

## **Democratization and Russian Education**

David V. Powell Olga V. Matvienko

---

### ***Abstract***

This review of literature examines the historical context and cultural, political, and economic forces affecting attempts to democratize education in post-Soviet Russia. Long-standing traditions of autocratic rule have cultivated a mentality of habitual dependence on authority and power, which poses many challenges to a cultural shift toward democratic values. Lacking experience in functional political democracy or cultivation of democracy in civil society, modern Russia remains insular, viewing the democratic West with suspicion and distrust. Attempts to introduce democratic principles often flounder in the wake of traditions of authoritarian rule, stagnation, political hypocrisy and apathy. Despite a simulation of democracy in Russian institutional processes, tight state control of the media and public skepticism of outside sources of information hamper efforts to emulate liberal democratic institutions and practices. Nevertheless, there have been tangible transformations in access to education and independence from rigid state control, but these have come with new challenges of coping with decentralization, insufficient funding, antiquated infrastructure, and the need for modern technology. Corruption and resistance to change persist, while piecemeal reforms have lacked systematic strategy. Civic-minded, progressive education, sustained by a shift to democratic tendencies in the national culture, is critical to freeing Russia from its totalitarian past.

***Keywords:*** *Russia; Democracy; Democratization; Education; Reform*

---

## **1. Authoritarian Roots: Historical Context**

Almost two centuries ago, Alexis De Tocqueville observed that "... the Russian centers all the authority of society in a single arm. The principle instrument [of Russian society]... is servitude" (Rutland, 2005, p. 1). Because of its historical experience, geopolitical conditions and political traditions, Russia has never experienced functional democracy or the cultivation of civil society (Rutland, 2005). Diligensky and Chugrov (2000) traced Russian's "traditional adherence to non-freedom" and "intrinsically aggressive attitude toward neighboring countries" to centuries of isolation and despotism. Russian history is filled with the juxtaposition of authoritarian restrictions with sporadic and reluctant top-down "reforms" that ultimately strengthened the privileges of the elites or suppressed dissent (Curtis, 1996).

Despite persistent suppression – or perhaps because of it – there have always been "seeds of liberal freedoms" at the local level, dating back to feudal Russia, through traditions of *veche*, the town assembly, *zemskysobor*, local self-management, and *mir*, the peasant community culture of "sacrificing individual rights for the sake of the collectivistic values" (Diligensky&Chugrov, 2000). Ironically, the stoic perseverance of the *mir* culture ultimately cemented the unquestioning acceptance of iron-handed authoritarian rule.

The 1917 October Revolution attempted to overthrow autocracy, but the Russian mentality, habitually dependent on authority and power, resisted the necessary cultural shift. During the Civil War of 1918-1920, Lenin consolidated power under the monolithic dictatorship of the Communist Party (Curtis, 1996), whose decisions were nominally by consensus of party leaders. In reality, freedom was tightly controlled by the Cheka, or secret police (Trueman, 2016), who denounced and imprisoned or exiled potential rivals (Curtis, 1996). When Stalin succeeded Lenin in 1924, he brutally maintained and reinforced this dictatorship for three decades with labor camps, forced collectivization, famine, and executions (Keller, 1989). The intelligentsia were virtually extirpated, either imprisoned, exiled or killed. Those who could fled the country to escape "the most...deep-rooted system of authoritarian rule the world has ever seen." (Rutland, 2005, p. 3).

The Cold War decades after World War II only served to strengthen the ideological and cultural isolation of Russia and its satellites. Soviet leaders created the image of an omnipresent enemy to justify further isolation and repression. Despite all evidence to the contrary, party leaders skillfully manipulated public opinion, perpetuating the illusion that Russians lived in the best democratic country the world had known, while western countries were portrayed to be suffering from exploitation and inhumane practices (Keller, 1989).

Yet, great discrepancies existed between Communist slogans and the realities of Soviet life. Empty pretenses staved off genuine democratic changes (Diligensky&Chugrov, 2000), since serious engagement of the Russian people represented a threat to those in power. Any deviation in practice was considered alien and dangerous. Democracy remained rudimentary at best and slight transformations in the pattern of state government never softened the rigidity of decades of iron rule (Denton, 2006). Bombarded by massive communist propaganda, the population was encouraged to reject liberal freedoms and self-governance (Bonicelli, 2014) that would have been necessary to establish and maintain successful Western-style democratic societies (Sidorkin, 1998).

