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# Democratic Russia: Why it is not a contradiction in terms

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## Abstract

Doubts about building a stable democracy in Russia are usually associated with the peculiarities of both the country's history and the Russian people's mentality. However, rather than being exclusively defined by a series of tyrants, Russian history is also marked by impressive attempts at democracy building. The long-standing battle continues to rage between those who advocate that Russia should be developed as a European country and those who adhere to the idea of Russia finding its own peculiar way, defined by autocracy. Indeed, we are witnessing a dramatic escalation of this battle. The specific features of the Russian nation have never been an obstacle to the proper operation of democratic institutions. In addition to sharing democratic values and being ready to implement them in real life, the younger generation of Russian citizens is also able to fight for them as they are now entering the political arena. What precludes democracy in Russia is not its history or the psyche of its citizens but its archaic and incompetent state. Russian society is thus now ready for democracy.

## Keywords

Russia, Democracy, Europe, History, Autocracy, Reform

Russia is a European state.

(Catherine II, 1767)

## Introduction

It is indubitably clear that Russia is currently being ruled by authoritarian and archaic means. It is also obvious that the entire world, and primarily Europe, is interested in Russia becoming an established democracy, not least because a democratic Russia will

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stop being a threat to its neighbours. However, many question the possibility of stable democracy existing in Russia. They think that something in this country, be it its history, culture, people's mentality or even climate, makes the ideas of democracy and freedom alien to it, and that this is why it slips back to its natural state of tyranny even after the most impressive and heroic efforts at democratisation.

Interestingly, Russia is the only country of Christian culture to be subjected to these kinds of doubts, and the only country of Eastern Christianity, too. While Ukraine receives criticism for some aspects of its politics, no one suggests that it has a categorical inability to build a democracy.

Russians like me, who have spent most of their lives promoting freedom in Russia, find it extremely difficult to accept that it is categorically impossible for democracy to exist in our country. It is clear, though, that people want us to bolster our convictions with arguments.

Suggestions that Russia is not fit for democracy because of its size or climate hardly deserve a second look. Stable democracies in Norway and Finland, each as cold as Russia, or the huge and scarcely populated Canada, prove that these reasons are fallacious. However, it is true that Russia's seemingly inexhaustible natural resources, ranging from fur under Ivan the Terrible in the sixteenth century to oil under Vladimir Putin, have enabled the government to remain dependent on its own people for a long time. As only a tiny share of the population participated in the extraction, transportation and export of these resources, the labour provided by the majority of the subjects did not equate to their opinions having an impact on the welfare provided by the state or on its leadership. Hence, as a tool to respect and acknowledge people's opinions, democracy appeared redundant. There is a good reason why the majority of the leading hydrocarbon-exporting economies are marked by political regimes opposed to democracy, with Russia accompanied by Venezuela, Saudi Arabia and Turkmenistan on this list. Along with climate and size, the 'resource curse' might be a hindrance; yet it does not render normal development impossible (Sachs and Warner 1995).

## **History: the ever-changing past**

The historical arguments require more serious consideration. These claim that Russia has always been ruled by tyrants, with embryonic democratic institutions emerging much later than in Europe.

Our history is hard indeed. Over seven decades of the twentieth century, three generations of Russians experienced one of the worst dictatorships humankind has ever known. Still, the history of Russia has more to offer than a sequence of ever-changing reincarnations of Ivan the Terrible and Joseph Stalin. As well as the tyrants who are an inalienable part of the Russian path, Russia's story is defined by the names of Alexander the Liberator, Mikhail Speransky, Alexander Kerensky and Boris Yeltsin.

Having borrowed their ideas from Europe, the Bolsheviks nevertheless had much in common with the political traditions of the Russian dictatorship. In particular, they relied on the system of the peasant community, which narrowed the space of individual freedom down to a minimum, and on the principles of the military settlements established by Count Aleksey Arakcheyev, among other elements. Their reliance on these traditions de facto enabled the Bolsheviks to reintroduce serfdom in the form of kolkhozes, which peasants could not leave and at which they had to work without payment, a practice that remained in place until the time of Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev.

