

ANDREI P. TSYGANKOV



The Strong State in Russia

Development and Crisis

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Preface

IN LATE 2011, Russia entered a new political era by leaving behind both the 2000s and the 1990s. More openly than other developments, the political protest in response to the rigged elections to State Duma exemplified a crisis in the country's development. Russia was entering the third stage in its post-communist evolution.

During the 1990s, Russia 1.0 transformed its institutions by eliminating what was left of the Soviet era and laying out foundations of a new system. Among them were privatization, macroeconomic stabilization, the new constitution, continued elections, and the leader's voluntary departure from power. During the 2000s the political pendulum swung back. As the leader of Russia 2.0, Vladimir Putin wanted to strengthen the state while preserving existing foundations for economic development. By integrating prominent members of the security elites within the ruling structure, he helped to unify the previously divided political class. Putin also sought to win people's loyalty by establishing political stability, new economic opportunities, and social services. The middle class now constitutes about 25% of the population, relative to 5% in the 1990s.

Yet the same middle class that Putin sought to develop has challenged his strong state system. In addition, some within the ruling structure grew comfortable with Dmitry Medvedev as president and disliked Putin's decision to return to power. Many in Russia are now dissatisfied with the accomplishments of the Putin era, which include state consolidation, economic recovery, the end of the war in Chechnya, and revival of Russia's international status. The system proved unable to deliver a greater openness, the rule of law, and a renewed economic confidence. Therefore some members of Russian opposition condemn the Putin system itself. Others favor a more open political system, eradication of corruption, and clear rules for business but do not want to go back to the 1990s and support a gradual improvement of the system. Will Russia 3.0 solve the crisis through a reform from the above? Is Putin,

known as a conservative stabilizer, capable of serious steps to improve the system? If not, will Russia go through another revolutionary transformation?

These are among the questions that inspire my overview of Russian politics from its emergence until the contemporary era. In writing it, I have been motivated by two interrelated considerations—one teaching and another scholarly. First, I wanted to assist students who begin to study Russian politics in Western universities. In my experience of teaching since 2000, most texts discuss Russia by applying Western liberal assumptions and providing little of historical and cultural context. More often than not, courses on Russian politics begin with a discussion of the Soviet system and its collapse, as if Russia had no meaningful, centuries-long political experience before communism. In addition, such courses tend to focus on the country's "domestic" politics and neglect the importance of the outside world in forming Russia's political system. I hope that my book, if adopted as a textbook, will compensate for some of these shortcomings.

Although I have written this book with a student audience in mind, I hope that scholars and the general public may find it of interest as well. My second motivation for writing this book is to highlight the potential vitality of culture and history in Russia's political system. Studying Russia by comparing it to other nations is important yet must not turn into what Stephen Cohen once referred to as "Russian studies without Russia." Until Russians themselves stop making sense of their politics by referring to the Times of Trouble (*Smuta*), Dual Power (*dvoyevlastiye*), In-Between-Tsardom (*mezhdutsarstviye*), or other historically meaningful terms, the field of Russian politics is not dead and should not become just a regional branch of comparative politics.

Central to the book is the Russian concept of a strong or highly centralized state (*sil'noye gosudarstvo*), which has roots in the tsar's autocratic rule (*samoderzhaviye*). I make no claims of establishing a novel interpretation of Russia's political issues and dilemmas, let alone showing a way out of the country's contemporary crisis. Rather, I argue that a perspective on Russia from a Western viewpoint is limited and that there has been an alternative way of thinking about the nation and its problems. Today, after the stifling decades of communism, such thinking is slowly being revived inside the country. Russia's strong state has evolved and survived throughout centuries and that alone suggests its historical vitality and possible future revival. The fact that all major intellectual currents in Russia—liberals, socialists, conservatives, and Eurasianists—have historically offered their own distinct versions of a strong state for resolving the country's problems

further suggests its importance. From this perspective, the central scholarly question is not whether Russia will re-create a strong state but, rather, what kind of a strong state it will be and under which circumstances it is likely to function.

The book is organized chronologically, as an overview of five distinct models of Russia's strong state—Kiev principality, Muscovy, the Romanov's empire, Soviet state, and post-Soviet republic—with an emphasis on the last two decades. Throughout the book, I discuss underlying conditions of each of these models' emergence, consolidation, and decline. Among these conditions, I highlight a role played by foreign threats, rising social classes, and leadership. I argue that each time a combination of these conditions was distinct thereby producing different political outcomes in Russia. The contemporary state is increasingly formed by responding to international economic challenges and pressures of the middle class at home. It remains to be seen whether the current leadership's attempts to reform the established system will be successful.