## **2. Education under Authoritarian Rule**

Soviet apologists have portrayed education as one of the highest achievements of the Soviet Union. Before the October Revolution, Russia had been a country of almost total illiteracy, but under Soviet rule this was completely reversed by decades of free general primary, secondary, vocational and higher education (Klyachko& Mau, 2007). However, this achievement was always subordinate to the greater goal of indoctrination in the social norms of the totalitarian regime. The collectivist values of Soviet society, especially prevalent in the 1960s, stressed a "unity of expectations" of both teachers and students, producing obedient individuals who would more effectively perpetuate the ideas of communism (Sidorkin, 1998).

The Soviet educational system was highly centralized, characterized by tight control over all educational policies and practices as dictated by the ruling Communist Party with its systematic control in each sphere of life. Marxist-Leninist principles permeated the curriculum, regardless of subject and level of education (Endo, 2003). Each textbook began with a pompous tribute to party leaders, and citations of Marx, Engels and Lenin were used generously in the explanation of subjects as unrelated as Darwin's theory of natural selection and Mendeleev's table of chemical elements. Charged with transmitting Communist Party ideology unabridged and unedited, teachers were closely watched and purged if suspected of teaching students to challenge the leaders or values of the Soviet system.

## **3. Emergence of Democratic Practices**

Despite the steady suppression of democratic educational practices in Soviet schools at all levels, some potentially democratic tendencies pushed their way through the thick layer of official oversight. Pedagogues such as Anton Makarenko and Vasily Sukhomlinsky advocated collectivism as a social force in a child's upbringing,

pioneering the use of structured activities for children through purposeful social engagement (Sidorkin, 1998). Makarenko wrote "We want to bring up a cultured Soviet workingman...teach him a trade...discipline him, and make him a politically developed and loyal member of the working class, the Komsomol and the Bolshevik Party" (1965, p. 13).

The Communards movement, begun in the late 1950s, also emphasized group identity and moral norming through periodic retreats and summer camps. These self-organizing groups focused on democratic decision-making and social activism but never at the expense of the welfare and interests of collective. Although "democracy and authoritarianism coexisted" in most schools, "democracy and civic life in education was many times larger than in the rest of the society" (Sidorkin, 1998, p. 6). However, this simulation of democracy was often just a pretense, as the children were closely watched and directed by their teachers, required to be ideologically correct and act as they were told to "because our elders behave this way" (Makarenko, 1965, p. 43). Nevertheless, the students were involved in elections of leaders and in distribution of duties within the classroom and school (Sidorkin, 1998).

#### **4. Democratic Aspirations and Transition: the Russian Federation**

Mikhail Gorbachev has been credited with starting the process to "put Russia on the road to democratization" (Denton, 2006, Abstract). Terminology such as "democratization," "humanization," "diversification," "development of individual character," and "creation of life-long education system" was first incorporated into education policy at the Plenary Meeting of the Central Committee of the Communist Party in 1988. This was followed by a draft version of the Basic Law on Education, based on principles of humanism and democracy (Endo, 2003). Unfortunately, the USSR collapsed before these changes could be adopted and piecemeal efforts to reform education were hampered by numerous impediments accumulated over the long years of Soviet authoritarian rule (Sidorkin, 1998).

The main concepts of the Basic Law on Education were carried forward by the Russian Federation. The Ministry of Education was directed to revise curricula and develop a new paradigm of educational guidance with more focus on the arts, humanities and social sciences. Teaching methodologies were updated and the culture of the classroom was changed, repudiating the principles of socialism in favor of a new system oriented on a Western style market economy and democratic society (Endo, 2003). However, the demand to align education to the "basic mechanisms and values of the free market economy" (Koybasyuk & Kuznetsova, 2012, para. 3) proved to be self-defeating as educational systems could not keep up with rapid changes in economic demands, leaving them "unable

to provide labor markets with employees who were equipped with the necessary qualifications in contemporary technologies” (para. 5).

