



(Source: Karaganov.ru)

## Contemporary Russian Thinkers Series — Part I — Renowned Russian Academic Sergey Karaganov On Russia And Democracy

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*The following article is the first in a series of analyses, presenting the thinking of Russian intellectual circles, close to the Kremlin.*

Understanding Russia's perspective on democracy is central to a comprehension of Moscow's views and approach to foreign policy.

Democracy has been for decades the United States' flag banner. Intermittently, the United States tried to export democracy through targeted socio-economic policies and even via military intervention.

Contrary to the United States, and the Soviet Union, Putin's Russia believes that every nation is entitled to build its own political system. For Russia, democracy, or more accurately liberal democracy, is merely a system that was imposed by the West, in an attempt to assert a uniform system of values. Russia believes that the West anticipates a Francis Fukuyama like "end of history", where liberal democracy will prevail as a permanent order.

Sergey Karaganov<sup>1</sup>, former foreign policy advisor to Russia's Presidential Administration (2001-2013) and a dean at the prestigious Higher School of Economics, explains that this is wishful thinking. The disintegration of the Soviet Union created a decade-long illusion that the era of ideologies and ideological struggle was over and that the world was moving inexorably towards Western liberal democracy and capitalism. "Europe and America fascinated the world with their freedom and their winning political system. The perception of the final victory of Western values was backed up by America's massive military supremacy, but, most importantly, by the Western countries' affluence that everyone, including the Soviet and Russian people, desired. This desire was sustained by a widely spread and [widely] cultivated view that wealth and prosperity were a result of democracy, not vice versa," Karaganov analyzes in an article, titled "New Ideological Struggle?" (*Izvestiya*, April 21 2016).<sup>2</sup>

However, argues Karaganov, new realities are coming into view. In an interview with RT, Karaganov states that "history never ends",<sup>3</sup> as in his view, the liberal order, established in the West after World War II and that subsequently spread to the rest of the world, is collapsing. This is occurring, because the liberal order that emerged around 1991,

when the West reigned supreme in all areas, was neither liberal nor was it an order.

Karaganov explains in an article, titled "A Cold War: A Forecast for Tomorrow" (*Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, October 22, 2017): "All countries were expected to accept one model, one leader and one ideology. And it certainly was not an order because the West broke loose and committed one act of aggression after another. This happened also because Russia was weak and could not, or was not ready to deter the West. As a result, the West felt it could do whatever it wanted and go unpunished. This led to the tragic events in Yugoslavia, Iraq, and Libya, and many other less known activities."<sup>4</sup>

Now, asserts Karaganov, Russia is consciously destroying that "caricature" of an order.<sup>5</sup> In order to do so, Russia became a promoter of sovereignty, the primacy of security issues, and traditional values. Russia effectively offers a contrast to the West, which would like social institutions to conform to liberal democratic rules.

Russia instead sponsors a world order, where every country would enjoy a freer choice and where sovereign states are capable of making their own decisions. Countries like China and India welcome these prospects. Karaganov assesses that the despite Western preferences, new political systems are crystallizing and that the future augurs a pluralism of models.

Below is an overview of Karaganov's perspective on democracy:

### **Absent War, Democracy Always Chooses The Worst Leaders**

In an interview with the Russian media outlet *Vzglyad* (October 3, 2019), Karaganov defines democracy as an "anti-meritocratic" system. "This is paradoxical only for those who have been using Western ideological products," he stresses.<sup>6</sup>

Karaganov opines that, in the absence of war, democracy always chooses the worst leaders, since people do not choose optimal leaders, but rather people of their own kind with whom they can get along. Karaganov believes

that war has a purifying aspect. “War kills the best, but during the war, the people tend to push up the leaders. The most classic example is Churchill. When the war broke out, the people intuitively chose Churchill, as soon as the war ended, they threw him out,” Karaganov stresses.

In order to work, Karaganov explains, democracy requires an enemy. Karaganov considers that the United States as well, “artificially” and “convulsively”, fabricates an enemy, as witness the accusations of “Russian interference” in the US presidential elections. In that specific case, Karaganov stresses that the “Russian intervention” was used by the political elites to unite the US electorate against US President Donald Trump.<sup>7</sup>

According to Karaganov, the myths that political democracies are not militant by nature are in need of reassessment. In an article, titled “70th Anniversary, Post Factum” (*Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, April 21, 2019), Karaganov writes: “It is true that it is hard for such regimes to wage big wars. But gripped by crisis, they need external enemies no less (and often even more) than other regimes. The current anti-Russian hysteria and sanctions are caused by 80 percent by internal political or intra-bloc factors. (The struggle with Trump in the U.S., attempts to cover up for the elites’ mistakes and weakness, and the desire to unite against an artificially created ‘enemy’).”<sup>8</sup>

