

Breaking the Vicious Circle of Autocracy

By [Arkady Prigozhin](#)

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Russia's 20th century began with tsarism and was replaced in 1917 by a more vicious form of autocracy — Bolshevism and communism.

Throughout the 20th century, not a single Russian or Soviet head of state left office without suffering disgrace and widespread vilification. Sometimes it happened during his lifetime and sometimes even before stepping down, as with Tsar Nicholas II, former Soviet leaders Leonid Brezhnev, Konstantin Chernenko and Mikhail Gorbachev, as well as former President Boris Yeltsin.

In some cases, they left office humiliated, as happened with former Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev, Gorbachev and Yeltsin. Others, such as Lenin and Stalin, were criticized after their deaths and then openly denounced by anti-Communists decades later.

Yury Andropov started his term in November 1982 by raiding movie theaters to enforce his campaign of increasing “work discipline” — that is to say, decreasing absenteeism at work. Andropov ruled for little more than a year before he died in February 1984, but it is interesting

to ponder how the Soviet Union would have evolved or devolved had Andropov remained in office for eight more years.

It is amazing how the supporters of Lenin, Gorbachev and Yeltsin were jubilant when those leaders first came to power and, yet, how each transformed into alter egos of their former selves by the end of their rule. Not one managed to leave office with dignity or before falling out of favor.

Why is it that almost every individual who was shown favor by a Soviet or Russian leader later rebelled against him?

Stalin destroyed the supporters of Lenin, Khrushchev denounced Stalinism, Brezhnev ousted Khrushchev, Communist hard-liner Gennady Yanayev rebelled against Gorbachev, former Vice President Alexander Rutskoi struck out at Yeltsin, former Prime Minister Mikhail Kasyanov rose against then-President Vladimir Putin.

For the past 100 years, this negative trend has weakened the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union and continued in post-Soviet Russia. Will it be possible to end it in the 21st century?

Taking a look at the current ruling tandem of Prime Minister Putin and President Dmitry Medvedev, many say the whole setup is a show, that the two are only actors meant to deceive the Russian people. Conspiracy and intrigue are par for the course in Russian politics. Some even believe that Gorbachev himself staged the attempted coup in 1991 to somehow reinforce his waning power.

The important thing is to break the historical pattern of autocratic rule controlling a compliant society, to incorporate the rule of law, to establish checks and balances so that leaders exercise unusual authority only under unusual circumstances.

If the unexpected happens and Russia is someday governed by a democratic leader, he or she will begin by establishing a new set of values that recognizes the primacy of law, improves the legislative process, establishes independent courts and competent law enforcement, supports the human rights movement and promotes greater legal awareness among the people.

This democratic rule will not serve as a substitute for law and order but firmly establish it.

Arkady Prigozhin is a professor of sociology and psychology at the Russian Academy of National Economy. This comment appeared in Vedomosti.

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