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Russian Democracy Under Putin

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Russians seem content with the current quasi-democratic, quasi-autocratic order.

IS Russia a democracy? Is democracy in Russia developing, eroding, or not changing-for either better or worse? The answers to these questions have tremendous implications for social scientists and policymakers. If Russia is a democracy, then theories that explain democratic transitions may provide a meaningful framework for understanding regime change in Russia. If Russia is not a democracy, then other metaphorical lenses may be more appropriate. If Russia is a democracy, then its entrance into Western multilateral institutions may be justified and Western aid for democracy assistance is no longer needed. If Russia is not a democracy, or if Russian democracy is eroding, then the exact opposite policy recommendations may be more appropriate-delayed membership in Western unions and more assistance that is democratic. If Russia is stuck in the middle-caught in the twilight zone between dictatorship and democracy-then this too has implications for theory development and policy-making.

The answers offered in this article to these difficult and politically charged questions are unlikely to please anyone. They are based upon a mixed and contradictory assessment. Although some might disagree, it is clear that some form of democracy emerged in Russia after the collapse of Soviet communism in 1991.¹ While not displaying the thick structures and norms typical of a mature "liberal democracy," the Russian regime that put down roots under Boris Yeltsin in the 1990s has many of the features of an "electoral democracy."² Especially after the enactment of Yeltsin's super-presidential constitution in 1993, mass-based interest groups were consigned to the fringes, pluralist interest intermediation became feeble, individual liberties began to be abridged by arbitrary practices, and institutions that could have helped to redress the imbalance-parliament, the party system, the judiciary-lost strength and

independence.

Nonetheless, the Russian state and Russian society displayed features of democratic development.³ Elections took place under a set of rules recognized by all. The results of these elections were not entirely certain beforehand, and no authority intervened after Election Day to reverse the outcome of the voting. The playing field for competitors in elections was never equal and has steadily become less so.

Nonetheless, the rulers of Russia were selected in competitive elections. The regime that emerged in the 1990s was qualitatively different from the communist and tsarist dictatorships.

Since Vladimir Putin became president at the beginning of 2000, democratic institutions have eroded. When Yeltsin appointed Putin prime minister in the fall of 1999, the regime's uncertain and unconsolidated nature lowered the barriers for institutional change. Putin soon put his imprint not only on policy but on institutions. He has not amended or radically violated the 1993 constitution, and he has not upended the institutional configuration of Yeltsin's regime. Nor does he seem to have any coherent plan for doing so. He has, however, initiated or tolerated a series of discrete changes that have diminished the democratic legacy of the reform years. Yeltsin, in recruiting Putin from the closed world of the security agencies and announcing him as the "steel core" of a revitalized government, undoubtedly expected a course correction toward discipline and order. He now thinks that Putin has gone too far in certain respects. However, Yeltsin's feelings are irrelevant. What is important and worrisome is the cumulative impact of the changes.

Putin's innovations coincide with a spate of revisionist thinking about democratization in the contemporary world. Some say that autocracies are being replaced, as often as not, by hybrid regimes entwining democratic with authoritarian principles. Others go further, asserting that Russia and a series of other countries are best thought of as "competitive-authoritarian" systems, in which the authoritarian element has the upper hand.⁴ Much ink has been spilled in recent years on the failure of the promising "third wave" of global democratization, which extended from the 1970s into the 1990s, and was capped by the fall of the Soviet dictatorship and its satellites in Eastern Europe. Although there have been democratic success stories in the former Soviet Union, there have been terrible failures and disappointments as well.⁵

It is premature to pigeonhole Russia into any of these autocratic categories. The phrase "managed democracy" will do as a marker for the current condition of its polity. If it is too early to sign the death certificate for democracy, it is too late to ignore tokens of a backing away from the liberal and democratic ideals in which name the Soviet regime was overthrown. Having begun on Yeltsin's watch, the retreat has gathered momentum under Putin. Russia's present rulers are modernizers in the economic and socioeconomic sphere and pro-Western realists in foreign policy.

In the political domain, they take the electoral mechanism and the trappings of democracy for granted. They accept that they must periodically renew their popular mandate and that when they do, society must be afforded alternatives to the status quo. They are also reconciled to a limited diversity of opinions and interests within the state machinery. Without setting out to extinguish it, they aim to contain this

diversity within boundaries they alone fix. For those at the rudder, democracy is neither good nor evil. It is an existential product of larger forces that, like gravity, cannot be stopped, yet, with the appropriate engineering, can be harnessed to one's own purpose. Institutional change under Putin has reflected this odd blend of preserving formal democratic practices and at the same time weakening the actual democratic content of these political rules and norms.

The New Balance of Power in the Duma

Putin took office bent on resuming the economic reforms that had been stymied by governmental disorganization and legislative resistance in Yeltsin's second term. Although he selected a face from the Yeltsin era, Mikhail Kasianov, to head his first cabinet, Putin inserted a team of market liberals into the next tier, most of them known to him from his St. Petersburg days. Key players were the new first deputy prime minister and minister of finance, Aleksei Kudrin (a fellow vice mayor with Putin under Anatolii Sobchak), the minister for economic development and trade, German Gref, and the president's personal adviser on economic affairs, the iconoclastic Andrei Illarionov. The team came in with an ambitious program encompassing tax reform, land privatization, deregulation, changes in labor and welfare policy, and incentives for foreign investors.

