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The "Monumental Politics" of Post-Soviet Russia:
How the Soviet Collapse Revitalized the Study of Symbolic Politics in Political Science

Abstract

One of the most enduring images from the collapse of the Soviet regime was the August 1991 removal of the statue of Soviet secret police founder Feliks Dzerzhinsky from its lofty pedestal in front of KGB headquarters in Moscow. As a new Russian state emerged, questions of how to address the vast and imposing Soviet monumental landscape, how and whether to symbolically acknowledge the crimes of the Soviet past, and what new monuments and memorials to raise in the post-Soviet context became fraught with political controversy. As Russian elites and publics waged pitched battles over Soviet symbols, political scientists - previously relatively indifferent to such "monumental politics" - realized the importance of integrating it into their field of study. Drawing on research traditions from geography, history, and sociology, political scientists newly inspired by post-Soviet symbolic politics made two major contributions to this interdisciplinary field of study. First, political scientists brought the issue of power to the fore - who had the power to manipulate symbols in public space, and to what political ends? Second, political scientists brought innovative comparative methods to a field previously dominated by studies of single monuments and countries. The post-Soviet experience not only enriched interdisciplinary research, but sparked a renaissance in the study of monumental politics in political science more broadly, as witnessed by the newly central role of political scientists in analyzing the symbolic politics of the Arab Spring or the legacies of the US Civil War.