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## MŮŽE BÝT V RUSKU DEMOKRACIE? IS DEMOCRACY IN RUSSIA POSSIBLE?

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Hlavním cílem tohoto příspěvku je zhodnotit vliv ruských kulturních hodnot a ruského kulturního prostředí na přijímání a prosazování liberální demokracie v Rusku, poukázat na nejdůležitější faktory tvarování ruské identity a ruské kultury a prokázání jejich vlivu na přijetí konceptu demokracie. Toto téma je velmi široké, proto se autor zaměřuje pouze na vybrané základní problémy. První problém souvisí s ruským kulturním paradigma, které vytváří překážky pro rozvoj euro-atlantického typu liberální demokracie v Rusku a druhá otázka je spojena především s dopadem výkladu dějin na demokracii v zemi.

Klíčové slová: Rusko, demokracie, kultura, identita.

The main objective of this paper is to evaluate the role of cultural characteristics of Russian society in adopting and enforcing concepts of liberal democracy in Russia; to point out the most important concepts shaping Russian identity and Russian culture and their influence on the adoption of the concept of democracy. This topic is very broad, therefore the author focuses only on selected basic issues. The first issue is related to the Russian cultural paradigm which creates obstacles to the development of the Euro-Atlantic type liberal democracy in Russia, and the other issue is associated mainly with the impact of the interpretation of the history on democracy in the country.<sup>2</sup>

Key words: Russia, democracy, culture, identity.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Russia certainly is, and at least in the near future will continue to be, one of the most important countries of the world. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia managed to overcome the crises and turmoil of the 1990s. At present, it is facing many problems which remain to be solved, such as poverty, alcoholism, corruption or scientific and technological backwardness. However, the most essential problem that challenges Russian leadership these days is the decision which way to direct its further development. Many experts say that this decision was actually made long time ago and that Russia is striding in the footsteps of Western European countries and the USA on the path towards democracy. Other experts maintain the exact contrary.

Russia has undergone a unique historical development, because of its geographical position between the East and the West, and also due to its specific geographic and climatic conditions. Both the European and the Eastern culture have influenced Russian territory. A common mistake made by Western scholars and journalists who criticize Russian democracy and political proclamations (including the ones released by international relations representatives) is that they consider Russian society to be identical with the European one and completely misunderstand the world famous assertion by Nikolai Berdyaev and Fjodor Tjutchev saying that “Russia cannot be understood through reason, only believed in”.<sup>3</sup>

Frequent criticism of Russia’s political scene for violating the principles of democratic government and insufficient extent of democratic reforms suggests that Russia has still not adopted democracy as its preferred form of government. Criticism of Russian democracy is frequently expressed in publications and appearances produced by Western journalists, publicists, sociologists or political analysts who often depict ordinary Russians and Russia as a country calling for democracy and the Russian government as a tyrant, who refuses to listen to these pleading voices. But has the entire Russian society really craved for democracy from time immemorial? So far it seems that poll surveys conducted among residents of Russia as well as scientific conferences give two completely different, even opposite answers to the simple question “Is democracy really implementable in Russia?”

The main objective of this paper is therefore to cast light on the relationship of Russian cultural values and to show whether the Russian cultural and historical context complicates the development of democracy in terms of the Euro-Atlantic pact. The main objective will be achieved by verifying to what extent, if at all, it is true that:

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<sup>3</sup> Nikolai Alexandrovich Berdyaev (1874-1948) was an Ukrainian Christian philosopher and writer, Nobel Prize winner for literature. His best known works include: *Origins and meaning of Russian communism*, *Freedom of the Spirit*, *New Middle Ages: Reflections on the Fate of Russia and Europe*, etc.

- Russian cultural paradigm creates obstacles to the development of liberal democracy of the Euro-Atlantic type in Russia.
- The short and tragic historical experience Russia has had with democracy leads to a rather negative attitude towards this form of government.

Due to the objective and hypotheses formulated above, the following partial objectives must also be achieved:

- Elaborate upon the most important concepts in shaping the Russian identity and Russian culture, which have a significant impact on the acceptance and implementation of democratic principles in the Russian administration.
- Elaborate upon Russia's historical experience with democracy, notably from 1905 to 1917, and in the 90s of the 20th century.

## **2 THE MOST IMPORTANT CONCEPTS FORMING RUSSIAN IDENTITY AND CULTURE AND THEIR IMPACT ON ACCEPTANCE OF DEMOCRATIC PRINCIPLES**

### **2.1 A permanent feeling of danger and permanent expansion**

The Russian state began to develop on a land that was, in geopolitical terms, rather unfavourable. Broad plains without natural boundaries such as mountains, sea or rivers were open to enemies. Fear of external attack can be traced throughout the country's history (Fleková 2000). We can mention the Huns, the Avars, the Khazars (1<sup>st</sup> century), the Teutonic Knights and the Mongols (13<sup>th</sup> century), the Lithuanians (14<sup>th</sup> century), the Chinese (18<sup>th</sup> century), the Poles, the Swedes and the French led by Napoleon (19<sup>th</sup> century), then the Germans (led by the emperor and then by Hitler in the 20<sup>th</sup> century) just to give a few examples of the largest armies that have ever invaded Russia.

The feeling of permanent threat has had a significant influence on the development of Russian national culture. Its population has lived in permanent fear of external attack, and therefore sought security<sup>4</sup>, certainty and stability. Such safety was achievable only by forming a centralized state, using its organized collective force. The population has therefore willingly forfeited a large part of their freedoms in favour of safety.

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<sup>4</sup> It is also an interesting linguistic fact that unlike most world nations, the Russian word for "security" has a much greater importance than "danger". While European nations attach to the word "security" a positive meaning and the word "danger" is its negation, the Russians perceive it the other way around. For them, the word "danger" has a positive meaning – "opasnost", and its negation creates the word "security" – bezopasnost (Macek 2002).

“Only such state that was stronger and more powerful than the surrounding enemies could survive and continue to maintain its statehood. Military power and size have become a significant source of legitimacy, justification and an objective of the actual existence of the state and its elites” (Macek 2002). Fear of external threat also brought a characteristic conservatism into politics and into the Russian way of thinking in general. Hence in Russian thinking style, any change means some degree of instability and chaos. Any instability equals a weakness and an enlarged vulnerability against an external attack.<sup>5</sup>

This conservatism led not only to the establishment of a centralized management (which transferred power to lower levels) but also to the creation of bodies pursuing execution of orders and regulations issued by the top power. Already tsar Ivan III. (1440-1505) appointed special authorities of political police (the so-called “*oprichniki*”). Their role was gradually taken over by one department of the tsar’s office, later by NKVD (People’s Commissariat of Interior) and finally by the KGB (Committee for State Security). This system lasted for several centuries and has resulted not only in a deep rooted feeling of obedience, bordering on fear of the ruling power, but also in the feeling of danger when “stepping out of the line” (Fleková 2000).