For reactions to the overall project and comments on individual chapters, I would like to thank (in alphabetical order) Tony D'Agostino, Hilary Apel, Boris Barkanov, Sanjoy Banerjee, Alfred Evans, David Foglesong, Julia Godzikovskaya, Dmitry Gorenburg, Henry Hale, Dale Herspring, Alena Ledeneda, David Parker, Peter Rutland, Alexei Shevchenko, Yuri Slezkine, Vlad Sobell, Matthew Tarver-Wahlquist, Pavel Tsygankov, and Igor Zevelev. I am alone responsible for the book's errors.

Parts of several chapters draw on my previously published books *Russia's Foreign Policy* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006) and *Russia and the West from Alexander to Putin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012). I thank the publishers for permission to use these materials in the book.

At Oxford University Press, I am especially grateful to David McBride for his guidance and faith in the project. Comments and constructive criticisms by anonymous reviewers were important in improving the book.

While finishing the book in the fall 2013, I spent October and November at Aleksanteri Institute, University of Helsinki. I especially thank the staff of the Institute, and particularly Hanna Smith, Toumas Forsberg, Markku Kivinen, and Riikka Palonkorpi for making my stay comfortable and stimulating.

I owe a special debt to my family for their love and support. I dedicate this book to my son Pasha and my wife Julia. Pasha's enthusiasm for history has been infectious and Julia's common sense has helped me to stay "sane" ever since I began to write about the "crazy" subject of Russian politics.

Last but not least, I dedicate this book to my students. Without their questions, support, and enthusiasm, the book could have not been written. I hope that throughout its pages my students will hear the same thick Russian accent that they have heard in my classroom.

In transliterating names from the Russian, I have used “y” to denote “ы,” to denote “ь” and “ъ,” “yu” to denote “ю,” “ya” to denote “я,” “i” to denote “й” and “ий,” “iyi” to denote double “и,” “e” to denote “э,” “kh” to denote “х,” “zh” to denote “ж,” “ts” to denote “ц,” “ch” to denote “ч,” “sh” to denote “ш,” and “sch” to denote “щ.” I have also used “Ye” to distinguish the sound of “е” (such as “Yevropa”) in the beginning of a word from that in the middle of a word (such as “vneshnei”). Everywhere, I did not distinguish between “е” and “ё.” Spelling is retained in quotations.

Introduction

I

Russia from Two Perspectives

*The West is not necessarily most alarmed when Russia is in
reality most alarming, or most reassured when Russia is in
fact most reassuring*

MARTIN MALIA¹

LET US BEGIN by introducing two different perspectives from which to approach Russia—the Westernist and the Nativist. Westernists view Russia through the eyes of members of Western civilization who deem their culture superior to all others. In contrast, Nativists seek to understand Russia from within by highlighting its own cultural and historical experiences. Each of these perspectives is imperfect in its own way.

The Westernist Perspectives

Westernism is not merely a perspective on Russia from a Western point of view but the one that perceives Russia as a culturally, historically, and institutionally inferior nation. Westernism denies Russia an authentic historical path or finds such a path threatening to Western nations' interests and values. Ethnocentric ideas are insensitive to other cultures and are uncomfortable with alternate perspectives. In its extreme form, Westernism replaces analysis with a mirror image projection of the self onto the other. The other is viewed as having nothing of what the self has developed. Whereas the self is deemed civilized, economically developed, and democratic, the other is presented as barbaric, backward, and oppressive. When perspectives from the other demand to be recognized, they are typically dismissed or viewed with fear and suspicion by the self.