The 1999-2000 electoral cycle put in place a Duma and a president with the same basic political orientation, enabling rapid progress on this reform agenda. The Unity bloc, partnering with the People's Deputy faction (consisting of pro-Kremlin deputies from the districts) and Regions of Russia (which parted from Fatherland-All Russia [OVR] after the Duma election), materialized as the pivotal force in the Duma.⁶ These political partners made a deal with the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (KPRF) to divide the chairs of major committees, cutting out OVR, the Union of Right Forces (SPS), Yabloko, and the Liberal Democrats (LDPR).⁷ The pact gave the KPRF's Gennadii Seleznev a second term as speaker. Seleznev's subsequent departure from the communist hierarchy made it apparent that he now had a binding commitment to Putin and the Kremlin. Unity's alliance with the KPRF was purely tactical and unwound in the course of 2000 and 2001. Unity increasingly counted on rightist deputies to help it pursue its legislative agenda, leaving the jilted KPRF leader, Gennadii Ziuganov, to huff at Putin as a "liberal dictator."⁸

For the first time since 1993, the balance of power in the Russian parliament is decisively anti-communist. The Duma has not indulged in squabbling with the president by debating impeachment and censure resolutions. Pushed to act on the economy by Putin and his government, the Duma has enacted new sections of the Russian tax code, which had been in legislative limbo for years, putting in place a flat income tax of 13 percent and a lower profits tax.⁹ It has gone along with a new labor code, considered very friendly to business interests, and a land code that allows for the ownership and sale of farms and urban land. Putin and the executive branch have also managed to work with the Duma to pass balanced and feasible budgets, a feat rarely accomplished in the Yeltsin years, when parliament and president were so bitterly estranged.¹⁰ Putin has not yet sent the Duma draft legislation on some of the most painful structural changes, such as those touching on pensions and social assistance. Nevertheless, much has been accomplished since the polarization of executive and legislature was eased as a consequence of the 1999-2000 elections.¹¹

The new relationship between the Duma and the president is not "anti-democratic." Every president around the world wants to work with a pliant parliament. Executives in liberal democracies most certainly spend considerable political and material resources to achieve a pro-presidential majority in their legislatures. The anti-democratic flavor of current executive-legislative relations in Russia comes from the way in which the new pro-presidential majority was achieved, that is, through an election in which the playing field was not level for all participants. Unlike any previous parliamentary election in Russia, the Kremlin intervened actively in the 1999 contest to assist Unity and destroy Fatherland-All Russia. The Kremlin relied on its allies in the country's two largest television networks, ORT and RTR, to unleash a negative assault against Fatherland-All Russia. Although other factors contributed to Unity's strong finish and Fatherland-All Russia's disappointing showing in the 1999 parliamentary vote, the playing field for the two parties was not equal.¹²

Weakening the Federation Council

Putin has assembled super-majorities in the Duma-majorities capable of overriding vetoes of bills handed down by the Federation Council, the upper house of parliament. As a result, he has been able to transform the organization of the upper house and therefore the federal system. To everyone's surprise, Putin made reform of the Federation Council one of his top political goals in his first months in office.

The Russian constitution states that after an interim period during which members would be directly elected (1993-1995), each region of the federation was to send two deputies to the Federation Council: one representing the province's legislative assembly, and one representing its chief executive. The constitution did not specify how these representatives were to be selected. By the end of the two years, the regional governments had won agreement on a law mandating that all provincial leaders were to be popularly elected-until then, Yeltsin had appointed many governors-and that governors and legislative heads would henceforth sit ex officio in the Federation Council. This formulation gave the governors and their legislative colleagues increased local legitimacy and greater autonomy from Yeltsin and Moscow. By granting the governors and republic presidents a direct voice in the national parliament, it also created a constitutional anomaly in that these figures would be concurrently executives and legislators. The Federation Council functioned mostly as a lobby for regional interests.

Two weeks after he was sworn into office, Putin proposed a new recipe for the upper house that replaced the regional leaders with persons designated by them under an intricate formula.¹³ The members of the Federation Council resisted tenaciously, knowing they would lose their apartments and offices in Moscow, their parliamentary immunity, and much of their clout with the federal government. After a heated battle, in which the Duma said it would override a Federation Council veto and the Kremlin allegedly threatened governors with criminal investigations if they did not support Putin's plan, the law was adopted in July 2000. As a sop, many governors and retired governors were appointed to a new presidential advisory body, the State Council.