Despite widespread pressure to reform, pockets of resistance persisted at the grass-roots level. After so many years of governmental imposition of what to teach and how to teach, few educators wanted to accept any kind of pressure to conform to any government imposed ideology. There was little interest in how to construct a new model of knowledge and traditional political structures of favoritism and personal allegiance resulted in fierce political infighting that drove policy decisions and reform programs on the basis of who formulated them, rather than intrinsic merits. (Holmes, et al, 1995).

Russian education is perceived by 72% of Russians to be “corrupt or extremely corrupt” (Transparency International, 2015). In 2003, the Ministry of Education launched the Unified State Examination (USE) for higher education, as an attempt to eliminate corruption in admissions. However, the USE failed to end deeply rooted dishonest practices in education (Samedova & Ostapschuk, 2012). Bribery and embezzlement erode what little trust exists for public education, compromising the development of democratic initiatives (Osipian, 2012).

## **5. Ongoing Challenges**

As early as 1988, it became obvious that decentralization would be required to provide the freedom of choice required to meet local needs (Holmes, et al., 1995). The Education Act of 1992 introduced a system of local financing and administrative control that provided freedom to control local school earnings, with the independence to define ideals of individualism, set goals, and determine structure. The success of these reforms depended on fundamental changes in institutional organization, infrastructure, personnel policy, content standards, educational technology, and quality assessment (World Bank, 1995).

Secondary education was restructured to raise the quality of preparation of secondary school students. The required level of general education was increased to eleven years. In 2003, the Ministry of Education introduced a system of “study orientations” or “profiles” that enabled senior secondary students (years 10 and 11) in general education schools to specialize in subject areas. This was intended to increase content rigor for general education students and to equalize opportunities for higher quality education. The Ministry of Education also initiated articulation agreements between secondary schools and universities, to better coordinate curriculum expectations (Nordic Recognition Network, 2005).

### *Democratization of Russian Education*

By 2000 the number of universities increased by 86%, students by 72%, and faculty by 25%; the number of private universities increased by 37% and the number of students in them by 10%. By 2007, the number of private universities further increased by 40% and the number of students in them by 17%. However, the growth in the number of universities and student enrollment was not matched by increases in faculty or resource support and in many cases represented low-quality distance education initiatives, which resulted in an overall decline in quality of educational services. In 2004-2005, Russia was still ranked 79th worldwide in terms of educational quality (Klyachko & Mau, 2007).

The introduction of the Unified State Examination further taxed the higher education infrastructure as universities were flooded with applicants. The new emphasis on passing the centralized exam also eroded curricular standards across the country and forced universities to "make up for the gaps" in students' secondary education, which "cuts the time needed for advanced learning" (para. 11). At the same time, there has been little provision for additional funds to meet growing demands. Expenditure for education initially increased from 2.9% of GDP in 2000 to 4.1% but quickly levelled off, fluctuating around 4% (Abdrakhmanova, et al., 2014). Since 2013, the Russian economy has significantly contracted across the board (Trading Economics, 2016) and long-term, endemic national recession, education threatens additional shortfalls, eroding quality even more.

Adequacy of school infrastructure, including maintenance of up-to-date equipment and technology, is indirectly dependent on school financing. The Soviet school was known for its adherence to austerity and minimalist policies, so educational technology integration has not been an easy process in Russia. There is also a reluctance of the older generation of "minimalists" to broaden the array of tools in the classroom (Heyneman, 2010). However, educational leaders realize that effective use of technology enhances motivation for learning, raises the quality of knowledge, and can even compensate in part for aging and inadequate physical resources in a struggling economy (Powell & Kuzmina, 2010).

The Russian Ministry of Education has recently demanded better engagement of educational technologies into teaching (Gazeta Vestnik Kavkaza, 2014). For example, electronic versions of textbooks are now required along with hard copies. A strong preference has been expressed for using teaching materials in both printed and electronic variants in order to embed technology into traditional. Technology has also been integrated into teaching in distance education programs in several institutions of higher education. (Kovbasyuk & Kuznetsova, 2012).

