

## *Original Paper*

# Why Is Russia Backward?

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### ***Abstract***

*Russia is a peculiar country. The Russian people is governed by a president who violates the constitution of the country, embezzling enormous sums of money and has begun a war with big losses. How did it then come to all of this?*

### **1. Introduction**

Tocqueville, the greatest of French sociologists, made several predictions that have become well known. One states that America and Russia will be the most powerful nations in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. If true of America and the Soviet Union, it does not hold today. Why? Russia is a third world country with nukes.

### **2. Communism and Fascism**

Suppose we call China “communist” and the US and UK “liberal”. How, then, to characterize today’s Russia? The regime that Putin has created is not easily identified. It is not communist, although of course an autocracy. Actually, it is astonishing that China and North Korea aligns itself behind Russia, as the latter has no longer a communist dispensation or policy. Putin rules the country through a hierarchy of his own making. Instead of referring to Lenin’s dictatorship of the proletariat, Putin looks for religious support as well Stalinist nationalism.

One often encounters the thesis that Putin’s regime is an example of fascism, which appears counterintuitive, given his relations with China. The common element is dictatorship. Putin’s autocracy is personal, whereas fascism targeted groups positively or negatively.

### **3. The Horseshoe Model**

One can employ a horseshoe to picture the various positions from Right to Left so that “*les extremes se touchent*”, due to the rejection of individualism by both fascism and communism. Putin’s regime is definitely to the Right, given the alliance with the Orthodox Church. But it differs from European fascism.

Already in 1936 did Swedish political scientist H. Tngsten identify the core of fascism and Nazism, namely the cult of physical strength and racial dominance. In a multicultural Russia such a Nietzschean message is impossible. The brutal methods in Putin's domination stem more from his KGB time than from a wish to create a new great Russia, which the former Soviet Republics will never accept. How come that there is no organised resistance to Putin?

#### **4. Tocqueville**

I would suggest an answer to this question of Russian misfortune by looking at Russian history through Tocqueville's "De la democratie en Amerique", published in 2 volumes in the 1840s.

Tocqueville travelled the US under Jackson's democracy. He predicted the civil war, the end of slave aristocracy and the terrible destiny of the Indians. The North of America was the viable future—the first democracy in the world.

#### **5. The Free Associations**

Democracy in the industrial North was founded upon individual formal equality and free association. Tocqueville hypothesized that the free associations—religious, economic, educational, political or generally mundane—were "schools of democracy" as well as the bulwark against state interference. The institutions reinforced the basic role of free association in political and economic freedom.

#### **6. Russia: Czar and Serfdom**

Russian history is the tales of the Czar and serfdom. From about 1650 there was no free peasantry, but serf is not slave like in the South of USA. The serf was tied to the manor and worked for the landlord, who decided in all matters, also law and punishment. Although serfdom was abolished in 1861, it left a mark of heteronomy on Russian people, much spoken of in novels. In western Europe, free peasantry replaced serfdom, whereas in eastern Europe serfdom drove out peasantry.

The czar institution -autocracy- grew out of the Grand Duchy of Moscow, defeating the Mongols and subduing the Cossacks. The czars expanded Russia considerably up until the defeat against Japan. The first *Duma* 1905 led to intense politics like agrarian reform, but ended in the fall of czardom in 1917 with two revolutions.

#### **7. Bolshevism**

Lenin and the Bolsheviks had a political theory in Marx' idea of the *dictatorship of the proletariat*, but no economic theory. On the one hand, big capitalism was restrained, like for instance the expulsion of Alfred Nobel's brother Ludvig from Baku. Ludvig and Robert Nobel had created the huge oil industry by the Caspian Sea with modern decent management. On the other hand, Lenin's new economic policy, NEP brought in market incentives like supporting free peasantry, as Stolypin had done. Lenin, however, also complained about the role of big peasants called "*kulaghs*". Thus, there was economic freedom,

but no political freedom under Lenin. He shaped the future of Russia's 20<sup>th</sup> century by the Soviet Union: one party state with a powerful secret police, viz. *Tjeka*. Russia and the Soviet Republics were to be governed by a small Communist Party—the *nomenclatura* or *avant garde* of the proletariat.

a. Political freedom

Lenin abolished political competition and free speech immediately. Whereas the czar often placed opponents in Siberian confinement for some time with freedom to study, Lenin opted for the elimination of opposition somehow once and for all.

The powers were concentrated to the *Politbureau*, which faced no restraints. During the Soviet era constitutional documents were enacted by the *Supreme Soviet*, but they were *facade constitutions*. Imagine a country with over 200 million inhabitants governed by a 24 member body! Policy implementation was left to the wide range of *Peoples' Commissariats* or ministries, mimicked in the Soviet republics.

The nature of the justice system was revealed to the world in the “Moscow trials” in 1936. A long row of old Bolsheviks and high army officers were sentenced to long punishments, based on confession to heinous crimes that must have been fabricated by torture or family threats. Justice knew not the presumption of innocence

b. Economic freedom

The NEP did not last long and the Russian peasantry was liquidated as “kulaks”. Stalin decided to put the entire economy on the Barone model of planning and 5-year plans. The rigid economic system was reformed somewhat after Stalin, but the market economy reappeared only with Jeltsin.

## 8. The 1993 Constitution

The efforts at *perestroika* and *glasnost* resulted in the dissolution of the Lenin-Stalin dispensation. The 1993 *Constitution* provided Russia with political and economic freedom as well as rule of law for the first time in its 1,000 years history.

Constitutional rule is one thing, constitutional praxis another. According to expert analyses by Anders Aslund it was really a revolution, as Jeltsin introduced true political and economic freedom, including peasant reform. Thus, some 100 years later than the US, Russia could start building the democratic society a la Tocqueville.

## 9. The Putin Regime

Putin has created a new political economy: crony capitalism. Political freedom is gone, but not economic freedom. Of the 1993 Constitution only the economic institutions are enforced. Yet, Russian economy is called state capitalism with corruption. Putin is a major player, as president and as private

investor, accumulating an immense fortune. Active in both the real and financial economies, he is estimated as richest in the world. Add then all the presidential palaces home and abroad.

One can analyse the recent developments in Russia as a principal-agent game, where the agent-president cheats the people-principal. In fact, Putin embezzles the Russian people. This is the politics of *looting*, bought to a new level. Slowly but consistently Putin and his entourage have made the liberal 1993 dispensation obsolete. It would have given Russia the following:

- 1) Strong legal formalism promoting equality under the laws;
- 2) Individual rights covering contract, free labour and property;
- 3) Checks and balances, i.e., institutionalized mixed government with countervailing competences: executive, legislature, and judiciary.

## 10. Conclusion

With his unique power of foresight, Tocqueville wrote around 1840: “There are at the present time two great nations in the world, which started from different points, but seem to tend towards the same end...Their starting-point is different, and their courses are not the same; yet each of them seems marked out by the will of Heaven to sway the destinies of half the globe”.

The road to world dominant position was indeed very different, especially political and economic freedom. The global superpower position of Russia is now in its twilight. Putin has gambled all on the Ukraine invasion. He and his politics of *looting* will not survive a defeat.

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<u>Average</u>	<u>Max</u>	<u>Number of countries</u>
0.60	0.83	15
0.51	0.60	14
0.74	0.90	24
0.53	0.71	30
0.50	0.65	8