

Russia's Failed Democracy

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In today's global society, the United States is and has been a world power. Since World War II, the US has maintained its seat at the head of the table in international politics, relations, and economics. The Soviet Union had also established itself as a world power alongside the United States after the war. However, the Soviet Union experienced a devastating fall that led to a decade of chaos in Russia. Russia is a mystery to the average United States citizen. The motivations, thoughts and politics are based on a very different culture that stem from a history much longer than that of the United States. In order to cooperate with this foreign country, it is important to understand the inner workings of its government and culture. Russia is at a precarious moment in its history. While the Russians desire most to be recognized and respected as a world power again, the problems inside the country will likely prevent Russia from reaching that status. The accumulation of events since the fall of the Soviet Union have led to the corrupt and ineffective government it has today, commanded by its president, Vladimir Putin. The political leaders within Russia are more interested in maintaining their positions of power and wealth than with fixing the domestic challenges the country faces. The whole country yearns for the respect it feels it deserves and wishes to reestablish itself as a world power, but a great international actor must have a solid base. In order for Russia to achieve and maintain a powerful and respected status in the international community, the corruption and intolerance within the government needs to be changed and the Russian culture must adjust to fit an effective

democracy. If the problems within the country are not addressed then they could lead to a fracturing of the Russian Federation, or more drastic consequences for the world as a nuclear power becomes increasingly corrupt and unstable. The purpose of this paper is to examine the reasons why Russia's government has failed as a democracy and what options the country has for the future.

The current government in Russia is not solely to blame for the problems in the country. The Russian people have a history of living under an authoritarian regime. As long as the economy is doing well, they are happy, as with the citizens of any other country.¹ The Russian people value freedom as much as Americans value freedom, but their idea of freedom is based on the most basic form of freedoms denied to them in the 1990s, such as the freedom to feel safe walking to the grocer, or the freedom to travel.² Leon Aron, Resident Scholar and Director of Russian Studies at the American Enterprise Institute, states in an article about the collapse of the Soviet Union that the fall of a government is not enough to change a "deep-seated authoritarian political culture."³ It certainly did not help that the switch from communism to a democracy was followed by the crime-ridden and chaotic 1990s. Many Russians said they would put "order over democracy" if given the chance.⁴ What needs to change in Russia is not just the physical infrastructure, but the social culture. Mikhail Gorbachev, the last leader of the Soviet Union, had

¹ Treisman, Daniel, and Andrei Shleifer, 2011, "Why Moscow Says No," *Foreign Affairs*, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/67044/andrei-shleifer-and-daniel-treisman/why-moscow-says-no>.

² Rojansky, Matthew, 2015, "The Riddle Inside the Enigma: Origins of Russian Conduct at Home and in the World," *Camden Conference*, Camden, <https://www.camdenconference.org/2015-conference-videos/>.

³ Aron, Leon, 2011, "Everything You Think You Know About the Collapse of The Soviet Union is Wrong," *Foreign Policy*, 7.

⁴ Judah, Ben, 2013, *Fragile Empire: How Russia Fell In and Out of Love with Vladimir Putin*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 28

a vision to build a “moral society” and solve the crime and corruption problems in Russia.⁵ Russians were getting fed up with the crime that got in the way of their ability to improve their daily lives and their country. However, the transition failed. Gennady Burbulis, a politician who had been with Yeltsin during the coup in 1991, laments that if Russia had been given the chance to slowly transition into a democracy and modern economy, it could have succeeded.⁶ Instead, there was a coup in 1991 that led to the abrupt change in leadership from Gorbachev to Yeltsin. It is arguable that the chaos of the 1990s could have been tempered by a more gradual transition. Not only did the government need to change, but the people of Russia needed to learn how to function in a democracy. They may have desired a democracy, but that does not mean they knew how to function in one. Moving from an authoritarian regime to a communist society, the people of Russia had no practice participating in politics at the level needed to keep a democracy working effectively. The West abandoned the Russian people, assuming that they would already know how to make a democracy work.⁷ The desired establishment of a democracy in Russia was ineffective because neither the government nor the people knew how a democracy functioned, and they were therefore unable to keep the system from being manipulated by those who caught on quickly. Furthermore, the Russian people valued “collectiveness” over the Western preference for individuality.⁸ They needed to be able to combine the economic structure of capitalism and the government structure of democracy with their ingrained cultural values, rather than feel pressured to change their values. The fundamental differences in each culture left the West assuming that Russia would know what to do once it had achieved a democracy, but

⁵ Aron, “Everything Everything You Think You Know About the Collapse of The Soviet Union is Wrong,” 4.