## **6. Conclusions**

There have been tangible transformations in access and independence that represent the first steps on the long road to modernization and democratization of Russian education. Many impediments to progress remain, however, including cuts in state funding, deteriorating working conditions for academic staff, decline in prestige for teaching and higher education, corrupt licensing and accreditation issues, and the disconnection between market demands and the capacity of the educational system to meet those needs (Kaplan, 2007). Endemic problems of corruption continue to plague education, just as they threaten Russian political and economic systems as a whole (Osipian, 2012).

The globalizing impact of technology has lifted the "iron curtain" separating Russia from the rest of the world. However, the Russian government has clamped down on internal communications, especially TV and radio news, flooding the airwaves with a heavily filtered, propaganda-driven "information war" that systematically skews and even falsifies reporting into a "pseudo-reality" to delegitimize any competing view (Torossian, 2016). It is hardly possible, with all of the existing means of communication, to isolate a whole country unless the country wishes such an outcome for itself, yet that appears to be exactly the case in Russia. A survey by the Center for Global Communication Studies reported that 42% of Russians believe that the Internet is being used by foreign countries against Russia and almost half believe foreign news on the Internet should be censored (Nisbet&Mikati, 2015).

"Backsliding" on early democratic initiatives has clearly slowed motivation for reform (Denton, 2006). However, civic-minded, progressive education, sustained by a shift to democratic tendencies in the national culture, is capable of freeing Russia from its "totalitarian nightmare" (Sidorkin, 1998). The willingness of the Russian populace to act in accordance with democratic values depends on the quality of independent and accessible public education (Petrov, 2008).

## References

- Abdrakhmanova, G., Gokhberg, L., Kovaleva, N., Galina Kovaleva, G., Kuznetsova, V., Ozerova, O., Shugal, N., & Zabaturina, N. (2014). *Digest of education statistics in the Russian Federation, 2014*. Moscow: National Research University
- Bonicelli, P. (2014, November 12). How Russian culture enables Vladimir Putin's global aggression. *The Federalist*. Retrieved December 3, 2016, from <http://thefederalist.com/2014/11/12/how-russian-culture-enables-vladimir-putins-global-aggression/>
- Curtis, G. (1996). *Russia: A country study*. Washington: GPO for the Library of Congress. Retrieved January 9, 2016 from <http://countrystudies.us/russia/>

*Democratization of Russian Education*

- Denton, A. (2006). Russian political culture since 1985. *Vestnik, the Journal of Russian and Asian Studies*. Retrieved December 12, 2015, from [http://www.sras.org/russian\\_political\\_culture\\_since\\_1985](http://www.sras.org/russian_political_culture_since_1985)
- Diligensky, G., & Chugov, S. (2000). *"The west" in Russian mentality*. Office for Information and Press, Brussels. Institute of World Economy and International Relations, Moscow. Retrieved on December 22, 2015 from <http://www.nato.int/acad/fellow/98-00/diliguenski.pdf>
- Endo, T., (2003). Decentralization and educational reform in Siberia and the Russian Far East. *International Review of Education*, 49(1-2), pp. 97-109. Retrieved June 20, 2015 from <http://www1.worldbank.org/publicsector/decentralization/Feb2004Course/Background%20materials/Endo.pdf>
- GazetaVestnikKavkaza. (August 13, 2014). *New tendencies in Russian education*. Retrieved January 4, 2016 from <http://vestnikkavkaza.net/articles/society/58777.html>
- Heyneman, S. P. (2010). A comment on the changes in higher education in the Post-Soviet Union. *European Education*, 42(1) pp. 76-87.
- Holmes, B., Read, G. H., & Voskresenskaya, N., (1995). *Russian education: Tradition and transition*. New York: Routledge.
- Kaplan, V. (2007). The History of Reforms in Russian Higher Education. *European Education*, 39(2), pp.37-59.
- Keller, B. (February 4, 1989) Major soviet paper says 20 million died as victims of Stalin. *The New York Times* [Electronic archive], Retrieved March 28, 2016, from <http://www.nytimes.com/1989/02/04/world/major-soviet-paper-says-20-million-ied-as-victims-of-stalin.html>
- Kovbasyuk, O., & Kuznetsova, A. (March 25, 2012). The Modernization of Higher Education in Russia: An interview with Dr. Alla G. Kuznetsova. *The International HETL Review*, (2), Article 3. Retrieved June 15, 2015 from <https://www.hetl.org/modernization-of-higher-education-in-russia/>
- Klyachko, T., & Mau, V., (2007). Tendencies in the development of higher professional education in Russia. *Educational Studies. Moscow*, (3), pp.46-64.
- Makarenko, A. S. (1965). *Problems of Soviet school education*. Moscow: Progress Publishers



