

• Author: [Vladislav Inozemtsev](#)

[The Great Russian Phantom](#)



We often hear that, unlike in most modern, developed societies, people in Russia are subservient to the authorities and everyone who represents them. This can usually be explained by the specifics of Russia's history, physical location and economic conditions. At the same time, when considering this topic, most people tend to deem the situation an anomaly which is hampering the country's development.

This may be true, but I would like to draw your attention to the fact that our problems go deeper than it seems. Unlike the liberals who regard Russia as a normal country, I think that we are inherently different, politically speaking, and, [as the Russian president claims](#), we have an "exceptionally strong genetic code", although it is unlikely to be "one of our main competitive advantages in the world today". And I will explain why.

What word in the Russian language defines a political form of society and its systems (which have special internal control and coercion mechanisms while being externally independent)? - *gosudarstvo* ["the state"]. We say the word every day and find nothing unusual in it. Yet, in my opinion, it contains a lot of peculiarities and determines, *inter alia*, Russia's completely unique path.

The etymology of the word *gosudarstvo* seems quite simple: it stems from the word *gosudar'* ["monarch"], which in turn derives from the Slavonic *gospodar'*, *i.e.* master or lord. Some linguists go even further and make the next step - to the word *Gospod'*, or God; while some stop at *gospodin* ["mister"]. Even if we refrain from calling the state holy (it was explained in the Holy Scriptures long ago anyway: "There is no power but of God; the powers that be are ordained of God." [Romans 13:1]), the term itself does not imply that the state should serve its citizens, but that *they* should provide for it, with no regard for their own interests and needs.

The phenomenon described as *gosudarstvo* in Russia has been known for thousands of years, but has never been so pronounced elsewhere as it is in our country. From our philosophy courses, we all remember Plato's famous work *The Republic* [officially translated into Russian as *The State*]. But what was its original title? *Πολιτεία*, of course. What does it describe? The classes, the interaction between them, and changing types of political systems. What was the state called in Roman times? *Res Publica*: a term which once again refers us to forms of governance and relations between leaders and their subordinates, but contains no requirement to obey. The term *gosudar'* did not exist in medieval Europe; the title of Niccolò Machiavelli's well-known book is just a whim of its Russian translator. The original title of the treatise was *Il Principe* - in the Roman sense of the word *Princeps*. Thomas Hobbes' famous work *Leviathan*, supposedly a treatise on state power, was devoted to the power of a Commonwealth, which was both ecclesiastical and civil. A *commonwealth*, meanwhile, is something other than a system in which everything is determined by a *gospodar's* whim. Of course, everyone was writing about *signori*, kings and emperors, but their titles did not give a name to the social systems themselves.

For centuries, states have usually been called *staat*, *état*, *estado*, *stato*, etc. in Romance and Germanic languages. All these terms, which came into usage to define a political unit in the 13-14th centuries (*i.e.* the time when relatively complicated, complex societies were forming in Europe), come from the Latin word *status*, which defines someone's wealth or position on an issue (in which sense they are close to Plato's *Πολιτεία*). Ever since its emergence, this term has been relativist, describing the relationship between a defined entity and a society/citizens or other similar objects/phenomena. Even the German word *Reich* (which is quite unpleasant to the Russian ear) - which derives from the Proto-Germanic *rikja* and Gothic *reiki*, and has equivalents in most Germanic languages - implies a direct line of succession or belonging to some clan, but not a relation between rule and obedience, and certainly not something holy. The Finnish *tila* describes the spatial designation of a given society, *i.e.* referring to its territory - as does the Chinese 国, which combines references to the family of the emperor and the border or, to be more precise, the wall separating the emperor's realm from the outside world.

In Russia, any doubts about the supreme role of the authorities in history and society have been eliminated from the very outset, even at such a basic level as language. Russian reality has always been even "sadder" than the system of European absolutism. In Europe, a monarch could declare: "I am the state!", while in Russia even *he* could not be the state, which has always been a completely depersonalised entity, isolated from the people - in fact, this is our country's greatest tragedy.

