



# Bureaucracy to Democracy to Autocracy in Russia



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*Must Authoritarianism be at Odds with Democracy in the Transition from the USSR to the Russian Federation?*

## Gorbachev's Democratization

From the beginning of his leadership, Gorbachev began his policies of Demokratizatsiya, Perestroika, and Glasnost to democratize the USSR. These policies were intended to liberalize politics, economics, and media in the USSR.

## Shock Therapy Begins

Boris Yeltsin instituted numerous measures to transform the command economy of the USSR into a market economy at all costs. These measures compounded throughout Yeltsin's presidency.

## Yeltsin's Constitution Passes

The constitution gave outsized power to the executive branch and strengthens the presidency. The legislative and judicial branches were stripped of power without the ability to check or balance the executive, who can issue decrees and legislation with impunity.



## The Fall of The USSR

Beginning in the late 1980's, various republics seceded from the USSR. A coup was attempted by Soviet loyalists in 1991. Yeltsin saved Gorbachev from this coup and Gorbachev handed over the presidency to Yeltsin on Christmas Day, 1991.

## Yeltsin Storms the Russian Whitehouse

President Boris Yeltsin used the military to storm the building that housed the Russian Congress and Constitutional Courts. After the Congress and Courts refused to agree to Yeltsin's version of the constitution, Yeltsin assumed control of all branches of the government, giving him complete control over the constitutional process.

## Putin's Presidency

In the wake of Yeltsin's presidency, the Russia Putin inherited was facing political destabilization. In response, Putin turned to authoritarian measures in an attempt to establish political order and stability. His actions resonate strongly with Schmitt's theories on order through legitimate state sovereignty. To strengthen the Russian state, Putin created seven federal districts to control the regional governments. He also established sovereignty by creating a power network based on his personal patronage rather than democratic, institutional relationships. Putin's attacks on opposition parties helped maintain his personal sovereignty and were justified in the name of democratic order.

Russia's transition from a communist bureaucracy to an authoritarian free-market economy demonstrates that authoritarianism and democracy are not mutually exclusive, and a shift towards democracy can be used to justify a concurrent shift towards authoritarianism based on a rejection of less supposedly democratic liberal forms of government like parliamentarianism.

## Recommended Readings

Gooding, John. "Perestroika as Revolution from Within: An Interpretation," *Russian Review* 51, no. 1 (1992).  
Lewis, David G. *Russia's New Authoritarianism*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020.  
Metcalf, Lee Kendall. "Presidential Power in the Russian Constitution." *Journal of Transnational Law and Policy* 6, no. 1 (1996): 125-142.  
Reddaway, Peter, and Dmitri Glinski. *The Tragedy of Russia's Reforms: Market Bolshevism Against Democracy*. Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2001.