

# POLITICAL CULTURE AND DEMOCRATIZATION IN RUSSIA

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Causes of democratization and its sustenance (or how it would sustain) has been primary focus area for students and intellectuals of politics science since long (probably from the time of Aristotle)<sup>1</sup>. With the increasing number of country becoming democracy, which has been described by Huntington (1991–1992) as “global democratic revolution”, the horizon of democratization research field has expended a lot. After 1990s shift from one political system (communist) to another political system (democratic), Russian democratization process has also got same importance and seriousness from the scholars and intellectuals, policy makers and government from whole over the world. Scholars and intellectuals engaged with democratization research are trying to put forward various possible answers regarding the way democratization process is unfolding and its actual form taking in Russia. The main theories through which the process of democratization in Russia has been explained are (1) Modernization theory (where industrialization, urbanization, secularization, bureaucratization and high per-capita income of a country has been considered as the prerequisite for democracy) (2) Transition theory (here consensus and compromise among national elite regarding the political form of the country has been given prominent place) (3) Cultural the-

ory (where culture of particular country (mass culture) is amenable or not for democratic experiment and development has been analysed and explained).

It is important the note that all of the above theories are either taken out from the democratic experience of Western European countries or Latin America. However scholars of “Kremlinology” are finding it difficult to theorise the sudden emergence of democracy and its form which is quite different from Western countries in the light of above mention theories. In this context the purpose of this article is to analyse present Russian democratization process through political culture approach and give various possible answers in order to understand (1) why scholars have not been able to give satisfactory answer regarding present democratisation process in Russia through political culture approach and related to this is (2) how one can make sense of “Russian political culture” and “Russian democracy” and the relation between the two.

One can define political culture as base above which any structure of political system can stand /sustain. It is part of countries over all culture. It is a mass culture; how mass make sense of its own political system, whether they have trust on and loyalties for particular political system. This political culture theory is of view that for the sustenance of any political system mass belief in that system is required, since it is the people who make or un-

<sup>1</sup> Coppedge M. *Democratization and Research Methods*. Cambridge University Press, 2012.

make the any form of polity (I.e. democracy, authoritarian, dictatorship, monarchy or aristocracy). The basic philosophy of the political culture approach is that any type of government needs legitimacy from masses to his or her survival and without peoples support, trust and loyalty no government can sustain and function. So it is the culture of masses (democratic, authoritarian, dictatorial, monarchy or aristocracy) which sustain any form of government. And distinctive civilization, history, values system, religion, and geographical location constitute main sources of this culture.

In this regard it is important to mention that a bunch of political scientist do not consider Russia's present political form as democratic. They described it as 'delegative democracy', 'guided democracy', 'electoral clanism', 'oligarchy and 'low calibre democracy'<sup>2</sup>.

Interpretation of Russian political culture and democracy

(a) Does Russia have undemocratic political culture?

The simple reason for Russia's not having democracy is because of Russia's undemocratic or authoritarian political culture<sup>3</sup>. For these scholars Russian people did not have experience of democratic government. So they lack the democratic political culture in order to support democratic government (Levada, 1995; Kutkovets and Klyamkin, 1997)<sup>4</sup>. In this way

"Russians are frequently described as the enablers of their own autocracy" (Haley 2009). In this regard modernisation theorists<sup>5</sup> are of the view that this culture can be change also with the introduction of industrialization, secularization, individualism and capitalism. It is on the believe of modernisation project that scholars of this theory are of view that if every country go through the process of modernization it is not difficult to have successful democracy in that country. However this theory has been heavily came under attack from "dependency theorist" (mainly belongs to Latin America) who argues instead of democracy many Latin American country spill into authoritarianism; simply following the footstep of Western country cannot guarantee the same result<sup>6</sup>.

Without denying the fact that Russia shares a distinctive, historical, civilizational, cultural, religious and ethnic identity like any other different civilization including present capitalist states like Germany, Japan and the United states. The basic problem here is to tag one culture is with one political system (i.e. European culture with democratic, individualistic and liberal while other culture

<sup>2</sup> Robinson N. The Politics of Russia's Partial Democracy // *Political Studies Review*. 2003. Vol. 1, issues (2). P. 149–166.

