

Up for Grabs

Russia's Political Trajectory and Stalin's Legacy

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Sarah E. Mendelson

CSIS

and

Theodore P. Gerber

University of Wisconsin

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Russia's post-Soviet political trajectory has long been understood as a U.S. national security concern. Recent survey data suggest this trajectory is still very much up for grabs. Republicans and Democrats should be devoting more attention to the internal politics of Vladimir Putin's Russia and spending more funds in Russia in support of democracy. Instead, the opposite is happening. Ignoring this unfinished business of Russian democracy for too much longer could have especially nasty and long-term consequences.

Although many policy makers have turned their attention elsewhere, activists and journalists have not. They are increasingly drawing attention to a long list of actions by Russian authorities that undermine Russia's frail democracy. These include the elimination of independent media outlets, tight strictures on the coverage of events as horrific as the Nord-Ost hostage crisis and as seemingly routine as the Duma elections, the use of the tax police to intimidate business leaders whom the Kremlin deems it cannot control, outright repression of individual human rights activists and organizations, deportation of foreign activists, and government complicity in the ongoing abuses of the civilian population by Russian federal forces in Chechnya.

How does the Russian public think about this tilt toward authoritarianism? Since the Gorbachev era, scholars have debated whether the Russian public favors democracy or authoritarianism. At least theoretically, Russia's political destiny is no longer only in the hands of the few, so it is especially important to know about public attitudes.

One way to get at how Russians view democracy versus authoritarianism is to ask them directly which they prefer. The surveys we conducted in 2002 and 2003 did just that. Our data suggest that the Russian public remains sharply divided into three roughly equal parts: one that favors democracy, one that favors authoritarian government, and one that is indifferent or cannot state a preference. Although younger Russians indeed support democracy in somewhat greater numbers, their level of support for authoritarianism barely differs from the level of support among older cohorts.

We also examined how Russians view democracy from another less direct but equally revealing angle: how they view Stalin. Much was made of the fact that, according to polls conducted in March 2003 in connection with the 50th anniversary of Stalin's death, the majority views him as a great man, despite the history of the GULAG. Our 2003 data paint a similar picture: about one-quarter of Russians say that they would definitely or probably vote for Stalin for president, while only two-fifths say that they definitely would not. Those who say they would vote for Stalin differ systematically from those who say they would not in their responses to additional questions that tap into political attitudes. Spontaneous references to Stalin by participants in focus groups we conducted in summer 2002 also increase our confidence that the survey findings are not mere research artifacts, but capture a true tendency in Russian society.

The numbers from the Russian street should be unsettling for those who have listed the post-Soviet transition as a mission accomplished. There are links between public support inside states for democracy and peace and stability in a specific region. Based on our data, we conclude that much work remains to be done to convince Russians of all generations that democracy offers them a better way of life than authoritarianism. Otherwise, there is little hope that the Russian public will raise many objections to further authoritarian actions on the part of the government. A good place to concentrate efforts would be a broad campaign to educate Russians about the murderous legacy of Stalin.

