

Why Russia's 'strong state' political system still remains a better option for the country than western-style democracy

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*Russia's political system has often been criticised by commentators and academics who advocate a transition to a more western-style of democracy. **Andrei P. Tsygankov** argues that while the Russian system under Vladimir Putin undoubtedly requires substantial reforms, the 'strong state' model adopted in the country also generates a number of benefits for Russian citizens that have largely been overlooked in the West. He writes that abandoning this model in favour of a western political system would be at odds with the prevailing conditions within the country and that the aim should instead be to reform the existing system so that it works more effectively for ordinary Russians.*



Many western scholars commonly present Russia's 'strong state' system as something dysfunctional that must be replaced by a western-style competitive system to be effective. They argue that such a system has a built-in tendency to become a form of personal rule, which silences the voices of important population segments, and deepens divisions within the ruling circles. As a result, the system is prone to being internally unstable and breeding future political crises.

In my book, *The Strong State in Russia*, I take issue with such views. First, competitive systems, by themselves, are not always effective and suffer from multiple flaws. In practice, competitive political systems may imply non-transparent power for business lobbies, rather than for the people. Such systems have a tendency to function more like an oligarchy than a democracy. Today, western nations are often ruled by corrupt oligarchical elites on behalf of increasingly shrinking middle classes. As far back as Ancient Greece, Aristotle warned of the danger of oligarchical rule resulting from elites' predatory instincts and self-serving behaviour.

Second, the fact that some strong state systems and their rulers have proven less effective is hardly a forceful argument against the strong state. Like other political systems, the strong state is an institutional arrangement to concentrate and distribute human resources in the interests of the common good. All governments must balance citizens' demands for order and security with those of individual and group rights.

The difference is that the strong state strikes this balance by relying on the centralised and concentrated authority of the executive, rather than checks and balances, as in competitive political systems. Some strong states and rulers have proven to be not at all effective. They neglected the needs for internal development and engaged in risky international adventures. Others, however, used their time wisely by capitalising on the system's advantages, such as the ability to formulate long-term objectives and mobilise the required social and material resources.



The Moscow Kremlin, Credit: Martha de Jong-Lantink (CC-BY-SA-3.0)

Similarly and logically, just because Russia's contemporary strong state system is not effective in solving some key

tasks does not mean that the system cannot be fixed and must go through a revolutionary transformation. For instance, comparatively speaking, China's strong state system is more effective than that of Russia. China has been more effective in generating economic growth, investing state capital, fighting corruption and capital flight, and observing rules for transferring power. In addition, democratic institutions and political openness are not sufficient for providing a system's stability and may in fact be highly destabilising. Mikhail Gorbachev's Perestroika during 1987-1991 or the [Provisional government](#) following February 1917 serve as reminders of system-breakdown, rather than successful reform.

Historically, Russia's strong state has had a mixed record, yet without it is hard to imagine the country achieving the successes it has. Located at the intersection of various cultures and traditions, Russia has sustained strong external pressures by becoming a politically sovereign nation and establishing the locus of decision-making inside the country. Not only has it avoided colonisation by other powers (except for the Mongol occupation), since the early 18th century it has emerged as a great power. For the last three centuries, Russia has been a maker, rather than a taker, of international rules, enjoying the influence and prestige of a global power. Russians had to learn advanced fighting skills and place the importance of funding their military above policy priorities. In addition, since the 1700s, Russia has emerged as a late developer, or a semi-peripheral country struggling to overcome its backwardness relative to better developed western economies.

Today, there are at least two reasons why Russia's system is likely to endure. The first reason is that the Russian economy belongs to the world's semi-periphery, with strong potential to export natural resources and relative weakness in the areas of services and manufacturing. Without a strong state, the country will continue to be a resource-oriented economy and will fail to mobilise in the correct manner to sustain competition with the advanced economies of the core.

As Immanuel Wallerstein states, "In those states in which the state machinery is weak, the state managers do not play the role of coordinating a complex industrial-commercial-agricultural mechanism. Rather they simply become one set of landlords amidst others, with little claim to legitimate authority over the whole." Indeed, faced with growing competition from China, India, Turkey, and others, the Russian challenge over the next two decades is to not to move up to the core, but rather to avoid falling behind by staying within the group of semi-peripheral states.

Another reason why Russia cannot follow the West in adopting a competitive system relates to the country's political culture. A decentralised state with weak social obligations is simply at odds with what Russians have historically supported. For centuries, the Russian state has had to simultaneously meet multiple challenges: diffuse foreign threats, the need to develop and populate the world's largest territory (including the remote areas of Siberia and the Far East), the requirement to guarantee certain living standards for people, all while managing a high level of national diversity within its borders. Russian people are mentally accustomed to a strong state and it would be presumptuous to think that they would settle for anything less than that.

If the state fails to deliver on these expected obligations, Russians are more likely to support politicians who promise social order and stability than those favouring western-style individual rights. Today, roughly half of Russians hold a positive view of Soviet leaders Leonid Brezhnev and Josef Stalin, while only a fifth hold such views about Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin. Russians appreciate and even romanticise the Soviet system because of their perception that this system was able to deliver on its promises by demonstrating state paternalism and the ability to withstand the pressures of special interests. Under the current system, Russians are frequently denied the vital services of health and education. They tend to view the state as captured by corrupt and self-serving elites. In addition, they continue to aspire for recognition by the outside world as a power capable of making independent decisions.

The effective strong state in Russia, however, should not mean building a neo-Soviet model that is anti-western, anti-capitalist, and anti-democratic. The temptation to move in this direction is great, particularly given western nations' determination to punish Russia for the annexation of Crimea and the country's general resistance to the

world order backed by the West. Instead, the aim should be a modern strong state which reflects contemporary changes in public administration and strikes a new balance between state and society.

The challenge is to preserve governance and the ability to make long-term decisions without stifling business or public initiative. Only a state that is both accountable and administratively strong will be capable of addressing Russia's formidable problems, while also preventing prolonged instability – with all the unpredictable consequences for the country and its leadership that this would entail. The modern meaning of the 'strong state' must be in keeping with Catherine the Great's maxim: "The purpose of 'Autocracy' is not to deprive people of natural liberty, but to steer their actions toward the greatest good." If Putin fails to reform the system by establishing effective policy mechanisms, better allocation of resources, proper procedures for the transfer of power, and sufficient levels of public engagement, then Russia will simply have to tackle the same problems under a new leader.

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About the author

Andrei P. Tsygankov – *San Francisco State University*

[Andrei P. Tsygankov](#) is Professor in the Departments of Political Science and International Relations at San Francisco State University.

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