

Article No. 330

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.26881/srg.2024.11.13>

Artykuł badawczy / Research article

Dziedzina nauk społecznych / Social sciences

Dyscyplina naukowa: nauki o bezpieczeństwie / Discipline of science: security studies

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Citation:

Składanowski, M. (2024). Russian Criticism of Western Liberal Democracy: A Security Perspective. *Studia Rossica Gedanensia*, 11: 275-285. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.26881/srg.2024.11.13>



## RUSSIAN CRITICISM OF WESTERN LIBERAL DEMOCRACY: A SECURITY PERSPECTIVE<sup>2</sup>

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(received 10.10.2024; accepted 16.10.2024)

### Abstract

The aim of this article is to elucidate how Russian policy discourse presents democracy under the current conditions of confrontation with the West, identify the key elements of the Russian criticism of Western liberal democracy, and explore how Russia portrays itself as an alternative model of a democratic state. The sources for this article are Russian strategic documents, primarily those devoted to national security and foreign

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<sup>2</sup> This work was supported by the National Science Centre, Poland, under Grant 2021/43/B/HS1/00254.

policy. These sources have been analysed for the presence of key elements defining democracy.

**Keywords:** Russia, national security, democracy, Russian conservatism, Russian security policy, Russian foreign policy.

## Abstrakt

### Rosyjska krytyka zachodniej demokracji liberalnej: perspektywa bezpieczeństwa

Celem artykułu jest ukazanie, w jaki sposób rosyjski dyskurs polityczny przedstawia demokrację w obecnych warunkach konfrontacji z Zachodem, zidentyfikowanie kluczowych elementów rosyjskiej krytyki zachodniej demokracji liberalnej oraz zbadanie, jak Rosja eksponuje siebie jako alternatywny model państwa demokratycznego.

Podstawę źródłową artykułu stanowią rosyjskie dokumenty strategiczne, poświęcone głównie bezpieczeństwu narodowemu i polityce zagranicznej. Źródła te zostały przeanalizowane pod kątem obecności kluczowych elementów definiujących demokrację.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Rosja, bezpieczeństwo narodowe, demokracja, rosyjski konserwatyzm, rosyjska polityka bezpieczeństwa, rosyjska polityka zagraniczna.

## Introduction

Russia, through the pronouncements of Vladimir Putin and other representatives of its political elite, has consistently defined itself as a democratic state. This was evident during Putin's early years in power, when Putin, at least on a declarative level, expressed a desire for political integration with the West. This has remained the case, even under conditions of escalating confrontation with the West since the onset of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict in 2014, and particularly since the Russian military aggression that began on 22 February 2024. However, the concept of democracy in Russian political discourse has shifted significantly during Putin's rule. The question is no longer whether Russia will become a democratic state modelled on Western liberal democracies, but rather one of demonstrating that the Western model of liberal democracy is not the sole possible form of a genuinely democratic state. Indeed, it is now suggested that true democracy can be found elsewhere—in Russia, China, or even, if Putin's declarations during his visit to Pyongyang are to be believed, North Korea.

The aim of this article is to elucidate how Russian strategic discourse presents democracy under the current conditions of confrontation with the West, identify the key elements of the Russian criticism of Western liberal democracy, and explore how Russia portrays itself as an alternative model of a democratic state—particularly in the context of great power competition for influence in the Global South. The research perspective adopted here is specific: we are concerned with the extent to which criticism of Western liberal democracy and the promotion of an alternative concept of

democracy is relevant to Russian security policy, both domestically and internationally. To what extent is the creation of a negative image of Western liberal democracy intended to influence internal security by consolidating Russian society and severing it from Western influences? Furthermore, do Russian official documents provide for the construction of an alternative model of a democratic state that could prove attractive internationally, thereby enhancing Russia's influence in the world and positioning Russia as a significant actor in the global security system?

