



## INFLUENCE OF PUBLIC SENTIMENTS, NATIONAL TRADITIONS, AND CULTURE ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE POLITICAL SYSTEM

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### ABSTRACT

**Background:** The article considers issues related to overcoming the consequences of the Soviet totalitarian regime that existed in Russia before the collapse of the USSR. **Objective:** The article aims at studying both objective and subjective factors that do not allow to overcome the remains of the Soviet system which was the world's longest-lasting totalitarian regime. **Methods:** Based on a cognitive-discursive approach, the authors of the article studied the concept of "Soviet totalitarianism" in Russian and foreign sources, as well as general and particular aspects of the Russian practice in facilitating this negative historical experience. **Results:** The article reveals the inconsistency of the US political mythology about the existing "threat of Russian authoritarianism" to Western countries. **Conclusion:** The article concludes that the process of overcoming the persistent Soviet totalitarian past is not a one-time act, and should be protracted and controversial. The current system of power in Russia is conditioned by the specifics of its political culture and depends on the historical past, the legal identity of its citizens, political and public sentiments, as well as the mindset, customs, and traditions of Russians.

**Keywords:** Civil society; Form of government; Legal consciousness; Opposition; Political regime; Post-Soviet countries; Repressive system; Totalitarianism.



## INFLUÊNCIA DOS SENTIMENTOS PÚBLICOS, TRADIÇÕES NACIONAIS E CULTURA NO DESENVOLVIMENTO DO SISTEMA POLÍTICO

### RESUMO

**Antecedentes:** O artigo considera questões relacionadas à superação das consequências do regime totalitário soviético que existia na Rússia antes do colapso da URSS. **Objetivo:** O artigo visa estudar fatores objetivos e subjetivos que não permitem superar os resquícios do sistema soviético que foi o regime totalitário mais duradouro do mundo. **Métodos:** A partir de uma abordagem cognitivo-discursiva, os autores do artigo estudaram o conceito de "totalitarismo soviético" em fontes russas e estrangeiras, bem como aspectos gerais e particulares da prática russa na facilitação dessa experiência histórica negativa. **Resultados:** O artigo revela a inconsistência da mitologia política estadunidense sobre a "ameaça do autoritarismo russo" existente aos países ocidentais. **Conclusão:** O artigo conclui que o processo de superação do persistente passado totalitário soviético não é um ato pontual, devendo ser prolongado e controverso. O atual sistema de poder na Rússia é condicionado pelas especificidades de sua cultura política e depende do passado histórico, da identidade legal de seus cidadãos, dos sentimentos políticos e públicos, bem como da mentalidade, costumes e tradições dos russos.

**Palavras-chave:** Sociedade civil; Forma de governo; Consciência jurídica; Oposição; Regime político; países pós-soviéticos; Sistema repressivo; Totalitarismo.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The Soviet totalitarianism as a system of state power, which had been dominating in the former USSR for several decades, was on the list of priority research topics for social politics in the US in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. American social scientists discussing this topic and belonging to different scientific schools include S. Andreski (1967), H. Arendt (1966), J. Armstrong (1961), Zb. Brzezinski (1956), K. Verdery (1996), B. Wolfe (1956), A. Gregor (1968), G. Kennan (1961), J. Kirkpatrick (1982), H. Spiro (Spiro, Barber 1967), A. Ulam (1963), and C. Fridrich (1969).

After the collapse of the USSR, scientific interest in Soviet totalitarianism and ways to overcome its consequences declined in the US. US social and political scientists regarded this event as the defeat of the communist totalitarian system in the Cold War and the establishment of American influence over almost all post-Soviet countries and the Eastern bloc.