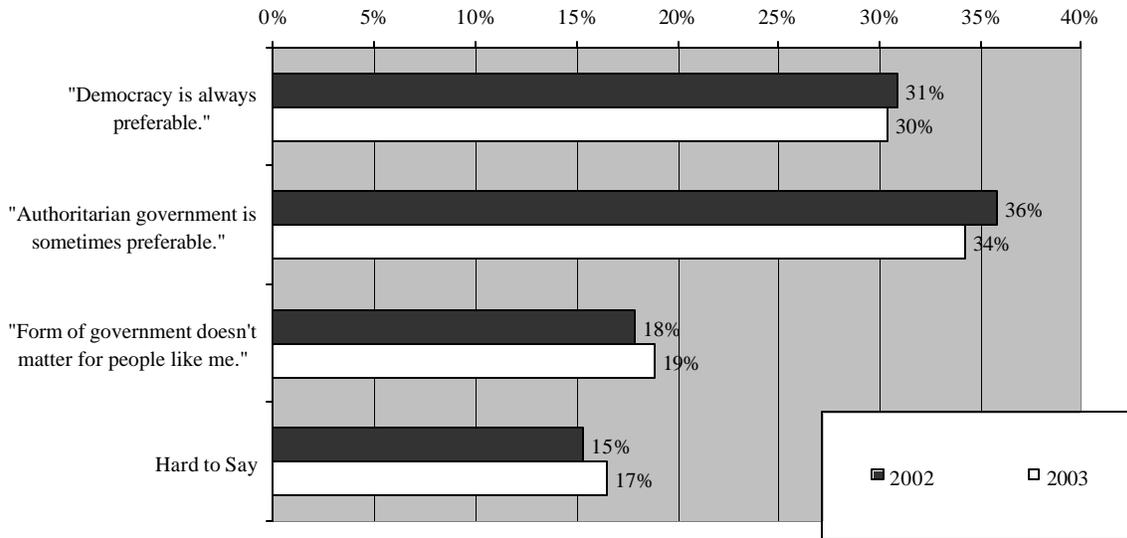
Whatever the specific solution, the situation calls for continuing, active engagement in Russia's transformation. Unfortunately, the Bush administration currently speaks as if democracy has been established in Russia and actually plans to end democracy assistance. These are serious policy mistakes, because they only bolster the forces within the Russian government and the Russian public who want to do away with what democratic institutions and rights remain. Perhaps worse, they undermine the real democrats in Russia.

Democracy versus Authoritarian Governance

In 2002 and 2003 we asked over 10,000 survey respondents a question that comparative survey researchers use as a barometer for attitudes toward democracy versus authoritarianism in many countries: "Which statement do you agree with most: 1) democracy is always preferable; 2) authoritarian government is sometimes preferable to democracy; or 3) the form of government does not matter to people like me?"¹

¹Our surveys were conducted by the All-Russian Center for Public Opinion and Market Research (VTsIOM), which itself has recently come under attack from the Putin administration, presumably because it presents objective social scientific information about political, social, and economic issues, which at times inevitably conflicts with the image the regime would like to portray. We designed a survey that was given to a probability sample of 18–64 year old residents of six regions of Russia (Perm, Sverdlovsk, Ryazan, Kaluga, Rostov on Don, and Stavropol) in April 2002 (N = 3002). A similar survey was repeated in the same regions in February 2003 (N=3008). We also included a subset of questions from these surveys on the May 2002 and January 2003 editions of VTsIOM's "Monitoring" survey, administered to nationally-representative samples (N's equal, respectively, 2407 and 2408). For both years we combined the data from the regional and national surveys, using case weights to adjust for the over-sampling of particular regions, the highly educated, women, and urban dwellers, in order to obtain unbiased estimates of population parameters.

Figure 1: Which statement do you agree with most?