Given the adopted research perspective, the sources for this article are Russian strategic documents, primarily those devoted to national security and foreign policy. These sources have been analysed for the presence of key elements defining democracy. Particular attention has been paid to the value-laden components within the sources, evaluating which patterns of state and societal organisation are deemed good or right and which are regarded as bad or wrong.

The article is structured into three parts. The first part revisits the main aspects of Russian criticism of Western liberal democracy prior to the aggression against Ukraine. The second part examines recent attempts in Russian strategic documents to portray Russia as a promoter and defender of authentic democracy. The third part offers conclusions, proposing an answer to the question of why democracy presents a threat to Putin's Russia.

## **1. Criticism of liberal democracy before the aggression against Ukraine**

In contemporary Russia, open opponents of democracy remain on the political margins. Even prominent figures such as Aleksandr Dugin, who in reality wields no discernible political influence, or Yevgeniy Fedorov, who, despite being a formal deputy to the State Duma, operates on the political periphery as the leader of the National-Liberation Movement (*Nacional'no-osvoboditel'noe dvizhenie*, NOD), are marginalised. Far more politically significant is the criticism of Western liberal democracy evident in state-controlled political discourse and in Russian policy documents since 2012, the beginning of Putin's third presidential term and the advent of the so-called conservative turn.

The objective of this criticism is not the unrealistic aspiration for Russia to return to an imperial system, nor is it a return to the political system of the Soviet Union. The criticism of Western liberal democracy serves other purposes. Domestically, it seeks to depict democratic Western states in a negative light, fostering hostile attitudes within Russian society towards Western values. This, in turn, aids in consolidating support for state policy and ensuring the unconditional acceptance of the authorities' actions, even when these actions involve the curtailment of citizens' rights or the deterioration of living conditions. Internationally, the criticism aims to position Russia as an alternative centre of integration for states that oppose Western dominance and do not subscribe to the values that the West regards as fundamental to a democratic state system. In both domestic and international dimensions, this criticism has a clear security focus. It seeks to bolster internal security by eliminating potential sources of opposition to the authorities' policies and fostering ideological cohesion within society.

Externally, it endeavours to enhance international security through the creation of an alliance of states that reject the principles and values promoted—or imposed—by the West.

### 1.1 Russia as a formally democratic state

Although Putin's Russia is authoritarian and kleptocratic (Snyder 2018: 11), de facto ruled by an oligarchy, existing legislation nonetheless shapes the direction of political and academic discourse. Formally, the Russian Federation remains a democratic state under the rule of law (Kostin and Kostina 2016: 15–16; Ūdin 2021: 10–11). Even the constitutional amendments initiated by Putin in 2020, which allowed him to seek a fifth presidential term, did not remove the constitutional guarantees inherent in democratic states. According to the constitution, sovereign power in Russia belongs to the people (Article 3.1), the state is obliged to respect human rights (Article 2), including freedom of speech (Article 29.1), the separation of state and church is guaranteed (Article 14), and any compulsory state ideology is prohibited (Article 13.2).

However, such provisions in the constitution of authoritarian states like Russia suffer from a fundamental flaw: they are essentially meaningless and, in practice, fail to protect citizens from abuses of power. Russia is a weak state (Stoner-Weiss 2006: 147–160), in which state structures and democratic procedures – though formally present, including the government, parliament, judiciary, and regional authorities – are merely façades. Currently, invoking constitutional guarantees of freedom of expression does not prevent punishment for newly introduced offences related to the war against Ukraine. The most infamous of these is the crime of ‘discrediting the armed forces,’ (*Diskreditaciâ*) where any critical statement about the war can be prosecuted. Similarly, the charge of ‘extremism’ (*Čto takoe ekstremizm?*) applies not only to organisations opposing war, corruption, or the abuse of power but also to religious groups not under state control, such as Jehovah's Witnesses (*Verhovnyj sud...*), and informal social movements whose goals contradict official ideology. For instance, the LGBTQ+ movement has been labelled as extremist (*Razrušenie tradicionnyh cennostej...*), and there is increasing pressure to designate the ‘childfree’ movement in the same way (Krivâkina 2024), despite neither of these movements being formally organised or institutionally recognised in Russia.