The reform has emaciated a significant institutional counterweight to the president. Council members, being unelected, do not have the same authority as their predecessors. Many, in fact, are Muscovites with patronage ties to Putin-they

obtained their seats with his administration's backing and have put the Kremlin's interests ahead of their constituents.¹⁴ The new setup also makes it more difficult for regional leaders to take collective action vis-à-vis the central government. As the Duma deputy Vladimir Lysenko stated in 2001, "The president had managed to get rid of one of the strongest and most authoritative state bodies in the country. Under the old structure, the Federation Council provided somewhat of a check and balance on the other branches of power, especially the executive, which is fast evolving into an authoritarian regime."¹⁵ Putin's reforms of the Federation Council did not formally transgress the democratic rules of the game outlined in Russia's constitution. Moreover, the prior method of constituting the upper house was far from perfect, since it blurred the lines between executive and legislative authority. Putin's correction to this odd formation, however, was not the democratizing measure that many had proposed for years—that is, direct election of senators. Instead, his reform decreased the role of the citizenry in selecting its governmental representatives and thus weakened another check on the Kremlin's power.

Moscow Versus the Regions

Putin's clipping of the governors' wings was extended to their home turf by a decree enacted on May 13, 2000. The decree established seven super-regions ("federal districts"), accountable to Moscow, and super-imposed them on the eighty-nine units of the federation. Each super-region was to be headed by a plenipotentiary appointed by the president and sitting on his Security Council. Five of the seven envoys named in 2000 were from the Federal Security Service (FSB), the army, or the police.¹⁶ Their writ extends to every federal agency in the regions other than the military forces, and thus they have access to officials in the politically most sensitive and influential agencies, such as the treasury, the tax inspectorate, the procuracy, the FSB, and the regular police. Their mission is to oversee the activities of the bureaucracy and report to the president's office on any regional noncompliance with the constitution or the law.

Three other changes accompanied the super-regions. First, a law passed in July 2000 authorizes the president to suspend elected governors accused of wrongdoing by the procurator-general's office. Inasmuch as criminal proceedings can drag on indefinitely (especially if it suits the president), the law is tantamount to a presidential right to fire governors. Putin has used the power only once, and indirectly at that (when he orchestrated the ouster of Governor Evgenii Nazdratenko of Primorskii Krai in 2001),¹⁷ but the mere threat of it has had a chilling effect on gubernatorial initiative. Putin can also dismiss any regional legislature that passes laws contravening federal laws or the constitution. Second, Putin's government has stopped signing the bilateral agreements with the provinces that were one of Yeltsin's favorite instruments for winning their acquiescence. As of 2003, the division of labor among the national and subnational governments is to be governed by an omnibus law that in principle is to be applied uniformly across Russia. Third, Moscow has pushed through a more centralized allotment of tax receipts. As of 1999, roughly 45 percent of the revenues collected in the regions were supposed to be transferred to the central government, but the amount that reached it was often smaller. Under a law signed by Putin in 2000, about 55 percent is to go to Moscow and 45 percent to the regions, and the balance is to be reviewed regularly. Regions like Bashkortostan, which for years paid almost no federal taxes by a virtue of bilateral agreement, are once again contributing to the federal budget.

Party Fractures, Election Machinations

Russia's party system does not perform the role that party systems play in working democracies. Most of the country's parties lack a distinct identity or a stable following. They have little effect on the elections that count, the ones in which the president and the regional administrative heads are chosen. Russian electoral law assigns political parties a pivotal role in parliamentary elections, but nonpartisans and weak party organizations continue to play a critical role. Finally, there is little internal cohesion within the parties that remain.

Fatherland-All Russia. The Fatherland-All Russia bloc (OVR), the founding of which initiated the electoral struggle, spoke for current and recent officeholders who sought control of the national government on the assumption that Yeltsin and his entourage were a spent force. Unity, the response to OVR's challenge, was initially created by some pro-Kremlin governors and businessmen like Boris Berezovskii who were concerned about the problems they would face if OVR and former prime minister Evgenii Primakov came to power.

Both founding groups miscalculated. OVR made the biggest blunder when it fumbled the Duma election and then concluded that it could not field a credible candidate for president. All Russia and the Regions of Russia caucus defected in January 2000 and mended fences with the Kremlin. In due course, the entire coalition followed abjectly into Putin's camp.

Unity. The original masterminds of Unity miscalculated in a different way. Unity achieved electoral success and incorporation into the power structure, but its architect, Berezovskii, did not survive as a political insider. Anticipating Putin's gratitude, Berezovskii got the back of his hand, because Putin feared that the "Family" group around Berezovskii and his business ventures had too much influence. He first ostracized Berezovskii and then pushed him into exile in London in 2001. Unity thrived without Berezovskii, upgrading its legal status from electoral bloc to civic movement and then, in 2002, into a political party named Unified Russia. OVR agreed to a phased-in merger with Unified Russia that will be complete in time for the 2003 parliamentary election. Whereas Yeltsin discarded two consecutive parties of power, Russia's Choice and Our Home Is Russia, Putin favors strengthening Unity/Unified Russia as an organization and seems ready to endorse and assist it in the 2003 parliamentary elections.

Communists. A smoldering disagreement in the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (KPRF), the main opposition party, between the leader, Ziuganov, and the parliamentary speaker, Seleznev, burst into flame in 2002. Seleznev resigned from the party but, with Kremlin support, kept the speaker's job. He has formed his own political organization, Russia (Rossiia), and vows to battle the KPRF for leftist votes in the next elections. Many members are disgruntled with Ziuganov's inflexibility, and thus the KPRF may very well nominate a younger, less hidebound individual, such as Sergei Glazev, as its presidential standard bearer in 2004. Despite these internal battles, the KPRF is poised to benefit from its loyal and stable electorate. Compared to all of Russia's other parties, the KPRF has the most promising short-term future.