"At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the form of government established in Russia again fell into the field of scientific interests of some American social scientists. Over the past two decades, the US social sciences have been indicating that the totalitarian regime as a type of political system formed after the collapse of the USSR allegedly transformed into post-



Soviet authoritarianism. The Russian Communism was defeated by liberalism," R. Kagan says, who is a researcher at the Brookings Institution. "However, it was not liberalism that won in post-communist Russia. The liberal experiment of the Yeltsin era turned out to be too imperfect and vulnerable, and almost immediately gave way to two anti-liberal forces: "the remnants of the Soviet (and even tsarist) police state" [...] and Russian nationalism and traditionalism, which Putin revived to give his rule an illusion of legitimacy" (Robert 2019).

In the US, the image of Russia has been formed as a country with an authoritarian form of government, whose foundations were laid by V.V. Putin. "Weak political institutions that he inherited from Yeltsin helped Putin establish the current regime," T. Frye claims, who is a Columbia University professor (Frye, 2021).

Attacks by representatives of American social politics toward the President of Russia were made during the period when V.V. Putin took steps aimed at maintaining state integrity and constitutional order. A counter-terrorist operation in the Northern Caucasus, known as the Second Chechen War, and a 2004 decree on the appointment of governors by the legislative bodies at the proposal of the president served as a pretext for US scholars to accuse V.V. Putin of establishing an authoritarian form of government in Russia. In 2004, M. McFall, a Professor at Stanford University, wrote that the development of democracy in Russia was hindered by individuals and not historical circumstances (McFall, 2004). In the joint work "Between Dictatorship and Democracy", American and Russian political scientists agreed that Russia was at the crossroads of democracy and authoritarianism. "Today Russia is much closer to a dictatorship than it was four years ago," M. McFall (2004) notes.

In view of the aforesaid, the study aims at determining the objective and subjective factors that hinder the formation of a new political system due to the influence of the worldview of the population and the elite of Russia, built on the ideological principles promoted in the USSR.

## 2. METHODS

The concept of "Soviet totalitarianism" is analyzed using a cognitive-discursive approach. We have reviewed both Russian and foreign sources in order to identify the general and particular in the perception and interpretation of Soviet totalitarianism.

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### 3. RESULTS

While studying the possibilities of building a dictatorship, we believe that Vladimir Putin became the most dangerous autocrat for the West after his speech at the Munich Conference on Security Policy in 2007. Russia's categorical rejection of the unipolar world order, disagreement with the US hegemony in the international arena, criticism of NATO's expansion to the East, and the growing military capability of the Russian Armed Forces were regarded by the American party as a "threat of autocracy" to liberalism and the foundations of Western democracy. "Nowadays Russia insists on an alternative non-democratic model that can compete with the prevailing Western democratic model," B. Grodsky, professor of political science at the University of Maryland, says. "Putin's biggest success is to sow unrest in the Western democracies" (Grodsky, 2018). In one of his latest books, B. Grodsky mentioned the impending threat to democratization posed by autocratic regimes (Grodsky, 2016).

Alarmist forecasts are also contained in the works of R. Kagan, according to whom "authoritarianism is the greatest ideological and strategic challenge to the democratic world" (Kagan, 2019). The American researcher viewed it as "the most powerful and long-term threat to liberalism". Moreover, this threat comes from such powerful states as China and Russia, "promoting anti-liberal ideas as an alternative to the shaken hegemony of democracy" (Kagan, 2019). The issue of confronting "global" authoritarianism is also reflected in another book by R. Kagan – "The Jungle Grows Back: America and Our Imperiled World" published in 2018 (Kagan, 2019). The American political scientist worried about the impending "threat" over the liberal world order. Authoritarian governments, including Russia, China, Saudi Arabia, Venezuela, and Iran, allegedly seek to weaken the influence of liberalism. The author's judgments boil down to the fact that Western liberalism is gradually losing its position in the modern world. The dominant feature in the system of international relations is the law of the jungle, which presupposes the survival of the most militarized states. According to R. Kagan, Germany and Europe as a whole might be among the outsiders, and the US, Russia, and China will be at the leading edge (Kagan, 2019).