An example of Westernism as the mirror image of the Orient is documented in Edward Said's classic work *Orientalism*. Similarly ethnocentric assumptions have shaped the minds of Western scholars ever since Russia emerged as an independent power. By the time that Marquis de Custine wrote

in the 1830s of the country as the “essentially aggressive” nation that “expiates beforehand, by a debasing submission, the design of exercising a tyranny over other nations,”² Russia had already been viewed as such by a number of Europeans who had had an opportunity to visit it.³ Americans too developed their version of a Westernist perception of the country. As demonstrated by historian David Foglesong, since the late 19th century influential circles in the United States viewed Russia as their “dark double”—disrespectful of religious freedoms and property rights.⁴ The revolution and the Cold War in the 20th century served to strengthen such perceptions of Russia in the West. Today this perception remains strong, as critics of Russia frequently attack it for not embracing Western institutions and instead for clinging to its own imperial and autocratic traditions.⁵

The Westernist perspective is not uniform and comes in two distinct forms, liberal and conservative. It is not restricted to Western scholarship. Indeed, Russians themselves sometimes hold views that largely correspond with the liberal Westernist perspective.⁶ Liberal Westernists view Russia as *institutionally* alien to the West. They direct their criticism not to the Russian people but to their government, which they view as excessively centralized and insensitive to the society. They present respect for individual liberty, property rights, and representative democracy as incompatible with strong government. Progressive and cosmopolitan in its outlook, this school of thought assumes that once Russia improves its government, it will join the West-centered global community of nations and will be fully accepted by it. Indeed, the Russians hardly have a choice not to do so. As Francis Fukuyama once famously expressed, humankind simply ended its institutional evolution by universalizing Western liberal democracy as “the final form of human government.”⁷ In full compliance with this outlook, liberal Westernists expected Russian reformers such as Mikhail Gorbachev and Boris Yelstin to take the country closer to the West. Russian conservative leaders, such as Nicholas I or Vladimir Putin, are frequently perceived as taking their country back to its uncivilized past. This linear progressive perception continues to inform much of the world’s scholarship on Russia.

Conservative Westernists are critical of Russian *culture*, rather than merely its governing institutions. Unlike their liberal counterparts, conservatives have a greater appreciation for Russia’s distinct history and do not have much hope for its transformation in the Western direction. However, they too are ethnocentric in their assumptions because they tend to view the other’s cultural difference as threatening the self’s values and interests. Conservative Westernist presentations of Russia’s culture and history are

frequently one-sided and unbalanced. For example, they depict Russia as an empire that oppresses nationalities, as an autocratic regime that despises citizens' rights, and as a power that is expansionist and disrespectful of existing international rules. Such depictions downplay the country's long record of protecting small nationalities from attacks by outsiders, Russia's recurring efforts to reform its economic and political system, and its attempts to reach out to Western nations. Being skeptical of the country's ability to reform, conservative Westernists are sometimes on the record that they prefer a weak Russia, which they view as less dangerous for the outside world.⁸ They too sympathize with Russia's liberal reformers as undermining the country's capacity to cause harm to the West.

The two Westernist perspectives converge in their criticism of Russia's development under Vladimir Putin. "Putin's Russia" is viewed as oppressive, undemocratic, and expansionist. Westernists attack the governing institutions of the country by drawing parallels with Stalinism and assuming the country's possible return to another cycle of state-organized violence. They point to Putin's past experience of serving in the Soviet KGB as evidence of the current regime's involvement in killing independent journalists and spy defectors. They further insist that Russia's ideological outlook is principally anti-Western and expansionist. Diverse developments that are taking place in the country—new efforts to understand Russia's role in history, decisions regarding foreign and homegrown nongovernmental organizations, examples of ethnic violence, and criticisms of American foreign policy—are explained as stemming from the single source of Russia's anti-democratic system. In the eyes of many Westernists, Russia again has become a powerful enemy to contain, not engage, as during the Cold War.⁹

The Nativist Perspectives

The Nativist perspective views Russia's historical and cultural experience as principally distinct from that of Western nations. According to this perspective, Russia has been a unique case since its appearance on the world's map and cannot merely march in lockstep with the West. Russia must be understood from within, that is, through its own experience, rather than by drawing comparisons with development of other nations. As a result of such an approach, Nativists tend to be less critical of Russia's institutions than Westernists. In particular, many Nativists view autocracy (*samoderzhaviye*) as essential to the country's development and not necessarily as internally oppressive or expansionist. In contrast to definitions of autocracy that highlight the system's

dictatorial and totalitarian tendencies, Nativists point to autocracy's ability to overcome partisanship and mobilize resources for long-term development and to the system's compatibility with some elements of democracy.

