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Russians Must Ditch Illusions for Bright Future

By Vladimir Ryzhkov

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Analysts traditionally classify authoritarian regimes as either successful or unsuccessful, based on their political stability, rate of economic growth and their ability to implement economic and social reforms for modernization.

"Classic" successful authoritarian regimes include those of modern China, Singapore under former leader Lee Kuan Yew, Chile under former dictator Augusto Pinochet, South Korea under its first presidents, as well as Mexico and Taiwan.

They are the exceptions. The overwhelming majority have failed because authoritarian regimes are generally corrupt and unstable, create stagnant economies, force the people to live in poverty while the ruling elite bask in luxury and eschew all meaningful attempts at modernization.

There are dozens of them in Africa, the Middle East and Asia. Classic examples of unsuccessful authoritarian regimes are found in Nigeria, Angola, Cuba, Myanmar, Zimbabwe and the

former Soviet republics of Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Belarus and, unfortunately to an ever greater degree, Russia.

According to a democracy rating conducted by the Economist magazine based on conditions in 2012 of 167 countries, 59 were democracies or imperfect democracies, 35 had transitional regimes and the remaining 73 were classified as authoritarian regimes.

Of the latter, only China, Vietnam, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia and Azerbaijan had successful authoritarian regimes — the latter three only due to their natural resource wealth and small populations. All of the other authoritarian regimes were examples of failure and suffering populations.

The existence of a few successful authoritarian regimes is a challenge to the theory that societies and economies can only achieve sustainable development through the rule of law, protection of property rights, government officials' accountability before the people and the regular transition of power through free elections.

However, those rare exceptions usually enjoy their success due to the presence of a strong leader or founder such as Lee Kuan Yew in Singapore or Deng Xiaoping in China who set a productive modus vivendi for their regimes from the outset.

They created meritocracies, properly functioning public institutions, market economies and advantageous foreign policy and foreign economic policies. Examples of this type include Chile, Saudi Arabia and Singapore, all of which are geared toward the United States and the West.

However, there is one more fundamental but frequently overlooked difference between successful and unsuccessful authoritarian regimes.

North Korea, Iran, Zimbabwe, Cuba, Myanmar and Venezuela are ranked as the worst for their suppression of democratic freedoms, widespread corruption, economic backwardness, increasing social stratification and failure to modernize. At the same time, these countries share another common feature — the extremely ideological nature of their respective regimes. In contrast, all successful authoritarian regimes are fundamentally rational and pragmatic.

In fact, both Lee Kuan Yew and Deng Xiaoping considered rationalism and pragmatism their main credo. One of the great Chinese reformer's favorite sayings was, "It doesn't matter what color the cat is, as long as it catches mice."

In contrast, the Castro brothers in Cuba have struggled for socialism and against the United States for decades and the Kim dynasty in North Korea continually fights "South Korean militarism and U.S. aggression" while building a bloody, repressive and hunger-inducing form of communism at home.

Zimbabwean leader Robert Mugabe — who constantly criticizes the U.S. and the European Union and whose policy decisions have prompted international sanctions — builds his own special brand of socialism and once drove thousands of white farmers out of the country, pushing the national economy to a condition of collapse.

Venezuelan leader Hugo Chavez and his successor, Nicolas Maduro, combined Castro's socialism with nationalism in the style of 19th-century Venezuelan leader Simon Bolivar, and proclaimed their opposition to the U.S. and world capitalism. They have managed to cause the economic collapse of their country — rich in raw materials — and found themselves forced to ration foodstuffs and consumer goods to their people.

All of these countries and their ruling elite live in a world of illusions and ideological chimeras that shape their domestic life and their economic and foreign policy. They all struggle against imaginary foreign and domestic enemies, hold deficient understandings of the modern economy and isolate themselves from the world.

That approach has imbued their populations with a similarly delusional understanding of themselves and the world, robbing them of both present opportunities and all hope of future progress.

In recent years, Russia has increasingly moved away from rationality and pragmatism and toward the world of illusions and chimeras. In place of rational arguments, government officials — most of whom grew up as atheists — now frequently speak of sacred territory, a nebulous "Russian world," blasphemy and sacred objects, divine providence, a special Russian civilization, the sanctity of military victory and so forth.

With the help of a concerted and full-scale propaganda campaign, leaders have resurrected past national myths — the chimerical and persistent mental constructs of Russia's mass consciousness. They include the alleged need for an autocratic personal savior of the Russian people, the superiority of Russian civilization and the subsequent need for isolation from the modern world and the rejection of modernization. After all, if Russia is already better than everyone else, why change anything?

It also promotes the idea that rulers and the state are sacred, and that any sacrifice or deprivation is justified for the sake of asserting Russia's greatness — a term defined strictly as Russia's military might, territorial holdings and its geopolitical influence.

And finally, it includes the idea that Russia exists in a hostile environment, that it is locked in a confrontation with the United States and the West — because of which the country must remain on the constant war footing of a "besieged fortress," arm itself against foreign aggressors and crack down on domestic enemies ranging from the intelligentsia to ordinary discontents.

The whole picture of the world is completely illusory and false, and yet that is now what motivates the domestic and foreign policy decisions of the Russian authorities. And that is why Russian policy has become so unpredictable and irrational.

Authoritarian regimes only succeed if they are rational. Irrationalism and an escape into the world of illusions and chimeras is a sure path to the quagmire of underdevelopment and poverty, violence and instability. To return to the path of development, Russia must first abandon its chimeras and stand on the solid path of rationalism and pragmatism.

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The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

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