“Tsarism” undoubtedly belongs among the most important social and historical features of Russia (in Russia at certain times in history, the “ruler” was more important than the “state”). According to many historians, the roots of “tsarism” stem from Byzantine and Mongolian influences. The word “tsar” is a Russian derivation from the word Caesar (or rather from the Byzantine emperor, who through the personality of Emperor Constantine embodied a continuity of the Roman Empire).

Additionally, the influence of the Tatar-Mongol civilization is no less important, as the Mongols brought the principle of primogeniture and completely changed the Russian perception of their ruler. “Since the late 15th century, the ruler was understood as the real guarantor of the state. His personality replaced the church and its representatives “ (Macek 2002). The Mongols forced the population to live in absolute obedience and humility, which actually bordered on absolute resignation and fatalism. Besides, the original nobility had to change its behaviour in order to serve the Tatar rulers, because the Tatars needed Russian noblemen to assist in building a local apparatus that would maintain order in occupied territories, ensure the collection of fees, taxes, food supplies, manpower etc. The Tatars charged Russian princes with the execution of these tasks and in turn they required absolute loyalty and obedience.

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<sup>5</sup> In this sense, we can observe a more short-term orientation of the Russian way of thinking, because a change can also result in a long-term strengthening, but in a short term, it always brings a disruption of balance and therefore weakening.

Therefore, these princes gradually became cruel autocratic rulers, whose subjects were obliged to be absolutely obedient (Fleková 2000).

Jan Slavík, a Czech historian, holds a slightly different opinion on the origin of tsarism. According to him, the Tatar and Byzantine influences are a phenomenon that played a role especially in the Middle Ages, while tsarism occurred as a result of the dismal domestic situation in the early modern times (Dvořák 2006). He thus sees tsarism as a natural consequence of historical necessity and the Tatar and Byzantine influences as mere elements, which gave form to this phenomenon, but did not create its contents.

## 2.2 Isolation

Another important determinant of Russia's development was the country's remoteness. Russia had been relatively isolated from major trade routes for centuries. Commerce brought not only wealth to towns and villages lying on such corridors, but also new cultural impulses and contact with other civilizations. The unfortunate Russian isolation was compounded by the absence of access to a non-freezing sea which made the Russian involvement in international trade even more difficult and also kept this vast state largely beyond main European and world developments. Russia has also never been part of any significant developmental waves that shaped modern European culture. In the period of European Renaissance, which began to shape individualism, so typical for Western culture, Russia had only just broken free from the Mongol domination and begun to build its path to European education and culture. While a strong middle class (with its members as reform bearers) began to develop in Europe in those days, Russia remained a large, backward, mainly agrarian empire dominated by autocratic dynasties with the sacred task of protecting the true faith against barbarians from the East and heretics from the West (Goehner and Richmond 2001).

Russia's isolation is also reflected in the contrast between towns and villages. At the time when most Western European countries focused on the process of internal consolidation, Russia was still ensuring its external borders. Due to its geographical position, Russia was predestined to become an expanding state. This expansion lasted for four centuries, and every single year Russia grew by the size of the entire Bohemia (Dvořák 2006).<sup>6</sup>

Consolidation (associated with bureaucratization) requires sufficient population density within a given territory, but the desirable number of inhabitants was impossible to reach due to constant expansion. The scarcity of towns and their significantly limited interconnectedness became a particularly painful issue (there was no network of mutually interconnected cities in Russia, as it was common in other

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<sup>6</sup> Bohemia is the western part of the Czech Republic with an area of 52,065 km<sup>2</sup>.

parts of Europe at that time). Towns and cities play a role in the development of national culture, since they are a platform for interaction among large groups of people and it can be assumed that the denser and more interconnected the network of municipalities in a given state, the more unified the national culture is. Absence of urban areas as cultural, civilizational and administrative centres can probably shed light on an interesting phenomenon, which is unprecedented elsewhere in Europe: the ecclesial tradition dominated over the national one, or in other words, for the majority of Russians the church was a source of identification and sense of belonging to the Russian State. The Orthodox Church and the tsar mattered much more than nationality itself. In addition, the lack of urban density made it impossible for towns to have a civilizational, cultural or administrative effect on their rural surroundings. Thus, Russian countryside was basically developing more or less independently, which led to considerable backwardness. The backwardness of Russian rural countryside, also partly caused by harsh climatic conditions, was so exceptional that we can talk about stagnancy.

### **2.3 Russian idea and Russian messianism**

The Russian idea is a term denoting a specific historical-religious concept that characterizes and explains the peculiarities of Russian culture and Russian history (Fleková 2000). The idea that the Russian nation has a unique mission towards all humanity followed from the Russian idea (in hardly any culture has it played such an important cultural and historical role as in Russia).

This idea of a special historical destiny of Russia - Russian messianism, began to form in late 15<sup>th</sup> century, when Filofei, a monk of a Psovk monastery, wrote three letters: A Letter against Astrologers (addressed to Mikhail Grigorievich Munechin, a representative of Pskov principality administration), A Letter of Cruising" (to Vasily Ivanovic, Moscow Grand Duke) and finally A Letter about Injustice against the Russian Church (addressed to tsar Ivan Vasilyevich).<sup>7</sup> In these three letters he formulated the idea of the so called Third Rome. According to Filofei, there used to be two bastions of Christianity: Western Rome (Rome) and Eastern Rome (Constantinople). Filofei claimed that Rome had turned away from the true faith when they began to use unleavened bread (i.e. accepted the teachings of Apollinarius of Laodikeia). In addition, emperor Charlemagne (742-814) and pope Formosa (891- 896) directed the West to the path towards Catholicism (Přihoda 2009). The second Rome was vanquished by the Turks, who conquered Constantinople in 1453. According to Filofei, Russia and especially Moscow must launch a divine mission to become guardians of the true faith: "Two Romes have fallen and emerged, Western and

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<sup>7</sup> Filofei is widely accepted as the author of all three letters, but it is likely that he authored only the first one – A Letter against Astrologers (Přihoda 2009).

Eastern, but Moscow carries a designated fate that it will become the third Rome and there shall never be a fourth” (Masaryk 1995).

Slavophiles saw Russia’s role in the history of mankind likewise. Their principal works date from the 1840s to 1860s, i.e. from the time when Europe was convulsed by instability and revolutions and when the decadent stream appeared in European culture (represented by writings of Charles Baudelaire, Paul Verlaine, J. A. Rimbaud etc.). Slavophiles regarded European culture as rotting, under the influence of demons and overall doomed to extinction. On the contrary, in the Russia of the time, strict discipline was still a dominating force (maintained by state absolutism), hand in hand with strict morality (promoted by the Orthodox Church).