Although the Nativist perspective tends to be country centered and is implicitly skeptical of comparative, cross-national approaches, it is anything but uniform. In the following chapters, I show that autocracy in Russia was defended by diverse political currents and found support among liberals, Slavophiles, populists, socialists, and Eurasianists alike. These currents disagreed in their vision of the country's identity, state-society relations, and ties with the outside world, yet they often shared an appreciation for autocracy as the requirement for Russia's survival and development. Nativists are united in rejecting the idea of change outside the state and without its patronage. The view is well captured in one of Vladimir Putin's speeches in which he states, "Our state and its institutions have always played an exceptionally important role in the life of the country and its people. For Russians a strong state is not an anomaly that should be gotten rid of. Quite the contrary, they see it as a source and guarantor of order and the initiator and main driving force of any change."¹⁰

In addition to substantively different ideologies, Russia's supporters of a strong state have differed in their preferences for the country's pace of development. While remaining loyal to a strong state, conservatives and reformers value the institution for their own reasons. Conservative Nativists have been guardians of the status quo, cherishing the system as the main pillar of territorial integrity, stability, security, and the preservation of established social values. In the widely cited expression of Russia's first official historian Nikolai Karamzin, "Autocracy is the Palladium of Russia; on its integrity depends Russia's happiness."¹¹ In their turn, liberal or reformist Nativists have viewed a strong state as the institution responsible for initiating and implementing socially urgent changes. From Peter the Great to Putin, liberal Nativists have sought to modernize Russia while preserving and developing its state institutions.

The Book's Argument

This book's argument is largely sympathetic to the Nativist perspective with an emphasis on Russia's history as the guide to understanding the country's future. Russia's historical institutions will continue to define its developmental trajectory. Within this trajectory, Russia will continue to borrow from other nations what its political system is able to borrow. Russia has developed historically by comparing its position to those held by other nations, and

to understand its development, cross-national comparisons are not simply helpful; they are necessary. To substantiate this argument, I advance the following three propositions.

First, autocracy is the central construct in Russia's political history. In the country's tumultuous history, many have opposed the principle of autocracy and have worked to dismantle it. In the 16th century, Prince Andrei Kurbski led the opposition from the nobles to the rule of Ivan the Terrible. A century later, opposition came from the Orthodox Church with Patriarch Nikon challenging Tsar Alexei and interfering with his vision of autocracy. Yet, each time autocracy survived, suppressed its critics, and further consolidated its rule. In the 19th century, an entire social class, the intelligentsia, emerged to advocate the revolutionary transformation of Russia. However, when a revolution indeed took place in the early 20th century, the autocratic state did not disappear but rather underwent a major mutation. The Soviet system reproduced parts of the old system in a sharply disfigured form. Religion was replaced with communist ideology and the tsarist state with the rule of the single party. The main principle of autocracy survived again. Finally, Russia's post-Soviet state is in the process of designing a new construction of a strong state, which in some ways is reminiscent of traditional autocracy. Given these remarkable reiterations of the system, it should come as no surprise that the central political debate in Russia's history has been about the optimal forms and parameters of strong government, rather than about its principal merits.

I also argue that in the Russian political context the establishment of a strong government was a rational response. Two circumstances determined Russia's political path as principally differing from that of Western nations: state relationships with the elites and an intense security dilemma. Internally, Russia's alternative centers of power, the nobles, demonstrated their inability to unite even under the formidable threat from the Mongols. When the Russian lands became "gathered" under the auspices of Muskovy's Grand Prince, the nobles lost their former autonomy and ability to serve as an effective opposition to the tsar. By contrast, European states emerged as a result of complex negotiated arrangements among kings, merchants, and feudal lords.¹² The historical roots of the Western concept of power division are in these arrangements.

This internal predicament was exacerbated by Russia's intense external insecurity. Located in the middle of Eurasia, Russia had few natural boundaries and was frequently attacked by outsiders, from the Mongols to Napoleon and Hitler. In response to this strategic situation, the nobility, the Church, and

other autonomous centers of social life yielded further to state centralization. The appreciation for autocracy was so great that soon after being re-created from below following the Time of Troubles, the state displayed new tendencies to suppress potential checks and balances of its power. As European politics was becoming increasingly about accumulating national power, Russia continued its drive to protect itself from future outsiders by strengthening autocracy. The external pressures were largely responsible for the state decision to impose the command system of long-service conscription and to legalize serfdom. This greatly simplified the collection of taxes and military mobilization.