Despite these signs of the increasing totalitarianisation of Russian social and political life, the existing legal framework does not allow for democracy itself to be questioned. This bears a striking resemblance to Soviet-era legislation. At the level of legal formulation, the Soviet Union was also a democratic state, with constitutional guarantees of human rights, as well as the structures and institutions typical of democratic legal states. This was true even for the so-called Stalin's Constitution of 1936 (Aptekar' 2020; Makarcev 2006: 28–38). To verbally distinguish itself from the West, Soviet official discourse, and that of other communist bloc countries, referred to ‘people's democracies,’ which were intended to be different from Western democracies. A similar propaganda tactic has been employed in the naming of Ukraine's Donetsk and Luhansk regions, partly controlled by Russia since 2014 and illegally annexed in 2022, as the Donetsk People's Republic and the Luhansk People's Republic. (Constitution 2022: Article 65.1).

Continuing this Soviet tradition, contemporary Russian documents do not question democracy as such. Instead, along with mainstream political discourse controlled by the authorities, they challenge the authenticity and universality of liberal democracy, which is understood as the organisation of political and social life in Western countries. For this reason, totalitarian political systems—such as Kim Jong Un’s North Korea or Bashar al-Assad’s Syria—are not described in Russian academic literature on security and international relations as undemocratic, but as resisting the imposition of the Western model of democracy (Šamahov and Kovalev 2020: 19–20). This is why, during his 2024 visit to Pyongyang, Putin could declare that Russia together with North Korea defend democratic principles in the modern world (*Zaâvleniâ dlâ pressy...*).

## 1.2 The Russian alternative model of democracy

When discussing Russian criticism of Western liberal democracy or the Russian alternative to liberal democracy, reference is often made to the now somewhat outdated notion of ‘sovereign democracy’ in Russian political discourse, a concept attributed to Vladimir Surkov. Surkov, once an influential politician and a key figure in Russia’s control over the so-called Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics, is now largely marginalised. In general terms, ‘sovereign democracy,’ as proposed by Surkov (2006) and others (Borko 2015; Dugin 2019a: 898–899) was intended to mean that Russia, in defining the values, principles, and norms of its political life, does not need to refer to external models, particularly Western ones, but should instead base these on its national interests and socio-political traditions. In this sense, Russia does not reject democracy per se in the organisation of its political and social life, but it does reject external patterns and values, especially those imposed by the West.

This approach aligns with a broader strand of contemporary Russian neo-imperialist thought, which, as emphasised by figures like Dugin (2019b: 140), argues that Western values, behavioural norms, and practices are not universal but geographically and culturally localised. Therefore, it is illegitimate for the West to impose these values in different geographical, cultural, and social contexts. This view, in its radical form, extends to the concept of humanity and society, as well as the associated ideas of human rights and freedoms. In this perspective, human rights and the principle of the state being subservient to the citizen—where the ontological primacy of the individual is placed above the community—are seen as expressions of Western individualism, incompatible with Russian culture, which is rooted in collectivism (Diec 2012: 212). Interestingly, collectivism is highlighted as one of the core Russian spiritual and moral values in the National Security Strategies of the Russian Federation, both in 2015 (sec. 78) and 2021 (sec. 91).

