

Russia's Progression to a Government of Democracy

Throughout the 20th and 21st centuries, the implementation of democracy and the system of international and economic relations Russia has developed with other nations has changed greatly, as well as how policies were and are being carried out in Russian politics. With the major power shifts in the system of government, as with the rise to power of Stalin with the Communist Party during World War II and also with Putin's rise to power and the fall of the Communist Party, we are able to see how transitions affected the level of democracy present in Russia at the time and how that level of democracy has affected other factors, such as the number of political parties, party platforms, economic policies, and relations with foreign nations. Over the course roughly 75 of roughly years, political inequality and corruption has been present in Russia, but there have been developments towards some forms of democracy and more efforts advertised in a sense for political equality with the current government. There has also been this leveling degree in the relationship Russia has with the United States of America, varying greatly from the time they fought alongside each other during World War II to the time they fought against each other during the Cold War. Even now, we see a strained relationship between the two nations with current scandals. Since the middle of the 20th and 21st centuries, we have been able to see an evolution in the system of government present in Russia consistent with change of the political party leaders in power, which then leads to variations on international relations and economic policies.

Over the course of the last 75 years, there has been two crucial events which lead to legislative changes in Russia, whether that change has been the party in power, political platforms, or a change in the regime: World War II and the Cold War. For both of these events, Russia was undergoing major political modifications with Joseph Stalin during World War II and the collapse of the Soviet Union at the end of the Cold War. This has led to monumental changes in their

relations with neighboring nations and alliances. Prior to World War II, tensions between Russia and the West (United States, Canada, etc.) had somewhat eased after the negative economic situation Russia was in after World War I and the revolutions of 1917, as “western businessmen and diplomats began opening contacts with the Soviet Union,” (Revelations 4). This led to the alliance between them in the 1940s with Great Britain and the United States. The alliance would come to an end with the resolution of the war, and this issue was primarily based off of differences in the system of government and democracy versus communism. During the Second World War, Russia was considered to be a dictatorship under the rule of Joseph Stalin, who addressed the Soviet people in a radio broadcast that they “had entered World War II on the side of the Allies (the United States, Great Britain, and other countries fighting against Germany, Italy, and Japan) (Stalin 7). Following World War II, Russia and the United States entered into the Cold War for the next 44 years, and this strain between the two nations led to changes in the allies of both, economic reforms in Russia, and eventually a regime change from authoritarian to some form of democracy with Vladimir Putin.

Since before the beginning of the Second World War, Russia was in a dictatorship with Vladimir Lenin, and following his rule, Joseph Stalin became the new ruler of the Russian government, bringing along with his rule, a change in the whole organization and execution of government orders and actions. Under Stalin’s rule during and after World War II, Russia was a part of the Soviet Union and was transformed into a major world power, especially in terms of industrializing with Stalin’s Five-Year Plans (Hingley 12). The political party which Stalin was a part of was the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, and his official title was the Prime Minister of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. The execution of governmental actions by Prime Minister Stalin was geared towards producing a strong military-industrial complex and for

prosperity for Russia rather than for individuals. Democracy is defined in many parts, but the main function of it is to provide a “means for the people to choose their leaders and to hold their leaders accountable for their policies and their conduct in office,” (What is 2). Although that is not the system of government present in Russia during this time, it is a stepping stool for the form of democracy that they have today. The basis for Putin’s rule was revolutionizing Russia to get it to become a world power, and the cost of this was enticing a reign of terror in his people that left today’s Russia with a disastrous legacy following the Soviet era. At the time of Stalin’s rule during World War II and until his death in 1953, Russian government was run by the elite circle Stalin surrounded himself with, making the impact that the people of Russia had on how the government was run almost minute.

Along with the political changes that came with the rule of Stalin there were economic, international, and social changes that affected nearly everyone in Russia, even those of his close-knit circle who he later would see as a threat. Economic endeavors between the United States and Soviet Union prior to and during World War II had “established the basis for further cooperation, dialogue, and diplomatic relations between the two countries,” but these would diminish as Stalin chose to use get rid of capitalism and focus on a communist regime (Revelations 10). Accompanying the vast economic and industrialization “progressions” Stalin was aiming for were the social difficulties farmers faced, who were forced to farm and give to the government, and the political challenges of relations with neighboring nations. The debt Russia accumulated during the war would affect them later on, and the policies of Stalin would continue to be based off of his communist ideals. Following the war, the allies of Russia would greatly change and be based mostly within countries of the Soviet Union, due to other countries negative view of the economic and political policies Stalin was carrying out. Stalin’s actions, along with the conclusion of the

Second World War in 1947, would lead to the end of the alliance between Russia and the United States and into the era of the Cold War.

