

Russia: The Democracy That Never Was

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ZACHARY K. OCHOA, DEC 23 2013

There are few images as iconic as the fall of the Berlin Wall. It was the end of an era marked by the spread of communism, human rights violations and various crises that brought the world to the brink of nuclear war. The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) stared down the United States from Eastern Europe and Central Asia, daring the Western democracies to challenge its position as a superpower in the international system. Soviet power terrorized the entire world, and for over half a century the communist state seemed indestructible. Everything changed when the Soviet Union fell, with the largest state in existence divided into several different countries. The largest of these new nations, and the country widely regarded as the Soviet Union's successor state, was the Russian Federation. Russia inherited the Soviet Union's seat at the United Nations Security Council, its massive nuclear stockpile and most of its territory. The West hoped Russia would not inherit the USSR's authoritarian system. There was hope that the fall of communism in Moscow would result in a new democratic system. Unfortunately, this has not been the case. At no point in Russia's history has a true democracy been instated, and it is unlikely that this will change in the foreseeable future. The reason for this can be summed up in a single name: Vladimir Putin, who personifies the reasons why Russia is neither free nor democratic and will not be in the near future. The combination of Russian culture, Putinism and corruption prove that Russia is currently not open to democracy, a free and open society, and a free market system.

From the beginning through the present, democracy has been non-existent in Russia. The country was founded as a monarchy, converted into an empire, reborn as a communist state and today lives on as an imperial presidency. This is not because Russians hate freedom and transparency; it is simply a product of their culture. The reality is that democracy is not the universally favored form of government. Democracy is a result of people's desire for transparency, accountability and involvement in their government; and not every society puts these things at the top of their list of priorities. Russians in particular do not identify freedom as the the main priority in their leadership. Even the first president of Russia, Boris Yeltsin, was anything but democratic. His term is widely described as a monarchical presidency; he even had the military bomb and storm the Parliament building during a political dispute (Judah 2013, 25). One explanation for why such blatant abuse of power was permitted can be found in Russia's economic circumstances. After the fall, Russia entered a period of economic uncertainty that kept most of the population in poverty. There was no strong central leadership, and Russia was devolving into a collection of feudal states (Judah 2013, 15). This is the Russian nightmare; a complete loss of control and order. It reminds Russians too much of the early days of the 20th century, when Russia was embroiled in both global and civil war.

It was this fear that elected Vladimir Putin. He came into power at the outbreak of a new war in Chechnya, which included a wave of terrorist attacks throughout Russia (Judah 2013, 37). To combat this, the Russians granted him additional presidential powers, further eroding any checks on his authority (Judah 2013, 38). Putin's victory in the war proved that he was a strong leader who could get things done (Judah 2013, 41). He represented the Russian ideal of strength, which appealed very strongly to the Russian idea of good leadership (Judah 2013, 49). And this is not an isolated case. Russia has always been led by a strong man, from Peter the Great to Joseph Stalin. It is simply what the Russians have always been used to. Allowing a man like Putin to have the near authoritarian power he possesses is, to a Russian citizen, as natural as breathing. Unfortunately, a society that feels safest when power is wielded by the few is not one that will adapt very well to democracy. For Russia to become a democracy, the Russians themselves first need to change. Unlike Egypt, where a people who craved democracy were being oppressed by a ruthless dictator, the people of Russia have never desired democracy reminiscent of western society.

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If democracy is ever going to reign in the country, the Russians will have to want it for themselves.

A second aspect of Russian culture that will hinder its openness to freedom is its inferiority complex. The, the Russians have a very “us-versus-them” mentality. While most of the West identifies the fall of the Soviet Union as a good thing, most Russians will say that they regret it ever happened (Judah 2013, 28). Russians have a deep desire to see their country as a great power. The first example of this goes as far back to Peter the Great, who was so desperate for his empire to be on par with the rest of Europe that he banned beards to make his subjects look more European. When Stalin came into power he placed his country in firm opposition to the United States and capitalism, setting the stage for a rivalry that would split the world in two for almost 50 years. This is not any different today; Russia has only celebrated the fact that it is listed among the BRICs (Brazil, Russia, India, and China) as a future economic powerhouse, believing that it is a short hop away from being an international superpower again (Judah 2013, 160). As long as becoming a major player is the most important priority to Russians, individual freedoms will always take a back seat. Russia will never be able to fix its internal problems while its sights are focused outwards.