Union of Right Forces. On the right, the SPS has made the transition from a coalition

of parties and movements to a political party. The head of its 1999 slate, Sergei Kirienko, withdrew from partisan activity when he became Putin's plenipotentiary in the Volga super-region. This left Boris Nemtsov as parliamentary chair, with Anatolii Chubais, Yeltsin's privatization tsar, lurking in the wings. Having cooperated with the government and seen it institute a liberal economic policy, SPS worries that it will not have a attractive platform to sell to the electorate in 2003. Several veterans of the Russian democratic movement, most prominently human rights advocate Sergei Kovalev, have quit the party in disgust at its pro-war stance on Chechnya.¹⁸ With Unity creeping to the right and the Kremlin ever more hostile to its leaders, SPS will have to fight hard to maintain its slightly right-of-center electoral base in the 2003 parliamentary elections.

Yabloko. SPS's liberal rival, Yabloko, suffered a number of defections after March 2000, including the manager of its 1999 campaign, Viacheslav Igrunov, who left to form his own boutique political movement.¹⁹ Grigorii Yavlinskii remains at the helm and has firmed his relationship with Mikhail Khodorkovskii, the CEO of Yukos and the richest man in Russia. Sporadic negotiations with SPS about a common slate in 2003 or other forms of collaboration have been in vain.²⁰ After years of standoffishness toward the government, Yavlinskii has edged closer to Putin, perhaps aware of how much the president's blessings could help him in the next election. Putin's attitude toward the liberals was apparently influenced by their conduct during the crisis sparked by the seizure of hundreds of hostages in a Moscow theater by Chechen fighters in October 2002. He accused Nemtsov of exploiting the disaster for political gain and praised Yavlinskii for not doing so. His reaction fueled suspicion that Putin may back Yabloko as his liberal ally instead of SPS.²¹

Long-Term Effects. Whatever comes of these partisan intrigues and squabbles, there are two other changes underway that must be watched for their long-term effects. The first stems from the interest of the Russian leadership in revamping the rules for party formation and State Duma elections. Addressing Unity's convention in February 2000, Putin spoke in favor of a "workable" party system made up of "two, three, or four parties."²² Streamlining was the main aim of a new law on parties passed in 2001, which stiffened the requirements for registration and stipulated that electoral blocs would now have to include one political party. In 1999, Unity called for an end to proportional representation and for all deputies to be elected in districts. Its motivations were not altruistic. Unity's poor showing in the districts in 1999 notwithstanding, its founders calculated that a party of power would do better in a district-based system, especially if it could polarize the district races and then prevail in the runoff. Unity and its Duma allies have so far failed to institute such a change, but in 2002, they raised the threshold for the party list from 5 to 7 percent, effective in 2007 (they originally proposed 12.5 percent), which will decrease the number of parties that get into parliament. Putin's brain trust hopes eventually to push all parties other than Unified Russia and the KPRF to the sidelines.²³ If the communists and Unified Russia were to cooperate in getting rid of proportional representation altogether, Russia's proto-multiparty system might easily become a hegemonic party system dominated by Unified Russia.²⁴

The second and more alarming trend is toward arbitrary interference by the central authorities in regional elections, usually with the connivance of local politicians, electoral commissions, and courts. The tone was set in November 2000, when Kremlin officials pressured a judge to remove the incumbent, Aleksandr Rutskoii,

from the gubernatorial ballot in Kursk on the eve of the election. Ruskoi, a supporter of Unity in 1999 and Russia's vice president from 1991 to 1993, had, among other things, offended Putin during the controversy about the sinking of the submarine Kursk several months before.²⁵ In April 2002, the scenario was repeated with the front-runner for president of Ingushetiia, a republic bordering Chechnya.²⁶ The same year, Moscow intervened on behalf of clients in gubernatorial elections in Krasnoiarsk and Nizhnii Novgorod, and there were charges of fraud in the vote counting.²⁷ Such practices, whether or not they spread to the national level, compromise Russia's functioning even as an electoral democracy. As Andreas Shedler has observed, the process of assessing electoral democracies is like multiplying by zero, as opposed to adding: "Partial compliance to democratic norms does not add up to partial democracy. Gross violation of any one condition invalidates the fulfillment of all the others. If the chain of democratic choice is broken anywhere, elections become not less democratic but undemocratic."²⁸

The lack of strong opposition parties and the central state's ability to intervene in local elections underscore the weakness of the checks on the Kremlin's power. Rather than consolidating, these potential balancers of presidential power have weakened with time.

