

Power Over People: How Russian Government Ignores Democratic Ideals in Favor of Autocratic Power

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia has moved further away from the modern idea of democracy, leaning closer towards autocracy and dictatorship. The disintegration of the Communist structure opened Russian government and society up to the integration of several democratic institutions, however major institutions from the previous government were maintained in the new regime. **While Russia may claim to be a democracy, in actuality, Russia has become an autocratic regime, starting with Boris Yeltsin handpicking Vladimir Putin as his successor and continuing with election manipulations that have become increasingly overt, as well as laws like the Foreign Agents law, and others that have reduced citizens' rights to freedom of speech, assembly, and independent, free media.**

When Yeltsin was preparing to retire at the end of the 1990s, he began vetting potential successors, settling on Putin because of his loyalty and the security and prosecution immunity he granted Yeltsin. Yeltsin's early resignation named Putin acting president, cementing Putin as the next president, as the required election three months later limited campaign opportunities for opponents (Bohlen). The precedent Yeltsin set has been followed by Putin, as in 2008, Putin chose his successor after reaching the legal limit of two consecutive terms as president, his successor naming him prime minister and following Putin's agenda, until Putin returned to the presidency in 2012 (Kotkin, 193-195). A democratic government includes free elections, but the appointment of successors before election day in both the election of Putin and Putin's temporary successor demonstrates Russia's authoritarian practices.

The appointment of a successor before a democratic election can be held has led some to label Russian elections, usually a foundation of democracy, "a façade for authoritarianism" (Gel'man, 18). In recent years, election manipulations have become more glaring. In 2011, the chairman of the electoral committee was found tampering with electoral ballots in favor of Putin (Schwartz and Herzenhorn). In the

2021 elections, it was seen that Russian authorities used several methods to sway the election for Putin and his loyalists, registering duplicate candidates, creating fake parties that claimed to appeal to the opposition, while maintaining Putin's position, and regulating information about the opposition (Kramer). The manipulation of elections through tampering and information restrictions goes against modern standards of democracy, encouraging furthering Russian autocracy to maintain Putin's power.

In addition to election manipulations, autocracy is strengthened by Russia's laws and societal attitudes. For example, the Foreign Agents law labels individuals and groups as foreign agents if considered to be acting in the interests of another state, targeting civil organizations, human rights defenders, and political activists, placing restrictions that undermine the ideals of democracy (RFE/RL). The law's restrictions limit information accessibility and opposition, disregarding the democratic ideals of diverse opinions. Outside of laws, society has been influenced to discourage freedom of speech, assembly, and independent media. With laws limiting internet access, especially to social media, Russia has reduced the freedom of information (Smyth). Beyond information censorship, protests are discouraged, with protestors punished, if not by the government, by society in work and school (Meduza). Government censorship isolates citizens from the global world and ignores democratic ideals of independent media. It is widely accepted that democracies should value freedom of speech, assembly, and independent media, so as Russia continues to censor and restrict its citizens rights to these democratic ideals, it is impossible to argue Russia is anything like a modern democracy.

When the Soviet Union collapsed, Russia had the opportunity to democratize leave behind the structures of the Communist system. Political decisions of Yeltsin, Putin, and their loyalists moved Russia away from modern democracy, towards autocratic rule in order to maintain supreme power. Russia is an autocratic regime, and its leaders have grown greedy in their power, reaching for more outside of Russia, as seen through the invasion of Ukraine. Not only is Russia not a democracy but have begun to threaten other democracies, setting a dangerous precedent of what the world may be willing to allow.

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