

The Romanovs Will Not Reign Again; Russia Already Has Its Tsar – Experts

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Grand Duchess Maria Vladimirovna

As calls continue to mount for the former imperial family to make a triumphant return to Russia, pundits told The Moscow Times this would never happen, as President Vladimir Putin already effectively fulfills the role of monarch.

Russian society is hardly aching for the reinstatement of the royal family, which was deposed by Bolshevik revolutionaries nearly a century ago, experts said.

Russia's government is too conservative to accept such a radical shift, and has displayed no interest in sharing legitimacy — even with a symbolic or cultural institution, they added.

Moreover, by welcoming in a new symbolic body, President Vladimir Putin would be giving up his own symbolic status as the focal point of the country's political and cultural life, experts noted.

Romanovs Eyeing a Return

The Russian Imperial House — one of two groups of the last tsar's descendants claiming to be the righteous successors of the Romanov dynasty — have long lobbied for Moscow to recognize it as a historic and cultural institution.

“We have stated our position many times. We want the Russian government to recognize the House of Romanov as a historic institution, so that the state will protect the true descendants from impostors,” Russian Imperial House spokesman Alexander Zakatov told *The Moscow Times* on Monday.

“The descendants [who are presently based in Europe] do not want any political rights and will not engage in politics in any capacity, but want to move to Russia permanently under the new status,” Zakatov said in a phone interview.

Russia's last emperor Nicholas II abdicated the throne following the 1917 February Revolution, leading many members of the Romanov family to flee to the West, presumably in a bid to avoid the fate that awaited the royal family.

In 1918, Nicholas II was executed by Bolshevik revolutionaries alongside his wife, five children and several members of the household staff who had accompanied the family into exile in Yekaterinburg.

As the imperial family's descendants proliferated abroad, they splintered off into two key groups, each claiming their own lines to be the only true successors to the throne: the Russian Imperial House, led by Grand Duchess Maria Vladimirovna Romanova, and the Romanov Family Association, led by Prince Dmitry Romanov.

Each of the two groups fervently denies the legitimacy of the other. The complicated issue revolves primarily around morganatic marriages, or marriages between Romanov descendants and partners of unequal social rank.

According to Stanislav Belkovsky, director of Moscow-based think tank the Center for National Strategy, this family feud is likely the reason the Russian Imperial House seeks official status in Russia. “They want to obtain a license proving that they are the only true Romanovs,” said Belkovsky.

An Indifferent Society

According to historians, it is not unheard of for a former royal family to obtain some sort of official government status. Montenegro, for instance, formally recognized members of its former royal house in 2011 in a bid to promote the country's culture and traditions.

The problem with Russia is that there is no clear, indisputable descendant to the throne, historians said.

According to prominent historian Andrei Zubov, Russian society is indifferent to the notion of reinstating the monarchy, and there is thus no support base to rally behind a single successor to the throne.

“The problem is — for contemporary society, pre-revolutionary Russia is like the Roman Empire for Italians,” said Zubov, who was fired from his position at the prestigious Moscow Institute of International Relations last summer after vocally criticizing Russia's annexation of Crimea.

“Moreover, Putin already fulfills the functions of a monarch, uniting all branches of power and providing a symbolic vision of the state authority,” he said in a phone interview.

The Tsar, Reimagined

Belkovsky echoed the sentiment that Putin is already perceived by the population as a modern-day monarch, whose status as such was bestowed upon him by the very nature of power in Russia.

In Russia, real and symbolic power have historically been concentrated in one individual. In the imperial era, the tsar enjoyed supreme rule. In Soviet times, the leader of the Central Committee of the Communist Party enjoyed this distinction. In the post-Soviet era, this role has alternated at times between the president and the prime minister.

If Moscow wanted to break away from the status quo by working the remaining Romanovs into the federal fold, it could embrace the constitutional monarchy model, where symbolic and real powers would be divided between the Kremlin and whatever palace the Romanovs were to occupy.

Under this model, the monarchs would lack any political powers, but would be the focal point for the population.

The head of government would have political powers, but likely would not be the darling of his people, and his desires and agenda items could be circumvented by members of the elected parliament, Belkovsky said.

“Putin will not introduce such a system, because he is afraid of any reform. He could adjust the system he inherited, but he cannot fundamentally change it,” Belkovsky said.

If Putin were to think seriously of introducing a constitutional monarchy in Russia, he would have to share his own legitimacy with the new monarch, analysts agreed.

“Putin exploits the monarchy ritual himself, so he would not be willing to give it up,” Belkovsky said.

Therefore, at this point monarchists can only dream of a change of government in Russia, according to analysts.

The country would never choose to embrace a constitutional monarchy; it would only embrace one if forced to do so by a cataclysmic event, said Vladimir Lavrov, senior researcher at the Russian Academy of Sciences' Institute of Russian History.

“In the present situation, an attempt to introduce monarchy in any form would be [so absurd as] to discredit the very notion of a monarchy,” Lavrov said in a phone interview.

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