Chechnya and Civil Liberties

Putin's rise to power dovetailed with a cruel war in Chechnya, the second Russia had fought there since 1994. In the 1999-2000 electoral cycle, voters saw Unity and then Putin as the political players who could best handle this tormenting issue. The initial use of force against the Chechen fighters making raids on nearby Dagestan in 1999 was justified. Russia also had a sovereign right to deal with the lawlessness that enveloped Chechnya after the Khasavyurt accord ended the first war in 1996, a plague whose barbarous manifestations included was a wave of kidnappings and the execution of hostages. The Russian government's response-full-scale reoccupation, bombardment by heavy weaponry, oppressive patrols and "filtration camps" for segregating and interrogating suspects-has not brought about the promised result. Putin has pledged military reform, as did Yeltsin before him, and appointed a civilian, Sergei Ivanov of the FSB, as defense minister in 2000, but this objective has taken a back seat to prosecuting the war with archaic military forces consisting of sullen conscripts led by a Soviet-era officer corps.²⁹

Wars are always brutal, and Chechnya is no exception, but the violence of the guerrillas and the terrorists linked to them does not exonerate Russia's routinely inhumane actions. Human Rights Watch has documented atrocities that include summary shootings, the torching of villages, the rape of Chechen women, and the mistreatment of prisoners of war.³⁰ Experts reckon that the fighting has displaced 400,000 refugees.³¹ Moscow has no strategy for either withdrawal or a negotiated settlement. The March 2003 referendum on Chechnya's status, in which more than 90 percent of its citizens supposedly endorsed all three of Moscow's questions, was a farce, emphasizing yet again the lack of a serious plan to end the bloodshed. To stanch the flow of information about human rights violations, Russia has expelled the observer mission of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe from the republic.

President Putin has loosened the leash on the FSB, which he headed in 1998-1999

and which is now directed by his associate Nikolai Patrushev. The agency has stepped up its harassment of targeted human rights activists and environmentalists, Western non-governmental organizations, and religious groups affiliated with outside organizations.³² New guidelines on foreign contacts for academics have been issued, and contacts with scientists in so-called closed nuclear cities are restricted. Several academics and environmentalists have been prosecuted for espionage, although the most conspicuous cases ended with acquittals or pardons.³³ At the end of 2002, the FSB became more aggressive about limiting contacts between Russian citizens and foreigners. The Ministry of the Interior must now review most visa invitations to non-Russians. In addition to evicting the OSCE from Chechnya, the Russian government canceled its agreement with the U.S. Peace Corps and refused reentry to Irene Stevenson, the long-time director of the AFL-CIO's Solidarity Center in Moscow.

Muzzling the Independent Media

Putin has also tightened the state's grip on the mass media, assigning priority to national television.³⁴ The commercial network NTV supported OVR in the Duma campaign and, though less warmly, Yavlinskii in the presidential campaign, and provided the most candid coverage of the two Chechen wars. Putin moved to settle scores in the spring of 2000. His Kremlin administration leaned on prosecutors to investigate alleged past misdeeds of Vladimir Gusinskii, president of the Media-Most company, which owned NTV. Gazprom, the natural gas conglomerate with strong ties to the Kremlin, then called in a large loan to NTV. In the space of several months, Gazprom's media holding company took control of the network, Gusinskii fled abroad, the staff of the weekly newsmagazine Itogi was fired, and most Media-Most ancillaries were shut down. Gazprom purged NTV a second time in January 2003, removing Boris Jordan, the Russian-American director it had appointed in 2000, due to NTV's critical coverage of the government's handling of the hostage crisis in a theater in downtown Moscow in the fall of 2002. Evgenii Kiselev and many of NTV's best journalists and producers migrated to TV-6, a much smaller station owned by Berezovskii, only to have the government close it. The former NTV employees got back on the air on a channel called TVS in 2002, but it has only a small fraction of the national audience. One of the original TVS board members, Evgenii Primakov, "called on editorial staff to exercise 'internal censorship' in order to keep the network 'responsible.'" ³⁵ By the time Berezovskii relinquished TV-6, he had already ceded his large minority stake and editorial control in ORT, and Sergei Dorenko, the sarcastic newscaster who was his and the Kremlin's battering ram against OVR in 1999, had been sent packing. Governmental agencies have severely restricted access to Chechnya by Russian and foreign correspondents, and have arrested and intimidated several print journalists whose war stories they found inconvenient.³⁶

The struggle about the media involves business and personality issues as well as questions of free speech. The losers to date are not blameless. Gusinskii's financial practices were questionable, and NTV did not offer equal access to all comers during the 1999-2000 elections. Nevertheless, the pluralism that comes from multiple owners and multiple biases is preferable to the monotone that would result from a total state monopoly of the news. In nationwide television broadcasting, Russia is closer to such a monopoly today than at any time since the establishment of NTV in 1993. In its Global Survey of Media Independence for 2003, Freedom House listed

Russia as "not free" for the first time since the collapse of the Soviet Union. As the 2003-2004 round of elections approaches, even moderate opponents of Putin have many fewer outlets for delivering their message than in 1999-2000.³⁷

Putin's Agenda and the Future of Russian Democracy

Putin and his statecraft cannot be appraised on one level or by one criterion. Enough is not yet known to make it possible to sort through the ellipses and contradictions in the thinking of the public man. The private man is hidden behind many veils.