Russian criticism of liberal democracy until 2021 relied on a fairly standard and stereotypical set of arguments. These included the glorification of individualism at the expense of social unity, the prioritisation of human rights over the welfare of the community, the emphasis on minority rights while disregarding the majority’s opinion, a relentless focus on modernisation and progress at the expense of tradition, and secularisation, understood as the marginalisation of the church and religion in public life (e.g., Kara-Murza 2013: 11–16; Medinskij 2011: 434–452). Against this backdrop, Rus-

sia was portrayed as an improved or true democracy, free from these perceived flaws (e.g., Dobren'kov and Agapov 2011: 120–121). A significant statement in this context came from the Patriarch of Moscow, Kirill, in November 2021, when the last free or partly independent media outlets were being dismantled in preparation for the war against Ukraine and the heightened confrontation with the West. Kirill asserted with conviction that Russia, in the modern world, is a 'leader of the free world' (*Patriarh Kirill nazval Rossiû «liderom svobodnogo mira»*). The patriarch also repeated this view after the outbreak of war (*Patriarh Kirill nazval Rossiû «real'no svobodnoj stranoj»*). Whether this image bore any elements of truth is irrelevant here. It was a construct designed for Western far-right groups, conservative Christians, and, on the other hand, Russians who were increasingly isolated from access to information. The image was crafted to justify Russia's confrontation with the West. The arena for this confrontation was intended to be the Russian military intervention in Ukraine, which was expected to swiftly lead to Ukraine's full subordination to Russia, following the model of Belarus. However, more importantly, this intervention was meant to demonstrate the ineffectiveness of the United States and its allies, collectively referred to in Russia as the 'collective West,' and to signal the end of their dominance in international politics.

## 2. Russia as 'Leader of the free world':

### The wartime radicalisation of discourse

While criticism of the West has been a constant feature of Russian policy and strategy documents since Putin's highly confrontational speech at the Munich Security Conference in 2007, the war against Ukraine in 2022 marked a significant shift. Criticism of the West became more radical and overt. The depiction of the West as an existential threat to Russia, previously confined to conservative Russian circles, became an integral part of the official security and foreign policy of the Russian Federation.

#### 2.1 Criticism of the West on the eve of war

It is worth noting that as early as 2021, preparations for war against Ukraine were already underway. In Putin's and the Russian General Staff's plans, the war was expected to change the situation rapidly, potentially within three days or, at the latest, within a month, leading to Ukraine's defeat, demonstrating NATO's ineffectiveness, and—on a broader scale—confirming the end of Western global dominance. These preparations were not only military but also ideological, justifying the impending war. Putin's historiosophic article 'On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians' (Putin 2021), which questioned Ukrainian national identity, culture, language, and history, is the most well-known and discussed. However, two other documents are equally important in understanding the ideological preparations for war. Alongside this article, a new National Security Strategy was published, which took an overtly confrontational stance towards the United States and NATO. Additionally, the joint Russian-Chinese communiqué issued during Putin's visit to Beijing in February 2022—where he is believed to have secured China's tacit approval for war—was also part of the ideological groundwork. To fully grasp the significance of Russian criticism of the West and liberal

democracy in relation to Russia's security policy during wartime, it is essential to examine these two key documents.

The 2021 National Security Strategy asserts that only by preserving self-reliance, culture, traditional spiritual and moral values, and patriotic education can the democratic system of the Russian Federation continue to develop (sec. 22). This statement is coupled with the claim that there is a global struggle for moral leadership and for creating an attractive ideological foundation for the future world order (sec. 6). The Western liberal model, according to the document, is in deep crisis, a crisis brought about by the dilution of traditional values in many states, the falsification of history, anti-Russian policies, the rehabilitation of fascism, and the fuelling of inter-ethnic and inter-religious conflicts (sec. 19).

