

China More Democratic Than Russia These Days

By [Vladimir Frolov](#)

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Russian policymakers frequently blame the country's 1990s democratization for all its current woes. They point to the "healthy" authoritarianism in China as the reason for its economic miracle.

Yet, as Bulgarian political scientist Ivan Krastev argues on [Opendemocracy.net](#), "in many of its practices, China is more democratic than Russia, and its decision-making is undoubtedly superior."

Russia has popular elections but no change of power. The role of elections, Krastev points out, is to avoid a peaceful rotation of rulers and legitimize a lack of change. China, without democratic elections, has ensured a regular rotation of power for three decades. The president and the prime minister are automatically replaced every 10 years by new leaders. The old team retires from public life.

The Chinese system prevents the emergence of personalized authoritarianism and establishes clear succession rules. Russia's system is a personalized regime that seeks to block real succession of power.

China tolerates major labor unrest, with thousands of strikes unfolding every year that help the government identify and deal with serious problems on the regional level and thrust future leaders in crises that test their mettle. Russian leaders clamp down on discontent and hide their incompetency through sham elections.

While the Kremlin broadly tolerates the opposition, Krastev argues, it does not listen to it. Dissent on policy matters within the government is suppressed. The Chinese leadership sees having different views as legitimate. "The loyalty test in China starts only once the Communist Party has taken a decision. The loyalty test in Russia starts as soon as the president makes a proposal," he says.

Russia is governed by a circle of friends. The most important factor influencing membership is to have known Putin before he became president. Few of these policymakers had proper careers of their own. China, meanwhile, is ruled by a meritocracy. The party recruits the best and the brightest and invests a lot into ensuring the diversity of experience and regional representation.

China and Russia differ fundamentally in their approach to political experimentation. China's leaders love to experiment with political and economic reforms to see what works best. Russian leaders shun experimentation for the sake of stability.

What matters here is the trajectory. While Russia is faking democracy to cover up an emerging dictatorship, China's authoritarianism is evolving into a more pluralistic system.

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