Further restricting the ability of Russia to transform into a free and open society is the system that Vladimir Putin put in place after he became president. By building a top-down approach to government, with himself firmly on the top of the pyramid, Putin has almost single handedly set freedom back by what could be decades. One of the most significant aspects of this was his destruction of federalism. To make sure that his policies were being followed, Putin gave himself the power to appoint all governors in Russia (Judah 2013, 99). This centralization of authority struck a blow against what few democratic institutions Russia did have. It meant that power was in the hands of an autocrat at both the national and local level.

A second aspect of Putinism other than its centralization is that it grants far too much power to a single individual. Peter the Great answered to his nobles, but Putin appears to answer to no one. His ability to act unilaterally is so great that he was able to arrest the richest man in Russia without consulting anybody else (Judah 2013, 74). He has his own personal envoys that enforce his will throughout every corner of the state (Judah 2013, 98). Even when Putin is not the acting president, he still holds all of the power. This was proven when he returned as president after a one-term hiatus (Judah 2013, 326). Based on current term limits, it is likely that Putin will retain his post until the year 2024 (Judah 2013, 228). A true democracy is characterized by the regular rotation of leadership, where said leaders are accountable to a base of constituents. These requirements are not met when one man holds total power for an indefinite amount of time. Unless something changes very soon, such as a popular uprising against the government or Putin willingly giving up some of his powers, it will be hard for a newer and more open regime to come into being.

The most visible aspect of Putinism that is hindering democracy is the archaic media restrictions that Putin has put in place since entering office. After a public humiliation by local media outlets, Putin exiled the media oligarchs in Russia and established state control of all of the major media firms (Judah 2013, 45). In doing so he established Russia as a videocracy, where the majority of the media marches to the beat of the federal government. In addition to that, all free contact between government officials and the media is strictly forbidden. This is incredibly detrimental to an open society because a free press is vital to an informed electorate. In a country where citizens from the outer regions only have access to state television, it is guaranteed that there is very little access to quality information (Judah 2013, 211). The Arab Spring has shown just how powerful the media is in all of its forms with its ability to mobilize the masses. Since it has been established that a popular uprising may be the only way to reverse Putinism’s grasp on the Russian government, it will be necessary for the Russian people to find access to free media if they are ever going to gather for a democratic system. One way they may do this is to focus more on mediums like Facebook, YouTube and Twitter, methods that have worked very well in the Arab revolutions.

Finally, Russia’s corruption problem will continue to hinder Russian freedoms. Corruption has had the double effect of removing government accountability and taking away the public’s ability to respond. When Putin put the power to select governors in his own hands, he made them accountable to nobody but himself (Judah 2013, 185). This means that governors have no incentive to improve the quality of life for their constituents, since they cannot be voted out of office. Transparency is also being eroded by corruption, with obvious tampering of the national elections (Warner 2012). Voting fraud is a big problem in Russia, and it is estimated that Putin’s party stole as many as 14 million votes in the 2011 elections (Judah 2013, 233). Since accountability and transparency are mandatory for any electoral

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system, Russia is going to have to reform in both of these realms before it can even be considered an emerging democracy. As it stands today, Russia lacks even the most basic components of a democratic system. If they ever do try to turn things around, the Russians are going to be starting entirely from scratch.

Putinism, corruption and Russian culture are holding Russia back from being a democratic state. Based on the evidence provided, Russia does not appear to be receptive to a democratic, open and free society. There are significant changes that need to be made at the cultural, structural and functional level before Russians can enjoy the freedoms that westerners enjoy today. There is some discontent with Putin, but nothing close to what is necessary to remove him from power. In regards to the West, the relationship with Russia is likely not going to change anywhere in the foreseeable future. Despite an attempted “reset” in relations between the United States and Russia, the relationship does not appear to have thawed. While tension may not be as high as it was during the Cold War, the United States and Russia will likely continue to view one another as rivals. This may not be such a negative thing for the United States; a country that claims to desire democracy for all can hardly be seen cozying up to a regime that stands for the exact opposite. Nothing appears to be changing in the near term, but it is uncertain what the future may hold. Five years ago, nobody ever suspected that popular revolts would topple the repressive regimes of three different nations. In another five years, we may find that we were just as wrong about Russia.

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