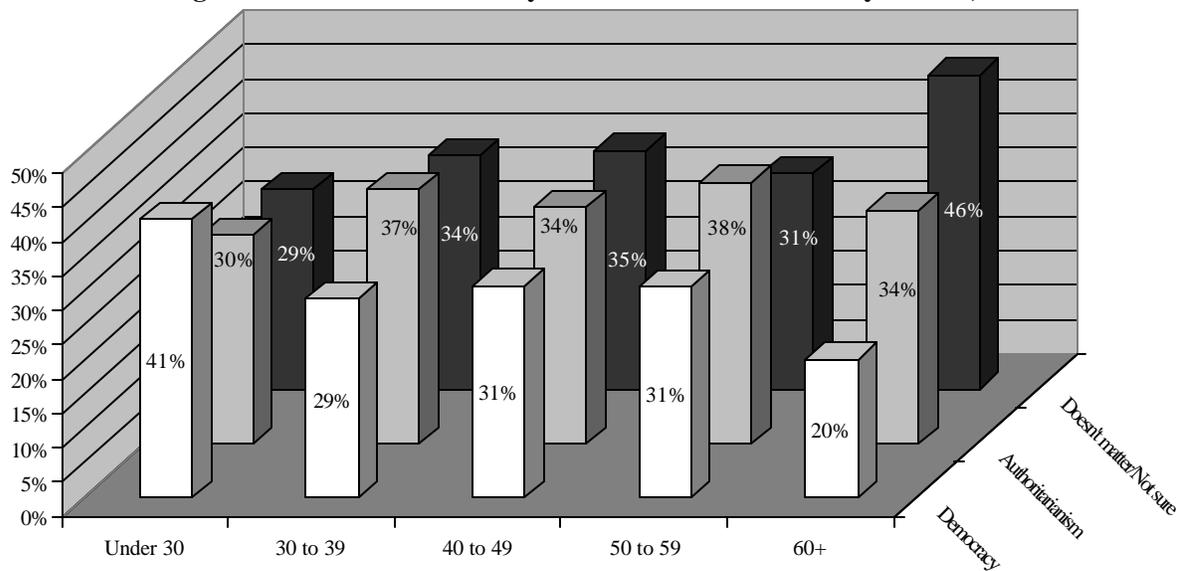


The distribution of responses was nearly identical in both years: 34 percent to 36 percent favor authoritarian rule at least some of the time, 30 percent to 31 percent favor democracy always, and the rest, 33 percent to 36 percent, either say it does not matter or decline to answer (Figure 1). Overall, these numbers suggest that the Russian public is divided into three camps of roughly equal size: one leaning toward authoritarian government, one toward democracy, and one that appears indifferent or undecided.

How typical is such a distribution of opinion? By comparison, the mean for African countries participating in the Afrobarometer surveys was 12 percent preferring autocracy and 69 percent preferring democracy. The mean for East Asian countries participating in the East Asia barometer surveys was 18 percent preferring autocracy and 59 percent preferring democracy (See www.afrobarometer.org/survey1.html and www.globalbarometer.org). Thus, by these measures the Russian public is substantially less inclined to support democracy than the public in a typical African or East Asian nation. Those who wish to see democracy in Russia can take little comfort that, if anything, a slightly greater number of Russians favor authoritarianism than unconditionally support democracy. The remaining third are, in a sense, up for grabs: they are not committed to either form of government. As such, they represent both a challenge and an opportunity for activists seeking to promote democratic values in Russia.

Examining the breakdown of views on the democracy versus authoritarianism issue by cohort from the 2003 sample (Figure 2), we see that the youngest generation (under 30 years old) is indeed more likely to support democracy than their older compatriots are, with 41 percent preferring democracy all the time. But this difference is very moderate: not even a bare majority, much less an overwhelming one, of the youngest cohort clearly supports democracy. Also, support for authoritarian rule among the youth is about as widespread as it is among older cohorts. Russia’s youth are not so much less authoritarian as they are less uncertain (although a surprisingly large number, 29 percent, are uncertain). Which way they turn—toward democracy or authoritarianism—could be key to the future of Russia’s political trajectory.