The Russian “muzhik” embodied the religious ideal of a human being for slavophiles. They believed that Russia was a country divinely ordained to redeem declining Europe through its humility and piety. Maintaining true morality, faith and culture was in slavophiles’ eyes seen as the true Russian task and these elements would be gradually passed on to miserable Europe, later on to the entire humanity, and finally the whole world would return to “the right path”. Vladimir F. Odoevsky (1997 [1844]) was one of the first to formulate the theory of the “Russian idea” in his work called *Russian Nights*, claiming that “The West is dying ... We, Russians, must save not only the body but also the soul of Europe...”.

Even Vladimir I. Lenin parted from the assumption of Russia’s exceptional role in the history of mankind in his writings about the proletarian revolution. He knew that Russia was an agrarian, backward country. Therefore, in accordance with the teachings of Marx, he believed that in Russia socialism could not win immediately (Bouček 2000). Conversely, Western Europe, in his opinion, had already reached the stage of advanced capitalism, in which the revolution must inevitably occur and workers would take power in their hands. But such revolution outbreak required some sort of a trigger, which, according to V. I. Lenin, was the historic task of Russia. The First World War brought an opportunity for starting the revolution, but contrary to Lenin’s expectations, Europe did not follow the Russian example, even though he had sent his agitators to Western Europe. However, Lenin kept arguing that the worldwide revolution was approaching, albeit slower than he had originally expected, and Russia’s historical mission is to become a bastion of communism and preserve it until the time of seeing the light comes for the rest of the world.

After the collapse of the USSR, an identity crisis and ideological vacuum occurred in Russia. Ever since the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the Russians had been aware of their historical role. But nowadays, they are still searching for the new one. This topic is very broad and also includes the issue of the Russian messianism. Former Russian president Boris N. Yeltsin expressed the problem of Russian national idea and national identity as follows: “The monarchy, communism, perestroika. Each stage of Russian history had its ideology. Only we have none.” He actually appointed a committee to

find “the best idea for Russia” in 1996. However, this committee did not have any sensible outputs (Duncan 2005).

President Vladimir Putin has chosen a different approach to the issue of identity crisis. He returned to national traditions, which he merged with some traditions of the Soviet system. Putin draws attention to great successes and victories of the Russian people (e.g. war victories). He points out that Russia beat opponents and enemies, whom other countries (even the most developed, richest, most successful and most civilized European ones) could not defeat.

According to some other authors (e.g. the Czech historian Jan Slavík), Russian messianism is merely an excuse for persistent poverty and backwardness. From the perspective of cultural values it does not matter whether Russian messianism is a fiction, to which ordinary people can look forward with hope, or not. The bottom-line of the “Russian idea” is that the Russians have always believed and still firmly believe that Russia plays a great, irreplaceable role in history. This role is currently not precisely defined. Yet, it is widely assumed that the prospective new definition will again be based on its historical formulations that require the preservation of stability and power in Russia, because only strong Russia can ensure both preservation and expansion of the “right” ideas.

## **2.4 Orthodoxy**

Orthodoxy (one of the most important cultural factors) influenced Russian culture especially during the era of the so called Holy Russia, when it became the main source of both moral values and national self-consciousness. Most Russian “muzhiks” were primarily orthodox believers and only the relation to common religion made them feel Russian. Religious traditions actually surpassed the national ones. A new cultural value paradigm, later called “sobornost”, came into existence at that time. “Sobornost” can be understood as a spiritual closeness of masses (seeking collectively the common path to salvation) and boundless faith in their ruler’s flawless actions (Vlček 2002).

A close link between the state and the church was typical for Russian society from the outset of Orthodoxy. In the Orthodox concept, the tsar is more than a secular ruler; he is Christ’s representative on Earth, and thus head of the church. Konstantin N. Leontiev (1969) wrote in his work: “The Tsar is the highest and the greatest authority, whatever he does is good and lawful, his actions must not be judged by their consequences – a person, who cannot understand it, may yet be a good person, but not a Christian, not a true Russian.”

The revolution in 1917 brought abrupt change – a transition from a society based on the Orthodox religion to a social order built on mass atheism. According to an opinion poll conducted by The Institute of Sociology of the Russian Academy of Sciences and published by Rossiyskaya Gazeta, Orthodox believers account for 80 % of the Russian population. Atheists make up 7 % of the Russian population (in 2009 it

was 12 %). However, there are very few practitioners. Only 11 % of all Orthodox Russians attend church ceremonies and only 20 % of them pray regularly. People with really firm faith, who truly celebrate orthodox holidays and go to church regularly, make up only 4 % of the total number of Orthodox believers.<sup>8</sup> It is obvious that Orthodox religion is more a source of national identity than a mere religion. Such a large increase in people who claim allegiance to Orthodoxy after seventy years of atheism suggests that Orthodox religion is still very close to ordinary Russians.

The influence of Orthodox religion on the development of democracy in Russia is also reflected in the innate respect towards authorities (especially to the tsar), in deference to the traditions and in the belief that only compliance with those traditions can help us achieve the “right” goals. On the contrary, any change in traditions could debauch them. Another important factor is the Russian mysticism – Russians rely more on their emotions, feelings, etc. than nations of Western Europe, who rely more on rationality and logic.

## **2.5 Europeanisation**

Russia (particularly its European part) has always been influenced by European affairs and culture. European influence was largely manifested during the reign of Peter I. and Catherine II., who sought to modernize Russia according to European models.

Peter I. tried to resolve the dismal developments in Russia and to raise Russia’s potential to become a superpower by copying European models, while also aiming at consolidating his own power. With this objective in mind, he focused on the implementation of economic, political, religious and social reforms, which were not entirely successful. He implemented these reforms unsystematically and violently, which led to a split in society. One part agreed and supported Peter in installing modern Western concepts, whereas the other part of Russian society stood firmly against reforms – they wanted to conserve Russian traditions and Russian distinctiveness. Europeanization noticeably affected only large towns and cities, while rural countryside remained virtually untouched, since his reforms proceeded very slowly outside large urban areas. Part of the old Russian aristocracy also rejected Peter’s reforms, therefore Peter created a new, fully loyal aristocracy, which adopted the European way of thinking and broke away from Russian traditions and roots. Western culture, customs, education and languages were spreading by hiring German and French teachers and governesses, who came to Russia. Due to the Europeanisation implemented by tsar Peter I., the Russian nation split into two parts: the traditional one, which represented the majority of the Russian population, and the pro-European one.

