



## How Freedom and Dreams of a ‘Normal Life’ Died in Post-Cold-War Russia

Optimism about democracy gave way to Putin’s chilling tyranny.

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“Nothing will ever change in this country except for the worse.”

“This country” was Soviet Russia in the late 1970s, and my father repeatedly said this to my mother trying to persuade her to emigrate while there was still a chance. It was the era of bare store shelves (getting barer) and long food lines (getting longer), of banned books and dangerous conversations. By the age of 9, I had learned that the things we talked about at home were not to be mentioned at school, “or Daddy will go to jail.” The unmentionables included forbidden literature—whether smuggled books published abroad or the blurry typescripts and carbon copies of *samizdat*—and uncensored news from heavily jammed foreign radio broadcasts such as the Voice of America and Radio Liberty. Eavesdropping by the KGB was matter-of-factly presumed; nothing risky was ever discussed on the phone, and risky conversations in one’s apartment were surrounded with precautions, like covering the telephone with a pillow to muffle a bugging device.

“Abroad,” in this world, was an unattainable Eden. Even among people who weren’t particularly anti-Soviet, everything Western was viewed with a mix of curiosity, awe, and impossible longing. When a girl in my class whose father was a diplomat brought a copy of *Vogue* to school, everyone, girls and boys, crowded around her to gape at the ads. While some European and even American films showed up in Soviet movie theaters, usually a few years late (a friend and I made a fairly long trek to see *The Golden Voyage of Sinbad* three times), most of Western popular culture was off-limits; all we knew of *Star Wars*, for instance, was the articles in the Soviet press denouncing the movie as propaganda for U.S. imperialism.

When my family finally left in February 1980—we were lucky enough to get our exit visa days after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and days before the door slammed shut on Jewish emigration—my father’s prediction certainly seemed to be coming true. Arrests of dissidents were becoming more frequent; Andrei Sakharov, the great physicist and human rights activist, had been forcibly confined to Gorky, a city closed off to foreigners. The Soviet leviathan seemed

more implacable than ever. The level of fear was such that after we arrived in the United States, most of my parents' and grandmother's friends and relatives were afraid to correspond with them. One friend whose daughter was starting her career as a ballerina was horrified when she found out that another mutual friend had sent my mother a program for the daughter's debut stage appearance: Everyone knew that *they* opened and read the mail, and what if *they* figured out that the program had been sent for its listing of this particular dancer?

By the time we had been gone for seven years, the usually bleak-and-bleaker reports from the Soviet Union began to show glimmers of hope. Sakharov was returned to Moscow with honors; political prisoners were getting released. The words *glasnost* (openness) and *perestroika* (restructuring) were suddenly all the rage. A slow trickle of heretical content in Soviet newspapers and magazines grew and swelled to a torrent. From exposés of Stalin-era Soviet crimes, it was but a step to articles that questioned communism itself and even suggested that Vladimir Lenin, the hallowed leader of the Bolshevik Revolution, may not have been the greatest man who ever lived. The old taboos fell like dominoes; crime, homelessness, hunger, child abuse, and other social problems that were once supposed to exist only "over there" were suddenly acknowledged. Religion and sex, both of which had to keep a low profile under the Soviet system, came out of the closet. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago* was serialized in a leading magazine. Formerly banned books such as Mikhail Bulgakov's *Heart of a Dog*, a 1925 short novel that savagely satirized the communist project of creating a "new man," were not only published but adapted for the screen.

By 1990, things had changed enough that I—by then a working journalist and the author of a memoir about my Soviet girlhood which was becoming more dated by the day—felt brave enough to go to Moscow, first on a media junket in April and then for a Cato Institute conference titled "Transition to Freedom" in October. (Until then, travel to the USSR had been mostly the subject of bad dreams in which I was back in Moscow and stuck, having either lost my U.S. passport or missed my flight back.)

It was a dizzyingly new world in which no one was afraid to talk about anything—not even on the phone. A typewritten booklet of jokes about then-Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev was sold freely on a street market, and you could get your picture taken with a Gorby cutout. Pro-democracy activists met out in the open and discussed such topics as changing the Soviet constitution to abolish the article establishing the Communist Party's "leading role" in the political system. I attended a protest rally and a symposium on Jewish life and anti-Semitism in the Soviet Union; I met with anti-corruption crusaders and gay rights activists. On my second trip, in the fall of 1990, a young Russian journalist invited me to a massive march for various democratic causes. Tens of thousands marched along one of downtown Moscow's largest avenues with banners, handwritten placards, and tricolor Russian flags. While there was anger and frustration, there was also a hopeful and festive spirit; some of the demonstrators had young children perched on their shoulders.

