

# The authoritarian challenge: russia's transition to democracy

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Throughout Russia's political history, there have been many dramatic efforts to bring about change to its authoritarian-like system. Most policies were usually adopted or introduced but had little to no success and regarding the past patterns of politics in Russia, it would seem as if Russia had an aversion towards change. In the late 1980s, the first attempt to change Russia's government was introduced by a man named Gorbachev. Gorbachev is often credited for being the first Russian leader to try and install democracy-like policies into the political regime. During his term, he introduced new policies like Perestroika (reconstruction), glasnost (openness or transparency), and other political guidelines.

In the book, Russia's Unfinished Revolution: Political Change from Gorbachev to Putin, McFaul stated that Gorbachev's new political changes consisted of free speech, elections, and a new relationship between the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and the Soviet State. These changes came too abruptly and were essentially overwhelming. Many people considered them counter-productive to the state and had little faith that it was going to work at all. These thoughts trickled down from the political leaders who were then expected to hold elections and adhere to the new political rules to Gorbachev's opposition who felt that the changes were too "different" to what Russia had already been accustomed to. The result ended with a disastrous outcome: a violent confrontation between opposing forces each claiming sovereignty over the same state.

However, despite Gorbachev's first attempt for political reform, Russia was far from stopping now. Fast forward a few years and Russia would be going

through another process of reconstruction by a man named Boris Yeltsin. In October 1993, Russia underwent a massive reconstruction on its economy by allowing free-market and private enterprise instead of government regulations on businesses. Yeltsin was not successful right away and faced strong opposition to his plan. In fact, while Yeltsin ended government control on goods, businesses, etc, the Russian Parliament very strongly voiced their discontent with these free-market transformations, claiming that Russia was steadily losing its grip on the state. Rather than seeing these new changes as potentially beneficial to the Russian economy, the opposition focused on the fact that they were losing “ control” over the economy. That mentality, inured over the years of Russian leadership’s absolute management and oversight of its state, made it hard to consider whether democratization can truly happen or not. The problem is not the policies themselves but the attitude towards change and being willing to allow the government to transform. By Yeltsin’s third attempt at transforming the political structure, he had finally reached success. “ In 1993 in a national referendum, Russian voters approved a new constitution, that has organized politics ever since... elections became a critical component of this new political order”. This shows that some policies can be welcomed and can be a key contributor in future political elections. Soon after, Russia would employ this new power in electing its first president, Vladimir Putin. Putin’s rise to power seemed obvious.

During the election, other political opponents dropped out and Putin gained most of the support. With Putin in charge, it seemed as if Russia was finally

heading in the right direction. He put forth his vision of how the Russian economy should work by stating that capitalism was not “good” and that Russian private corporations should work for the interest of the state and not their own. He viewed that enterprises (oil, petroleum, nickel) linked to the state would be extremely beneficial and would supply Russia with wealth. In his term as president, it is said that Putin developed a Praetorian-like system. According to Putinism: A Praetorian System, Praetorianism began in republican Turkey as an ideology that prioritizes the urgent need to protect the state from external dangers and, in particular, the threats represented by various ‘internal enemies’. In other words, Putin wanted Russia to rely on itself and that to seek outside assistance would display the state as weak. One major event that solidified this was the Khodorkovsky affair.

Khodorkovsky was a Russian businessman, most notably known for his company called Yukos, who sought to introduce a western-style of business and advocated that other Russian businesses do so as well. He also met with foreign businessmen, especially those in the West like Rex Tillerson, the chairman of ExxonMobil. Ultimately, Putin could only see Khodorkovsky as a threat and subsequently had him arrested.

A form of democratization in Russia is possible as we have seen in Russia’s adoption of elections into their political system. However, a true democracy would not be possible because Russia is still apprehensive to Western ideas. Instead of cultural obstacles being the reason why Russia cannot develop a Democratic political system, I would argue that it is more about their frame of mind and unwillingness to accept other methods of political and economic

structure. In order for that change, there would have to be a serious upheaval in the educational sector of Russia to adequately inform people rather than allowing uncertainty to take hold.