Even more striking is the Russian-Chinese declaration of 4 February 2022, entitled Joint Communiqué of the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China on International Relations Entering a New Era and Global Sustainable Development (*Sovmestnoe zaâvlenie...*). In the context of the impending Russian military intervention in Ukraine, which was intended to showcase Russia's strength and the West's weakness, the title is particularly significant and sets the tone for the document's interpretation. Putin's visit to Beijing in early February 2022 is widely seen as an effort to gain China's approval for Russia's invasion of Ukraine. In addition to this covert aspect of the visit, the surprising result was a joint declaration. One of its central themes was the shared Russian-Chinese understanding of democracy, distinct from the Western model. According to Russia, which by then had completed its final preparations for war, and China, authentic democracy comprises: (1) respect for the rights of nations to choose their own paths of development; (2) respect for the sovereignty and security interests of states; (3) the defence of an international political system based on the central role of the UN and adherence to international law; and (4) efforts to promote global peace, stability, and sustainable development. The leaders of Russia and China declared that democracy is a universal value and not the privilege of individual states, and that its promotion and defence is the shared responsibility of the international community. Democracy was vaguely defined as a means by which citizens participate in the governance of their country to improve living standards and uphold the principle of popular sovereignty. It is to be implemented across all aspects of social life through nationwide processes. Democracy, they argued, expresses the interests and will of the people, guarantees their rights, meets their needs, and protects their interests. There is no single, correct model of democracy; depending on the socio-political system, history, traditions, and cultural characteristics of a particular state, its people have the right to choose forms and methods of implementing democracy that suit their unique circumstances. The right to determine whether a state is democratic rests solely with its people. According to the declaration, Russia and China have deep traditions of democracy rooted in thousands of years of experience, strong popular support, and a profound respect for the needs and interests of their people. Both Russia and China guarantee their citizens the right to participate in various forms of governance and social life. The peoples of both nations, the declaration asserts, are confident in the paths they have chosen. At the same time, Russia and China stated in the declaration that it is unacceptable for any state to impose its 'democratic standards' on others or



to monopolise the assessment of democratic criteria. Such states, they argued, trample on democratic principles and pose a threat to global and regional peace. Furthermore, the declaration stressed that the defence of democracy must not be used as a tool of coercion against other states. It is equally unacceptable to interfere in the internal affairs of sovereign states under the pretext of defending democracy and human rights. Lastly, the declaration affirmed that Russia and China are willing to work with other partners to promote genuine democracy.

## 2.2 Ideological confrontation under conditions of ongoing war

Following the start of Russia's military aggression against Ukraine on 24 February 2022, successive Russian strategic documents have developed a comprehensive criticism of the West, particularly of Western liberal democracy, portraying it as an existential threat not only to Russia but also to the entire non-Western world.

The 2022 Concept of Humanitarian Policy Abroad asserts that the West is aggressively imposing neoliberal views on other countries. However, by neoliberal views, the document refers to the perceived destruction of traditional values, including family values. In this context, Russia – despite the ongoing war against Ukraine and the revelation of the first war crimes committed by Russian soldiers – is depicted as the defender of traditional spiritual and moral values, the spiritual heritage of world civilisation, human rights, the family, and humanism, as well as a society founded on the principles of altruism, mercy, justice, and respect for others (sec. 19). The document also claims that Russia is strengthening its international image as a genuinely democratic state (sec. 63). Similarly, another policy document published in 2022, Bases for State Policy on Preserving and Strengthening Traditional Russian Spiritual and Moral Values, presents Western values as a threat to the Russian state and society (secs. 13–14), and assigns the state the role of protecting these 'traditional Russian spiritual and moral values' (sec. 1).

The 2023 Foreign Policy Concept continues to address the theme of Western neoliberalism. This document is highly confrontational, containing veiled threats of military action by Russia against Western countries. Although such threats are a regular feature in Russian state media, they had not previously appeared in Russian strategic documents – until Putin's announcement of changes to the nuclear weapons doctrine in September 2024 (*Zasedanie Postoãnnogo sovešaniã Sovbeza...*). The 2023 Foreign Policy Concept accuses the West of seeking global domination and pursuing neo-colonial policies through aggressive actions against all states that refuse to comply with the neoliberal agenda. The West is portrayed as attempting to impose neoliberal principles on states that uphold traditional spiritual and moral values. In this way, Western neoliberalism – which, notably, is nowhere clearly defined – is seen as having a destructive impact on all spheres of international relations (sec. 8). Moreover, the Foreign Policy Concept pledges Russia's commitment to consolidating international efforts to neutralise attempts to impose pseudo-humanist, neoliberal ideological principles, which allegedly lead to the erosion of humanity's traditional moral foundations (sec. 19.9). The document further expresses the belief that 'the greater part of humanity' supports constructive relations with Russia and the strengthening of its position on the inter-



national stage as a peaceful world power striving for the equitable development of all humankind, in contrast to the aggressive United States and its allies (secs. 61–62).