Some of what is here called managed democracy is a pragmatic response to the trying circumstances Russia found itself in at the end of the 1990s. Boris Yeltsin, capable of flashes of imagination and boldness, was bored with the minutiae of government and preferred changing officials to rethinking policies. To buy support and stability in tumultuous times, he repeatedly made concessions to groups like the provincial governors and the new business elite, barely considering the costs. Putin inherited these arrangements, found many of them lacking, and set out to enforce or negotiate better terms. The particulars often reflect common sense more than ideology, and might very well have been implemented no matter who succeeded Yeltsin. Although the means have sometimes been suspect, there is nothing objectionable in Putin's ending the polarization of executive and legislature, removing the anomaly of governors sitting in the upper house of parliament, squeezing more tax revenues from the provinces, tinkering with the electoral system, putting one or two of the most arrogant oligarchs in their place, and retaliating against the Chechen incursion into Dagestan. In economic policy, Putin has listened to liberal advice and converted it into legislation more consistently and effectively than Yeltsin did. His reforms, along with the 1998 devaluation and the rise in world oil prices, have helped sustain an economic recovery now in its fifth year, a welcome respite after so long in the doldrums.

Prolonged economic growth should be conducive to democracy, for it will grow a middle class that will demand freedoms and accountable governance.³⁸ This could end up being Putin's most benign legacy to Russia. Nor should one ignore the institutional and political projects he supports that may ultimately strengthen democratic governance. To his credit, for example, Putin favors legal reforms that will pare the power of prosecutors, introduce jury trials nationwide, and lessen the incarceration rate. In 2002, he vetoed restrictive amendments to the law on the mass media passed by parliament after the Moscow hostage crisis. On occasion at least, Putin says the right things about democracy and human rights. In November 2001, he attended a Civic Forum sponsored by his administration with the purpose of bridging the chasm between state officials and grassroots activists. The sight of a former KGB agent, Putin, sitting at the same table as a former Soviet dissident and Helsinki Watch leader, Ludmila Alekseeva, was a stirring one, although some fretted that it was all a ploy to co-opt activists.³⁹ A year later, Putin met with a similar group on International Human Rights Day and proclaimed that his heart was with them: Protecting civil rights and freedoms is a highly relevant issue for Russia. You know that next year will see the tenth anniversary of our constitution. It declares the basic human rights and freedoms to be the highest value and it enshrines them as self-implementing standards. I must say that this is of course a great achievement.⁴⁰

Unfortunately, Putin's actions are all too frequently at variance with his words. He

has worked assiduously to weaken the ramshackle checks and balances built up during Yeltsin's tenure and to impose the tidy logic of the rationalizer and controller but not, as a rule, the logic of the democrat. Yeltsin loved adding pawns to the political chessboard. Putin is happier subtracting them, as he has with Fatherland-All Russia, the oligarchs who got too close to the throne (Berezovskii and Gusinskii), the governors who rashly meddled in Moscow politics, the parties he wants to limit to "two, three, or four," and the elected government of Chechnya. When the chips are down, Putin has shown himself to be, if not actively antagonistic to democratic values, indifferent to their application. In his pursuit of a strong state that can solve Russia's problems, he tends to forget what he said in his open letter to the electorate in February 2000-that a strong state, capable of promoting popular freedom and welfare, must itself be "bound by the laws." A presidential administration that schemes to have candidates whisked off the ballot hours before a gubernatorial election is not one bound by the law. Neither is a government that invokes phony legal excuses to seize control of an NTV or a TV-6 or that lets ill-trained troops run amok in the North Caucasus.

It is not the trees that one should dwell on here but the forest. Democracy as practiced by Putin is partly about practical problem-solving, but it is also about eliminating external checks on the power of the state and the leader without scrapping the constitutional framework bequeathed by Yeltsin. Russia's political institutions were never more than partly democratic and were not properly consolidated during the Yeltsin period. This makes it all the more deplorable that Putin has diverted the country further away from democratic development. After the critical set of elections in 1999-2000 and the first several years in office of the talented leader who triumphed in them, the future of Russian democracy is, in fact, more uncertain than before. Theorists and policymakers must come to grips with the regime trajectory in Russia today. The country is not following the democratic-transition script. Contrary to what some in the Bush administration believe, Russia is very unlikely to graduate to liberal democratic status by 2008.

The impact on the regime of Putin's rise to power suggests that the current political system has not consolidated. Russia's nascent democracy is on a negative trajectory, but the unconsolidated state of the regime gives some cause for hope. The regime has not become a total dictatorship.⁴¹ Whether Putin even wants to create such a regime is an open question. Whether he could is also uncertain. Although weak throughout the 1990s and weaker today than just two years ago, democratic rules and procedures are still embedded in the regime, and democratic norms permeate society.⁴² Above all else, every major political actor in Russia today believes that elections are the only legitimate way to choose national leaders. No serious leader or political force in Russia today has articulated an alternative model to democracy. For the near future, Putin and his advisers seem likely to manage a version of democracy that limits real political competition and blocks the strengthening of alternative sources of political power. During new crises or after unforeseen events, "managed democracy" can become unmanageable, and pseudo-democratic institutions may suddenly gain real democratic content. The experience of Slobodan Milosević in the former Yugoslavia and Leonid Kuchma in Ukraine demonstrates how formal democratic rules can suddenly and surprisingly undermine the best plans for "managing" democracy.