Directly following the end of the Second World War was the Cold War between Russia and the United States. It lasted for 44 years and occurring due to the different views the two governments had on democracy versus communism. There was a disagreement on whether or not Russia should be working under communist rule, and Stalin “saw the world as divided into two camps: imperialist and capitalist regimes in the one hand and the Communist and progressive world on the other,” (Revelations 25). Throughout the Cold War, the Communist Party of the Soviet Union remained in power, and Joseph Stalin was in power of the party until his death in 1953. After his death, Nikita Khrushchev took over the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Although he continued efforts in the Cold War, he started a process called “De-Stalinization” and pursued for a peaceful policy with Western nations (History 1). This change in the demographics of the Russian government was small, in terms of their relationship with the U.S., but there was still a strain on their relationship with the creation of the Warsaw Pact for the Soviet Union and their allies and of NATO for the United States and their allies. While under Khrushchev’s rule, he tried to have peaceful relations with capitalist countries but the relations between “the two superpowers deteriorated somewhat in 1960 when the Soviets shot down an American spy plane inside their territory, and Khrushchev approved the construction of the Berlin Wall,” (History 10). Tensions than raised between the two nations even more and lead to a more communist system of rule for the government at the time, as both nations appeared to be ready to enter into a nuclear war and a series of proxy wars and M.A.D. (mutually assured destruction). The allies of Russia during the Cold War were primarily nations who were already members of the Soviet Union, and they did not branch out and make more connections with other nations as the United

States had done. The people of Russia had no impact on the reforms made in relation to the Warsaw Pact and still had no impact on who their ruler was. With the reign of Mikhail Gorbachev, the Cold War would continue and keep Russia under a dictatorship until the Berlin Wall came down, the “Iron Curtain” was lifted, and the war was finally over. With the dictatorship of the Communist Party in combination with the communist form of government that lasted throughout the Cold War, the system of government would remain the same until the end of the Cold War and the regime change of 1991.

Post-Cold War, Russia underwent a complete regime change with the partial westernization of the Russian government and the creation of their first Constitution under the rule of Boris Yeltsin in 1991. The entire layout of the government and its interaction with the citizens of Russia had changed after the collapse of the Soviet Union. While under the rule of Yeltsin, changes came due to how he was trying to turnaround the negative impacts Stalin and the former USSR had on their economic and political background. As soon as Yeltsin came into power, he was able to end the Soviet Union with the “recognition of independence for the other republics or the former USSR (Revelations 29). He launched a economic reform program that was goals towards creating a market economy and had pledge to Russia he would help in overcoming the imperial and ideological legacies that have scared the people of Russia. Succeeding Yeltsin was Vladimir Putin, a previous foreign intelligence officer for the Russia government and German National People’s Army who had worked his way up the Russia political ladder under the mentorship of Yeltsin. The way Putin executed his proposals and reforms was different than the way communist rulers of the previous regime did, as now there was/is a bicameral legislature (Federal Assembly) that is a moderate check-and-balance type system to the political leader in power. Although the Federal Assembly consists of a lower house (State Duma) and an upper

house, which are meant to be a check on the powers and decisions of the Prime Minister, Putin was able to bypass these checks though given how his political party, United Russia, is the majority in both houses of the legislature. The political system which Putin is working under is a multiparty political system that is dominated by the United Russia party, and as President, he is able to also appoint a portion of both houses and gave himself an edge in any voting for laws or regulations. The main political change made after the collapse of the USSR was the incorporation of democracy into the Russia election system. This can with “the victory of the new political actors led by the popularly elected president Boris Yeltsin and the Russian parliament, who had defended the ideals of freedom and democracy” for the people, indicating a change to a democratic form of government and ended an era of dictatorship and communism (Regime 1). Even with this incorporation of characteristics of democracy into the Russian government, we still see a corrupt government with Putin’s control over legislation and missing elements of what would make this a true democracy.

In today’s world, Russia is considered a semi-democratic or semi-presidential system of government with its voting system for the president and some departments of the legislature, but it is missing key aspects that would make it a full democracy. According to the Humanistic Studies department at Hilla University, one of the key elements for a democratic government is “for elections to be free and fair, they have to be administered by a neutral, fair, and professional body that treats all political parties and candidates equally.” This is one element where the Russian government falls short. There is still debate on whether the progression Russia is making is towards democracy or if it is falling back into an authoritarian type rule with how Putin controls so much of the government and the election process. This is demonstrated with how he was able to give the President position more power during his time as President between Prime Minister positions, and