<sup>3</sup> Keenan Ed. L. Muscovite Political Folkways // *Russian Review* 1986. 45. P. 115–84; Tucker R. *Sovietology and Russian History // Post-Soviet Affairs*. 1992. 8 (3): 175–196.

<sup>4</sup> Mishler W., Willerton J.P. The Dynamics of Presidential Popularity in Post-Communist Russia: How Exceptional are Russian Politics?

A revised version of a paper presented at the Annual Meetings of the American Political Science Association, Washington DC, and August 31 – September 3, 2000; Inglehart R., Welzel Ch. *Modernization, Cultural Change, and Democracy: The Human Development Sequence*, Cambridge University press, 2005; Ishiyama J.T. *Comparative Politics Principles of Democracy and Democratization*. Wiley-Blackwell USA, 2012.

<sup>5</sup> Inglehart R., Welzel Ch. *Modernization, Cultural Change, and Democracy: The Human Development Sequence*, Cambridge University press, 2005.

<sup>6</sup> Ishiyama J.T. *Comparative Politics Principles of Democracy and Democratization*. Wiley-Blackwell, USA, 2012.

including Russia as collectivist, authoritarian and illiberal). However in spite of being distinct civilization from Europe many Asian and African countries became democracy (including India). It is important to mention that after Indian independence same doubt had been raised by many western scholars regarding the prospect of Indian democracy looking at its distinct civilization and location from Europe. However today India has been considered as the one of the most successful democracy. In this regard Mishler and Willerton<sup>7</sup> persuasively argue that “exceptionalist hypothesis is far from being exceptional or limited to Russia. Lipset<sup>8</sup> among others has written widely on the idea of American exceptionalism, and, in one guise or another, exceptionalist hypotheses have been used to distinguish parts or all of Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and Latin American”.

As far as Russia’s culture is concern scholar from inside or outside Russia are not satisfied with the cultural interpretation which identify Russia with authoritarian and illiberal. Instead they have provided equally valid alternative interpretation of Russian political culture. In this regard Sakwa<sup>9</sup> while quoting from Whitefield<sup>10</sup> is of the view that “The past,

like facts, is created in the eyes of the beholder. There are many Russian pasts reflecting its Asiatic and European identities. In the nineteenth century Russia was torn between Slavophiles like Alexei Khomyakov and Ivan Kireevsky who stressed Russia’s communal, Orthodox and traditional ways against Westernisers like Konstantin Kavelin, Boris Chicherin and, on the socialistically inclined wing, Alexander Herzen and Vissarion Belinsky, who rejected appeals to Russia’s uniqueness and insisted that the only road to the future lay through Europe. In the twentieth century the country once again was divided between liberals espousing the development of individualism, the rule of law and the market and socialists of various stripes espousing collectivism, egalitarianism and constraints on the market, if not its abolition in its entirety”.

It is because of the reason that Petro<sup>11</sup> is of the view that “the reasoned analysis failed to predict the demise of communism, I believe, lies in the conventional wisdom about Russian political culture. Despite their political and methodological differences, nearly all students of Russian and Soviet politics agreed that Russian political could safely be characterised as more centralist, more interventionist, and more collectivist than its north American or European counterparts”. Perestroika, however laid bare inadequacy of this received wisdom. The astonishing upsurge in activism after 1987 (more than sixty thousand independent associations involving nearly fifteen million people emerged) was clearly inconsistent with

<sup>7</sup> Mishler W., Willerton J.P. The Dynamics of Presidential Popularity in Post-Communist Russia: How Exceptional are Russian Politics? A revised version of a paper presented at the Annual Meetings of the American Political Science Association, Washington DC, and August 31 – September 3, 2000.

<sup>8</sup> Lipset S.M. *Continental Divide: the Values and Institutions of the United States and Canada*. Routledge, 1990.

<sup>9</sup> Sakwa R. *Russian politics and society*. Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2008.

<sup>10</sup> Lukin A., Lukin P. *Myths about Russian Political Culture and the Study of Russian History*; Stephen Whitefield (editor). *Political Culture*

*And Post-Communism*, Palgrave Macmillian, 2005.