A threat to the Western democracy from authoritarian states is a cross-cutting topic in an article written by R. Foa, a Cambridge University political scientist, and J. Mounk, a Harvard University researcher, published in the Wall Street Journal in 2019 (Foa, Mounk, 2019). According to the authors, authoritarian states could only give their citizens "poverty,



a miserable life, rationed consumption, and scarcity". In the modern world, drastic changes are taking place. They estimated that Western democracies accounted for a third of the global economy in 2019. Currently, 376 million people live in deeply unfree countries – including Russia, Kazakhstan, and the Gulf states – that have per capita incomes above \$20,000 in terms of purchasing-power parity. When China as a whole crosses above \$20,000 in per capita income, which the IMF estimates will happen next year, 1.8 billion people around the world will live in "upper-income authoritarian regimes" (Foa, Mounk, 2019).

It is worth mentioning that we do not share the viewpoint of American scientists who consider V.V. Putin as a politician who established an authoritarian regime in Russia. He inherited this political form of government from his predecessor B.N. Yeltsin. Having crushed the main ideological institution (the Communist Party of the Soviet Union), B.N. Yeltsin practically left the Soviet system unchanged, which was transformed into an oligarchy during the years of his rule. One of the prominent leaders of the democratic movement in the USSR and Russia in the 1980s-1990s, G.Kh. Popov believed that B.N. Yeltsin saved the Soviet bureaucratic system, being convinced that he could not retain power without it (Popov, 2016). He conducted reforms using authoritarian methods. After banning the Communist Party in the territory of Russia for one year, in which he saw the main threat to his rule, B.N. Yeltsin left the Soviet state machine intact, including law enforcement agencies and special services. The former ministries and departments were renamed and headed by his closest associates.

B.N. Yeltsin, as a statesman and political figure, received ambiguous reviews from the US. Some American political scientists present the first Russian president as a champion of freedom and democracy. S. Sestanovich, a former US Ambassador to Russia, Professor of Columbia University, called B.N. Yeltsin "the savior of the Russian state" during the second half of 1991 (Sestanovich, 2006). The famous American political scientist Z. Brzezinski held the opposite opinion about B.N. Yeltsin and predicted Russia's authoritarian development in 1993 (Brzezinski, 1993).

The dismantling of the Soviet totalitarian system in the former USSR was of an evolutionary nature. We are convinced that this was the most rational and acceptable way, which minimized the confrontation in society and prevented political repressions in the country. Decree of the President of Russia B.N. Yeltsin of November 6, 1991 suspending the activities of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union was unconstitutional. At the same



time, he ordered executive and other authorities not to prosecute Russian citizens belonging to this party (Decree of the President of the RSFSR of November 6, 1991)

The evolutionary way of overcoming the consequences of Soviet totalitarianism caused an ambiguous assessment among Russian social scientists. Yu.S. Pivovarov, an academician of the Russian Academy of Sciences, supported the decommunization of Russia (theoretical and practical activities aimed at rejecting communist ideas and eliminating communist ideology from all spheres of society) and believed that the Russian state lived in Soviet (Communist) Russia (Pivovarov, 2011). A number of Russian scientists often refer to the surrender of the Nazi regime as an example of overcoming the consequences of the totalitarian form of government. According to the Russian historian A.I. Boroznyak, the German experience of eliminating the totalitarian past is helpful for Russia since the transition from totalitarianism to democracy is unfinished acts of a single planetary drama, scattered in historical time and space (Boroznyak, 2014).

The denazification of post-war Germany and the relevant practices could not be used in Russia after the collapse of the USSR. Firstly, the proposed decommunization measures contradicted the Russian law. The Decree of the President of Russia suspending the activities of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and the Communist Party of the RSFSR, their property, and dissolution, signed in November 1991, was declared unconstitutional by the Constitutional Court in 1992. Secondly, the idea of holding a public trial of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, initiated by B.N. Yeltsin and his establishment, would inevitably lead to a final split in the Russian society and cause a civil war. Thirdly, the denazification of Germany was carried out in accordance with the Potsdam Conference of 1945, which was attended by the "Big Three" (USSR, USA, and Great Britain) and took place under the control of the Western occupation authorities. Fourthly, unlike Germany, where the Nazi regime lasted only twelve years, the Soviet totalitarian system existed for more than seventy years. During this period, several generations of citizens grew up and formed in the country, who reacted differently to the socio-political and economic changes that later happened in Russia. The presidential elections of 1996 clearly demonstrated the political polarization of the Russian society, which remains fragmented to this day. In recent years, polls on the main historical figures indicate that respondents still consider Stalin the most prominent politician in the history of Russia.