Along with this raucous freedom, there was the influx of Western popular and consumer culture, from the Sylvester Stallone poster in my 14-year-old cousin's room to the Nina Ricci store in downtown Moscow. Everything Western was still surrounded by such an aura of glamour that

disposable cups and containers from Moscow's first McDonald's—where you had to stand in line for hours—were sometimes kept as souvenirs. Movie theaters showed Western films that were not only new but would have been considered shockingly decadent in the old days, such as the sexy and violent French thriller *La Femme Nikita*. (It was also in Moscow that two Russian friends dragged me to see Bob Guccione's execrable *Caligula*, which I had managed to successfully avoid in the United States; its awfulness was almost redeemed by the hilarious Russian voiceover translation in which all the lines were read by a single monotonous male voice.)

Although the West was much more accessible, it was still idolized. A possibly apocryphal story was going around about a little boy who, asked what he wanted to be when he grew up, replied, "President Bush." (That would be Bush 41.)

Above all, the West was a place of "normal life." The dream of a normal life was a theme that came up all the time in conversation with ordinary Russians as well as journalists and activists, and turned up just as often in the newly liberated Russian media. What was this coveted "normal life"? Personal freedom; being able to read, watch, or listen to anything you wanted, live wherever you wanted and travel abroad if you could afford it; abundant consumer goods; and, in the most basic sense, being able to make your own choices and live for yourself and your loved ones without having to serve, or at least pretend to serve, a collective or an ideology.

Several months after my second trip came the news of the coup by Communist Party hardliners, intended to oust Gorbachev and scuttle the reforms. Tanks rumbled through Moscow. For a scary moment it looked as if the spirit of freedom I had seen was about to be choked in its infancy. While I was certainly glad that my own life and freedom were secure, I felt heartbroken for all the people whose dreams of a better life—a "normal life"—were about to be crushed.

But that didn't happen. Muscovites, led by Boris Yeltsin, fought back. The coup was defeated. When I returned to Moscow again, in late November 1991, the USSR was nearing its last days.

By the time Vladimir Putin became president in 2000, I had not been to Russia in nearly seven years; I had been busy with other projects, and my relatives in Moscow (at least, the ones with whom I'd been in touch) had emigrated. Depressing news had been coming in from in Russia for some time: the war in Chechnya; the 1998 default and economic collapse; the shocking fatal shooting, also that year, of scholar and political figure Galina Starovoitova, a brilliant and brave woman I had met in 1990. But the ascension of an unrepentant ex-KGB officer who quickly restored the old Soviet anthem (albeit with new lyrics) and brought back the red Soviet banner (minus hammer and sickle) as Russia's military flag was still a jolt.

Re-reading an [article](#) I wrote for *Reason* in the summer of 2001 titled "Soviet Reunion: Russia's future is looking frighteningly like its past," I am struck by the extent to which Putin's authoritarian turn was already evident by then, and particularly by this passage:

In recent months ... I have occasionally wondered if, having once overestimated the permanence of the Soviet system, I had more recently overestimated the permanence of change. The news

from post-Soviet Russia, never particularly heartening, increasingly evokes grim and queasy feelings of *déjà vu*.

The danger signs were numerous: a steady drive to muzzle the independent media, especially television, through takeovers and investigations; a new “spy mania” that had led to new requirements for scientists to report all foreign contacts and file written reports on trips abroad; a newly cozy relationship with China, Cuba, and North Korea; a surge of anti-Americanism in the Kremlin-loyal press, along with a tendency to attack opposition leaders and activists critical of the government—especially of its brutal war in Chechnya—as dupes or paid lackeys of the West. Another huge red flag, so to speak, was the newly reverential attitude toward the KGB. Putin had proudly referred to himself as a “Chekist,” which has a terrifying ring for any Russian who isn’t a Stalinist. (It is derived from the Cheka, the Soviet regime’s first secret police created as an instrument of Red Terror in 1917).

Still, I wrote back in 2001, there were causes for cautious optimism: one could find plenty of counterexamples showing “just how much Russia *has* changed since the Soviet era.” Some courts had refused to convict whistleblowers on charges trumped up by security services. Journalists who had resigned from NTV, a once-independent television station brought under state control, had been able to find a refuge on a smaller station, albeit one with much more limited reach. The independent radio station Ekho Moskvyy (Moscow Echo) had managed to remain alive and independent, and voices of dissent were still strong in the print media.

And then I added a retrospectively chilling disclaimer.

But when listing all these signs that Russia’s fledgling civil society is not moribund, one feels compelled to add: for now.