<sup>11</sup> Petro N.N. *The rebirth of Russian democracy*. Harvard University Press, 1995. P. 1–2.

the image of a politically passive population". He is further of the opinion that "By assuming that official political expression reflected popular sentiment most analysts failed to recognise that democracy, or *narodovlastie* in Russian has deep roots in Russian history. These roots became quite apparent if the traditional focus of political culture is broadened to include the Russian emigration, dissident groups inside the USSR, and contemporary post-communist Russian politics. In each of these arenas the struggle for Russian civil society can be traced from Muscovite times through to the collapse of communism and beyond". For him the desire to restore civil society, the rule of law, private property, free enterprise, and political pluralism existed in Russia well before the Soviet regime collapsed and even before perestroika began.

Similarly emphasising on alternative Russian political culture Lukin and Lukin<sup>12</sup> has shared a similar view "historical basis of these assumptions (which portray Russian political culture as authoritative and undemocratic) is based on excessive generalisation and on overly broad and ill-founded conclusions that fail to take into account recent developments and findings in the study of Russian history. Rethinking these assumptions, therefore, may put Russian political culture and the constraints it may impose on the country's political development, in a different light". They are further of the view that "Self-government existed in the territory of contemporary Russia for hundreds of years and, in some periods, it played a significant role". For them "the

political system of the Russian state in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries is often called limited monarchy with representation of estates". In this way "Russian did not experience unconstrained monarchy as has been portrayed by many scholars. In 1699, a decree by Peter I introduced elected self-government in the cities (bailiffs in provincial cities, a town council in Moscow). And even during the Soviet period some elements of genuine elections (e.g., in research institutions, the Orthodox church, etc.) survived. Besides, the Soviet Communist Party and the Soviet State preserved formal election procedures, which began to gain real meaning as soon as the Communist dictatorship weakened. Thus, elements of self-government existed in Russia during every period of its history that at times played an important role"<sup>13</sup>. They are further of the opinion that "at the beginning of the twentieth century, the Russian empire was hardly less democratic than the Hapsburg Empire, where the two-chamber parliament (*Reichsrat*), like the State Duma in Russia, was elected by indirect elections.

Similarly the leaders of the Soviet Union had always described their political system as democratic. So the Soviet Union, like most parliamentary democracies, claims to be evolving in the direction of greater democracy. It may of course be found that the system itself, the direction of its development, and its development, and its democratic ideal were vastly different from those of the west<sup>14</sup>. So there are historical reasons to believe that why 'democracy' was not unknown to the people of the former Soviet Union, contrary to what is suggest-

<sup>12</sup> Lukin A., Lukin P. *Myths about Russian Political Culture and the Study of Russian History*; Stephen Whitefield (editor). *Political Culture And Post-Communism*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2005. P. 16.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* P. 20.

<sup>14</sup> Churchward L.G. *Contemporary Soviet government*. Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1968.

ed by those sceptics who argue that citizens of former Soviet Union should have no understanding of democracy. In this context<sup>15</sup> has rightly pointed out that “scholars who specialize in Russian history are inclined to emphasize distinctive and even unique features of Russia’s past and to argue that these tend to determine the path that the new regime will follow. Continuities between past and present are readily cited from tsarist and Soviet practice”. In this regard they are further of the opinion that “the proposition — Russian history matters — raises the question: which history? Is it the history of despotic reform of Ivan the Terrible or of the successes and failure of nineteenth — century tsars? How relevant is the Soviet experience under Stalin as compare to that of Brezhnev and or Gorbachev?” In the same way while referring to M. Berdiayev, Czajowski is of the view that, “the Russia civilization cannot be treated as a phenomenon characterized by a certain historical continuity, but one must isolate in the past of that country several cultures succeeding each other’s. Referring to the scheme proposed by that philosopher of the Christianity, Z. Madej individuates the micro-model of the oriental civilization (Byzantine) and opposes it, in a certain sense, to the macro-model “covered by the Western civilization”. The first is a sort of a buckle clamping the three civilization models: the Ruthenia of Kiev; the Tartarian and Mongolian period; the Russia of Moscow. The second encompasses the Russia of Peter and the communist “closed society”. The collapse of that last civilization opens the way to the sixth, post-communist model”<sup>16</sup>.

<sup>15</sup> Rose R., Mishler W., Munro N. *Russia transformed; developing popular support for a new regime.* Cambridge University press, 2005. P. 9.

<sup>16</sup> Czajowski A. *The Prospects of Democratization of Russia: Between Slavophilism and*

(b) Do Russian people are undemocratic?