Historically speaking, Russia's autocracy had a rhythm of moving from weakened (Smuta; Time of Troubles, 1584–1613) to consolidated statehood. One may identify several large cycles in the country's political history, each resulting from a combination of external challenges, dynastic crises, and misguided attempts to transform the system. Both attempts to reform and consolidate the state were rational responses to a historically repetitive set of domestic and international circumstances.

To argue that an autocratic response was rational is not to justify any policy by Russia's autocrats as optimal. Autocratic systems and autocratic rulers in the country varied greatly. Some rulers were not at all effective. They neglected the needs for internal development and engaged in risky international adventures. Others, however, used their time wisely by capitalizing on the system's advantages, such as the ability to formulate long-term objectives and mobilize the required social and material resources. The fact that some autocracies and their rulers were less effective is hardly a strong argument against autocracy. Competitive political systems in the West also have their flaws and in practice often imply opaque influences of business lobbies rather than that of the people. Such systems have a tendency to function as oligarchies rather than democracies. Aristotle had already warned of the danger of oligarchical rule resulting from elites' predatory instincts and self-serving behavior.

My final argument concerns Russia's contemporary development. I submit to the reader that the country's post-Soviet era needs to be understood as a crisis of strong state rule. The strong state system is differentiated from the Western-style competitive system by the high degree of power and authority concentrated in the hand of the executive. While Russia has historically relied on strong state rule, it has experienced different strong state models. The traditional autocracy of principalities was different from the Muskovy system. The latter differed with the system established by the Romanovs dynasty. The Romanov autocracy, even in its most centralized form under Peter the Great, was no match to Stalin's totalitarian system. Varying domestic and

international conditions produced strong state systems that suited such conditions the most, yet Russians always reproduced the highly concentrated systems of authority for addressing their historical challenges. Today Russians are also in the process of building a strong state system. While the new system borrows some characteristics from past practices, it responds to new conditions and popular demands and therefore is likely to be historically distinct.

The question remains whether Russia will find a type of strong government that suits the country's economic and social needs while responding to the basic political aspirations of both the elites and the masses. Some powerful international and internal forces are at work against Russia's success. Russian politics remains excessively polarized, with conservatives having little truck with liberals. Conservatives are frequently influenced by nostalgia for the "better old days." They fail to understand that the world is different and that the old autocratic forms based on hereditary or communist principles will no longer work for Russia. In addition, Russian conservatives tend to be excessively protective of the state and fearful of people's participation in politics. Just as often liberals are motivated by a utopian vision according to which Russia will only be able to solve its social and political ills if it follows the West's example of governing institutions. In the meantime, Russia's leadership tends to procrastinate efforts to reform the state and offer a new coherent vision of its political system.

The weight of history is such that Russia may only succeed if it finds an appropriate way of rebuilding the institution of a strong government. Although the new era cannot sustain the old-style autocracy, a strong state remains just as vital for steering the country to a promising developmental path. History teaches us that in the absence of such a state Russia does not adopt a Western-style system but instead enters a new and devastating Smuta. A recovery from another Smuta will be painful and may lead to territorial disintegration of the country. The key dilemma for the country remains how to change while not radically deviating from the historically tested institutional arrangements.

Recommended Sources

For Russia's self-perceptions, see sources in chapter 2.

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For general work on ethnocentrism in international relations, consult Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), and Naeem Inayatullah and David L. Blaney, *International Relations and the Problem of Difference* (London: Routledge, 2004).

The Roots of the Russian State: Autocracy

The purpose of “Autocracy” is not to deprive people of natural liberty, but to steer their actions toward the greatest good.

CATHERINE THE GREAT¹

THE POLITICS OF the Russian state cannot be properly understood without appreciating the significance of autocracy in the nation’s political history. Russia’s autocratic system went through several distinct stages but also preserved some important elements that have remained salient even in the post–Soviet era.

What Autocracy Is and Is Not

Like other political systems, autocracy is an institutional arrangement that concentrates and distributes human resources in the interests of the common good. All governments must balance citizens’ demands for order and security with those of individual and group rights. The difference is that autocracy strikes this balance by relying on a centralized and concentrated authority of the executive rather than checks and balances as in competitive political systems. By establishing a highly concentrated system of power, autocracy does not neglect citizens’ rights and freedoms but presents itself as their ultimate guarantor. A comparison to competitive systems highlights the prominent features of autocracy.