I am delving into such detail about the terminology because it is crucial to understanding the Russian identity.

The idea of the Russian-style *gosudarstvo* has long been used to justify the right of any authority established in the country to suppress its own people and manage the country's resources not in the name and to the benefit of the people or society, but in the name and to the benefit of the *state* - a phenomenon represented by no person in particular. No Russian monarchs in the olden days, or general secretaries and presidents in more recent times - ever claimed to be a personification of the state. Moreover, even without denying their supreme authority, they were skilled at making people believe that their close associates were responsible for all of society's ills. Only in Russia could the maxima of "Good tsar - bad boyars!" have emerged and survived for centuries. Defending the state has always been declared the ultimate value - even when any logic would suggest that the authorities deserved to be overthrown and the regime dismantled. As a result, most members of Russian society are ready to sacrifice their welfare and lives to the state without ever knowing its aims and intentions. Contrary to the West, where "To make us love our country, our country ought to be lovely" (Burke, Edward. *Reflections on the Revolution in France*), the state's *raison d'être* in Russia has never been in doubt.

Nowadays, the *gosudarstvo's* status in Russia's history and worldview has produced three peculiarities of the country and its society.

Firstly, the *gosudarstvo* has successfully driven the people (and the individual in particular) to the margins of society. Therefore I believe that Russia represents one of those rare countries where, on the one hand, the value of human life hardly seems to have grown over time, and, on the other hand, the government is directly and indirectly responsible for many more victims among its own population than any external wars or cataclysms. This trend has given rise to several others, the most important of which is a skewed attitude to the economy: labour is valued less than objects and can be considered as something unpaid – which is why our economy remains resources-oriented, not industrial, and, judging by the progress of our “modernisations”, is unable to make the transition to a higher, more contemporary state.

Secondly, endorsing the idea that “the end justifies the means” has become an extremely important result of the *gosudarstvo*’s primacy, and this rationale has yielded an almost total disregard for effectiveness. For many centuries, what is usually known as *efficiency* has been mixed up with what could be termed *effectiveness* in Russia; success meant achieving goals, not solving problems. Russian history is filled with examples of the extremely hard labour involved in building new cities, roads, industrial facilities, etc., the need for which was quite unclear. Sometimes they were the outcome of flawed strategies, often the product of rulers’ deranged ideas, but a lack of rational economic interest was a feature common in an unprecedentedly high number of cases. Consequently, such economic ideology was a serious obstacle for the development of private business, which, in all countries and in all periods of history, is driven by financial interest and economic results. This is the main source of our fundamental difference from the rest of Europe.

Thirdly, these peculiarities of the Russian understanding of *gosudarstvo* and authorities per se have radically decreased Russians’ level of commitment to rationalism, leaving them wide open to any large-scale doctrines and concepts. This imaginary nature of the *gosudarstvo* has become the most important precondition for Russia’s predisposition to doctrinal concepts, and its real dependence on them and their alleged, illusory aims. In my opinion, the scale of indoctrination in our country exceeds any other similar cases in the world, and such indoctrination has become our society’s natural state, whereas in the majority of other countries it has only ever been a short-term deviation from dominant trends.

The list of Russia’s problems and their roots could go on, but the conclusion is obvious: in order for it to become anything modern – a country, society, state, commonwealth or republic – it should stop being a *gosudarstvo*. In the end, there is nothing wrong with authorities, governments or even monarchs. The true evil is the *gosudarstvo* in its typically Russian definition; a great, futureless phantom which has occurred nowhere else before. This fawning, anachronistic concept, which confuses spiritual authorities with secular power, must be rejected if we wish to live together in the modern world as a single nation, instead of fleeing in different directions – to places where the natural form of human life is society, not a “state”, where the rulers serve the people and are not their “masters”.

**The article is an authorised excerpt from Vladislav Inozemtsev’s book Russia: a Pre-modern country, to be published by Albina Publishers in Autumn 2017*

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