How Russia became an autocracy

Russia will greet visitors from around the world with traditional hospitality when the 2014 Winter Olympics begin on Friday in Sochi. For Russians themselves, however, life has become decidedly less open. The current release of the Bertelsmann Stiftung’s Transformation Index (BTI) rates the country as an autocracy for the first time – for limiting basic democratic rights, among other reasons.

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Increasing suppression of unwanted political views, diminished freedom of the press, restrictions on the right to free assembly, harassment of politically active nonprofits, massive human rights abuses in the fight against rebels and terrorists in the North Caucasus – as documented by the BTI, the political changes that have transformed Russia between January 2011 and January 2013 are, for the most part, grim.
Since 2000, Vladimir Putin has played a key role in setting Russia's political priorities – as president between 2000 and 2008, as prime minister between 2008 and 2012, and as president since 2012 once again. According to the BTI experts, his primary objective remains creating a stable political system and achieving considerable economic growth. In order to reach those goals, government leaders apparently feel it is acceptable to violate basic democratic rights and market principles, the BTI authors conclude.

The authors give a number of reasons for the downgrade, including increased manipulation of election results, and not only in the form of overt fraud in rural areas. Opposition parties only receive scanty media coverage, their ability to participate in elections is restricted and they are only granted limited freedom to assemble or hold demonstrations. Also outside of election campaigns, criticism of government policies seldom appears in the media, and when it does it is only covered by a few newspapers or radio stations of minor importance. The legal system is hobbled by political influence and corruption. For example, during the 2012 trial of the punk rock band Pussy Riot, a Kremlin opponent, basic legal procedures and principles were violated – in the government's favor. The authors also note that even though President Putin has announced he wants to combat the corruption found throughout Russia, the anti-corruption measures that actually get passed are often purely symbolic.

As for Russia's economic transformation, the BTI findings show that, in contrast to the quality of its democracy, the country has changed little since BTI 2012. The country maintains a solid monetary policy and, thanks to government aid, the impact of the global financial crisis on the Russian economy was limited. At the same time, however, social injustice persists at a high level, the result of a number of factors, including long-term unemployment, a flat income tax rate, and pensions and unemployment compensation that, despite increases, do not keep recipients from falling below the poverty line. The country is also below the OECD average in the areas of educational outcomes and research and development.

Russia lacks an overriding, effective strategy for reducing its resource dependence and improving its global competitiveness. The government is instead concentrating on projects of symbolic importance and on promoting influential large corporations, especially those owned by the state. Economic sectors of strategic importance such as the oil industry are increasingly coming under state control, while the share of small and medium-sized enterprises, small to begin with, continues to shrink.

Despite this, the BTI authors note, Russia takes self-confidently to the world stage, often refusing international aid. When outsiders criticize the country’s
political or economic system or the human rights situation there, political leaders interpret this as a lack of understanding of Russia's traditions and unique situation. Whether the Olympic spirit will help to improve mutual understanding over the next two weeks remains to be seen.

The complete BTI country report for Russia can be downloaded on the right. Key findings can also be accessed in the form of interactive graphics at atlas.bti-project.org. (fwa)

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