Unlike competitive systems, in which popular elections of public officials are regularly held, autocratic leaders are elected by elites. Traditional monarchs may inherit power, but the process can involve complex negotiations within the dynasty if more than one candidate is eligible to assume the duties of a ruler. Other members of the political class may also get involved,

as occurred with the election of the young Mikhail Romanov by a national assembly to end the Time of Troubles.

Autocracies are legitimated by a religious or (quasi)religious ideology. The Russian nobles elected Tsar Mikhail among other contenders in no small part due to the Romanovs' blood relations to the previous Ruriks' dynasty. In the Russian tradition, the tsar had a divine authority to rule, a system that was only broken by the socialist revolution in the 20th century. But even the atheist revolutionary regime sought to construct a coherent Marxist–Leninist ideological vision to assist the rulers in justifying their claims to power. In line with the old religious principle, the new ideology served to demonstrate a state–society unity and a common effort toward a greater social purpose. Connected to the principle of (quasi)religious ideology is the idea of formally controlled information or censorship. By contrast, censorship does not exist in competitive systems, although this does not mean that the state does not try to shape and spin information flows to its advantage.

In the economic area, autocracies preserve control by placing formal constraints on land ownership and labor movement. The institutions of private property and free labor were historically alien to Russia's political system, in which rulers were involved in distributing economic assets and binding labor to the land. Both features are connected to the system of privileges that are practiced by autocratic rulers to expand their base of support. Economic privileges are not to be confused with property rights. Members of the elite are rewarded for good service to the ruler, but the state may take these privileges away from social groups and individuals.² People are also rewarded for their loyalty, although not as handsomely as members of the elite. In exchange, the people expect order, decent living conditions, and protection from unfair treatment by local authorities.

Such organization of social and economic life explains why autocracy rarely has an organized opposition to its rule. Autocracy functions as a complex system with multiple advisory councils, and it encounters both support and criticism from various social circles. However, under autocracy voices of dissent do not generally gain organizational momentum. Instead, the system has the discretion to co-opt, ignore, or purge such voices. Although parliament, courts, and various nongovernmental institutions may be established, they refrain from directly challenging the autocrat and his power. In other words, institutions function as advisory councils, not as checks and balances to constrain the ruler.

Autocracy organizes relations with nationalities in an imperial fashion. The Russian autocrat expects political loyalty from the non-Russian nationalities.

In exchange, he pledges to respect their cultural autonomy and does not impose unified standards of citizenship on them. Foreign relations remain fully a state domain. Only the state is in a position to determine which international ties serve the common good. As with critically important internal issues, various social strata and members of the elite may influence the foreign policy making process, but the ultimate decision remains in the hands of the autocrat.

To further clarify and dispel some of the myths about the autocrat system, it may be helpful to define what autocracy is not. In addition to being different from competitive systems, an autocracy is not an oligarchic or totalitarian system, nor is it necessarily expansionist in its foreign policy. Oligarchy is the rule by the few, as opposed to autocracy's rule by one (as derived from the Greek, *αὐτός*; "self"). Oligarchic systems often lack leadership or a sense of direction and are therefore inherently unstable. Related to the leadership deficit is the lack of support among broad social strata and even a tendency to become isolated from society. By contrast, autocracies emerge with broad social support and a popular mandate to rule.

Autocracy is also not to be confused with totalitarianism. The latter is associated with unlimited control over private and public life. The totalitarian ruler seeks to eliminate all constraints to government—ideological, informational, and institutional—and rule without feedback from the ruled.³ Although some autocracies may develop totalitarian tendencies, most autocratic systems are respectful of established social and political boundaries. In pre-revolutionary Russia, the Church and the self-governing institutions were established not to interfere with the monarch's duties but to act on them by developing specific, locally sensitive responses. The autocrat, in his turn, had no plans to control the entire life of society but only to serve as the ultimate guarantor of citizens' rights. As Nicholas Petro argues, "In contrast to the prevailing view that nationality and religion served only to prop up the autocracy . . . they constrained the autocracy by emphasizing the monarch's accountability to the popular will and to the Church."⁴ Incidents of revolts and instability uncommon for totalitarian systems do take place under autocracies.

Finally, autocracies are frequently defensive and regional in their international policy and not expansionist or revisionist as it is often asserted.⁵ Rather than being determined solely by the regime nature, the Kremlin's foreign policy has been strongly shaped by security conditions and actions of outside powers toward Russia. The Russian state acts within the same constraints of an international system that defines the choices of other states. The Russian autocracy therefore has been generally defensive and has sought to play by existing international rules.