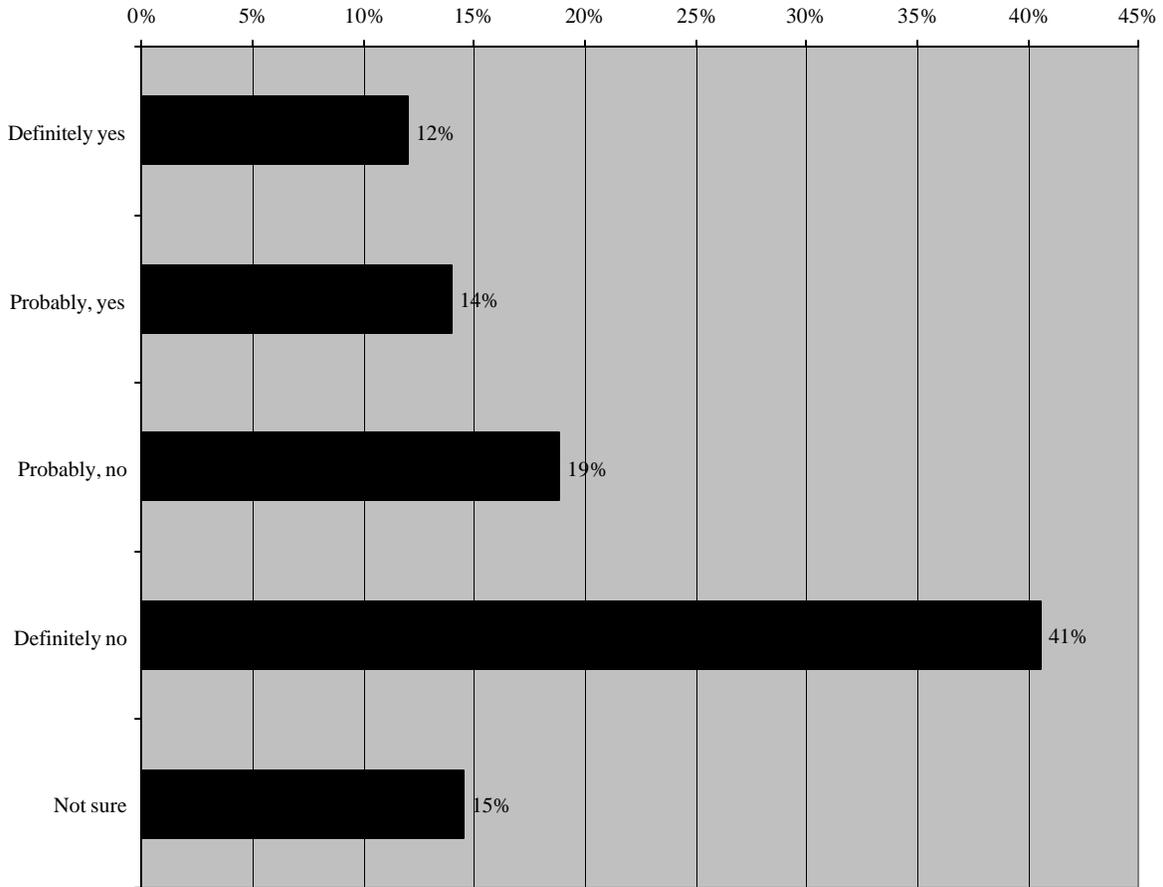
Figure 2: Views on Democracy versus Authoritarianism by Cohort, 2003 Data



More than a Residue of Stalinism

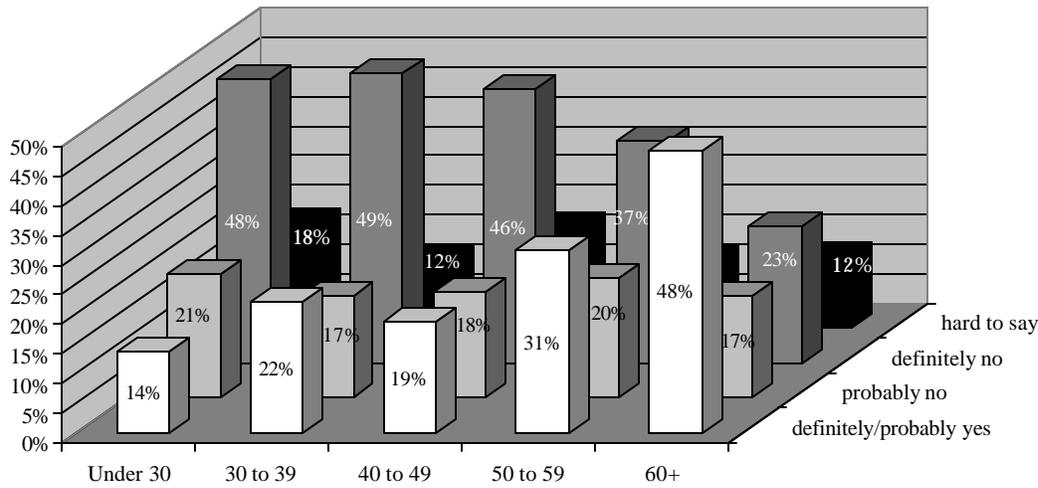
Residual norms from the Soviet era continue to have support, and not just among the usual suspects? that is, the older generation. We find more evidence of this in the responses to a question we asked on the 2003 surveys: “If Stalin were running for president today, would you vote for him?” Our results suggest that 26 percent of the population would definitely or probably vote for Stalin. An additional 19 percent would *probably not* vote for him. The adverb is significant: we would surely be very concerned if nearly 20 percent of German adults said they would *probably not* rather than *definitely not* vote for Hitler if he were running for president. Only about two-fifths, 41 percent, unambiguously reject the possibility of voting for Stalin. An additional 15 percent cannot say if they would vote for a leader who, by all accounts, killed, tortured, enslaved, and imprisoned many millions of his country’s citizens.

