

Catherine the Great Ruled Better Than Putin

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One year has passed since Russia awakened.

A negative trend had dominated the past 12 years in Russia: The number of freedoms decreased while abuses of the Kremlin's power increased. This was largely met by indifference among the people. But in December 2011, that indifference ended with the beginning of the protest movement. The country was set on a new path that will lead to either the overthrow of the regime or a revolution. A peaceful transition of authority is impossible for the simple reason that President Vladimir Putin refuses to relinquish his hold on power. He will eventually go the way of either former Italian dictator Benito Mussolini or Spanish dictator Francisco Franco, but he will never willingly hand over power to anyone.

Russia's current problem could be described as a new type of authoritarianism set against the backdrop of a new and global form of democracy.

Both the new authoritarianism and the opposition movement have arisen thanks to technological advances during the past 20 years that have enabled the minority

to financially support the majority. As a result, that good old democracy — the one former British Prime Minister Winston Churchill famously described as "the worst form of government, except all the others that have been tried" — no longer exists.

Not only has the old democracy disappeared, but even the classic form of dictatorship made infamous by the likes of former Haitian President Francois Duvalier and former Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos can no longer be found. This was when the ruling elite held close ties to the dictator and prospered by robbing and abusing the majority of their own people, who were constantly yearning to rise up in rebellion against the tyranny.

In contrast, modern authoritarian regimes are careful to give the majority enough money to satisfy their hunger and thirst, thus engendering genuine love for the dictator and pulling the rug out from under any would-be reformers. The opposition cannot claim that the majority is dissatisfied when most people are perfectly content to turn a blind eye to official abuses as long as their refrigerators are full. What's more, opposition leaders understand perfectly well that even if a change in regime were to take place, Russia's low level of economic development makes it impossible to meet voters' demands for free education, housing, medical services or a Western standard of living.

Unlike Catherine the Great, for example, today's dictators care nothing about the effectiveness of the state and successful development of the economy. In their view, those things only benefit the country's numerous businesspeople, who enjoy financial and political independence from the ruling regime. On the contrary, today's brand of dictator needs citizens who are dependent on government handouts. Ideally, an "oilocracy" like today's Russia needs only a handful of specialists to pump the oil and an enormous number of state employees dependent on the government.

I have no doubt that the current regime will come to an unhappy end.

But I am afraid that Russia will escape the strategic trap into which it has fallen only after a crisis leads to a change in certain global trends. In particular, when universal suffrage is no longer considered a legitimate form of government and when the threat of losing national territory forces authoritarian regimes to end their populist and irresponsible ways.

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