However, enslavement has not been the only trend in Russia. In addition to the emancipation of peasants, which came simultaneously with the abolition of slavery in the US, but without a war, the Great Reforms of Alexander II in the nineteenth century introduced two crucial democratic institutions: local self-government and jury courts. Genuinely independent of the government, the courts would deliver rulings that were in direct conflict with the will of the sovereign monarch. Yet long before Alexander, in 1730, Prince Dmitry Golitsyn had also undertaken a heroic attempt to limit the tsarist autocracy by making Anna Ioannovna accept the 'Conditions'—a list of limitations to the powers that she held—before her accession to the throne. The ever-changing Provisional Government that came much later, in 1917, was not successful in preventing disaster; yet it was consistent with the idea of building a democracy. Finally, Yeltsin abandoned the traditional imperial stance of Russian rulers by accepting the freedom of former colonies and vassal territories, and in just a few years established democratic institutions which had never before existed in Russia. Weakened as they are, these institutions remain in place today. Rather than foreign missionaries, Russian people of Russian flesh and blood have taken all these steps towards freedom and democracy.

Along with facts, the history of any country consists of images and myths, which pay particular attention to some elements of history by deeming them crucial and typological, while almost completely ignoring others. Sometimes state propaganda does this intentionally, as was the case in the USSR or as it is in today's Russia, in the fashion brilliantly described by George Orwell in *1984*. Yet, purposeful distortions aside, historical images cannot fully match the actual truth. This is why tourist maps mark the most significant attractions, leaving the rest of the city as a vague scheme. Depicting everything would result in a city-sized map of the city. However, apart from public consensus, choosing sightseeing landmarks is about the preferences of the publishers. The same applies to history. When people discuss Russia, they remember the tyrants not only because they ran the country in certain periods, but also because they seem to be a natural fit for Russia. At the same time, people tend to recall the Novgorod and Pskov Republics much less often, even though these entities could serve as examples of an alternative path for the Russian state. Popular around the world and in Russia itself, the traditional image of Russian history eliminates everything that contradicts the overarching concept. For example, who knows, except for professional historians, that Alexander III, a conservative tsar who consistently rolled back his father's reforms, was nevertheless the first in Europe to prohibit corporal punishment in schools?

The fight for freedom in our country is also about what should be considered natural for Russia and Russians, that is, in terms of the people's perception of history. For most Russian citizens, Stalin represents the main personal symbol of Russia, followed by Ivan the Terrible and Peter I. People see dictatorship as the norm. However, for Russia to develop as a democracy, people need to understand that these three rulers actually destroyed the country rather than building it; for example, the depopulation under Ivan the Terrible was comparable to the aftermath of the Tartar invasion (Kluchevsky 2018). On the other hand, Alexander II; his follower in rural reforms at the beginning of the twentieth century, Pyotr Stolypin; and Yeltsin were actual heroes and constructors.

In reality, Russian history is about the multiannual battle between the champions of the European democratic path and those who believe in Russia's peculiar way of living, distant from democracy and freedom. On the surface, it seems that the democrats will always lose. Anna Ioannovna was 'pleased to tear apart [the Conditions she had signed]' (Gordin 1994, author's translation), imprisoned Golitsyn and proceeded to rule autocratically. Alexander II was followed by Alexander III, February 1917 succumbed to the October Revolution and Putin undid Yeltsin's reforms. Still, anti-democratic forces have never fully prevailed, either. After reactionary periods, a new turn of history has always brought new liberals to power. The reformist team of Alexander II would lead the country out of the deadlock into which Nicholas I had driven it; Yegor Gaidar, as acting prime minister, rebuilt the economy of Russia after its total demolition by Communists. The pendulum swings on, and so does the history of Russia, which is far from predetermined.

## The 'mysterious' Russian soul

Along with appeals to history, the claim that democracy is impossible in Russia is frequently substantiated through references to the specific mentality of Russians, that is, their 'mysterious soul'—with a line or two from Dostoyevsky thrown in for good measure. Democracy is allegedly alien to this soul, freedom is not necessary and slavery is natural. Such allegations are racist.

People resembling Dostoyevsky's characters are not more common among Russians than among, for example, the French or Americans. Rather than a picture taken from life, this is a genius-created myth. Russians do differ from other peoples; however, two questions emerge: Are they any more different from the citizens of European nations than those are from each other? And do these mental differences prevent Russians from establishing democracy at home?

There is no answer to the first question. One can only assume that the perception of Russians as essentially different from other Europeans is not so much rooted in reality, since most people who consider Russians 'special' have never even talked to them, as it is in the perceived threat to Europe traditionally originating from Russia.