### 3. Conclusion: Democracy as a threat to Russia

In scholarly discourse, it is difficult to assess the level of cynicism in documents that speak of peace and the just development of humanity, issued by a state whose army has been committing war crimes in an aggressive war against Ukraine for nearly three years. However, in light of the criticisms outlined above, it is possible to propose an answer to the question of what, in Western liberal democracy, constitutes a threat to Putin's Russia.

Firstly, a key threat to Russia's internal stability lies in the Western understanding of citizens' rights vis-à-vis the state and the limits that democratic principles impose on the state's authority. In democratic Western societies, the state is not regarded as the highest value in people's lives but serves a subordinate role to them. In Putin's Russia, the citizen is expected to submit to the interests of the state, and the state's welfare is seen as the highest individual good. Challenging this principle would open the door to the development of Russian civil society and ideological pluralism, thereby undermining the foundations of the political system Putin has been constructing in Russia since 2000.

Secondly, the rejection of the Western model of democracy and the promotion of an alternative – albeit nowhere explicitly defined – stems from the fear of challenging the monopoly of the state and state-controlled organisations in shaping the individual and social lives of citizens. It is unsurprising that organisations or movements associated with social, political, or religious activities not controlled by the state, or with values or lifestyles deemed politically unhelpful by the state authorities, are labelled extremist in contemporary Russia. The stability of the Russian political system is threatened by the mere possibility of questioning traditional patterns of life, minority rights, and a value hierarchy that prioritises the needs and freedoms of citizens over the interests of the state.

Thirdly, Western democracy imposes a specific mode of organisation on the state, including rules of political conduct, restrictions on the legitimate use of violence, accountability of authorities, limitations on their powers, and the principle of power changeability of power through free, universal, equal, and secret suffrage. Such limitations and obligations are unacceptable to authoritarian and kleptocratic states, such as contemporary Russia, as they would inevitably lead not only to the weakening or collapse of the current government but, above all, to the enforcement of accountability on the Russian political elite. The rejection of accountability, external constraints, and the principle of changeability of power also appears to be an important argument in Russian foreign policy for fostering alliances with other authoritarian states, whose political systems would also be threatened by such constraints and principles.

It is, therefore, unsurprising that, although Russian strategic discourse often verbally references democracy – even when presenting Russia as an alternative model of democratic organisation to the West – it never explicitly defines democracy. In reality, democracy – understood as genuine citizen participation in the organisation and gov-

ernance of the state and the limitation of state power – poses an existential threat to Putin's regime. Conversely, the prospect of political and military success in confrontation with the West (such success being the defeat of Ukraine, or at least ending the war with Ukraine losing part of its internationally recognised territory and abandoning integration with NATO and the European Union) could enhance Russia's influence in the integration of primarily authoritarian countries, whose political systems also perceive the values and constraints of the Western democratic model as a threat.

From the Russian perspective, opposition to Western liberal democracy is thus necessary to strengthen the internal security of the state and to increase Russia's role as a participant in and contributor to the global security architecture. However, the increasingly confrontational and aggressive rhetoric of Russian policy documents towards the Western democratic model of political and social life has a positive dimension. It indicates that, despite the flaws of Western liberal democracy, the values and principles that underpin it and define its identity pose a genuine threat to an authoritarian state such as the Russian Federation today. This, in turn, suggests that democratic values, especially in the face of the threat of wider armed conflict, are indeed values worth defending by all available means.

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Competing interests: The author declares that he has no competing interests.