Over the next two decades, I wrote several updated variations on the same story: here is how freedom in Russia is being crippled, squeezed and strangled; no, things haven’t returned to the Soviet era, and people still have freedoms would have been unthinkable then. While the political opposition had been crushed or neutralized, and the system elaborately rigged to prevent any meaningful challenge to the ruling party, there was still plenty of space for free thought and debate. Besides, millions of Russians did have their “normal life” (and with a new level of oil-boom-generated affluence). Western consumer goods abounded. Travel to Western Europe, Israel, or the United States was available to anyone with decent earnings. Living in Russia, you could watch any movie or TV show you wanted. And, if you didn’t get involved in politics, the state pretty much left you alone: no mandatory “political education sessions” at work, no required “volunteer work Saturdays” cleaning up trash and collecting recyclables. (Yes, that was really a thing in Soviet days.)

But the islands of freedom kept getting smaller and smaller, and less and less free. Ekho Moskvyy radio was swallowed by Gazprom, the majority state-owned energy giant, and had to make compromises to stay on the air—for instance, to platform far-right and far-left authoritarians to “balance” liberal journalists. (Needless to say, pro-government media were under no parallel requirement to platform dissenters; eventually, liberals disappeared from state-owned television except when they were needed as designated punching bags.) Independent television stations

were taken over and turned into zombie versions of themselves one by one; the sole survivor, the cable channel TV-RAIN, was subjected to harassment campaigns that caused providers to drop it from their packages and advertisers to flee. Changes in the law made it increasingly easy to prosecute a wide range of political speech as “extremism.” Protesters were viciously beaten by riot police and sometimes given hefty jail terms on flimsy charges of violence against law enforcement.

There was a noticeable and scary shift in cultural mood and public opinion, too. Polls showed a growing nostalgia for the USSR and even sympathy for Joseph Stalin himself. While the Soviet period was still officially considered a time of error, pro-Western dissidents from that era were once again routinely cast as foreign stooges. And U.S. Cold War policies that had been intended to contain Soviet Communist expansionism and influence—such as support for anti-totalitarian movements in Eastern Europe—were now presented as hostile actions against Russia. The extent to which the Russian mainstream was becoming a cesspool of anti-American, anti-Western hate and outright derangement became shockingly evident to me when, in October 2008, I watched an hour-long program on the country’s largest TV channel, Channel One, discussing “truther” claims about the September 11 attacks. While some of the panelists rejected the conspiracy theory, the host treated them with unconcealed disdain and barely gave them a chance to speak. When the studio audience was asked how many believed the “official version” of 9/11, not one hand went up.

Militant nationalism surged in 2014 after the first invasion of Ukraine and the Crimea takeover. Tirades against “the fifth column” multiplied; the targets included Ekho Moskvyy. Sergey Roganov, a columnist for *Izvestia* (the veteran Soviet-era paper that had been liberal and pluralist in the 1990s and most of the 2000s, but was now as staunchly loyalist as in Soviet days), wrote that Russia was tired of “Russophobic babble” and that he would welcome a crackdown even if he himself became one of its casualties. Several dissenting news sites were blocked on Russian territory. And, while plenty of space for personal freedom remained, ordinary people were increasingly under pressure to display their patriotism.

Still, for eight more years, things slogged along. Until it all came crashing down with the new invasion of Ukraine.

The battered remnants of the free press are being stamped out, under a policy that forbids using the words “war” and “invasion” in reference to Putin’s “special operation.”

Ekho Moskvyy was taken off the air and then had its website blocked for breaking these rules; shortly afterward, the station’s board of directors voted to shut it down, and its YouTube channel was disappeared as well.

TV-RAIN staffers decided to take the station off the air voluntarily rather than wait to be shut down; some of them have left the country.

*Novaya Gazeta*, Russia’s only independent newspaper, whose editor was awarded a shared Nobel Peace Prize last year, still functions—but it routinely has content taken down by censors. Its staffers’ mood is somber. “I don’t know what will happen next,” correspondent Nadezhda

Prusenkova wrote in her weekly email to readers on March 4. “Obviously, after Ekho and RAIN (hi, guys, love you!), the chances that we are staying are pretty low.” Another correspondent, Vyacheslav Polovinko, noted with dark irony that there was a certain “anthropological interest” in observing current events in Russia: “It’s not every day you find yourself in the midst of a full-fledged apocalypse.”

Having lost their freedoms and gotten used to it, Russians are now losing their Western goodies as the sanctions hit and company after company pulls out of Russia. There will be no new Batman movie for Russian viewers. McDonald’s is leaving. Ikea is leaving. (You may have seen the long lines of people hoping to grab something before the store is gone.) Victoria’s Secret is leaving. Coca-Cola is leaving. And on and on. Also, Russians can no longer exchange rubles for dollars because the ruble has crashed, and European countries no longer allow Aeroflot planes into their airspace.

