisely from this.

Wherever our people might happen to live – in the Far East or in the south – we are Europeans’ (Gevorkyan *et al.*, 2000, pp. 155–6). More recently, he has said that for the first time in several centuries, Russia was not claiming any unique path of development (Volkhonsky and Sysoev, 2002).

In short, Putin largely rejects traditionalist or Slavophile thinking. Although he has clearly not embraced all that Western advanced industrial democracies represent, and despite the fact that he adopts a decidedly patriotic rhetoric for domestic consumption, he has shown a willingness to import ideas, especially from the West. For example, he embraced the experimentation with jury trials begun under Yeltsin and got legislation passed that will phase in jury trials throughout the rest of the Russian Federation over several years (‘70 of Russia’s Regions Introduce Jury Trials’, 2003). Also, governmental deliberations leading up to the passage of pension reform legislation in 2001 included consideration of the Chilean model. Putin’s orientation – buttressed by the political elites’ willingness to import models demonstrated in this study – implies that future integration of Russia into Western political and economic structures would encounter only feeble ideological resistance at the elite level. At the same time, since economic productivity is the ‘performance’ ideal most valued by Russian elites, democratic institutionalization may continue to get short shrift in the years ahead. And in fact, the words and actions of Russia’s president lean in this direction. Putin has stated that the economy is his top priority (‘Putin Says Economy Is First Priority’, 2002), and as Mendelson (2002) has pointed out, democracy has indeed taken a sharp turn for the worse under his watch.

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### Notes

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- 1 I am focusing on voluntary borrowing rather than imitation prompted by conditionality, pressure or coercion – or in the language employed by Majone (1991), on ‘pull’ rather than ‘push’ forces.
- 2 ‘Diffusion research’ is conducted under a variety of labels – all of which can have slightly different definitions and emphases. These include ‘policy transfer’, ‘lesson-drawing’, ‘borrowing’, ‘policy-copying’, ‘demonstration effects’, ‘snowballing’, ‘contagion’ and ‘emulation’. For overviews, see Bennett (1991), Bennett and Howlett (1992), Dawisha and Turner (1997, pp. 409–10), Katz (1999) and Stone (1999). In his informed, empirical study of institutional transfer in Germany after the Second World War and again after reunification, Jacoby (2000) employed the term ‘imitation’ as something distinct from diffusion or policy borrowing.
- 3 Bennett stressed that emulation cannot necessarily be inferred from diffusion – which is ‘the successive adoption of similar policies by different states’ (1991, p. 220) – without evidence of conscious copying.
- 4 I am grateful to Polina Kozyreva and Eduard Sarovskii for their expert assistance in Moscow.
- 5 Two additional regional samples – one from Nizhnii Novgorod and one from Tatarstan – are excluded from this analysis.

- 6 For a vivid example written by a senior scholar in Moscow, see Mikoyan (1998).
- 7 Depending on the initial response, this question was followed by a probe asking either why such a model was appropriate for Russia or why no model would work. Working with the original Russian-language transcripts, I then coded all of the qualitative responses. To assess reliability, a second coder (and native Russian speaker) independently coded this set of questions. On the initial question about whether there was an appropriate model for Russia, the author and the independent coder were in agreement on 83 percent of their coding decisions. In cases where initial judgments differed, we arrived at a final coding decision by negotiation.
- 8 To reiterate, I am talking about receptivity toward foreign borrowing of a general developmental model and without explicit consideration of its political or technical feasibility. Most work in this field focuses on the willingness to learn from another's experience one step lower – at the level of concrete policies that in fact may be derived from an overarching paradigm (on the difference, see Rose, 1991, p. 8).
- 9 These numbers refer to the interviewees in the study. 'D' denotes deputies and 'G' stands for government bureaucrats.
- 10 For a discussion of this point and other comparisons between Russia and previous democratic transitions, see Bunce (1995, 1998), Schmitter (1994) and Terry (1993).
- 11 These findings were also reinforced by Ware (1995, pp. 272–4), a participant observer of British parliamentary assistance programs in Russia. Although noting that 'the attraction of a rhetoric which appeals to national tradition' increased in the early 1990s, he also reported a high degree of receptivity to foreign borrowing during this period. Yet he also noted that many deputies do not always appeal directly for the imitation of foreign models. Rather, they often make the case for a particular reform by referring to 'international standards' or 'normal practice'.
- 12 I am grateful to William Zimmerman for providing me with access to these data. For more on this topic, see Zimmerman (2002, pp. 178–82).
- 13 The percentage of respondents (all specialists in foreign policy) favoring a unique path for Russia ranged between 44 and 52 percent over the three time periods, and the percentage desiring integration with leading Western countries ranged between 40 and 51 percent (Rossiiskii nezavisimyi institut sotsial'nykh i national'nykh problem, 2001, p. 9).
- 14 For example, a prominent banker, Petr Aven, called on President Vladimir Putin to resort to 'totalitarian force' to push through economic reforms, stating that he was 'a supporter of Pinochet, not as a person but as a politician who produced results for his country' ('Banker/Oligarch Calls on Putin to Become Pinochet', 2000).
- 15 In a survey of Russian national-level political elites holding office in 1992–93, respondents who believed that a foreign country could serve as a model for Russia's development selected Germany most often, then Scandinavia and 'other West European countries' (tie), and then the US. And 'capitalist corporatist societies like South Korea and Taiwan had no recognition as possible ways forward' (Lane, 1997, pp. 872–3). With regard to the post-communist countries in general, Weil reported that, according to a 1991 survey of citizens in eastern Germany, the six countries most admired are (in descending order of preference) Switzerland, Sweden, the US and France (tie), the UK and Japan (1993, pp. 203, 222). In a 1991 Freedom House survey conducted in Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Poland, citizens most wanted their countries to emulate Germany and Sweden (Rose, 1993, p. 114). On mass attitudes toward the economy in Russia, see also Whitefield and Evans (1994, pp. 46–51) and Zimmerman (2002, pp. 43–87).
- 16 In the early 1990s, the Japanese economic model was touted by many Russian scholars as being relevant to post-Soviet economic conditions (Moltz, 1991).
- 17 Putin has also touched on these parallels. In an interview before a G-8 summit in Japan, he stated that 'Russia will develop along the same lines as Japan and Germany after World War Two' ('Key Quotes from Putin Interview', 2000).
- 18 Of course, it may be difficult to disentangle performance from the comparability and prestige dimensions. For example, an actor's evaluation of a country's prestige will be affected by performance-related factors such as economic success. Similarly, a respondent might admire the social-welfare system of a given state in part because she believes that it corresponds to the Russian mentality. For example, one voluntarist deputy explained his preference for Sweden this way: 'Well, Swedish socialism is well-known in today's world. Theoretically speaking, they have a society that is more socialist than we once had' (D-001). (For examples of this type of thinking, see also Lukin, 2000, pp. 231–2.) However, since the entirety of this respondent's comments (not included here) focused on the attractiveness of an economy with extensive social-welfare benefits rather than on the similarities between Russia and Sweden, this is coded as an argument for performance rather than comparability.



19 In an elaborate development of contemporary Russian identities based on the study of newspaper articles, high-school textbooks, memoirs and popular novels, Hopf similarly asserted that 'a simple dichotomization of 1999 Russian reality into a struggle between those who wanted to become the West and those who either wanted to return to Soviet rule or to some authentic Russian past is possible only if we focus on the most extreme tails of the narrative distribution' (2002, p. 159).

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