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<sup>8</sup> See [www.rg.ru](http://www.rg.ru).

Although this group represented only a fraction of the population, it held all power in its hands.

Europeanisation during the reign of Catherine II. had mainly a spiritual impact. Catherine was German, never happy with the Russian mentality, therefore she was promulgating a Western way of thinking in Russia. She tried to persuade the Russian elite to begin to study European science, philosophy, culture and accept it as their own. Catherine deepened the split in Russian society as its masses remained stuck in “sobornost” and in an infinite belief in Old Russia (Vlček 2002).

## **2.6 Slavophile movement**

The most important representatives of slavophilism include Ivan. V. Kireyevsky (1806-1856) and Alexander S. Chomyakov (1804-1860). They refused Europeanisation and argued that it was an insensitive interference in the natural development of the Russian culture, resulting merely in unhealthy bipolarism of the Russian society – they claimed that Russian intelligentsia began to imitate European models, and it was only a Russian “muzhik” who retained the “right purity”.

Slavophiles based their stance on an assumption that ordinary Russians have no political ambitions, do not try to gain power and voluntarily entrust themselves to the hands of invited leaders.<sup>9</sup> According to slavophiles, the Russians are a non-state nation; they perceive political power as a sin and a burden, not as a privilege. Their ruler is a Saviour, who bears the sin of governing, rescues the souls of ordinary people and condemns himself to damnation. Slavophiles promoted theocracy, generally despised state as a system and did not respect it. They also refused individualism.

Besides, slavophiles inclined to mysticism. They believed in the power of faith and in the spirit of Russian traditions. Internal morality clearly dominated over addressing social, economic and political problems. On top of that, they refused to codify the Constitution, as in their opinion, no document can replace such sort of civil freedom, which is built on ethical principles.

In essence, the slavophiles rejected democracy, since not only was it a Western form of government, but especially because this form did not match the “Russian nature”. Democracy would have forced the Russian “muzhik” to participate in the government, which he naturally did not want. Thus democracy would have brought new problems to face for an ordinary Russian “muzhik” and these new issues would have turned him away from his goals, from his “true” life.

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<sup>9</sup> Slavophiles argued with an unsubstantiated legend by a chronicler Nestor (11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> century), who claimed that the original inhabitants were not able to rule on such a vast territory, so they invited Prince Oleg.

## **2.7 Pan-Slavism**

Pan-Slavism, similarly to slavophilism, emphasizes the specificity of Russian culture, highlights the advantages of Russian traditions and opposes the uncritical acceptance of European culture. However, pan-Slavism comes with new features such as nationalism, confrontational character and superiority of the Russian nation. This political programme intensively promotes the idea of the messianic role of Russia in the history of mankind and the obligation of the Russian nation to spread Russian Orthodoxy (as the only “right” religion). The best known ideologues of pan-Slavism are undoubtedly Nicholas J. Danilevsky (1822-1885) and Mikhail N. Pogodin (1800-1875).

Pan-Slavists regarded the other Slavic nations as allies and relied on their close cooperation. They built their vision on cultural, linguistic, moral and customary proximity and on relative geographical adjacency. They joined the fight against Europeanisation with enforcing the “true” faith and with the idea of united Slavs. According to pan-Slavists, Russia was supposed to guarantee freedom for all Slavic nations and unite them in a single cultural entity, which would be led by the Russian tsar, and the only possible culture would be Russian Orthodoxy.

Obviously, pan-Slavism completely rejects the concept of democracy, perceives it as a form of government utterly inappropriate, even malignant for Russia. Due to these ideas, this political stream is more often called “pan-Russism”.

## **2.8 Pro-Western political movement**

The most important representatives of this trend are V.G. Byelinsky (1811-1848), A. I. Herzen (1812-1870) and B. N. Cicerin (1828-1904). They all promoted the opinion that Russia should continue with the reforms of Peter I. and Europeanise itself. They parted from the assumption that Russia anyway did not have any ideas of its own, and any cultural elements worth promoting and spreading around the world. They also criticized the Tatar domination, which caused Russia’s considerable backwardness.

Westerners also advocated an immediate commencement of liberalization and democratization of Russian social and political life. Their theory held that free individuals would contribute to the economy and prosperity (Vlček 2002). Liberalization and democratization were understood as organized processes which should be governed by the highest Russian institutions: the tsar, the Senate and the Orthodox Church, but in a peaceful, smooth way i.e., these changes would not have triggered any impulses to some kind of a revolution.

## **2.9 Eurasianism**

The October Revolution of 1917 prompted a massive emigration of Russian intelligentsia representatives. Although their most frequent destination was France, the second most favoured place where to settle down was Prague. And it was in Prague

where, probably in the early 1920s, a new historical and political system called “Eurasianism” began to form (Voráček 2004). Its supporters emphasize the Asian influence on the evolution of Russian culture and consider it to be significantly undervalued. According to them, the slavophiles did not pay proper attention to influences from the East and greatly overestimated the Western European ones (Voráček 2004).

The proponents of Eurasianism claimed that Russian culture could not be included in any cultural group or cultural zone; therefore they often spoke about a “specific Russian way of development”.

The supporters of Eurasianism also rejected Western culture and critically commented on Western European democracy and parliamentarianism. They insisted on that these features were incompatible with the Russian cultural environment. They asserted that states and nations were not ruled by special human beings or institutions, but by uniting in ideas. Even Bolshevism was judged by them as a phenomenon that stemmed in Europe and was only imported to Russia as the next step of Europeanisation. Additionally, they argued that the “true” Russian culture was incompatible with egoism or individualism, conflicts or vulturisms and that Russian society was peaceful, solidary and homogenous. For these reasons, the supporters of Eurasianism rejected pluralism of political parties.

They assumed the adoption of the principle of indirect (representative) democracy, in which elected representatives would pass laws along with other measures and also elect the head of state. These elected representatives would come from various social backgrounds, ethnic groups and territories, but all of them would defend the interests of the entire society. In exceptional cases, the proponents of this system would agree with a plebiscite. A proposed head of state – “the elder” – should be equipped with broad powers and his election period would last for three years with the possibility of re-election. In Eurasianists’ eyes, he was not supposed to be a leader with dictatorial powers. They basically desired to introduce some form of a strong presidential system in Russia (Voráček 2004).

Even though Eurasianists rejected Western-style liberal democracy, they did not refuse democratic system of government. Democratic principles were accepted and understood as means of expression of the will of Russian people i.e. the Russian idea. Nevertheless, they were firm in their criticism of Western democracy, especially for its mechanical nature, rationality, neglect of spiritual values etc. Eurasianists argued that society should not be built on all sorts of speculations, but on stable spiritual foundations.