We cannot agree with the accusations of American opponents that the Russian leadership is nostalgic for the Soviet past and strives to resurrect it. During his presidency,



V.V. Putin repeatedly expressed his negative attitude toward the Stalinist regime. In 2007, during a visit to the Butovo training ground, where more than 20,000 people were shot at the end of the 1930s, V.V. Putin declared the responsibility of Stalinism for crimes against the Soviet citizens. In 2010, when visiting the Memorial opened at the site of the killings in Katyn, the head of the Russian state also gave a tough political, legal, and moral assessment of the atrocities committed by the totalitarian regime. At the same time, he ruled out any possibility of their revision (Gazeta.Ru, June 16, 2017).

On February 21, 2022, V.V. Putin addressed the Russian citizens in connection with the recognition of the DPR and the LPR, expressed his extremely negative attitude both toward the personality of Stalin and to the government he formed in the USSR: "Stalin fully implemented was not Lenin's but his own principles of government. [...] Everything seemed to be working well in conditions of the totalitarian regime, and outwardly it looked wonderful, attractive, and even super-democratic" (Putin, 2022).

The Russian leadership considers the extremely complex and controversial Soviet period in the history of the country that is characterized not only by political repressions against citizens but also by the unprecedented achievements of the former USSR in almost all spheres of domestic and international politics. They also take into account socio-political sentiments and preferences of Russians and the country's demographic profile. The socio-political and civil views of the vast majority of the adult population of Russia were formed by the Soviet system. The results of the 2016 Russian State Duma elections showed that 13.5% of people voted for the Communist Party of the Russian Federation, securing 42 seats in the lower house of parliament. In our opinion, a person who grew up in the Soviet era cannot radically change their mindset and give up the convictions and principles formed throughout their life in the three decades after the collapse of the USSR. The long-existed dominance of the only state communist ideology, the obligatory study of its dogmas in the system of higher and secondary education, total state control over the spiritual life of citizens, persecution for dissidence, the Soviet propaganda purposefully introduced the idea of "advantages" of socialism over capitalism, which could not but affect the psychology and socio-political sentiment of Russians. In the 1990s, B.N. Yeltsin's reforms only aggravated disunity and confrontation in Russian society. "All the peoples of the Soviet Union need a long recovery after the communist corruption. And the Russian people, against whom this blow was the most destructive and protracted, needs 150-200 years of recovery," A.I. Solzhenitsyn writes (Solzhenitsyn 1980). The inner world of a person, their views, and



beliefs can be influenced from the outside, but it takes time to change and adjust them. "We cannot lightly throw off our sense of individuality," A. Schopenhauer emphasizes (Schopenhauer, 1992).

Some American scientists also see the reason for the long-drawn process of overcoming the totalitarian past in modern Russia in the domination of this tyrannical system in the USSR. G. Pop-Eleches, a Professor in Political Sciences at Princeton University, and J.A. Tucker, a Professor in Political Sciences at New York University, believe that the legacy of the Soviet system still exists, and affects people's attitudes and views. They also note that the longer citizens live in a totalitarian system, the more they support beliefs associated with the communist ideology (Pop-Eleches, Tucker, 2017). The same opinion is shared by T. Frye: "The legacy of the Soviet system exists and influences the attitudes and worldview of people" (Frye, 2021).