⁶ Burbulis, G, 2011, “Meltdown,” *Foreign Policy*, 6

⁷ Roxburgh, Angus, 2013, *The Strongman: Vladimir Putin and the Struggle for Russia*, London: I. B. Tauris, 13

⁸ Roxburgh, *Strongman*, 13

Russians did not have that knowledge or experience in their cultural tool-kit.⁹ Now, the country has returned to an authoritarian government, with the “dressings of democracy” and it will take a lot of change before it can truly call itself a functioning democracy.¹⁰

Since the fall of the Soviet Union, Russia has had the opportunity to grow into an effective democracy, but Nikolay Petrov, a professor in Moscow, believes that the last 25 years have been wasted.¹¹ Russia is nowhere closer to achieving a democracy than it had been in 1991. It is currently stuck in a “hostage situation” in which Putin’s actions have affected the culture of the Russian people.¹² Putin’s emphasis on nationalism to win him public support is causing a xenophobic attitude among ethnic Russians.¹³ What Russians want, and what Putin is emphasizing in his propaganda, is a strong Russia that deserves the respect of other world powers. Russians want to identify with their ethnic Russian background and not become copies of the West.¹⁴ Both Putin and Dmitry Medvedev, the President in between Putin’s first and second presidential terms, highlighted their focus on the protection and security of ethnic Russians, particularly in their foreign policy.¹⁵ However, the emphasis on the importance of ethnic Russians is causing discrimination and disparities in employment and housing among non-ethnic Russian minorities.¹⁶ Russia is a huge country with a variety of ethnic nationalities residing within its borders. By encouraging nationalism, non-ethnic Russian nationalism is also growing in Russia. While Putin’s popularity is still overwhelmingly high, his support is largely coming from ethnic Russians. There is currently a demographic crisis in Russia in which the

⁹ Roxburgh, *Strongman*, 13

¹⁰ Petrov, Nikolay, 2015, "Post-Crimean Russia and prospects for its future," *Camden Conference*, Camden, <https://www.camdenconference.org/2015-conference-videos/>.

¹¹ Petrov, "Post-Crimean Russia and prospects for its future."

¹² Petrov, "Post-Crimean Russia and prospects for its future."

¹³ Warhola, James W, 2007, "Kremlin's Religion Temptation," *Current History*, 343.

¹⁴ Rojansky, "The Riddle Inside the Enigma: Origins of Russian Conduct at Home and in the World,"

¹⁵ Treisman, Daniel, "Why Moscow Says No,"

¹⁶ Warhola, "Kremlin's Religion Temptation," 343

ethnic Russian population is decreasing rapidly, while the non-ethnic Russian population is on the rise.¹⁷ As the non-ethnic Russian minorities in the country, such as the Chechens in Chechnya, slowly grow larger in proportion to the ethnic majority, Putin will need to take into consideration the concerns and complaints of the minorities if he wishes to maintain a legitimate majority of popular support. Another issue that arises with the demographic shift in population is the possibility of Russia fragmenting into smaller independent states. The First Chechen War in the mid-1990s was fought to keep Chechnya firmly within the Russian Federation because of the fear of fragmentation.¹⁸ The breakaway of Chechnya so soon after the fall of the Soviet Union could have encouraged more ethnic borders to form within Russia and lead to more breakaway states. Petrov points out in his speech at the Camden Conference, that if the current regime in Russia falls apart, then the most organized groups will pick up the pieces of power.¹⁹ At the moment, that includes the Russian police and groups of nationalities, such as the Chechens. Chechnya is also headed by an authoritarian leader, who remains in power in part with the support of Putin.²⁰ If the current regime falls, there is no telling what the future of Russia will be and if it will be given the opportunity to establish a democracy again.