Furthermore, Karaganov warns that if democracies are not contained militarily, they commit aggression in any case under the banner of protecting human rights, ethnic minorities and democracy itself.<sup>9</sup>

## Authoritarian Regimes Are More Manageable

In the aforementioned interview with *Vzglyad*, Karaganov explains that as Russia and China are more “authoritarian” than the West, they are therefore more “manageable.” He adds that the West’s wish to impose democracy on Russia, is more than an ideological desideratum. “Democracy, especially for poor countries and especially for large countries, is the kiss of death,” Karaganov explains. Karaganov adds that each society must develop according to its own laws. “Democracy is just one of the ways to manage complex societies,” Karaganov reckons.

In another interview, published by the Russian newspaper *Kommersant* (October 4, 2018), Karaganov explains that authoritarian regimes enjoy an advantage over modern democracies, as they are better capable at consolidating resources and promoting a consistent long-term policy. Nevertheless, he also acknowledges that authoritarianism is not a panacea, and it frequently leads to stagnation and sometimes to failure.<sup>10</sup>

Karaganov predicts a form of convergence: if Russia will enjoy 15 more years of peaceful development, it will become more democratic and more humane. Conversely, Europe will inevitably become more authoritarian by nature, because otherwise it won’t survive in a new world.<sup>11</sup>

In it is worth noting that Karaganov is not advocating a return to the Soviet era. In an article titled “Russia In The Changing World” (*Obshchaya Tetrad*, 2012), he argues that Russia to become democratic must also overcome “the terrible trauma of Communism”. “[It was a time,] when faith and dignity were destroyed, where the best members of society were killed, where certain people who became the country’s leaders thought and decided for us. And we still feel all this. We must overcome this heritage and become stronger in order to become more democratic,” Karaganov writes.<sup>12</sup>

## Authoritarianism Is Not Imposed On Russia From Above

Karaganov suggests in the *Kommersant* interview that authoritarianism is not forced on Russia from above. To the contrary, Karaganov asserts that the Russians’ genetic code was shaped by history. “Without a centralization of power it would have been impossible to master and provide security for our giant country with geographically indefensible borders. When that [centralized] power weakened – in the beginning of 17th century – there was turmoil, collapse, break apart and Polish intervention. The very same followed the February revolution in 1917 – collapse, civil war, intervention. Then the Bolsheviks came, delivering the Gulag nightmare. I consider it miraculous that the country did not die after the 1991 Revolution and the ensuing collapse.”<sup>13</sup>

He follows up by arguing that Russian President Vladimir Putin became an authoritative leader, because Russia demanded it. “That’s the way of history. Russia has dethroned non-authoritarian leaders. I’ll repeat - constant interventions and internal land grabs have forged a certain mentality. This [mentality] comprises a fierce aspiration for sovereignty and autonomy,” Karaganov asserts.<sup>14</sup>

### **Moving Eastwards - Russia Is ‘A Successor Of Genghis Khan’ And Is Committed To The Authoritarian System Of Government Not To Liberal Democracy**

In an interview with *Kommersant’s* magazine *Ogonyok* (September 10, 2018), Karaganov stresses that the West’s obsession to impose a liberal democracy on Russia created a drift between Russia and the West. This division started after the collapse of the Soviet Union, in the early 1990s, when the West failed to integrate Russia, which was then ready to be incorporated into the “European team”, but as a sovereign part. “The failure of the last Russian ‘drive towards Europe’ can be partially explained by the greed and stupidity of the collective West that decided on the expansion of its alliances — the zone of its direct control, which wanted to impose its modern values that most Russians are in no position and do not consider useful to accept,” Karaganov says.<sup>15</sup>

In the East, by comparison, Russia finds itself more at ease, since there the approach is different. “They [in the East] are not hampered by political or cultural missionary activity,” Karaganov specifies. He then adds: “We must move, and move in the only direction possible to us for the time being — eastwards. But this movement is not forced or involuntary; rather, it is a way home, to our unique Eurasian character.”<sup>16</sup>