Table 2.1 Ten Features of Autocracy Relative to a Competitive System

Autocracy	Competitive System
1. Elite elections	Popular elections
2. (Quasi)religious ideology	Secular ideology
3. Information censorship	Free press
4. Nationalized land	Private property
5. Bound labor	Free labor
6. Privileges	Equal opportunities
7. Intra-elite consultations	Organized opposition
8. Institutions as advisory councils	Checks and balances to constrain the ruler
9. Imperial organization	Nation-state
10. State-driven foreign policy	Socially constrained foreign policy

The Russians developed several perspectives on autocracy and supported it for various reasons. Slavophiles praised it for serving as the ultimate pillar of moral and spiritual values. In the writings of Ivan Kireyevsky, Aleksei Khomyakov, and Vladimir Solovyev, the state–society unity was captured with the term *Sobornost*, which means the highest degree of cooperation on the basis of Orthodox Christian values and not individual self-interest. Nationalists, such as Minister of Education Sergei Uvarov and the tsar’s advisor Konstantin Pobedonostsev, insisted on the importance of autocracy for preserving political unity and stability. The former coined the triad of “Orthodoxy, Autocracy, and Nationality” to cement support for Nicholas I’s regime, and the latter denounced the Western competitive system as hypocritical and unfit for Russia.⁶ Liberals, beginning with philosopher Yuri Krizhanich, and prominent historians, such as Vasili Tatishchev and Nikolai Karamzin, saw autocracy as the tool for society’s gradual liberation and enlightenment. In the early 20th century, Prime Ministers Sergei Witte and Pyotr Stolypin advocated economic reforms on the basis of autocracy. Even leftist ideologists, while opposing the government, often thought in terms of preserving autocratic institutions. To Alexander Herzen, populists, and social democrats, the strong state was necessary to guarantee social equality and overcome Russia’s economic backwardness relative to the West.

Many Russians were therefore in no hurry to abandon autocracy in favor of the Western-style competitive system. Often critical of autocracy’s flaws, they remained impressed with its potential to provide vital public goods and sought not to dismantle but to improve the system. Given Russia’s historical

predicaments of economic weakness and insecurity, their reliance on autocracy was entirely rational. When effective, the system was able to deliver what was expected of it: security from external threats, internal peace, social justice, economic development, and national dignity. When not effective, the system came under growing pressure from various social and political strata to reform. In the absence of expected reforms, the dissent grew, occasionally threatening to overthrow the ruling class. Other political systems too may be familiar with such destabilizing dynamics.

Autocratic Regimes: Mobilization and Normalization

An autocratic regime should be differentiated from an autocratic system. Whereas the latter stands for a collection of institutions, the former expresses the leader's attitude toward change. Normally, autocracy seeks to reproduce itself by relying on multiple resources such as state centralization, ideological unity, a supportive political culture, natural wealth, and cheap labor. However, autocracies are faced with various historical tasks and are either protected or challenged from outside. In response to an external environment, autocratic rulers act in either normalization or mobilization modes.

The need to mobilize resources comes when the system's survival is at stake. During this time, the ruler feels threatened from inside or outside the country and seeks to consolidate the institutions of autocracy by tightening state control over society, strengthening security institutions, purging disloyal members of the elite, and offering an elaborate system of ideological indoctrination for the people. Such a totalitarian tendency may be accompanied by the demand for more sacrifices from society for the sake of an ideologically defined "victory." The mobilization trend became visible during the rise of Muskovy when Ivan the Great and his grandson Ivan IV laid the foundations of the Russian state by not only defeating the Tatars but also by establishing the ruler's internal sovereignty. Ivan IV was crowned tsar and assumed the supreme authority "equivalent and parallel to those held by former Byzantine caesar and the Tatar khan."⁷ He gained independence from the Church by becoming a "divine" ruler and from the nobles by creating an army of his personal security servicemen (*Oprichnina*). Ivan also introduced the first laws restricting the mobility of the peasants.