Figure 3: If Stalin were running for President of Russia, would you vote for him? (2003)



In the under 30 cohort, 14 percent would vote for Stalin, 21 percent would probably not, 48 percent would definitely not, and 18 percent cannot (or will not) say. Thus, we find a similar pattern with respect to the younger generation: it is somewhat more inclined to value democracy rather than authoritarianism, yet a substantial number—in any case, more than half—are still ambivalent at best in their rejection of Stalin. Overall, optimism that the younger generation of Russians has enthusiastically embraced democracy is clearly misplaced. Assumptions that a younger generation of democrats will simply replace the older generic communists have little basis in reality.

Figure 4: Voting For Stalin, By Cohort (2003)



A skeptic of these findings might argue that those who say, in response to a survey question, that they would vote for Stalin are merely being flippant. In that case, we should not ascribe too much significance to these surveys findings. If that were true, however, we would not find much correlation between stated intentions to vote for Stalin and other measures of support for democracy versus authoritarianism on the survey. In fact, we find that intention to vote for Stalin correlates with views on a number of related topics (Table 1). Stalin voters are more likely to advocate authoritarian government, state control over the mass media, and support harsher military measures in Chechnya. Russians who would not vote for Stalin support a peaceful solution to the conflict in Chechnya and democratic government, and a media free from government control in significantly greater numbers. These correlations tell us that the “vote for Stalin” variable captures something real and meaningful in Russian public opinion.

Table 1				
Relationship of Views on Stalin to Other Views				
<i>Q: What form of government is best?</i>				
<i>Would vote for Stalin...</i>	Always democracy	Sometimes authoritarianism	Does not matter	Hard to say
Definitely/ probably	16%	46%	25%	13%
Hard to say	21%	32%	23%	24%
Definitely/ probably not	40%	29%	15%	16%
<i>Q: Would it be good or bad for Russia if the government controlled the contents of all news reports in the mass media?</i>				
<i>Would vote for Stalin...</i>	Definitely/ probably good	Hard to say	Definitely/ probably bad	
Definitely/ probably	53%	19%	28%	
Hard to say	33%	31%	36%	
Definitely/ probably not	29%	12%	58%	
<i>Q: What should be done in Chechnya?</i>				
<i>Would vote for Stalin...</i>	Intensify military action	Maintain status quo	Negotiation/ Ceasefire/ Withdrawal	Hard to Say
Definitely/ probably	40%	5%	37%	18%
Hard to say	30%	2%	39%	29%
Definitely/ probably not	30%	7%	47%	16%

Beyond the Numbers: Spontaneous Talk about Stalin

Our data show that taboos in support of Stalin are not nearly as robust as one might expect in 2003. Indeed, one can buy postcards on Moscow's most fashionable street and playing cards in Sheremetevo airport in his likeness. In some parts of Russia, streets still bear Stalin's name. These details may strike observers as isolated and irrelevant but they indicate that support for Stalin remains socially acceptable in Russia. We were especially conscious of this while observing nine focus groups on issues involving human rights, the war in Chechnya, and political institutions in the summer of 2002 in three regions of Russia. Although none of our questions mentioned Stalin, his name came up spontaneously in several groups. One sample exchange in Rostov offers insight into how Russians think about Stalin.