The Eurasian movement fell apart in the 1930s, but its principal ideas were restored after the collapse of the USSR. A new stream, called “*novo-Eurasianism*” and shaped by the works of L. Gumilov and A. Dugin, characterizes the current political and ideological thinking of Russian elites. Even the current president, Vladimir Putin

perceives Russia as a separate, distinct culture and stresses that Russia must be strong and needs to develop without experiments based on affairs with liberalism (Hospodářské noviny 2011).

An ongoing clash between Russia and Europe has been around in post-Soviet Russia. Eurasianists are in dispute with Atlantists over the future heading of Russia. This phenomenon represents a strong parallel with the row between slavophiles and Westerners in the 1800s. The Atlantists believe that Russia belongs to the Western civilization and that it was abruptly cut off by the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917. The Atlantists promote Russian integration into European structures, into the institutions of the European Union and into the North Atlantic Alliance. However, their impact has been significantly declining since early 1990s and currently the Atlantists' voice is almost unnoticeable.

## **2.10 Socialist period**

Socialist Russia emphasized the size and power of the state. Russia was supposed to be prepared to face any external enemies. As already mentioned, the theory of Russian messianism was also alive, although it now took a different form. Moreover, the relationship to authorities also remained essentially unchanged. Tsar's position was consequently replaced by Lenin and later by Stalin. Their exposure in mausoleums (Stalin's body only between 1953-1961) also testifies their adoration. Besides, the attitude of ordinary citizens of the state did not change much either – the vast majority of Russian citizens remained passive in relation to the political system and dissociated themselves from specific mechanisms of power or from any efforts to participate actively on civic life etc.

The biggest change was the move away from religiosity and mysticism towards atheism and materialism / technicality. Most of the 79,000 churches existing in 1912 were closed and only 11,000 were left in 1990. The decline in religiosity outside big urban areas was less dramatic as religion remained rather strong in the country and especially in the peripheral parts of Russia. Overall, the decrease in religiosity seems smaller than we might expect after 70 years of official atheism (Švankmajer 2004). The total number of believers rose sharply in all parts of Russia after the collapse of the USSR. We can, therefore, assume that ordinary Russians retained their religiosity during the communist era, even though they did not present it outwardly.

Hence we conclude that the socialist era Russia in fact did not bring any significant change in terms of concepts underpinning Russian culture.

This chapter described the most important concepts and theories having shaped Russian society and having an influence on the adoption of the concept of a democratic form of government. These concepts include in particular the belief that Russia must be strong and great and this for two reasons. First, because a weak Russia would not stand

up in foreign competition and would disappear; and second, to be able to fulfil their missionary role in the history of mankind. The Russian society will therefore be willing to develop a democratic form of government only if the stability and strength of the Russian state is ensured (maintained).

The chapter also highlighted the disunity of Russian society in terms of rural and urban areas and especially in terms of intelligence versus the broad masses. While the broad masses still tend to live in accordance with traditions, in humble and uncritical reverence of the ruling class and in the spirit of Orthodox traditions distrust changing traditional forms of government; intelligence embarks on a debate about the appropriateness or inappropriateness of adopting Western models, and with them the principles of representative democracy. Although the dispute Russia-Europe has been ongoing since the 19th century, the Russian intelligentsia has still not arrived at a consistent view of the relationship with Europe. However, in the last decade, it seems that the predominant view is that of Russia as a unique culture, fundamentally different from that of Western Europe. It follows that most of the intelligentsia and most importantly most of the government officials believe that it would be a mistake for Russia to blindly and uncritically accept European models instead of developing its specific form of government.

### **3 THE MAIN OBSTACLES TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF DEMOCRACY IN RUSSIA**

When examining this question, we must understand that the Russian society is still hugely inconsistent. It is principally divided into two categories: a group of elites and masses of millions of Russians, who stick to the traditions of the Orthodox mysticism and conservatism. Compared to broad masses, the Russian elite is rather open to new, modern ideas and to scientific knowledge and bears the most important reforms in the country. This is in line with the fact that Russian society has almost always been reformed “from top to down”.

Nowadays, the main initiator of the gradual process of liberalization and democratization is the state, as there has been a persisting absence of individual activities and willingness to participate (Holzer 2003).

Russian society has been evolving in an atmosphere of permanent fear of an outside threat, which has resulted in a general belief that Russia, in order to survive, must be strong, large and stable. This idea dominated in Old Russia, as well as in the Tsarist and Soviet Russia and continues to these days. This theory is supported both by the parliamentary elections outcomes in 1993 and 1995 and by popularity and rhetoric of Vladimir Putin. Thus it is obvious that any democratic principles may be accepted in Russia only under the condition that they ensure stability and power for Russia. Historically, this assertion is evidenced by the fact that democratic reforms never occurred until Russia’s international position had been weakened by some political and/or military defeat; for example the abolition of serfdom followed losing the

Crimean War, the October Manifesto was adopted after the defeat in the Russo-Japanese War, and democratization occurred after the collapse of the Eastern bloc.<sup>10</sup> The ability to succeed against foreign enemies and to ensure both the stability and the strength of the country (regardless of the means) became basic elements legitimizing power in Russia. For example, one reason why the Bolshevik Revolution succeeded in 1917 was its leaders' capability to set up an effective organization of the country.

Currently, there is a dominating concern, almost tangible throughout the whole Russian society that the introduction of "too loose liberal democracy" will only lead to chaos, anarchy and ultimately to the disintegration of multi-ethnic Russia. There are many more or less autonomous republics that remain in the federation only due to generous subsidies to their local governments and due to the fear of military intervention if they attempted to gain independence (Trenin 2009). Besides several outlying areas such as Chechnya, Dagestan or South Ossetia, which all have shown their interest to become independent, also the inland Tatarstan has given hints about its possible secession from the Russian Federation (Vojtech 2011). In case of a full adoption of democracy in today's Russia, it is quite likely that all these republics would really separate. In this regard, Vadim Kirpichev (2009) has written about democracy in Russia: "The Russians do acknowledge democracy many positive qualities. Democracy is a tool in the fight for human rights; it allows authoritarian power and gives it a human face, the absence of democratic mechanisms makes peaceful changing of government elites impossible... Democracy is also an instrument of instability and the first step towards the disintegration of multi-ethnic Russia." History itself confirms that all major attempts intending to spread democracy have weakened and reduced Russia (think of e.g. territorial losses after the Brest-Litovsk peace or after the collapse of the USSR).

On the other hand, it is its economic power, not its size that makes any given state strong and powerful in today's globalizing world. Liberal democracy has demonstrated in all parts of the world that it effectively supports economic development and growth (Duedney and Ikenberry 2009). Anyway, an assessment of the impact of democracy on Russian economic stability goes beyond the topic of this study.