Ambiguous assessments both among Russian citizens and abroad raise questions related to the burial of V.I. Lenin's body, the demolition of Soviet monuments, and the renaming of streets that are symbols of the past era. As evidenced by public opinion polls, they divide Russians into approximately two equal parts. Some are in favor of a ban on the Soviet and communist symbols, the others are for its preservation. With a high degree of certainty, it can be assumed that the lack of unity in society prompted V.V. Putin to return the former national anthem of the USSR, designed to become a unifying symbol of new Russia. The arguments of Russian and American opponents that the legalization of the Soviet anthem should be regarded as the country's return to the past are untenable. After the reunification of Germany in 1990, the national anthem was composed on the basis of J. Haydn's melody, which was the music for the anthem of the Weimar Republic and the Third Reich. "Today's Russia bears some birthmarks of Stalinism (totalitarianism)," V.V. Putin said in his conversation with American director O. Stone in 2017 (Gazeta.Ru, 2017).

The US is severely criticizing the Russian leadership which pursues a policy of repression against the opposition and tramples on the constitutional rights of Russian citizens. In 2020, additions to the Federal Law "On Measures to Influence Persons Involved in Violations of Fundamental Human Rights and Freedoms, Rights and Freedoms of Citizens of the Russian Federation" on the recognition of individuals as foreign agents was regarded in the US as a "rollback of Russia" to Stalin's times. However, the adopted law is a mirror reflection of the legal norms that have been in force for many years both in the US and several European countries. In 1938, the US passed the FARA ("Foreign Agents





Registration Act") which, contrary to its title, is not aimed at neutralizing spies or agents of foreign states, but at individuals and organizations that, on behalf of and with financial support from other countries, attempt to influence public opinion in the US. In accordance with this law, the mentioned organizations are required to register with the US Department of Justice and submit a report every six months on the funds received into their bank accounts from foreign countries. The difference between Russian law and US law is that its violation in Russia provides for an administrative penalty and not criminal liability, as in the US. The propaganda campaign about violations of human rights and democratic norms in Russia conducted at the state level in the US serves to justify its interference in the internal affairs of Russia. Thus, the American party seeks to preserve the non-governmental commercial organizations and foundations it finances. The American model of democracy imposed by the US on Russia and other independent states differs little in its methods and means from the practices used by the Soviet totalitarian system "exporting" revolutions.

It is worth mentioning that a significant part of American scientific works is initially tendentious and biased. "There are politicians who benefit from inflating threats from Russia, and there are people who seek to present themselves as experts in this country," T. Frye says (2021).

The formation of the Russian government after the collapse of the USSR directly depended on the public mood of its citizens, their participation in political life, traditions, and features of the national character. Russia's difficult path to a state of law, human rights, and freedoms has been aggravated and complicated by some negative factors inherited from the past. These include, first of all, the centuries-old traditions of despotism and serfdom, the omnipotence of power and the lack of human rights, persistent and widespread legal nihilism, no significant experience of freedom, law, self-government, democracy, constitutionalism, political and legal culture, the subordinate position of society in its relations with unlimited and uncontrolled power, etc. (Nersesyants, 2020). For a significant part of Russians, the form of government that has developed in the country is quite acceptable since historically they know only such a system based on the strong centralized power of one person. "For Russians, the most advantageous form of community life is one's leadership. Russians who understand their true nature will strive for such leadership (in the form of monarchy, dictatorship, or otherwise)", a major political figure in pre-revolutionary Russia V.V. Shulgin claims (Shulgin, 2002).



#### 4. CONCLUSION

After the collapse of the USSR, Russia failed to overcome the consequences of the Soviet totalitarian past. The lack of progress in this sphere is conditioned by both objective and subjective factors. The rejection of totalitarianism did not fix the alienation of citizens from state and power.

Considering the historical past of Russia, stagnation in social and political life, the underdevelopment of civil society, the indifferent attitude of most people towards democratic values, and the genetic fear of despotic regimes that has formed in the minds of people over the centuries, we can assume that the process of overcoming the consequences of Soviet totalitarianism will be extremely long and difficult.

The formation of power in any country depends on public sentiments, national traditions, and civil participation in political life. The existing form of government is elected by the Russian people. Any attempt to change it from the outside violates the principles of international law and the established world order.

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