

## **Autocrats are perhaps on the rise, but they are not attractive and have no future**

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The turn towards autocracy in the last decade is worrisome. Autocrats are however nothing new. The most important leaders of world history,—one can think of Ceasar or Napoleon, to say nothing about its absolute worst villains, Hitler and Stalin,—were of the autocratic sort, bordering on megalomaniac craziness, and their autocratic regimes caused unspeakable suffering and millions of deaths. This autocratic streak also showed itself in most emperors, kings, queens and rulers, large and small. Lest we forget, autocrats are not limited to the sphere of politics: there are autocrats in public and private organizations as there are some in family life, alas! In the sphere of politics, to which the debates on autocracy are often confined (unjustly in my view), to be an autocrat used to be part of the job description: if you do not display force, someone else will take your place. This is why many still value the iron fist in politicians: they must show leadership and demonstrate that they have a “spine”, otherwise they risk being dismissed as weak and ineffective. Many are thus, consciously or not, attracted by the strong hand.

A new model of leadership began to emerge with the advent of modern democracies, in the wake of the French and American revolutions. While the French Revolution produced its share of autocrats, its core principle was that political leaders should be nothing more than the representatives of their people and their constituents. Their main task was to defend a constitution that rested on basic charters of human rights, which were enshrined in universal declarations like the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#) of 1948. These declarations were inspired and written, at least in part, by philosophers (Rousseau certainly influenced the French Revolution and some might not know that Thomist philosophers such as Gilson and Maritain had a small hand in writing the San Francisco declaration of 1948). The declaration of 1948 was, of course, sparked by the recent traumatic experience of a devastating World War (the second in a generation) and the new fear raised by the emergence and use of the atomic bomb in 1945. Another world war would be even more devastating if not suicidal for humankind. The contemporary world situation is still very much the result of this post-war constellation which triggered a renewed democratic consciousness throughout the world and an increased sensibility for human rights. The basic tenets of democratic life—fair elections, a

free press, an open society guaranteeing the basic freedoms of opinion, assembly and religion, the right to a decent education—quickly spread throughout the Western world, in which they were intellectually rooted, and even found root (to the surprise of some) in countries like Japan, which had recently been autocratic. These ideals also spread to India (the world's largest democracy by far), South America, South-East Asia and Africa (where the main liberation was from colonial rule). Their courageous defense and their contagious success led to the fall of the Berlin Wall in Eastern Europe, which had been tragically deprived of these basic freedoms. They even reached the Soviet Union and the Tiananmen Square demonstrations taught us that China was not immune to them either. For a short time, both superpowers, Russia and China, seemed to be moving toward the Western democratic model, which is perhaps far from perfect, but it remains the best, or least worst, form of human cohabitation and governance ever developed in the history of human civilization, which is not nothing. It is a model that remains very attractive in countries that are suffering under autocracy. The Soviet Union was dissolved in 1991, something that would have been unthinkable three years before: overnight, it appeared to abandon its official communist doctrine and organized elections that seemed relatively credible. For a few golden years, Russia appeared to embrace the basic tenets of liberal democracies. The G7 quickly became the G8 and welcomed Russia. It was quite an impressive and fascinating achievement in the span of just a few years. As for China, it did not officially renounce its official communist doctrine, on which the legitimacy of its governing party and its rulers is based, nor did it organize fair elections, but it spectacularly embraced liberal capitalism, which had hitherto (that is, under Mao or until Deng Xiaoping) been the worst of all evils and certainly the archenemy of its official Marxist doctrine. Despite this schizophrenic situation, China rapidly became one of the two leading world economies. Many expected at the time, that with time this liberal turn would also bring about democratic change, just as that seemed to be the case in the former Soviet Union. Francis Fukuyama's Hegelian thesis on the end of history appeared to be fulfilled.