Two other important characteristics of Russian culture go hand in hand with a desire for stability and strength. Firstly it is the mistrust and unwillingness to change – an aversion to uncertainty, and secondly, it is the respect for authority, because only a strong centralized state with a strong leader could ensure stability in the multinational Russia. This assertion is deeply supported by the fact that the masses have always sought some democratic reforms only when the economic and political situation

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<sup>10</sup> It is not a military defeat, but there has been a speculation about the impact of the Soviet failure in the Afghan War (1979-1989) on the breakup of the Soviet Union, etc.

became extremely difficult, almost unbearable (economic crisis together with war failures in 1917, another economic crisis and finally the collapse of the Eastern bloc in 1989).

Conservativeness, shown by ordinary Russians, is in our opinion firmly linked with religion i.e. with the Orthodox doctrine, which says that any change is potentially dangerous and claims that if we accepted some sort of change, we would betray traditions and leave the “right way” paved by our tradition. The other factor is fear of chaos and instability (or rather of weakness that is a necessary side effect of changes), which is to a certain extent associated with any sort of transition. As a result, basically any change in established traditions is received with distrust and apprehension. However, such fear of change does not constitute a major obstacle for democratic (or other) reforms. As mentioned above, ordinary Russians trust their leaders and their deeds and at the same time fear their anger if they (individually or in larger numbers) should stand up against proposed reforms.

Respect for authority, bordering on total obedience towards the ruling power has been deeply rooted in Russians since the Tatar-Mongol domination. This deference to authority was imposed on ordinary Russians throughout their history up to 1989 (with the exception of a brief period of democracy in 1917). The highest authority in Russia was traditionally the tsar. His cult was later transferred to the communist leaders and then to the current president.

“The main interest has always focused on the leader, not on the party: Lenin, Brezhnev, Gorbachev, even Yeltsin created their own cults” (Murray 1996). The Orthodox church perceived the tsar as a divine, infallible and benevolent ruler. Everything he did was for the sake of his people, even in cases where his actions seemed rather harmful to his own folk.

The current president of Russia does not function only as a head of state, but he is also a symbol of the state and its future (Holzer 2003). This perception makes it impossible to define the contemporary Russian politics as activist and participatory. The executors of political mechanisms are not oriented towards autonomous and creative processes, but rather follow orders from “the top”. Public criticism towards the government and presidential decisions almost does not exist (or is truly rare). As confirmed by practice, the time before and during elections is almost the only time when any sort of activation of Russian political life can be witnessed. A major role is played by the already mentioned deference to authorities, together with a big fear of retaliation – including physical liquidation.

Another reason why the Russians express only limited dissatisfaction even when they strongly disagree with the actions of the ruling elite is a greater tolerance of inequality in the Russian society in general, including power distribution. Their fatalism, associated with a conviction that an ordinary citizen cannot change anything is another factor, and such passive approach apparently enables toleration of higher

levels of corruption and paternalism. Taking all these characteristics into account, it is basically confirmed that slavophiles were correct in asserting that the Russian society is a non-state one, has no political ambitions and renders power to elites.

Russian collectivism, along with the fear of “stepping out of the line”, remain live factors in Russia’s political life. Overall Russian thinking continues to be very collective and the Russians are still trying to maintain some sort of harmony in the society. Together with the previously mentioned predominance of mysticism over rationality in Russian thinking, the opinion of voters towards political parties is based rather on a very subjective and emotional perception than on parties’ programmes and ideology. This explains why Russian political parties mainly focus on creating their own image and manipulating the public instead of their actual political activities.

Ronald Inglehart, an American political scientist and sociologist, has published his research outcomes, which show that Russian society has recently been gaining a bit more individualistic characteristics (Inglehart and Welzer 2010). Such increase in individuality not only brings greater emphasis on rationality in voters’ decision process, but also makes them less prone to manipulation. On the other hand, the research also shows that this individualism is not followed by an increase in the willingness to actively participate in government.

When judging Russian willingness to accept the Western European model of liberal democracy, we must take into account that since about the 1850s, the identity of the Russian nation has been formed on the basis of comparison (or rather confrontation) with the West.

Despite the belief of some sociologists, political scientists and philosophers that Russia is actually only a mirror image of European culture (“Russia is what Europe already was”), most current scientists share the opinion that Russia is a very specific culture – a blend between the East and the West – differing fundamentally from both of them.

Additionally, the concept of an exceptional Russian role in the human history is still alive. The Russians see themselves as a truly sovereign nation that, unlike the West, preserves its purity and high morality. It stands to reason that a society, which perceives itself as fundamentally different from the Western European culture, may agree with adopting the Western models (including democracy), but only upon their critical assessment and adjustment to the specifics of the Russian environment. This argument could be used as an excuse for almost any imperfection of Russian democracy, and as a reason for ignoring any criticism coming from the Western.

Overall, from the cultural point of view, Russian society remains a society with an authoritarian form of government. During its brief historical experience with democracy (or better said quasi-democracy), this society did not learn how to use the opportunities and the rights democracy offers (e.g. the possibility of exchanging elites,

etc.). The same can be said about general participation in government, as it also remains marginal to these days.

However, some signs of increase in individualism and inclination towards rationalism may be noticed lately, suggesting that Russian society has embarked on a journey towards liberal democracy. It seems, though, that the journey ahead of them is still very long.

We believe that if free liberal democracy were to be implemented in Russia today, given today's circumstances and today's society, the very same people would likely be elected to rule the country. The reasons for this are: insufficient activation and participation of ordinary Russians in public affairs, their tendency to judge a given political party emotionally rather than rationally, and last but not least, their innate admiration for power. We believe that the new government would, in particular due to their close connections with the president and his cabinet, again adopt the current form of quasi-democracy, without being challenged and without any loud protests (except for a small group of intelligentsia).

Theoretically, there is, of course, also a second (so-called "crisis") scenario. Sadly, this version does not seem completely out of question. The indicated scenario assumes that extremist parties would gain power through widespread corruption and connections with the Russian mafia. Their potential victory would probably mean a complete end of democracy and a return into the state of lack of freedom.

In conclusion of this chapter, in relation to the established hypothesis, we can summarize that we have pointed out that the Russian cultural environment compounds many obstacles to the evolution of democracy in the country. Nevertheless, none of these obstacles (hardly any criticism towards authorities, requirements on stability and strength of Russia, low rate of participation in public affairs etc.) form an insurmountable obstacle to the development of democracy in Russia. As mentioned above, recent studies by Professor Roland Inglehart include concrete indications that Russian society has already embarked on the path to "true, real" democracy.