then changed the laws again when he became Prime Minister for the second time in 2012. In a publication by the University of Pittsburgh in 2015, they highlighted some aspects of Russian politics that go against democratic values, ranging from “unfair and fraudulent elections to the stamping legislatures at the national and subnational levels to arbitrary use of state economic powers,”(Regime 2). Some of the corruption of their government, and a clear demonstrator of the authoritarian type power Putin has, is shown in how the political party in power made it necessary to utilize personal connections with individuals who were in power, rather than the drawing support from the people. This is clearly not an aspect of democracy in their government, and when looking back at Hilla University’s definition of democracy, it violates the idea in democratic regimes where “independent observers are able to observe the voting and the vote counting to ensure that the process is free of corruption, intimidation, and fraud.” As with American democracy, we vote for various departments of government, from the president to members of both houses of the senate. That is not the case for Russia. Their Prime Minister Vladimir Putin is part of the United Russia political party, which has the majority in both the upper and lower house of the legislature. There is no real checks and balance on his decisions as the members of the houses are afraid to lose their jobs and positions in government. This is not how a democratic government would operate, and there should be a system to check the decisions of the Prime Minister where one or both of the houses can stop laws or regulations that are proposed without having to worry about getting fired for not agreeing with the Prime Minister. So, all in all, it is clear that the Russian regime has transitioned out of the communist system they had pre-Cold War, but it still lacks some of the key elements which make it a democratic government.

In addition to the regime change that took place under Yeltsin and Putin’s time as Presidents of the Russian government, we also see changes made to the economic policies,

relations with other nations and socially. In terms of the economy, Russia has overall seen beneficial changes that have increased their gross domestic product (GDP) and made them more known on the global market. These changes would take a long time to occur though after the “corrupted process of privatization of state assets were enormously damaging for the institutionalization of democracy” of the 1990s and the economic crash in 1998 (Evans 3). With Putin’s transition to power, we see a consistent rise on the overall gross domestic product over the years and also more free-market economics, which has benefited both the people of Russia and their government. Consistent with the opening of trade and the attempts to play on a more global economic scale, Putin was able to bring some economic prosperity to Russia, but people in the lower classes were still being hurt by the byproduct of privatization from after the Cold War ended. In terms of the economy, there is a type of authoritarian rule still present under Putin, as his government controls a majority of the oil empire in Russia, rules in relation to the tariffs, and overall control on trade. Based off of her study of the Post-Communist world, Valerie Bunce has noted that “there is a very high correlation between democratization and economic reform” in these countries “and that the relationship between democratization and successful market reform is “robust and positive” (Evans 15). Even with the change in regime and new constitution put in place, the civil society in Russia has remained weak with having little political influence and little social impact. A huge component of what affects the democratic principles of a regime is the impact the people have on the government and the fact that their opinions are able to be voiced. The government has taken away peoples’ freedom of speech in regard to political matters and criticism of the current leaders by controlling a multitude of the national media outlets, and this relates to the issue of a corrupt government that can control specific information that the people are exposed to. This therefore affects the impact and political desires of the people, and with the

misguided information that can be released and/or monitored by the government, the people continuously vote for Putin and the United Russia party without knowing all the facts and outcomes that his decisions have produced. Within the supposed semi-democratic regime that Russia has turned into following the disassembling of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and under the rule of Prime Minister Putin, we can see some of the ways democracy has entered into Russian society but also the ways the societal and economic factors have been negatively impacted.

Following the progression of Russia's political development to their current form of democratic government, we see how a country can transform from a communist, dictatorship style regime to a semi-democratic one, while also completely change their industrial and economic platform as well. Over the past 75 years, Russia has undergone changes in the leadership of their main political party during World War II and a complete regime change following the Cold War and end of the USSR. These changes have resulted in changes to the political structure and the power the government has over the people, other branches within the government, and the economy with the creation of new policies, privatization, and control over major exports. From the control Putin has over the legislative branch to the media, we see certain elements of what makes a government a democracy lacking. In terms of the social structure and freedoms people have, they have increased slightly from what they were until the Communist Parties rule during the Second World War and throughout the Cold War, but they are still lacking democratic principles in today's Russia. For the economic progressions that have been made, we can see positive economic growth under the semi-democratic government, but this growth hasn't really impacted the people and has been consistent in benefiting the highly power political figures, not the common people. This is Russia's progression to their idea of democracy, but it has a long way

to go until it meets the criteria of an American style of democracy and is able to get rid of the political corruption present in so many areas. The strange dynamic in Russia's journey to democracy and the correlation of political corruption present throughout past 75 years has resulted from the changes of the political parties and those in power, and these changes have led to developments in the social and economic aspects of the Russian culture as well.

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