In Russia, though, the most likely outcome for the near future is neither more democracy nor more autocracy-neither liberal democracy nor dictatorship-but a

stable regime somewhere in between. Putin has eroded democratic institutions and practices but has not destroyed them, nor has he articulated a plan for their further erosion. Russian society seems content with the current quasi-democratic, quasi-autocratic order. Russians value democracy but are too exhausted, from decades of turmoil, to fight for better democracy. Stability is the greater priority. Managed democracy could be around in Russia for a long time.

Notes

1. For more skeptical assessments, see Vladimir Brovkin, "The Emperor's New Clothes: Continuities of Soviet Political Culture in Contemporary Russia," *Problems of Post-Communism* 43, no. 2 (March/April 1996): 21-28; Peter Reddaway and Dmitri Glinski, *Market Bolshevism: The Tragedy of Russia's Reforms*, (Washington, DC: U.S. Institute of Peace Press, 1999); Stephen Cohen, "Russian Studies Without Russia," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 15, no. 1 (1999): 37-55; Lilia Shevstova, *Yeltsin's Russia: Myths and Realities* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1999).
2. On the differences between electoral and liberal democracies, see Larry Diamond, *Developing Democracy: Toward Consolidation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999).
3. For elaboration of the authors' views on this subject, see Timothy J. Colton, *Transitional Citizens: Voters and What Influences Them in the New Russia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000); Michael McFaul, *Russia's Unfinished Revolution: Political Change from Gorbachev to Putin* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001).
4. See Larry Diamond, "Thinking About Hybrid Regimes," *Journal of Democracy* 13, no. 3 (July 2002): 21-35; Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way, "The Rise of Competitive Authoritarianism," *Journal of Democracy* 13, no. 3 (July 2002): 51-65; Larry Diamond and Marc F. Plattner, eds., *Democracy after Communism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002).
5. Michael McFaul, "The Fourth Wave of Democracy and Dictatorship: Noncooperative Transitions in the Postcommunist World," *World Politics* 54, no. 2 (January 2002): 212-44.
6. See Thomas F. Remington, "Putin, the Duma, and Political Parties," in *Putin's Russia: Past Imperfect, Future Uncertain*, ed. Dale R. Herspring (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), pp. 39-62.
7. The pact scrapped a rule of thumb that assigned committee chairs in proportion to the size of the respective fractions. OVR and the two liberal groups, SPS and Yabloko, boycotted Duma sessions for several weeks, to no end.
8. Quoted by Susan Glasser in the *Washington Post* (June 8, 2002): A14.
9. For details on the package, see Erika Weinthal and Pauline Jones Luong, "Resource Wealth and Institutional Change: The Political Economy of Tax Reform in

Russia," Yale University, December 2002.

10. See Alexander Sokolowski, "Bankrupt Government: The Politics of Budgetary Irresponsibility in Yeltsin's Russia" (Ph.D. dissertation, Princeton University, 2002).

11. Political polarization generally results in bad economic policy. Polarization between institutions produces especially bad policy, as the 1998 financial crisis in Russia starkly demonstrated. On the first issue, see Timothy Frye, "The Perils of Polarization: Economic Performance in the Postcommunist World," *World Politics* 54, no. 3 (April 2002): 308-37. On the second issue, see Sokolowski, "Bankrupt Government"; Vladimir Mau, *Ekonomicheskaja reforma: skvoz prizmu konstitutsii i politiki* (Economic Reform: Through the Prism of Constitutionalism and Politics) (Moscow: Ad Marginem, 1999).

12. For details, see Timothy J. Colton and Michael McFaul, *Popular Choice and Managed Democracy: The Russian Elections of 1999 and 2000* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2003).

13. One representative is selected by the speaker of the regional assembly and confirmed by the assembly as a whole. The governor selects the second representative, but the assembly can veto the nominee with a two-thirds majority. Representatives serve at the pleasure of those who select them.

14. Aleksei Makarkin, "Sovet Federatsii: novyi sostav, novye problemy" (Federation Council: New Structure, New Problems), in *Politika v regionakh: gubernatory i gruppy vliianiia* (Politics in the Regions: Governors and Groups of Influence), ed. Rostislav Turovskii (Moscow: Tsentr politicheskikh tekhnologii, 2002), pp. 53-75.

15. Vladimir Lysenko, "The Federation Council Fails to Become a House of Lords," in *Russia on Russia: Administrative and State Reform in Russia*, ed. Yuri Senokosov and John Lloyd (Moscow: Moscow School of Political Studies, June 2002), p. 20.

16. Many of the "federal inspectors" reporting to them from the administrative regions also have backgrounds in the FSB/KGB and the uniformed police. Natalia Zybavich, Nikolai Petrov, and Aleksei Titkov, "Federalnye okruga-2000" (Federal Districts-2000), in *Regiony Rossii v 1999 g* (Russian Regions in 1999), ed. Nikolai Petrov (Moscow: Moscow Carnegie Center, 2001), p. 190.

17. Nazdratenko, who supported the Unity bloc in 1999, was removed mainly because his government was incapable of dealing with power outages in the region. He was allowed to resign and given the comfortable Moscow post of head of the national fisheries agency.