However, Karaganov says that this move towards the east is hindered by many factors, among them the fact that the Russian intelligentsia is ashamed of acknowledging this Asian “half” of themselves. According to the Russian academic, it is time to stop being ashamed of the fact that Russia is as much a successor of Genghis Khan’s empire as China, since this is Russia’s historical and genetic code. Pursuantly, he emphasized that it’s time to stop feeling

ashamed that historically, Russia is committed to the authoritarian system of government and not to liberal democracy. “If we were not authoritarian and centralized, we would not have existed in our current borders. But shame comes from ignorance as well,” Karaganov states.<sup>17</sup>

### **The Illusion Of Liberal Democracies**

In an article, titled “How To Win A Cold War” (*Globalaffairs.ru*, September 4, 2018), Karaganov asserts that the West has so far been able to sustain the stereotype that well-being is a result of political democracy. But this argument is beginning to fray. Karaganov notes that Freedom House indices evaluating the spread and popularity of democracy in the world have been showing negative dynamics for several years in a row. “The key reason for that lies within the West itself—growing inequality and the declining quality of life in the middle class. The West’s image was badly damaged by a series of interventions, unsuccessful for the most part, in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya, and by its support for the failed Arab Spring. A long-term crisis in the European Union and U.S. President Donald Trump’s policy have added tarnish to democracy, making it less appealing,” Karaganov writes.<sup>18</sup>

Additionally, the Russian academic explains, the achievements of authoritarian Asian countries are undermining the West’s soft power argument that its model of development is the exclusive path to success.

For Karaganov, anyway, contemporary liberal democracy is just an example of mass intellectual delusions, since democracy always died with tightened international competition or the outbreak of internal turmoil. Karaganov cites examples: “Hellenic republics gave in to tyrannies. The Roman Republic turned into an empire. The Novgorod one fell. The Republic of Venice became weak and surrendered to Napoleon. The relatively democratic Polish state lost to the Russian Empire and Prussia and was torn apart. We can find similar examples in the less distant past as well. Almost the entire Europe succumbed to Hitler. Had it been not for the desperate struggle of the Soviet Union and the selflessness of its people, the history of continental Europe and the major part of the world could have been different.”<sup>19</sup>

In an interview with the German media outlet *Der Spiegel* (July 13, 2016), Karaganov provocatively claimed that liberal democracy shares similar features with socialism/communism. Karaganov asserts: “During Soviet times, we too claimed there were only universal values, just as the West is doing now. It scares me when the Europeans demand more and more democracy. It sounds like times past, when people here demanded more and more socialism.”<sup>20</sup>

## Capitalism Runs Counter To Democracy; The ‘Regressive Authoritarianism—Progressive Democracy’ Dichotomy Will Fade Out

Karaganov also denies that capitalism’s success in the West is linked to democracy. To the contrary, he calls capitalism antithetical to democracy, and its success in the West was predicated not on democracy, but on the legal system that the West inherited from feudalism and was designed to protect private property.

Taking China as an example, Karaganov, in an article titled “A Predictable Future?” (*Globalaffairs.ru*, July 25, 2019), elucidates his point: “Had China with its diverse population of more than 1.3 billion become truly democratic, a global catastrophe would have become unavoidable. It was believed that once it accepted capitalism, it would without a doubt become more democratic, pro-Western, and, therefore, less able to manage itself and its own resources. When it had transpired, by the beginning of the 2000s that things were not going this way, Western pundits started talking about China’s inevitable collapse, claiming that capitalism could not develop without democracy.

“However, capitalism was developing regardless of democracy but on the basis of the legal system inherited from feudalism, which protected private ownership, and political models, which now would be considered radically authoritarian.”<sup>21</sup>

In the above-mentioned article “How To Win A Cold War,” Karaganov, expands on this argument: “Democracy in the capitalist West evolved leaning on the political systems which would be considered authoritarian today and which were based on military supremacy and redistribution of

the world gross product from colonies and semi-colonies. There are no such possibilities any more to lean on and there will be none in the future. Likewise, there will be no threat of state communism which forced the ruling circles in the West to share and pay attention to social justice.”<sup>22</sup>

However, this does not mean that democracy is dying out. According to Karaganov, all governments have to respond to their citizens’ demands, especially as technologies give people unprecedented opportunities for self-organizing and pursuing their interests.

Hence, Karaganov predicts that the “regressive authoritarianism—progressive democracy” dichotomy will recede even further in a dozen years or so, and will be supplanted by a variety of hybrid systems.<sup>23</sup>

Karaganov further considers that democracy has the best chances of holding out in the United States due to its efficient economic system. “In fact, this is the only state born as a democracy and it is probably simply unable to give up this form of government. But the degree of liberality may vary. The democratic space will shrink in the U.S. too,” he writes.<sup>24</sup>

## The Alternatives To Democracy

In an interview with the Russian media outlet VPK (*September 28, 2019*), Karaganov asserts that Russia offers an alternative approach to democracy. The Russian academic explains that Russia supports the “freedom of choice”, meaning that every nation should build its own political system and decide what is best for it. “This is drastically at odds with the ideology of democratic universalism advocated by Europeans and Americans,” Karaganov notes.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, Karaganov denies that universal democracy is the “end of history”, and insists that other alternatives exist.