Many scholars and intellectuals from inside and outside Russia has describe Russian masses as undemocratic (Baker and Glasser; 2005; Mendelson and Gerber (2006); Gudkov and Dubin (2007)<sup>17</sup>. Contrary to this Rose (et. al 2006; p. 128) are of the view that “for majority of Russians, democracy is a positive ideal”. Similarly Colton and Mcfaul (2001) are of the view that “Comparative scholars throughout the 1970s and 1980s portrayed the process of democratization as a top-level affair, a bargain between elites that produced new democratic institutions. These democratic institutions then helped to change society in a more democratic and liberal direction. The Russian case brings to mind a quite different dynamic: the people have assimilated democratic values faster than the elite have negotiated democratic institutions”. Making more clarity on this issue Mcfaul further explained in media conference in 2007, “If you ask Russians do you want an autocratic system, they say no, and by like, 80 per cent say no. They just don’t perceive the system that they live in today as being autocratic in the way that maybe (you)...or I do” (Machalek 2008)<sup>18</sup>. While quoting Brown,

Westernization. ul. 9-Maja 82/451-671. Wroclaw, 1999.

<sup>17</sup> Hale H. *The Myth Of Mass Authoritarianism In Russia Public Opinion Foundations Of a Hybrid Regime;* George Washington University; The National Council for Eurasian and East European Research; University of Washington; Box 353650; Seattle, WA 98195; TITLE VIII PROGRAM. 2009.

<sup>18</sup> Machalek K. *The Paradox of the Putin Phenomenon: Democracy, Fairness, and Popular Support for President Vladimir Putin;* A thesis submitted to the faculty of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in the Department of Political Science. 2008.

2001a, Carnaghan2001; Gibson, 2001; Rose (et al. 2006) is of the view that “in a post-communist society the meaning of democracy is problematic. In this regard a factor analysis identified three important meanings in the minds of ordinary Russian people: democracy was about respect for individual rights; representative political institutions; promoting social and economic welfare”<sup>19</sup>.

However negative experience of democracy from its initial years of implantation has put negative impression on Russian mind-set. As number of writing regarding results of democracy reveals that there during 1990s (initial year of democratic experiment) a literal loot of public property happened in the name liberalization. Only a certain section of society (oligarchs) benefited from this liberalization process. Because of their disappointment Russian people used to call it “oligarch democracy” meaning democracy which was only benefiting oligarchs and not simple masses (personal interview). On the other hand economy was suffering from huge inflation; People were not getting their salary and pension in time. Law and order situation was not up to mark and everywhere there was chaos like situation. Taking benefit from the ambiguous interpretation of freedom and liberty separatist tendencies was going strong in many regions of Russia (i.e. Chechnya and Tatarstan). In this way over all situations was quite pathetic. The role of Regional governors was unsatisfactory and they were behaving in undemocratic manner. Initially some oligarch backed media was also not behaving properly and their only purpose was to serve the interests of individual business class. In that sit-

uation Putin came to power and try his level best to let Russian get rid of this entire problem and took many steps which were essential for that time. But these work / steps have been interpreted as undemocratic act (i.e. selective ban on media, and recent ralisation of regional power). However scholarly research has tried to prove that actually this was an act to restore democracy and was not against democracy (Remington, 2000)<sup>20</sup>.

The way Putin handled fragile Russian situation which he got from previous government has made him popular among Russian people. They do not consider it as undemocratic acts instead they believe that these acts are necessary to restore normalcy in Russia. So Russian people are selecting him not out of their Undemocratic political culture which they inherited since long but because the way Putin has showed firm stand on these issues and try to resolve it. There can be no two opinions in this regard that only a strong sate can implement democracy in the benefit for masses otherwise it will be only affairs of fewer once. That is why Putin was of the view that “Democracy should not be accompanied by the collapse of the state and impoverishment of its people. I’m sure that democracy is not anarchy and laissez faire (quoted in Watson, 2005)<sup>21</sup>. He is further of the view that “he believes political dictatorships are invariably fragile and temporary, and that democracy is the only truly robust and enduring political system” (Remington, 2000)<sup>22</sup>. That is way if

<sup>19</sup> Rose R., Mishler W., Munro N. *Russia transformed; developing popular support for a new regime*. Cambridge University press, 2005.