18. Viktor Pokhmelkin and Sergei Yushenkov also quit SPS, ostensibly for the same reason. They joined forces with Berezovskii in 2002 to form a new movement, Liberal Russia. They severed ties with him in 2003 and have demonstrated little appeal for voters.

19. Other defectors included the well-known Duma deputies Nikolai Travkin and Elena Mizulina.

20. In January 2003, SPS offered to support Yavlinskii as presidential candidate and to sever its ties to Anatolii Chubais, whom Yavlinskii abhors, but Yavlinskii rejected the proposition.

21. There were reports after the hostage crisis that Yavlinskii was considering taking a senior position in Putin's government. See Boris Sapozhnikov at www.gazeta.ru (December 23, 2002).

22. RFE/RL Newslines (February 28, 2000).

23. See the perceptive report by Olga Tropkina in *Nezavisimaia gazeta* (October 8, 2002).

24. Pointing in a more positive direction is the 2002 federal law mandating proportional representation for 50 percent of the seats in local and regional legislatures. The law creates incentives for party building at the subnational level, where it has gone at a snail's pace for the past decade. See the statement by Aleksandr Veshniakov of the Central Electoral Commission (www.cikrf.ru/_1_en/doc_2_1/).

25. The incident was widely reported at the time. See, for example, *Novosti Rossii* (November 9, 2000), available at www.newsru.com/russia/. Ruskoi confirmed the main elements of the story, but did not blame Putin personally, in an interview with Colton in Moscow on June 5, 2001.

26. *Novosti Rossii* (April 29, 2002).

27. See Anatolii Kostukov in *Nezavisimaia gazeta* (October 1, 2002).

28. Andreas Shedler, "The Menu of Manipulation," *Journal of Democracy* 13, no. 2 (April 2002): 41.

29. Some Russian observers speak of the "militarization" of civil government, as opposed to what Putin promised. See Olga Kryshtanovskaia, "Rezhim Putina: liberalnaia militokratiia?" (Putin's Regime: Liberal Military Rule?), unpublished manuscript, December 2002; "KGB vo vlasti," (KGB-There Is the Power), *Kommersant-Vlas*, (December 23, 2002), available at www.compromat.ru/main/fsb/kgbvovlasti1/.

30. See, for instance, articles in the OSCE publication *Russia/Chechnya: "Now Happiness Remains: Civilian Killings, Pillage, and Rape in Alkhan-Yurt,"* 12, no. 5 (April 2000): 1-33; "February 5: A Day of Slaughter in Novye Aldi," 12, no. 9 (June 2000): 1-43; "The 'Dirty War' in Chechnya: Forced Disappearances, Torture, and Summary Executions," 13, no. 1 (March 2001): 1-42; "Burying the Evidence: The Botched Investigation into a Mass Grave in Chechnya," 13, no. 3 (May 2001): 1-26. John Dunlop's *Chechnya Weekly*, published by the Jamestown Foundation, also provides full coverage of the war, including human rights violations. There is extensive discussion of the first and second wars in Matthew Evangelista, *The Chechen Wars: Will Russia Go the Way of the Soviet Union?* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2003).

31. This figure is cited in Sarah Mendelson, "Russia, Chechnya, and International Norms: The Power and Paucity of Human Rights?" working paper, National Council for Eurasian and East European Research, Washington, DC, 2001, p. 11.
32. Details may be found in the special issues on civil society in Russia in *Demokratizatsiya* 10, nos. 2-3 (spring and summer 2002).
33. Those involve Aleksandr Nikitin and Grigorii Pasko, who were accused of leaking classified information about the Russian navy's mismanagement of nuclear waste. Both were arrested when Yeltsin was still president.
34. For details, see Masha Lipman and Michael McFaul, "Putin and the Media," in Herspring, ed., *Putin's Russia*, pp. 63-84.
35. RFE/RL Russian Political Weekly (April 2, 2002).
36. Criminal prosecutions by the national and regional authorities have also been widely utilized. According to Oleg Panfilov, the director of the Center for Journalism in Extreme Situations, the number of criminal cases against journalists under Putin already exceeds the total under Yeltsin. Quoted in RFE/RL Russian Political Weekly (January 11, 2003).
37. The parties are thus devising new information strategies. These include expensive means for distributing programming to regional and cable stations.
38. See the argument in Adam Przeworski, Michael Alvarez, José Antonio Cheibub, and Fernando Limongi, *Democracy and Development: Political Institutions and Well-Being in the World, 1950-1990* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000).
39. Alexander Nikitin and Jane Buchanan, "The Kremlin's Civic Forum: Cooperation or Cooptation for Civil Society in Russia?" *Demokratizatsiya* 10, no. 2 (spring 2002): 147-65.
40. Remarks translated and circulated by Federal News Service (December 10, 2002).
41. On the differences between "politically close authoritarian," or full-blown dictatorship, and "competitive authoritarian," see Diamond, "Thinking About Hybrid Regimes"; Levitsky and Way, "Rise of Competitive Authoritarianism."
42. Timothy J. Colton and Michael McFaul, "Are Russians Undemocratic?" *Post-Soviet Affairs* 18, no. 2 (April/June 2002): 91-121.

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