According to Karaganov, the future heralds a pluralism of models. In the article “A Predictable Future?”, he pours scorn on faculty members in most universities for sticking to the “politically correct narrative” and vainly persisting in convincing themselves and their students that the victory of democracy is inevitable, in the face of evidence that authoritarian tendencies are growing even in Western societies.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, Karaganov notes, in the above-

mentioned article titled “Russia In The Changing World” (*Obshchaya Tetrad*, 2012), that new democracies are not necessarily turning pro-Western.<sup>27</sup>

In an interview with RT, Karaganov says that Russia momentarily has an authoritarian democracy.<sup>28</sup> And in another interview with the Turkish state international news channel TRT World, Karaganov explains: “I believe that the whole world is moving toward a kind of combination of authoritarian democracy or democratic authoritarianism.”<sup>29</sup>

In another article, titled “The Age of Authoritarian Democracy” (*Project Syndicate*, March 7, 2012), Karaganov recalls that, a few years ago, it was fashionable to worry about the challenge that authoritarian-style capitalism in China or in Russia presented to Western democratic capitalism. However, according to Karaganov, today, the problem is not solely an economic one.<sup>30</sup>

“Western capitalism’s model of a society based on near-universal affluence and liberal democracy looks increasingly ineffective compared to the competition. The authoritarian countries’ middle classes may push their leaders toward greater democracy, as in Russia, but Western democracies will also likely become more authoritarian,” Karaganov writes.<sup>31</sup>

The Russian academic stresses that by today’s standards, Charles De Gaulle, Winston Churchill, and Dwight Eisenhower were comparatively authoritarian leaders. Hence, Karaganov reasons that the West will have to re-adopt such an approach, or risk losing out globally as its ultra-right and ultra-left political forces consolidate their positions. “We must find ways to prevent the political polarization that gave rise to totalitarian systems – communist and fascist – in the twentieth century,” Karaganov concludes.<sup>32</sup>

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## Endnotes

1 Sergei Karaganov, Doctor of History, is Dean of the Faculty of World Economy and International Affairs of the National Research University–Higher School of Economics (NRU–HSE), and Honorary Chairman of the Council on Foreign and Defense Policy, Russia.

2 See MEMRI Special Dispatch No. 6410, [Renowned Russian Political Analyst Sergey Karaganov On The New Russia-West Ideological Struggle](#), May 4, 2016.

3 See the video: [“AUTOCRATIC DEMOCRACY? Ft. Sergey Karaganov, School of World Economics & Intl Relations Dean at HSE”](#), October 5, 2017.

4 See MEMRI Special Dispatch No. 7195, [Former Kremlin Foreign Policy Advisor Karaganov: We Are In A New More Perilous Cold War](#), November 24, 2017.

5 See MEMRI Special Dispatch No. 7195, [Former Kremlin Foreign Policy Advisor Karaganov: We Are In A New More Perilous Cold War](#), November 24, 2017.

6 See MEMRI Special Dispatch No. 8312, [Putin’s Former Foreign Policy Adviser Karaganov: Russia’s New Mission Is To Defend Global Peace; Democracy Is An Anti-Meritocratic System](#), October 10, 2019.

7 See MEMRI Special Dispatch No. 8312, [Putin’s Former Foreign Policy Adviser Karaganov: Russia’s New Mission Is To Defend Global Peace; Democracy Is An Anti-Meritocratic System](#), October 10, 2019.

8 Originally published in Russian in Rossiyskaya Gazeta, on April 21, 2019. See the English translation, [“70th Anniversary, Post Factum”](#), Karaganov.ru, April 23, 2019.

9 Originally published in Russian in Rossiyskaya Gazeta, on April 21, 2019. See the English translation, [“70th Anniversary, Post Factum”](#), Karaganov.ru, April 23, 2019.

10 See MEMRI Special Dispatch No. 7730, [Former Kremlin Advisor Karaganov: Our People Are Anti-Western; Authoritarianism Is Not Imposed On Us From Above, History Shaped Our Genetic Code](#), October 25, 2019.