It’s as if all that glossy Western consumer culture that Russia has acquired in the last 25 years or so—and that would have seemed like magic to my friends and me when I was a teenager—really was a magic spell that has now ended, the shops and restaurants winking out of existence one by one, the tickets to Paris or Rome going up in a puff of smoke. I am reminded of a classic poem known to every Russian child, Pushkin’s “The Tale of the Fisherman and the Little Fish”: After an old fisherman catches and releases a magical fish that can grant wishes, his wife keeps escalating her demands, finally becoming a queen in a grand palace—until she gets too greedy and asks to rule over the seas and the fish itself. In an instant her luxuries vanish and she finds herself back where she was, sitting next to a broken washtub outside a dilapidated shack. The tale has even generated a common Russian idiom that needs no explanation, “to be left with a broken washtub.” Except that in today’s Russia, the people left in that predicament are all paying for one man’s vaulting ambition.

Meanwhile, fear is back. “Be careful if you want to call and talk to someone over there,” a friend who has many contacts in Moscow told my mother. “Definitely avoid political questions. It’s not safe.”

*Novaya Gazeta* reports that after a 12-year-old student at a Moscow school, Kirill, challenged a teacher’s claims about the war in Ukraine—for instance, that Ukraine is dominated by Nazis—his mother Natalia got a call from the school asking her to come in for a chat with a child welfare inspector. Natalia responded by pulling Kirill out of school. The next day, after she had left for work, two policemen showed up. When the boy wouldn’t let them in, they slipped a “summons for questioning” under the door, turned off the electricity in the apartment and left. “I think the teachers are wrong,” Kirill told *Novaya Gazeta*. “They told us the people in Ukraine were being brainwashed, but I think we’re the one being brainwashed over here.”

*Novaya Gazeta* correspondent Irina Lukyanova, who is also a teacher, wonders what will happen to the generations of young Russians raised without fear: Will they have to learn the old habits of “keeping quiet” and of “speaking the right words without believing in them”?

When such a report can still appear in a newspaper—and when Kirill and his mother can stand up to the authorities—we’re not quite back in Soviet times. The anti-war protests, too, are a

hopeful sign. After the invasion of Czechoslovakia in August 1968, eight people came out on Red Square to protest, two of them holding a banner that read, “For your freedom and ours.” They were arrested within minutes, and virtually no one in the Soviet Union knew about their protest. In 2022, tens of thousands have protested across Russia, braving arrests and beatings.

And yet the sense that the country is slipping back into Soviet darkness is hard to shake. Travel opportunities are drastically reduced. Alternative news sources such as CNN and the BBC are cut off. Russia has left the Council of Europe to preempt an almost certain expulsion. (“It’s not a bad pretext to finally slam the door and forget about these pointless old folks’ homes forever,” sneered Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev, once acclaimed as a liberal when he filled in for Putin as president in 2008-2012.) It is unclear whether Russia will still accept the jurisdiction of the European Court for Human Rights, which has been a recourse for at least some Russian citizens who despair of finding justice at home when their rights are violated.

In other words, there is no doubt that for many innocent Russians, things will get worse. Already, tens of thousands are reportedly fleeing the country while they still can—to Georgia, Armenia, the Czech Republic, Turkey. Those new émigrés lament their stolen future and their country’s shame.

I feel sad for them, of course; I feel even worse for those who stay behind but oppose Putin’s war (though I try not to forget that the real victims are the Ukrainians being bombed). No one wants to see fellow human beings suffer, and it’s painful to watch a dream of freedom die. I wish I could believe in the outcome that some observers have forecast: that the fiasco of this war will prompt Putin’s ouster and put Russia back on the road to freedom. Unfortunately, I don’t think it’s very likely.

Who or what is to blame for the decline and fall of the new Russia—the question of “who lost Russia,” so to speak—can be discussed *ad infinitum*. The botched transition to a market economy played a role; the 1990s were certainly a time of hardship during which the country actually saw a dip in life expectancy, causing “democracy” to be associated with chaos and misery. (Whether these problems were the result of too much free market or too little is another matter.) In 2008, when I interviewed Elena Bonner, Sakharov’s widow and an outstanding fighter for freedom in her own right, she told me that among the major mistakes of the Russian “democrats” in the 1990s was allowing members of the old Communist elite to keep so many government posts and supporting a constitution that gave far too much power to the executive—later allowing Putin to build an autocratic “vertical” of authority. Western politicians certainly made their share of mistakes, though here too one can debate whether the problem was an overly confrontational attitude toward Russian leaders or (as Bonner believed) an overly trusting one.

My father, who lived until 2011, never had much faith in democracy in Russia, though he said repeatedly that he would love to be proven wrong; by the late 2000s, he certainly felt vindicated in his pessimism. Does his prediction from 1978—that nothing would ever change in Russia except for the worse—still apply? “Ever” is a big word; countries and cultures have certainly changed in drastic and unpredictable ways. But in the near future, I see no good scenario.

Of course, I too will love to be proven wrong.