- Mikkil, E. (2006). *The Russian party system*. Academic Center for Baltic and Russian Studies. Retrieved May 24, 2016, from <http://www.ut.ee/ABVKeskus/?leht=prognoosid&aasta=2006&keel=en&dok=partysys>
- Nisbet, E. C., & Mikati, S. (February 18, 2015). Russians don't trust the Internet – and it's making the country worse. *The Washington Post*
- Nordic Recognition Network. (2005). *The system of education in Russia*. The Danish Centre for Assessment of Foreign Qualification (DK- ENIC/NARIC). Retrieved January 12, 2016, from <http://http://norric.org/files/education-systems/Ruslandsrapport-feb2005.pdf>
- Osipian, A. L. (2012). Education corruption, reform, and growth: Case of Post-Soviet Russia. *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, (3)1, pp.20-29
- Petrov, A. V. (2008). The value preferences of young people: Diagnosis and tendencies of changes. *Russian Education and Society*, (50)9, pp.53-67.
- Powell, D., & Kuzmina, S. (2010). *Distance teacher education*. Language, Education, Culture: Integration Processes in the Modern World. International Internet Student Conference, Vinnytsia Pedagogical University. Vinnytsia, Ukraine p.15.
- Rutland, P. (2005). *Why is Russia still an authoritarian state? (Or, what would De Tocqueville say?)*. Government Department Wesleyan University, paper prepared for American Political Science Association, Washington D.C., September 2-4, 2005. Retrieved June 10, 2015 from <http://prutland.web.wesleyan.edu/>
- Samedova, E., & Ostapschuk, M., (2012). *Russia: An educational system in crisis*. Retrieved June 10, 2015 from <http://www.dw.com/en/russia-an-educational-system-in-crisis/a-15906118>.
- Sidorkin, A., (1998). *Authoritarianism and education in Soviet schools*. Rhode Island College. Retrieved December 14, 2015, from <http://digitalcommons.ric.edu/facultypublications/18/>
- Torossian, R. (May 31, 2016). Russia is winning the information war. *The Observer* [Online]. Retrieved May 31, 2016, from <http://observer.com/2016/05/russia-is-winning-the-information-war/>
- Trading Economics. (2016), *Russia GDP growth rate, 1995-2016*. Retrieved May 31, 2016, from <http://www.tradingeconomics.com/russia/gdp-growth>
- Transparency International. (2015). *Global corruption report: Education*. Retrieved July 7, 2015, from [http://files.transparency.org/content/download/675/2899/file/2013\\_GCR\\_Education\\_EN.pdf](http://files.transparency.org/content/download/675/2899/file/2013_GCR_Education_EN.pdf)

*Democratization of Russian Education*

Trueman, C. N. (2016). *The Russian civil war*. Retrieved March 28, 2016, from <http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/modern-world-history-1918-to-1980/russia-1900-to-1939/the-russian-civil-war/>

World Bank. (1995). *Russia: education in the transition*. Report #13698-RU. Washington, DC, the World Bank, Europe and Central Asia Country Department III, Human Resources Division. Retrieved May 25, 2016, from [http://www-wds.worldbank.org/external/default/WDSContentServer/WDSP/IB/1995/12/01/000009265\\_3961019095647/Rendered/PDF/multi\\_page.pdf](http://www-wds.worldbank.org/external/default/WDSContentServer/WDSP/IB/1995/12/01/000009265_3961019095647/Rendered/PDF/multi_page.pdf)