

# Debating Russia's Future

By [Robert Skidelsky](#)

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It is often said that Russia lacks a “civil society.” But it partly makes up for this by having a rather interesting public sphere in which serious topics get debated and where glimpses of the great are not entirely confined to televised snippets.

The first two weeks in September saw successive meetings of two major Russian political groups, the Valdai Discussion Club and the Global Policy Forum. The first was on a boat and ended with dinner with Prime Minister Vladimir Putin at Sochi on the Black Sea. The second, in Yaroslavl, culminated in a symposium with President Dmitry Medvedev. Scholars from universities and think tanks and journalists (both Russian and foreign) joined political and business leaders to discuss the country’s future.

What stood out for me was the fact that the two events saw the emergence of two rival political courts, each exuding the faint but unmistakable odor of a looming conflict. The two conferences presented a fascinating glimpse of a crumbling diarchy.

The main theme of the Valdai conference concerned whether Russia’s history and geography doomed it to authoritarian rule. If democracy was the wave of the future, was Russia destined

to miss out?

The pessimists — mainly Russian historians — claimed that Russia would find it difficult, if not impossible, to overcome its legacy of autocracy. Lev Belousov of Moscow State University argued that in Russia, autocracy rises constantly from the ashes, like a phoenix, sustained by Russians' passivity and endurance. The Bolsheviks inherited the autocracy of the tsars, and Putin rediscovered the old monarchical principle of anointing his successor, bypassing democratic competition for the presidency.

Radicals like Vladimir Ryzhkov rejected this historical determinism. We should not, he argued, legitimize authoritarianism by reference to history. Protests were growing. It was Putin's yoke — not history's — that lay heavily on Russia.

Much of this discussion lacked clarity, as such discussions tend to do. Most participants failed to distinguish between history as a constraint and history as a determinant. No country or civilization can entirely transcend its history, but each history offers many different possibilities. Countries are not genetically programmed like animals.

The discussion about autocracy was inevitably bound up with others. Autocracy has been defended in Russia as necessary for empire. But this leads to another question: Is empire necessary for Russia? Can Russia renounce its imperial past and accept ordinary relations with newly independent neighbors like Ukraine and Georgia? Can it, in fact, be an "ordinary" or "normal" player on the world stage?

At the Yaroslavl meeting with Medvedev, attention shifted to the connection between democracy and modernization. Everyone agreed that Russia must diversify its economy away from reliance on energy. As Medvedev pointed out, a raw materials-based economy is always vulnerable to volatile commodity prices.

But there were two broad views about the relationship between political and economic modernization. Putin's view is that democracy results from a modern economy, a kind of reward for hard work. If the state pushes modernization from the top, democracy will grow naturally, if slowly, as a result of rising prosperity and a growing middle class. The Kremlin's chief ideologist, Kremlin first deputy chief of staff Vladislav Surkov, has suggested that full democracy presupposes "democracy in the head," implying that this desirable mental condition was still a long way off in Russia.

The alternative view, championed by people such as Igor Yurgens — head of Medvedev's favorite think tank, the Institute of Contemporary Development — is that democracy is the precondition for economic modernization. Their argument is that the Russian state lacks any real incentive to reform its own — or Russians' — bad economic habits.

The record bears this out. Russia has staged a modest recovery from the recession. But there is almost no innovation, the elites are happy to live comfortably off energy rents, and corruption continues unchecked. Putin is the strong leader of a weak state, which, lacking a mobilizing or feedback mechanism, is incapable of carrying out a modernizing project.

There is a clear rift between Putin and Medvedev. Medvedev is far from being Putin's puppet. They both believe that democracy must come sooner or later, but Putin's emphasis is very

much on later, whereas Medvedev has added a liberalizing voice to Russia's public discourse. Cynics say that this is simply a deceptive "good cop-bad cop" routine. But words matter, and new rhetoric is a political force in its own right.

Moreover, Medvedev's main strategic goal must be to secure a second term as president. He cannot openly challenge Putin's legacy, but he has to position himself as reaching beyond Putin. It is a difficult balancing act, because Putin can always reclaim the presidency if he believes that his erstwhile protege wants to dismantle the authoritarian state he has created.

Nineteen years after the fall of communism, Russia's direction remains as unclear as ever. This matters chiefly to Russians, but because Russia straddles the vast Eurasian landmass, lack of clarity about its future imposes a permanent fearfulness on the rest of us.

Is Russia part of the West? Does its history and geography give it a distinctive Eurasian outlook capable of mediating a potential clash between Western and Eastern civilizations, or between Christianity and Islam? Russia does not fit neatly into geopolitical categories, but remains too important to be ignored.

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