Economic stability is the driving force in any president's ability to maintain public support. Barrack Obama won the public's support when he promised to change things in the government and the economy to help families that suffered after the 2008 economic crash that rippled worldwide. Daniel Treisman, a college professor in California, connected economic growth and military accomplishments directly to Vladimir Putin's approval rating.²¹ Once Putin

¹⁷ Warhola, "Kremlin's Religion Temptation," 343

¹⁸ Warhola, "Kremlin's Religion Temptation," 342

¹⁹ Petrov, "Post-Crimean Russia and prospects for its future."

²⁰ Petrov, "Post-Crimean Russia and prospects for its future."

²¹ Treisman, Daniel, 2015, "The Russian Economy and its Influence on Politics," *Camden Conference*, Camden, <https://www.camdenconference.org/2015-conference-videos/>.

gained office at the turn of the century, the Russian economy picked up and rose from the depths it had reached in the 1990s. Rising oil prices and the use of more efficient technology by oil companies also helped rebuild Russia's economy, which relies heavily on oil and energy prices. On the surface it would seem that Putin's presidency has helped improve the Russian economy and deserves the support of the public. However, Katherine Stoner-Weiss, Associate Director for Research and Senior Research Scholar and former Research Scholar for the Kennan Institute, argues that the economic growth Russia experienced during Putin's time in office has allowed him to ignore the problems from the 1990s.²² Corruption is still thick within the Kremlin, perpetrated by Putin himself as he promotes his friends and former colleagues to positions of power within the government, surrounding himself with his supporters and puppets. Instead of attempting to solve the infrastructure problems within Russia, Putin is hiding behind its economic growth and tightening his grip on the country through propaganda and bribery. Meanwhile, the Russian people attribute their economic prosperity to his presidency. However, the economic recovery at the turn of the century was likely after the downfall of the 1990s. Putin's presidency paralleled the eventual recovery rather than causing it.²³ Putin's fortuitous timing, as well as his aggressive actions in the Second Chechen War, allowed him to gain popular support. With this support, he quickly took control of the media, the Kremlin and Russia's largest oil producer, Gazprom.

Putin's Kremlin is based on favoritism and corruption. The elite surrounding him are friends of his that he has promoted to high government positions. Any sort of system of checks and balances has been replaced by a system of bribery and power grabbing. It is not abnormal to

²² Klump, Sarah Dixon, 2015, "Medvedev's Challenges in Governing Putin's Russia: What a New American President Should Know," *Kennan Institute*, <http://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/medvedevs-challenges-governing-putins-russia-what-new-american-president-should-know>.

²³ Treisman, "The Russian Economy and its Influence on Politics."

find funds for one project syphoned off into the pockets of someone else for his own personal use. Russian politicians and critics of Putin, Vladimir Milov and the late Boris Nemstov, claimed in an article in *Foreign Affairs* in 2011 that the costs for pipeline construction, essential to the Russian economy, were three times the world average, implying that funds for the project were not going just towards the pipelines.²⁴ Further evidence of Putin's corrupt behavior comes from Sergei Kolesnikov, before he defected from Russia and Putin's inner circle. Kolesnikov was offered support by Vladimir Putin through various elites' donations to his medical equipment company.²⁵ By directing donations towards the medical equipment, elites looking to gain favor with Putin had an outlet to show their support, and Putin was helping an old friend, Kolesnikov, in the process. However, Kolesnikov was asked to put aside 35% of the donations in offshore accounts.²⁶ Later in Putin's presidency, he asked Kolesnikov to put money aside to build a house on the Black Sea, which eventually became a palace as Putin's power grew and more and more funds were directed towards its expansion.²⁷ Kolesnikov provides clear examples of the head of the Russian nation surreptitiously taking funds intended for medical equipment for hospitals and using them to meet his own personal desires. Corruption has become "normal" within Russian politics and business. Kolesnikov describes his first request to divert funds as "*normal* corruption" implying that it was common place to have at least 35% of donation profits disappear into offshore accounts without the donor's knowledge.²⁸ With the Duma and the Russian media under his control, Putin has effectively eliminated any checks on his power. A democracy functions effectively when the checks and balances work to keep any branch of government from abusing its power and authority. Without such measures, Putin has created an

²⁴ Treisman, "Why Moscow Says No."