Stalin was first mentioned during a discussion of freedom of speech (the numbers denote the different participants who made the following comments:

- 10: Freedom of speech should be the top priority.
- 2: What's the big deal? We're sitting here and gabbing away as we like.
- 3: We've forgotten all about that right because we have gotten used to speaking more freely.
- 10: And under Stalin, would we be able to sit here calmly and talk like this?
- 3: Of course not, under Stalin we would be sitting somewhere else.
- 10: Exactly, we would be "sitting" [in prison].
- 1: Did you live under Stalin?
- 10: No, my mama did.
- 1: Well, then what are you saying? My mama lived under Stalin, and she says she knows nothing about any of that.
- 3: They all say they knew nothing.
- 1: Not a single person around her was ever arrested, and the social conditions were much better, and she worked in the *obkom* [regional committee] of the *komsomol*.
- 3: My mother also says she didn't know anything about those facts. But when she starts to think about the past, she suddenly remembers that something happened to so-and-so, that her neighbor somehow disappeared or something like that. Nonetheless, when you ask her directly, she doesn't remember anything. It's very curious.

Participant number one's comments suggest that she doubts that many arrests and repressions took place during Stalin's reign. Her parents apparently have convinced her that discussions of these aspects of Stalinism are inaccurate, and that life under Stalin ("social conditions") was better. To her, at least, the truth about the Stalin era remains

obscure, and has evidently been distorted by the experiences of her mother. In the absence of systematic, far-reaching public education about Stalin, individuals rely more on the idiosyncratic accounts and anecdotes of their relatives in order to form an opinion of what happened during his regime. Others in the group are clearly more convinced that Stalin restricted freedom of expression and that arrests and disappearances were quite common. Number three even comments insightfully on the curious disjuncture between the concrete memories and general statements of his mother. Russians who are well informed about Stalin's deeds evidently can treat rosy accounts with skepticism.

What Can Be Done?

Well-respected observers of Russia have argued that Russians intrinsically need to believe in a strong leader, and that support for Stalin is not likely to disappear anytime soon. We take a different perspective. Political culture is malleable. If unaddressed, support for Stalin will not disappear on its own accord. Like any attitude toward any political and social concept, views on Stalin in Russia depend on exposure to history and argument. No active program of de-Stalinization has ever been implemented in Russia. To bring about a fundamental rejection of Stalin and all he represents, Russia needs such a program. Educators must develop modules on the Stalin era and Stalin's role in Soviet history to be included in the standard curricula of all schools and universities. A public campaign involving entertainment personalities, television shows, films, and public lectures has a critical role to play in challenging and replacing myths about Stalin's role in World War II. In place of Stalin, a de-Stalinization campaign should celebrate Russia's dissident heroes from the Soviet era such as Andrei Sakharov and Joseph Brodsky. Russians should take deep pride in the courage of these figures. To make a de-Stalinization campaign effective, supporters should first collect more data on what Russians—especially those of the younger generation—know about Stalin, what myths they believe regarding his rule, and where they get their information. Armed with these data, activists and educators could design and implement a serious and sustained national campaign to construct a new history and new heroes.

To be sure, such a campaign is a large undertaking, but there are well-organized and respected human rights groups in Russia today that are prepared to take the lead. The U.S. government and other international donors should support these efforts. As the Bush administration moves toward ending assistance for democrats in Russia, the role of donors and those in Congress who can challenge this policy becomes all the more important.

Russia's transition to democracy is incomplete in several ways. Recent political developments show that it has not only stalled, but has begun to regress in terms of political institutions and government actions. It is also imperiled in the realm of public opinion: the Russian public is divided as to the merits of democracy in general, and substantial support for Stalin remains. A sizable proportion—as much as one-third—of the population remains “up for grabs” ideologically and politically. Democratic values do not grow on trees, and de-Stalinization will not happen spontaneously. If this authoritarian trend continues, the need for effective, sustained campaigns to promote democratic values and reveal the horrors of Stalin's rule becomes all the more urgent.

The greater the delay in launching major efforts pursuing these goals, the sooner the day will come when it will no longer be possible to do so.

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