#### **4 INTERPRETATION OF HISTORY AS A FACTOR INFLUENCING THE DEVELOPMENT OF DEMOCRACY IN THE COUNTRY**

Looking back at Russian history, there is no doubt that Russian experience with democracy is extremely short. Unfortunately, any attempt to implement this principle has resulted in quite significant, even tragic loss for the Russian society. However, the issue of examining Russian history and its influence on the evolution of democracy in the country goes beyond that. This part of the paper will try to confirm or refute the second of the established hypotheses.

As already mentioned, the experience of the Russian society with having a democratic form of government is very limited – eight months in 1917 and then from

1989 to the present. In none of the two periods has liberal democracy fully developed, though. Practically, Russian society has never experienced true democracy.

In Russia, first attempts at some sort of democratic reforms occurred in early 19<sup>th</sup> century. These reform efforts were mostly associated with weakening of the tsar's position, mainly due to defeat at wars. The economic crisis and failures in the World War I both led to the activation of ordinary Russians and resulted in the overthrow of tsarism and significantly contributed to the first steps towards democracy. However, before democracy could really develop, power was taken over by the Bolsheviks. The main reasons which are considered to have led to the failure of the Provisional government in October 1917 include continuing participation in the World War I, failure to execute land reform and (from the perspective of this paper the most important cause) the fact that vast layers of population were not ready to embrace the idea of a democratic form of government. Instead of articulating their interests, the ordinary Russians succumbed to the Bolshevik agitation and did not protest against the coup. Tragically, this "democratic intermezzo" in Russia launched a civil war, which claimed about 9 million victims.

A second chance for Russian democracy came in 1985. Mikhail Gorbachev believed that the socialist system in Russia (or rather in the Soviet Union) can be reformed and democratized. He was wrong. The regime eventually collapsed, and the totalitarian socialist system, the Soviet Union and the entire Eastern bloc had the same fate. Thus, in the early 1990s, Russia entered into a democratic reform process, but it had to pay a very high price in the form of huge territorial losses. Additionally, Gorbachev's and Yeltsin's reforms brought about a number of side-effects such as significant decline in living standards, increase in overall crime and corruption, decrease in industrial production, budget deficits, enormous increase in foreign debt, deepening chasm between the rich and the poor etc... Strong depression among the population resulted in increased mortality and a growing suicide rate. On the other hand, supply of goods in cities improved considerably – almost everything was available (including luxurious Western brands, albeit for exorbitant prices). A new social class of profiteers (or "nouveau riche") emerged in the 1990s. Its members were often closely linked with the mafia. Murders of journalists, politicians, bankers and businessmen became commonplace (Švankmajer 2004).

Vladimir Putin managed to stabilize this dismal situation after the year 2000, but at the cost of a significant limitation of democracy in Russia. In 2000, Putin took over the legacy that was more like a white elephant. The threat of disintegration of the Russian Federation was very acute, accompanied by proliferated terrorist attacks. Local governors were out of hand and tax collection problems were mounting (Đuriš 2009). Putin's major objective was to restore federal and state power. Meanwhile he declared war on the so called "oligarchs". His struggle to consolidate state power, curb the overall chaos and stabilize the economy, however, also resulted in a limitation of

democracy. For example, the number of state posts (especially at the level of governorates) filled by popular vote (elections) was trimmed and some important independent media were totally destroyed. According to American non-governmental organisation Freedom House, since 1999 the level of democracy in Russia has been steadily declining.<sup>11</sup> Nowadays, many Western and Russian analysts often use the term “managed democracy in Russia” or “Putinism” to characterize the ideology practiced by Vladimir Putin. One of the factors by which the success of “Putinism” is going to be measured, will be Putin’s success in Ukraine (Zakaria 2014).

On one side, we can probably claim that history is one of several factors that shape any given society’s culture. Seen from the other side, history forms a sort of base, which we use to interpret our presence and decide on our future. History, as a factor that models our culture, is more or less independent of interpretation. But if we use history as a means of assessing the present and our decisions on future developments, we usually refer to the most recent events, i.e. to such events that are still alive in our memories and in narration of those around us. In this case, however, the interpretation of historical events does matter, because when it comes to historical moments “every cloud has a silver lining” and thus almost any event can be interpreted from different points of view, i.e. as a loss or as a victory. The willingness of a nation to adopt or foster democratic reforms is not based only on actual historical events, but also on the selection of events (which are used as a reference sample) and on the interpretation of such selected events.

In today’s Russia, we still encounter the problem of political censorship concerning the interpretation of history. Former President Dmitry Medvedev established a commission in May 2009, whose task was to combat all possible attempts at falsifying Russian past leading to harming Russian interests abroad or to reducing its international prestige. Given that this committee reports directly to the presidential office and its activity is personally supervised by the Minister of Culture, it is quite obvious that its tasks are of a political rather than a professional or scientific nature.

An innovative idea how to support patriotism and pride in Russian history (especially among the young generation) is being promoted by the Russian government – it is to be done by distributing video games. According to reliable estimates by Russian experts, around 40 million Russian children and teenagers play video games. As reported by the newspaper *Izvestia* on October 5<sup>th</sup> 2013, the Russian Ministry of Culture announced a public tender for the creation of new Russian video games that would further promote the glory of Russian weapons and spread the Russian concept of the “historical truth”. Simultaneously, this office’s ambition is to censor foreign production, which is available on the Russian market. The very first video game ordered focuses on the birth of the Russian air force during the World War I. This

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<sup>11</sup> See [www.freedomhouse.org](http://www.freedomhouse.org).

game is intended to compete with Western products, which, according to the Russian Ministry of Culture often distort history and discredit the Russian armed forces. Izvestia also reported that the Russian government disapproves of the fact that in many Western video games, the Red Army soldiers are portrayed as bloodthirsty beasts, who slay peaceful civilians with flamethrowers. Russian programmers are supposed to create new videogames, which would teach Russian children to perceive history in the spirit of patriotism and Russian national values.

In May 2014, the Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a new act, which aims at punishing anyone, who should question the merits of the Soviet Union in the defeat of the German Wehrmacht. This act raises concern among Russian liberal circles concerning potential strengthening of censorship, restrictions of freedom of speech, and possible criminalization of Russian historical science and unofficial views on war events. Refusing facts proven by the Nuremberg Tribunal and dissemination of deliberately false information about Soviet wartime history can be punished by up to five years in prison and by a fine of up to half a million rubles. The law punishes disrespecting the state-approved version of the course and the results of the war, as well as spreading of “disrespectful” information regarding war anniversaries and accompanying events. According to renowned lawyers and critics, this act will make it possible to prosecute anyone, who e.g. shows disapproval of the organization of the May military parade commemorating the anniversary of the war on the Red Square in Moscow, etc. Expert community (composed of historians and sociologists) fears that actually any alternative view on modern history may be criminalized, along with prospective publications dealing with newly discovered evidence. According to the opposition and to renowned scientific circles, this law has merely one goal: “to shut up journalists, and also historians and writers” and thus make any criticism (e.g. towards dictator Joseph Stalin, who ruled the Soviet Union during the war) virtually impossible.