On the other hand, numerous facts indicate that Russians easily fit into the democratic context. The twentieth century subjected Russia to harsh experiments, with millions having to leave their homeland and adapt to living elsewhere. Some waves of Russian emigration constituted a representative sample of the population. Consider, for example, the 1.5 million soldiers of the White Army who fled Russia after the victory of the Reds and settled around the world. Their identification as 'White' was more or less a matter of happenstance as many of the fighters ended up 'White' or 'Red' purely by circumstance. Scattered across alien lands with no knowledge of the local language and usually without an education (since many were semi-literate peasants), most of them successfully integrated. The world has no poor Russian ghettos, and a significant part of the American elite, for example, is of Russian origin. The majority of Russians living in democratic countries, such as the Baltic states, are good at understanding the advantages of democratic institutions and skilful in using them. Many of them are politically active. It is important to know whether Russians believe themselves and their compatriots able to lean towards a democratic way of life.

Throughout the country's history, Russian elites have fought to limit autocracy and to participate in governance. However, in most cases this struggle was only about rights and institutions for a limited group of members of the aristocracy. Nonetheless, it is also the case that the barons who forced the English King John to sign the Magna Carta over eight hundred years ago were also only thinking about their own rights, or the rights of other barons at best, and definitely not about the freedom of the entire population. Still, the signing of this agreement provided a framework for the eventual establishment of democracy for everyone.

Russian elites have usually been more pro-European than the majority of the population. Alexander Pushkin even presented the government as the 'only European' in the country (Pushkin 1836/1979). Many Romanovs were Westernisers in essence, even though they limited themselves to establishing institutions that would not restrict their own autocratic rule.

Interestingly, when the Millennium of Russia monument was unveiled in Veliky Novgorod in 1862, the 109 figures that symbolised Russian history did not include Ivan the Terrible, albeit other actors living under his rule were represented. Symptomatically, there were very few debates about including his figure on the monument, which contrasts with the many debates about other candidates. The elites of those times were unanimous in agreeing that despotism destroys a country; logically, Tsar Ivan had no place among the constructors thereof.

While most of the elites were only interested in ensuring their own empowerment, some members of the upper classes were fighting for the emancipation of the entire population, with the Decembrists being the most outstanding example. This was a group of aristocrats that rebelled against the accession of Nicholas I after the sudden death of Alexander I in 1825. The uprising aimed to abolish serfdom and transition the country to a constitutional monarchy or even a republic. Importantly, the Decembrists came from a

privileged class and had no personal interest in this struggle. The rebellion was crushed, its leaders executed and 107 people were deported to penal servitude. However, with their idea of liberating everyone, for decades the Decembrists remained a moral example and heroes to the well-educated and better-off portion of the population.

Notably, the Russian aristocracy and educated classes tended to believe that the entire nation was aligned with them in their aspirations for freedom. In his response from Chita prison to Pushkin's famous appeal, *Deep in Siberia's Mines*, Decembrist Alexander Odoyevsky referred to the times when 'Our enlightened people would rally around the holy banner' (meaning the banner of freedom) (Odoyevsky 2003, author's translation). Traditionally enlightenment was seen as a precondition for the Russian people's readiness for freedom. The intelligentsia of the 1870s aimed to educate people based on its leadership's ideas of a peaceful transition towards a more humane and democratic form of government. Later, even the terrorist organisation Narodnaya Volia (People's Will), which ultimately succeeded in killing Alexander II, saw terror merely as a tool to be used in the transition to self-government by the people. In their suppression of freedom and reinforcement of the idea of a dictatorship as the only possible way to handle Russia, the ideas of the Soviet Communists stemmed from the traditions of the Horde and Ivan the Terrible, and definitely not from the mainstream of Russia's intellectual and political thought.

In terms of the establishment's attitudes, today's situation is closer to that of the times of Ivan the Terrible than the Romanov Empire. The current rulers believe that, if at all, democracy in Russia should come at some later point or be a special 'sovereign' democracy in line with our traditional values. Interestingly, if asked bluntly what these traditional values are, policymakers either do not give an answer or explain that they mean the rejection of same-sex marriage. Nothing positive is suggested whatsoever! In fact, the only traditional value which today's rulers of Russia are trying to legitimise is autocracy at all levels. It is about ensuring the man's absolute power in a family, preventing legislation against domestic violence. It is about ensuring the power of the owners or managers of companies, making it virtually impossible to create a real labour union; while the Chair of the Constitutional Court, Valery Zorkin claims that serfdom was a unifying 'bond' that held the Russian nation together (Zorkin 2014). Certainly, it is about ensuring the power of the supreme state ruler, unchecked by the parliament, courts or law. People have no rights in this system. They cannot claim anything; they can only ask and hope for mercy.

