

Is the US Becoming Less Free Than Russia?

Commentary by Lawrence Solomon

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Russia gets bad press, deservedly so. Corruption is rampant, journalists and other critics of President Vladimir Putin have met untimely ends, mass political protests are met with batons, the LGBTQ community suffers restrictions of a kind that ended decades ago in most Western countries, and religions seen as disloyal to the nation—a radical Muslim offshoot and Jehovah's Witnesses are examples—aren't tolerated.

Yet, by some measures—some more personal than political—Russia today affords its citizens more rights, more respect, and more accountability than the United States, Canada, and other Western countries, where fundamental freedoms can no longer be taken for granted.

The decline of U.S. freedom is clearest since COVID-19, where under the “guise of a real medical pandemic, [the United States is] really moving into a

coup situation, a police state situation,” states Naomi Wolf, a former adviser to President Bill Clinton who has been warning of the rise of tyranny in America since her 2007 bestseller, “The End of America.”

The “state has now crushed businesses, kept us from gathering in free assembly to worship as the First Amendment provides, is invading our bodies ... [and is] restricting movement.”

In contrast, Russia ended its nationwide six-week shutdown in May 2020, with bars and restaurants reopening with social distancing measures, and has refused to countenance a second nationwide lockdown. When regional or local lockdowns subsequently occurred, they tended to be short-lived or targeted, such as lockdowns of those 65 years of age and older, forcing bars and restaurants to close at 11 p.m., or requiring temperature checks before admitting patrons to Moscow’s theater and concert halls. Churches were often defiant.

Pointing to the Russian constitution’s guarantee of separation between church and state, many if not most remained open for Easter. The tyranny that the United States and other Western countries embraced

via COVID-19 was short-lived and relatively tepid in Russia.

After COVID-19 concerns end, the U.S. cancel culture will remain, threatening the livelihoods of millions of employees in universities, arts organizations, major corporations, and governments who dare dissent from the orthodoxy. Even heroes such as George Washington and Abraham Lincoln are being canceled for not being pure enough, or being too white and male. In effect, large pluralities of American society who combined represent the majority of Americans are subject to discipline for being allegedly racist, xenophobic, sexist, homophobic, transphobic, or otherwise suspect.

In Russia, the West's cancel culture phenomenon and the political correctness that fuels it, doesn't exist, so much so that an opinion article in the liberal Moscow Times, a critic of Putin and the Kremlin, bemoans the insensitive talk that's rife throughout Russia, including by politicians: "In any other country with a modicum of political correctness, fellow lawmakers and public opinion would have forced these politicians to resign. Some countries

would have charged them under hate-speech or extremism laws.”

Russians aren't only free to be politically incorrect, they also don't feel disenfranchised from their political leadership. Unlike the millions of Americans who doubt that President Joe Biden garnered more votes than Donald Trump in the presidential election, few Russians, even among political enemies, dispute Putin's electoral victory. As shown by the internationally respected Levada polling company, Putin has been consistently popular with approval numbers that far exceed those of Biden or Trump before him.

Russians much more approve of their federal legislators than Americans do of their congressional leaders, and Russians also endorse their many governors. Contrary to the spin from the anti-Putin, anti-Russia Western media, Alexei Navalny, a political opponent of Putin's who was poisoned and then jailed, may be lionized by many in the West, but his approval rating is only 19 percent, and he's "most trusted" by only 4 percent of Russians, compared to 32 percent who most trust Putin.

Only 17 percent of Russians are confident that Navalny's inflammatory film—"Palace for Putin: History of the World's Biggest Bribe," which claims he owns a \$1.5 billion palace—isn't an unfair slander.

Although Russia is a multinational state with close to 200 ethnic minorities, many of them represented in ethnically based national republics and autonomous regions, Russia has avoided the deep divisions and identity politics seen in the United States. If anything, the ethnic minorities tend to be even more supportive of Putin than ethnic Russians, despite Putin's "Russia First" platform, or perhaps because of it.

With the possible exception of Chechnya, where Muslim extremists have waged war against the federal government, the ethnic minorities tend to be patriotic Russians.

Religious minorities also tend to be freer in Russia than in many Western countries, where they are subject to intolerance or worse. Anti-Semitism has been rising in the United States, Canada, the UK, and France, leading many Jews to emigrate to Israel

or other countries perceived to be safe. Jews don't leave Russia for fear of attacks—Putin and the Russian establishment are vigilant in making Russia's Jews feel welcome, leading many Jews who emigrated to Israel from the former Soviet Union to return to Russia (pdf).

Russians don't aspire to be woke Americans and Americans don't aspire to live under Russian-style strong-man rule. But unless the trend reverses, Americans could do worse than Russia-level liberties.

“We're turning into a version of a totalitarian state before everyone's eyes,” Wolf fears.

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