Another way how the Russian government controls the interpretation of history is limiting access to the archives. For instance former KGB archives are still under the control of the Russian intelligence services (direct successors of the KGB).

The Russian government has also other means of influencing the interpretation of history (and not only the Russian one). Teaching history in schools of all levels is considered to represent one of the most important and effective ways. The textbooks used are all edited by a political centre (Miller 2010).

Vadim Kirpichev (2009) concludes in his book that in Russia democracy in the true sense of the word is impossible, because it would almost certainly lead to an inadvertent collapse of the Russian Empire. Kirpichev sees Russian historical development cycle “empire – Old Russia – democracy” as a life-cycle, i.e. “youth – old age – death”. He sees the period of “the empire” as the time of modernization, reforms, economic growth, ethnic balance and peace, authoritarianism and dynamics of

development. The “Old Russia” era on the other hand, is associated with protectionism, conservatism, patriotism and Russian nationalism. In turn, the advent of democracy means disintegration, chaos, and the beginning of a new cycle.

According to Kirpichev, the very first historical cycle began with Ivan the Terrible (1530-1584) consolidating the power of the Moscow principality and beginning the so-called “collecting of the Russian lands”. The golden age of the first “empire” came during the era of Peter I. (1672-1725) while the golden age of the second historical cycle, after the Civil War 1917-1920, is attributed to the period of Vladimir Lenin. It should, however, be stated that modernization, associated with the golden age of the “empire,” was usually performed by non-Russian methods (mainly by applying Western European mechanisms) i.e. methods clashing with traditional Russian values. This applies to both cycles (Kirpichev 2009).

The period of the “Old Russia” is associated with Alexander III. (1845-1894) and in the second cycle with L. Brezhnev. This period is characteristic by the renewal of “Russification” of the empire, i. e. the renewal of Russian traditions. However, it brought along a slowdown in growth and an increasing obsolescence of the country. Finally came the era of Nicholas II (with M. S. Gorbachev in the second cycle) and two main “gravediggers” of the Russian state have come on the scene: democracy and nationalism. Kirpichev accepts democracy as a well-functioning instrument for European countries. However, in a multinational Russia, democracy only leads to chaos and decay, because it releases the hands of nationalism and separatism. Hence democracy is perceived as a painful means that enables both destroying obsolete Russia and beginning a new, non-Russian, modernization. Overall, Vadim Kirpichev (2009) comes to the conclusion that given its current ideologies and philosophies Russia can only exist as a quasi-democratic state. Only if the government manages to maintain a balance between democracy and nationalism will Russia be safe and able to thrive.

Kirpichev further points out that after each cycle, Russia was “reborn” within much shorter borders. At the end of the first cycle, the empire lost Poland and Finland, at the end of the second cycle, Russia (the Soviet Union) lost all Soviet republics and its actual area decreased by almost 30 % in the early 1990s. What losses lie ahead for Russia at the end of the third cycle remains to be seen.

Despite being very simplistic, this theory reflects the opinion of a considerable part of the Russian population – i.e. democracy should be handled carefully and shouldn't be “overdone”. Nevertheless, it would be wrong to say that their historical experience has led to a denigration of the concept of “democracy” itself in the eyes of Russians. They do perceive the advantages of a democratic form of government, but agree with the official doctrine, i.e. democratic reforms should be introduced slowly and gradually. Besides, it is necessary to “adapt” democracy to the specific Russian environment to avoid significant social upheaval resulting in chaos and instability.

A survey conducted in 2009 by Levada, a respected Russian agency, showed that only 57 % of Russians considered democracy to be a suitable form of government, beneficial to the country in general. Conversely, a full 26 % of those polled think that democracy simply does not fit Russia at all. A full 95 % of respondents said they have negligible or literally no influence on what is happening in the country. The poll agency Levada interviewed 1,600 adults from different parts of Russia, of a different age structure, with different education, women and men, etc. Although most of these respondents do believe in democracy, they think that there is essentially no chance for democracy to succeed in Russian conditions. 60 % of the respondents said that it would be better for the country if the president also controlled the Parliament and the juridical system as well. 43 % of Russians frankly admitted that countries such as Russia need a strong leader armed with “an iron fist”. Moreover, looking back at the Soviet past also brings an interesting finding – more than a quarter of all respondents said that they had been far better-off during the era of the Soviet Union.<sup>12</sup>

## 5 CONCLUSION

This paper has confirmed that the Russian cultural paradigm introduces many obstacles to the development of democracy in Russia. Conservatism, respect and obedience to government elites still dominate in the Russian society. All these factors have resulted in a low level of mobilization and public participation in the political scene. Thus, if the government opted for democracy, apparently no one would oppose such an idea, but the problem would be to maintain it. Russians are used to being assigned tasks and to fulfilling them; they generally prefer to leave making decisions to their superiors. Therefore, the installation of a democratic form of government would most likely lead back to authoritarianism.

Another characteristic feature of the Russian society is its continuing emphasis on maintaining the power, unity and stability of Russia, which automatically favours authoritarian forms of government (especially in multi-ethnic conditions, typical for Russia). Moreover, the Russian idea of its exceptional mission and overall specificity of its culture in the world still plays an important role. The Russians, confined to the idea of their own uniqueness, feel that the Western model of liberal democracy cannot be automatically implemented in the Russian environment, and that such potential implementation would require quite extensive adaptation to the specificities of Russian culture.

Historical experience confirms ordinary Russians in their conviction that democracy should be approached cautiously and should be installed rather slowly and gradually to avoid painful societal turmoil. Nevertheless, analyses and surveys do not confirm an overall negative opinion on democracy and do not suggest that the entire

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<sup>12</sup> See [www.levada.ru](http://www.levada.ru).

Russian society would be in a resolute opposition to a democratic form of government. Quite on the contrary, the Russians (especially the younger generation and intelligentsia) perceive advantages of democratic forms of government, and they tend to believe that democracy in Russia should be further developed.

The author is convinced that none of the obstacles identified above constitutes an insurmountable obstacle to building democracy in the country. In today's Russia, there are indications that the growth of individualism and rationalism in Russian society is progressively, albeit slowly, building a civil society as one of the basic prerequisites for the development of democracy. The author hopes to spark an expert discussion on this topic.

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