

Rallying for Autocrats

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There are many ways that democracy differs from authoritarianism, but one of them is very basic: In a democracy, street demonstrations always protest against something, such as the policies of the ruling party — while rallies in support of the ruling authorities are virtually unheard of. But in an authoritarian state, rallies are staged in support of the government all the time.

Consider the Occupy Wall Street movement. Only a small percentage of U.S. citizens share its aims and ideals. If the occupiers were the majority, the United States would have an unemployed communist for president.

And for some reason, nobody is staging counterdemonstrations against Occupy Wall Street. Even the fat cats on Wall Street are not trying to inspire anyone to fight the "communist hipsters."

Or consider the protests in Greece. Last May, immediately after the government of Greek Prime Minister George Papandreou made deep cuts to federal spending to save the bankrupt country, at least 100,000 people took to the streets in protest. They stormed the parliament and burned a bank. Several people died in the rioting, including a pregnant woman.

It should be mentioned that most Greeks do not support the demonstrators, the majority of whom are low-level government paper-pushers — people who get a full day's pay for a few hours of work and who have a reputation for taking bribes. Greece has way too many state employees, and ordinary people — taxi drivers, store owners, factory workers — despise the protesters, whom they believe are driving the country to ruin. Notably, there are no demonstrations in support of the ruling authorities. Why? Because they are in power.

The third example is Georgia, where opposition leader Nino Burjanadze staged anti-government rallies last summer. Burjanadze had a miniscule following, even before the Georgian secret service published conversations she had with her son in which she apparently said it would be good to have a bloody confrontation and intervention by the Russian army. The truth is, Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili is genuinely popular. So why didn't Saakashvili urge his hundreds of thousands of supporters to stage a pro-government demonstration after the Burjanadze rally or after an even larger demonstration that preceded it?

The answer: Why should he? Georgia has fair, honest elections. As such, the vote is the final arbiter in any political contest. That is why you will never see a pro-government rally in a truly democratic state.

In riot-torn Paris in 1968, nobody in France staged a counterdemonstration against the revolutionary students.

In 1970, advocates of disarmament marched regularly through the streets of London and Paris. In all likelihood, not all Europeans thought disarmament was a good idea when a totalitarian power that devoted 90 percent of its industry to military needs had tanks placed directly on their borders. But there were no pro-government countermarches advocating armament. Why not? If you are opposed to the current administration, then go and protest.

Things are different in an authoritarian country. Authoritarian leaders are always frightening or forcing their people into rallying for the government and against an endless succession of external "enemies" — infidels, Jews, Americans, Orange revolutionaries and so on. In those countries, hundreds of thousands rallied in support of Josef Stalin, Saddam Hussein, Moammar Gadhafi and Bashar Assad.

And now a similar crowd is gathering in support of Vladimir Putin.

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