²⁵ Judah, Ben, *Fragile Empire*, 117-118.

²⁶ Judah, *Fragile Empire*, 118

²⁷ Judah, *Fragile Empire*, 119

²⁸ Judah, *Fragile Empire*, 118

authoritarian regime in all but name and the methods of corruption are so deeply rooted in the system that they are now an unquestioned part of it.

Petrov made a bold statement, coming to the conclusion that Putin has, at most, two years before he loses his position of power.²⁹ He claims that the decisions that Putin has made in Crimea, and now in the Ukraine, have led him down a path from which he cannot return. Putin also came to a similar conclusion in a 1996 interview. He describes the desire for a “firm hand” to take control and provide security and safety, but that such comfort would be “short-lived” because the hand would soon strangle them.³⁰ Nowhere in Petrov’s assessment does he lay out a future for Russia that involves a functioning democracy. If the regime falls, the power in Russia will go to the quickest and most organized group to sweep it up.³¹ He mentions that the leadership in Chechnya is fairly well organized, however the tensions between Chechens and ethnic Russians is thick.³² Conflict would surely arise if the Chechen president attempted to do more than establish Chechnya as an independent state. If Putin falls, sacrificed by the people who have risen with him throughout his presidency, the regime would still be made up of power-hungry politicians with corrupt tendencies.³³ Somehow, the Russian people would need to want a functioning democracy, and then they would need to organize and fight for it. Without such action, Russia’s future will likely lead to another authoritarian regime.

Russia is a country with a history of crime and corruption that has made it difficult for it to function effectively since the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991. It has experienced 25 years of attempting and pretending to be a functioning democracy. It may take as many years, and the right leadership, to build Russia back up to what it has the potential to become. It has plenty of

²⁹ Petrov, “Post-Crimean Russia and prospects for its future.”

³⁰ Judah, *Fragile Empire*, 12

³¹ Petrov, “Post-Crimean Russia and prospects for its future.”

³² Petrov, “Post-Crimean Russia and prospects for its future.”

³³ Petrov, “Post-Crimean Russia and prospects for its future.”

potential, being an enormous country with demographic capital as well as energy capital. The improvement in the economy that paralleled Vladimir Putin's first term as President of Russia in 2000 was inevitable after the disastrous economic plummet in the 1990s. Although the economy in Russia has improved, it is based on the fluid and unstable prices of oil and energy. The current sanctions placed on Russia by the United States and other countries due to Russia's actions in neighboring Ukraine are damaging Russia's economy. Yet, Vladimir Putin, in his third term as President, is achieving an amazingly high approval rating. Despite a lack of economic stability, extensive corruption within the Kremlin and a government incapable of functioning efficiently to meet the needs of its people, Putin appears to have a firm grip on his position. Treisman states that Putin's approval rating strongly correlates with economic well-being and new military feats.³⁴ This theory points to the current invasion of Ukraine and the improved economy since the 1990s to explain Putin's popularity. His public approval may suffer once the conflict in Ukraine is no longer fresh and the consequences from long-term military effort and economic sanctions have become evident. Once the sparkle around Putin fades, assuming it will, Putin and the rest of the Russian government will need to solve their efficiency and infrastructure problems if they wish to maintain the support of the Russian people. Nikolay Petrov believes that there is little or no hope of Putin's recovering from the decisions he has made. Despite having the Duma in his pocket and the support of the Russian people, he needs them to make his actions appear legitimate. He needs the cover of democracy to maintain the majority of the people's support and to ease already tense relations with other democratic governments. As much as he maintains an iron grip on the government and public, he needs them as a foundation for his position, or else he will lose it. What needs to be done is clear. The government needs to be cleaned of corruption and the Russian people need to start participating at a political level. The various paths laid out

³⁴ Treisman, "The Russian Economy and its Influence on Politics."

for Russia, however, do not suggest these things will happen. If Russia hopes to improve its country's well-being to the point of maintaining a stable position as a world power in the international community, then the public and government will need to go against their nature of complacency and corruption in politics respectively and become an effective and functioning democracy.

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