11 See MEMRI Special Dispatch No. 7730, [Former Kremlin Advisor Karaganov: Our People Are Anti-Western; Authoritarianism Is Not Imposed On Us From Above, History Shaped Our Genetic Code](#), October 25, 2019.

12 See [“Russia In The Changing World”](#), *Obshchaya tetrad*. Vestnik Moskovskoi shkoly politicheskikh issledovaniy, Moscow, 2012, No 4, pp. 8–21.

13 See MEMRI Special Dispatch No. 7730, [Former Kremlin Advisor Karaganov: Our People Are Anti-Western; Authoritarianism Is Not Imposed On Us From Above, History Shaped Our Genetic Code](#), October 25, 2019.

14 See MEMRI Special Dispatch No. 7730, [Former Kremlin Advisor Karaganov: Our People Are Anti-Western; Authoritarianism Is Not Imposed On Us From Above, History Shaped Our Genetic Code](#), October 25, 2019.

15 See MEMRI Special Dispatch No. 7699, [Former Kremlin Advisor Karaganov: We Have Exhausted The European Pantry... Russia Is An Authoritarian Power By Its ‘Genetic Makeup’](#), October 7, 2018.

16 See MEMRI Special Dispatch No. 7699, [Former Kremlin Advisor Karaganov: We Have Exhausted The European Pantry... Russia Is An Authoritarian Power By Its ‘Genetic Makeup’](#), October 7, 2018.

- 17 See MEMRI Special Dispatch No. 7699, [Former Kremlin Advisor Karaganov: We Have Exhausted The European Pantry... Russia Is An Authoritarian Power By Its 'Genetic Makeup'](#), October 7, 2018.
- 18 See MEMRI Special Dispatch No.7667, [Former Kremlin Advisor Karaganov: The West Has Started A New Cold War... Today's Russia Has Every Chance To Win Over The West, As It Acts Not All By Itself But As A Vanguard Of The Non-Western World](#), September 12, 2018.
- 19 See MEMRI Special Dispatch No.7667, [Former Kremlin Advisor Karaganov: The West Has Started A New Cold War... Today's Russia Has Every Chance To Win Over The West, As It Acts Not All By Itself But As A Vanguard Of The Non-Western World](#), September 12, 2018.
- 20 See ["We Are Smarter, Stronger and More Determined"](#), Spiegel Online International, July 13, 2016.
- 21 See ["A Predictable Future?"](#), Globalaffairs.ru, July 25, 2019.
- 22 See MEMRI Special Dispatch No.7667, [Former Kremlin Advisor Karaganov: The West Has Started A New Cold War... Today's Russia Has Every Chance To Win Over The West, As It Acts Not All By Itself But As A Vanguard Of The Non-Western World](#), September 12, 2018.
- 23 It is worth noting that, in the article ["Russia In The Changing World"](#), Karaganov stresses that democracy is not always equal to progress, just as authoritarianism is not always regress. "Authoritarian China is developing much faster than much more democratic India where the government system is less effective," Karaganov wrote.
- 24 See MEMRI Special Dispatch No.7667, [Former Kremlin Advisor Karaganov: The West Has Started A New Cold War... Today's Russia Has Every Chance To Win Over The West, As It Acts Not All By Itself But As A Vanguard Of The Non-Western World](#), September 12, 2018.
- 25 Originally published in VPK, on September 28, 2016. See the English translation, ["Devaluated Standards, The Reason for the West's Fear Is That Russia Is Offering A Viable Alternative To The Present Western Values"](#), Karaganov.ru, September 28, 2019.
- 26 See ["A Predictable Future?"](#), Globalaffairs.ru, July 25, 2019.
- 27 See ["Russia In The Changing World"](#), Obshchaya tetrad. Vestnik Moskovskoi shkoly politicheskikh issledovaniy, Moscow, 2012, No 4, pp. 8–21.
- 28 See the video: ["AUTOCRATIC DEMOCRACY? Ft. Sergey Karaganov, School of World Economics & Intl Relations Dean at HSE"](#), October 5, 2017.
- 29 See ["Why nationalism is rising at the expense of liberal democracy"](#), Trtworld.com, July 8, 2019.
- 30 See ["The Age of Authoritarian Democracy"](#), National Research University Higher School of Economics, Hse.ru, March 7, 2019.
- 31 See ["The Age of Authoritarian Democracy"](#), National Research University Higher School of Economics, Hse.ru, March 7, 2019.
- 32 See ["The Age of Authoritarian Democracy"](#), National Research University Higher School of Economics, Hse.ru, March 7, 2019.