Other examples of mobilization rulers may include Peter the Great and Joseph Stalin. Although they ruled in different eras, they each sought to consolidate the state by tightening control over both the elite and the people. In an

era of increasingly secular sovereign statehood in Europe, Peter sought to suppress potential checks and balances of his power by imposing a new ideology of state patriotism or loyalty to the state. He further restricted the role of the Church by eliminating the position of Patriarch and introducing the Holy Synod, a council of ten clergymen. Determined to create a strong army, the tsar banned Russian men from joining a monastery before the age of fifty, and he further bound the peasants to the land by imposing a new head tax (*podushnaya podat'*). By the time of European secularization, Russia had already legalized serfdom, which simplified the collection of taxes and military mobilization. Finally, Peter constrained the nobility's rights by introducing a new order of precedence known as the Table of Ranks. The high position of the nobles was now determined by their service to the emperor, not by birth.

The Bolshevik ruler Stalin was determined to consolidate the state after the revolution and the devastating civil war. His rule exemplified the totalitarian evolution of traditional Russian autocracy. Horrific terror against his own people, mass purges against bureaucracy and all those perceived disloyal to the new system, and destruction of many churches in the name of an atheist socialist state were among the methods of Stalin's rule. As extreme as these methods were, they had their partial roots in the tsarist eras of Ivan IV and Peter the Great. Indeed, the appeal of Stalin to nationalism and security from external threats resonated within his party circles because it reflected a culturally accepted pattern of state-imposed modernization earlier practiced by the tsars. As Robert C. Tucker wrote, the Stalinist rural revolution from above and the introduction of collective farming (*kolkhoz*) bore a strong resemblance to serfdom and "was in essence an accelerated repetition of this tsarist developmental pattern."⁸ In collective farms (*kolkhozes*), the peasants too were bound to the land. Most of their products could only be sold to the state, and being deprived of internal passports, they had virtually no mobility.

The state mobilization efforts frequently found the necessary support from below. Indeed, external threats encourage elites and the public to pressure the state to create a mobilization strategy. If the threat is intense and real, both elites and the public tend to perceive the mobilization regime as acting to protect their interests and defend them from foreign invasion. In such cases, support for criticisms of the state tend to decline, as the critics join the ranks of the regime's defenders and political centralization consolidates further. When there is a territorial threat, even competitive systems become more centralized.⁹ For example, in response to a territorial rivalry with Turkey over Cyprus, Greece became more centralized in the 1950s and 1960s, culminating in military rule for seven years.¹⁰ Armenia and Azerbaijan

showed similar trajectories in the 1990s when they each became more centralized and authoritarian over the issue of Nagorno-Karabakh.

Russia also knew many periods as a normal autocratic regime. Unlike mobilization regimes, normal autocracies do not feel the pressures of survival and operate in a more relaxed gradual fashion. Typically, normalization regimes succeed those of mobilization and may initiate liberalization from the above. Normalization takes place under conditions of relative internal stability and a lack of existential threats. Normal autocracies rely on the earlier established relations with the elite and the people by respecting or even expanding the degree of their autonomy and by refraining from the excessive use of force. Under normal conditions, autocrats are constrained by elites and act not as dictators but as brokers between competing groups within the ruling classes. Indeed, because of the expanding privileges that they grant to the elites, some normal autocracies may look like weak states in terms of their policy effectiveness. Formally or institutionally strong, a normal autocracy may resemble a weak state because its objectives are limited to those of internal peace and stability and do not include those of development. Some examples of normal autocracies include the years that followed the establishment of the Romanov dynasty, the reigns of Elizabeth and Catherine following Peter the Great, of Tsars Alexander II and Nicholas II, and the Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev. Vladimir Putin's strong state also bears resemblance to normal autocracies in terms of liberalization from above and the sought preservation of balance between competing groups in the Kremlin. Each of these regimes brought with them relative prosperity, internal peace, and new privileges for the elites. Ironically, privileges and improved living standards in some cases generated new social expectations and pressures on normal autocratic regimes for greater freedoms and prosperity. Russian violence from below, from revolts to anti-state terrorism, often took place under liberalizing autocracies, paving the way for future political destabilization.

Normal or liberalizing regimes should be also differentiated from moderate and radical reforms. Moderate reformers sought to introduce elements of economic and political modernization while preserving the core of the strong state system. Among Russian statesmen, Prime Ministers Sergei Witte, Pyotr Stolypin, and Vladimir Kokovtsev were committed to gradual, state-controlled modernization in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. During the Soviet era, Vladimir Lenin, Nikolai Bukharin, and Nikita Khrushchev, each in their own way, attempted to introduce reforms while controlling the "commanding heights" of the economy. On the other hand, radical reformers consciously sought to dismantle the institutions of the strong state system.