<sup>20</sup> Rogovskaia T. *Russia // Post-Communist Democratization Political discourses across thirteen countries* // eds. John S. Dryzek and Leslie Templeman Holmes — Cambridge University, 2004.

<sup>21</sup> Rose R., Mishler W., Munro N. *Russia transformed; developing popular support for a new regime*. Cambridge University press, 2005.

<sup>22</sup> Rogovskaia T. *Russia // Post-Communist Democratization Political discourses across*

Russian masses like strong government, order and stability it should not be interpreted that they are in favour of undemocratic and authoritarian regime. It should be judged on their situation and demand of the present time. Even for democratic European country initially nation building and state building was primary task.

#### **Political culture and democratization in Russia**

Having provided ample evidence to prove that Russian had neither undemocratic political culture nor Russian people are anti-democratic. Why Russian democracy is going in the direction where it is; the simple answer is since Russian is going through the transitional phase where everything has to be put in right place and right direction. Change from one political system to other, from one economic pattern to another will take certain period and Suddenly everything cannot put in place in small span of time. And even when the initial results of new patters was quite disappointing. It should be remember by student of democracy that even European and American democracy took at least hundred years in order to take firm root in these countries. Even there were lots of trail and err happened in the course of democratic experiment. How one can expect Russia to embrace this all qualities in within few years? So instead of considering Russian political culture as defective for democratic experiment and development it should be looked as cul-

ture which is trying to implement its own model of democracy “Sovereign democracy” in order to prevent any foreign power to intervene in Russia’s internal affairs in the name of democratic promotion as had been done in the initial years of its disintegration (Klitsounova, 2009) as well as putting many thing in place to have successful democracy in future. It can be consider as “transition”, “transformation” age for Russia. While quoting Collier and Levitsky, 1997 in order to explain difficulty to define democracy, Rose (et al 2006; p. 126) are of the view that “Democracy today is a symbol; it is defined in hundreds of different ways by compounding different characteristic that may be incorporated in particular definition. There is no agreement among scholars or politician about the essential requisite of a democratic regime. Definitions often qualify the words by attaching adjectives, some positive, such as liberal democracy or social democracy, and some negative, such as reference to a defective pseudo-democracy. A catalogue of definitions has found that more than 550 different adjectives to characterize “democracies”. This is more than five times the number of regimes that today have any claim to be described as democracy. So it is important to bear in mind that “Democracy is not just a matter of constitutions, parliaments, elections, parties, and the rule of law. In order to see if or how democracy works, we must attend to what people make of it, and what they think they are doing as they engage with politics, or as politics engages them”<sup>23</sup>.

thirteen countries // eds. John S. Dryzek and Leslie Templeman Holmes. Cambridge University, 2004 ; Klitsounova E. Russia’s Response: Sovereign Democracy Strikes Back in Democracy’s Plight in the European Neighbourhood; Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS), Brussels, Belgium, 2009.

<sup>23</sup> Post-Communist Democratization Political discourses across thirteen countries // eds. John S. Dryzek and Leslie Templeman Holmes— Cambridge University, 2004.

## Политическая культура и демократизация в России

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**Виджей Кумар**

***Аннотация.** На основе сорокапятидневных полевых исследований, а также глубокого изучения имеющейся литературы по политической культуре и процессу демократизации настоящая статья рассматривает политическое развитие России. Автор делает оптимистичный вывод относительно развития процесса демократизации в стране. Вместе с тем он заключает, что упрощенные оценки российской политической культуры не позволяют понять особенности политического развития страны и не способствуют российскому процессу демократизации и перспективам укрепления демократии в России.*

***Ключевые слова:** демократия, исключительность, политическая культура, исторический анализ, российские мыслители, общественные ценности, политическая идентичность.*

## Political Culture and Democratization in Russia

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**Vijay Kumar**

***Abstracts.** On the basis of forty five days field survey as well as extensive survey of literature regarding political culture and democratization process in Russia this paper makes positive case for Russian democratization process, simultaneously this paper is also of the view that the simplistic account of Russian culture can neither help to understand the kind of political culture present in Russia nor its impact on Russian democratization process in particular and prospect of democracy in Russia in general.*

***Key words:** democracy, exceptionalism, political culture, historical analysis, Russian thinkers, public values, political identity.*