How and why did this outlook change? Historians will struggle with this question for a long time. As far as we can tell, at least two things were overlooked by those optimists of the early 1990s, to which I modestly belonged (and probably still do: I cannot fathom the intellectual possibility of cynicism, however tempting it might be at times). 1/ The extent and pervasiveness of *corruption* in the countries that have become ever more autocratic was certainly underestimated: those in position of power, who can be called the oligarchs, had no incentive whatsoever to relinquish their power, which was in some cases

newly acquired and in others more ancient. It was natural for them to repress any challenge to their authority, especially in the wake of the color revolutions that spread through Eastern Europe, which all grew out of demonstrations against state authority and all yearned for a rapprochement with the Western model. 2/ The attractiveness of *nationalism* was also underestimated: through Western eyes, the democratic wave that swept through these formerly communist countries was viewed as a form of liberation (the Cold War is over, the yoke of authoritarianism has been cast aside, Germany is reunited), but it was resented by many, or at least some (it is hard to know which is the case), as a national humiliation of sorts. In the case of the Soviet Union, the West, the former enemy, had won (without a fight) and the Soviet empire had been dissolved in a matter of years, if not months. It caused resentment and favored the emergence of autocratic forms of leadership which wrapped themselves in the flag of nationalism. In the case of China, the sudden rise of the country as one of the economic powerhouses of the world was a source of understandable pride and fostered a new form of assertiveness.

Widespread corruption and resentful nationalism (or its instrumentalization) certainly nurtured the recent rise of autocracy. Of course, autocracy also has its own form of “efficiency”: it is not bothered by the checks and balance of parliamentary debate, multiparty cacophony, a free press or the imperatives of the next elections. Autocratic leaders are thus not burdened by the shortsightedness of many of our democratic politicians who only think of the latest opinion polls and focus groups.

It remains however that, in spite of its own and demonic form of efficiency, autocracy is not attractive in the long run. Their political model is repellent to everyone endowed with reason and a basic aspiration to freedom. People want to be governed by representatives whom they freely elect, they want to be able to voice their opinions freely and to be informed by a critical and free press. This is what is repressed by autocrats because they rightly perceive in those bulwarks of sanity a mortal threat to their rule. Autocracy thus reveals its utterly hypocritical nature: its leadership is not based on the will of those it pretends to represent. To be sure, these autocratic countries actually have democratic constitutions, in which basic human rights are enshrined, but they exist only on paper, since there is no independent judiciary worthy of the name to enforce them.

What is the task of democratically minded countries and intellectuals in this situation? It is to point out, at the very least, the glaring hypocrisy and thus the lies at the root of these autocratic regimes. Who defends human rights anymore? Have we forgotten that it was the courageous work of dissidents who

fought for basic human freedoms that brought down the Berlin Wall ? Have we forgotten that the Helsinki Accords of 1975 were a major inspiration for these dissidents and the upheaval they made possible? These democratic human rights, which are rooted in a strong philosophical conviction that all men are created equal and endowed with the same basic rights, form the basis of the democratic worldview which should not be shy, nor silent about the triumph of reason they represent. Over the last decades, our democratic leaders were often silent on human rights abuses in order to appease the autocrats and, of course, to gain access to their economic market, as if selling cars to the Chinese was more important than the fate of repressed minorities. Misplaced and misguided self-doubts of the West about the imperialism of imposing its own culture on others, as happened during colonialism, did not help either. In the name of economic interest, *Realpolitik* or because of the self-doubts of the West, many of our leaders legitimized by their silence on human rights the hypocritical rule of autocrats. It is more important and at this crucial time more urgent to call them out and defend more forcefully those who courageously defend basic human rights and who are shamelessly oppressed by autocratic regimes. Let us not forget about the martyrdom of Anna Politkovskaya and the courage of Alexei, Navalny. Autocrats might be on the rise here or there, but their model is not attractive and history is not on their side in this day and age when outrages against human rights cannot remain hidden. Many more walls still need to fall.