

On the RPSA's Fourth Congress

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The Fourth Congress of the Russian Political Science Association (RPSA) met in Moscow over October 20–22, 2006. The theme of the congress was “Democracy, Security, and Good Governance: New Challenges for Political Science.” I represented the American Political Science Association at the Congress, and representatives of the IPSA and of the Greek, Korean, Ukrainian, and Belarus Political Science Associations were there as well on behalf of their organizations. Political scientists from Germany, Egypt, and Switzerland also took part. Friday was devoted to plenary sessions, Saturday to thematic panel sessions, and Sunday to section meetings. Some 400 members of the RPSA from throughout the country attended the congress. Many of these were young scholars, including graduate students. In Russia, political science—*politology*, as it is more commonly termed—has become a recognized discipline in many universities and research institutes, and a number of textbooks have been published for use in political science courses.

As a scholarly discipline in Russia, political science originated in the Soviet period in the mid-1960s (the British political scientist Archie Brown published an article reviewing its development in the journal *Soviet Studies* in July 1984), but its development was severely constrained by the close overlap between its subject matter and Communist Party ideological doctrine. Under Soviet conditions, until the late 1980s, political scientists were limited in their ability to frame and test theory, but they could discuss concepts such as decentralization, presidentialism, and democratization in ways that implied the desirability of institutional reforms in the USSR. In the Gorbachev period, as Archie Brown showed, some of the ideas that political scientists had advanced cautiously in earlier years were taken up by Gorbachev—including the adoption of a presidential constitution. Two of the pioneering figures who helped to establish

the discipline in the Soviet Union in the 1960s and went on to influence Gorbachev’s sweeping reforms—Fedor Burlatsky and Alexander Galkin—made presentations at the congress.

The plenary addresses by leading figures of the RPSA reflected Russian political science’s interest in assessing the contemporary political system in Russia as well as understanding trends in international relations. They also suggested that the discipline continues to be attentive to ideological formulations and political signals from the authorities. Several of the speakers, for example, interpreted the meaning of “sovereign democracy,” which has been promoted by Russian President Vladimir Putin’s associates as a conceptual model for the contemporary Russian state. Leonid Smorgunov, a professor of political science at St. Petersburg University, compared the concept of “sovereign democracy” in Russia to neo-conservative thought in the United States. The latter, he observed, seeks to impose democracy by force overseas but to dismantle the state at home. Putin’s “sovereign democracy,” by contrast, has no ambitions overseas, but seeks to create an authoritarian order at home. Both, he implied, are at odds with the ideals of democracy and pluralism.

Former RPSA President Yuri Pirovarov, a member of the Russian Academy of Sciences, argued that “sovereign democracy” represents a rejection of the older Russian habit of adopting messianic universalistic doctrines such as the notion of Moscow as the “third Rome” or Marxism-Leninism. Instead, he sees “sovereign democracy” as focusing only on the political order within Russia, with no wider international ambitions. On the other hand, Pirovarov emphasized the continuity in Russian political traditions between the Soviet period and the post-communist regime. State authority, he argued, remains intimately intertwined with the economy, as in the past, and presidentialism is simply a new form of the personalization of state power by the country’s leader.

The current president of the RPSA, Alexander Nikitin, who is on the faculty of the Moscow State Institute of International Relations (where the congress was held), gave a presentation about the end of the “post-Soviet space” and its implications for international security. He argued that the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) is declining in influence as a framework for political or security cooperation among the former Soviet states (among other things, he suggested, the “colored revolutions” that took place in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan represented rejections of integration among the former Soviet states). He identified new forms of regional cooperation, each involving different groupings of states, that are taking the place of the CIS in the former Soviet territory. Among these he singled out the Organization of the Treaty of Collective Security, the Eurasian Economic Space, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. These, he argued, are emerging as the principal integrating mechanisms in Northeast Eurasia. They compete with the rising presence of NATO and the United States in Central Asia, the European Union in Moldova, and Turkey in the Caucasus region. Thus he sees a new set of alignments and rivalries developing, with Russia seeking the status of a great power in the Eurasian region.

These and other presentations at the RPSA congress indicated that political science in Russia is a lively and diverse discipline, closely linked to trends in political science in the United States, Europe, and elsewhere. At the same time, the field is clearly influenced by a felt need to make its work relevant to the topical concerns of policymakers. Nevertheless, the manifest interest among the participants at the congress in defining the concepts and methods of a scholarly discipline devoted to the systematic study of political phenomena, and their desire to take part in an international professional community, are evidence of favorable prospects for the continuing development of the discipline.