However, the Russian people have a different take on this issue. The European Values Study (GESIS 2020) indicates that Russian respondents gave an average score of more than 7 out of 10 when asked about the importance of living in a democratic country (which is, nevertheless, almost the lowest score in Europe and only slightly higher than the average score in Serbia). Even with no experience of life in a democratic framework, most Russians believe that it is necessary for themselves and their country. The same data indicate that, despite the endless propaganda that Russia has a real democracy compared to what exists in Europe, only half of Russians believe that democracy is present

in their country (GESIS 2020). In contrast, according to the Levada Center (2020), the share of people who think that the regime in Russia is democratic fell 1.5 times between 2015 and 2020, down to a mere 22%.

Analysis of the attitudes of Russians should take into consideration the extreme heterogeneity of our society. The regime's shrinking support base remains quite large. At least 35% of voters firmly vote for Putin, if considering mean organic votes rather than the figures inflated by multiple falsifications. Approximately the same share is permanently against the regime, even if some of these people do not vote because they do not want to contribute to what they see as a meaningless pantomime. The first group includes mostly older and more poorly educated people, with the core age group being over 65 years old, and the politically indifferent populations of villages and small towns. The opposition includes younger and better-educated city inhabitants. The sources from which these groups acquire information are television and the Internet, respectively. People still defined by their Soviet identity dominate the first group. Their thinking goes along the lines of 'the government is distant; we make no difference and have no chance to influence it; it is therefore advisable to avoid problems and behave (and vote) properly'. The government's sole responsibility in the worldview of these people is to maintain minimal order and social welfare, first of all by paying pensions. Defined by the 'estate' into which they were born, this feudal mentality presupposes tolerance towards elite corruption and luxuries: they are the bosses, after all.

Some of these people sincerely hate the opposition, America and the West. However, you will not find anyone who personally loves the government or Putin. They are supported as a tribute to tradition and because, in the opinion of these people, any change is for the worse. This support is extremely passive. They would readily vote for a replacement for Putin. Rather than Putin-voters, these are status quo-voters. They will only wake up if their pensions stop being paid or if their children are sent to war en masse; this thus puts limits on the regime's military adventures. Importantly though, these people never support the regime proactively and voluntarily; no one lines up for solidarity actions to defend the president from enemies and slanderers, but people are paid to participate in pro-regime rallies. When the members of a pro-Kremlin movement got it into their heads to write 'I am a patriot' (Я – патриот) using human figures, which was intended to be seen from space, they failed to mobilise enough people for even the first letter.

The share of the population that opposes Putin exhibits very different behaviours. 'Freedom' was the most popular slogan displayed at the harshly dispersed rallies that took place in dozens of Russian cities in late January 2021. The educated youth is very conscious of the need for democratisation, meaning fair elections, freedom of expression and fulfilment of the other demands of the revolution of February 1917, which fell prey to the Bolsheviks.

In general, Russian society is much more developed and ready for democracy, self-government and constructive conflict resolution than the Russian state. Self-help and



volunteering are on the rise, something that has been particularly obvious during the pandemic, while the state has done almost nothing to help its citizens. Despite clear segmentation being visible in society, there is no split, since the pro-opposition citizens oppose the state bureaucracy rather than their fellow citizens. Despite the long-standing attempts of state propaganda to instigate mutual hatred and open violence, civil clashes have not materialised, at least not so far.

## Conclusion

Russia is the only country of Christian culture about which doubts are expressed about the fundamental possibility of it operating as a stable democracy. Many believe that democracy is impossible in Russia because of Russian history and the peculiarities of the Russian psyche. But Russian history has not been a constant transition from one form of tyranny to another, but a dramatic struggle that continues to this day between the supporters of dictatorship and the supporters of freedom and of a European path for Russia. Among the heroes of this struggle are several Russian tsars, Russian intellectuals and ordinary Russian people. And, in mentality, a Russian is no different from other Europeans. The notion of the specialness of the Russian psyche is a myth traditionally used by authoritarian governments to explain why Russia does not have the same democratic institutions as those that work successfully in other countries. In fact, we have enough evidence that Russians strive for, know how to achieve and can use such freedom no less than other Europeans.

Russia and modern Russian society are ready for freedom. It is therefore its archaic, greedy and utterly ineffective government, rather than Russian history or the mysterious Russian soul, which remains a barrier to democracy in the country.

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