

CURRENT HISTORY

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Putin's First Two Years: Democracy or Authoritarianism?

THOMAS M. NICHOLS

When Vladimir Putin was elected to the Russian presidency in a landslide victory in 2000, observers who had written eulogies for Russian democracy—first after the coup of 1991, then with the attack on the Russian White House in 1993 and the nerve-jangling electoral contest with the communists in 1996—began a new chapter in predictions of Russia's doom with warnings that Putin's arrival heralded a new wave of authoritarian rule in Russia. Their concerns were not unreasonable. Putin, a career Soviet intelligence officer, was anointed by President Boris Yeltsin as his successor in 1999, and during his time as Yeltsin's prime minister he built both his popularity and his reputation for toughness with a brutal campaign to crush the Chechen rebellion. Yeltsin's surprise resignation in 1999 gave Putin a significant advantage in the 2000 election by allowing him to run as an incumbent; other serious contenders wisely pulled out of the contest, leaving only the hapless Communist Party and a smattering of candidates in a race that was a foregone conclusion. Once Putin was in office, the Kremlin moved against Russian media outlets that were critical of the new administration. How could Russia still be considered “democratic” in the wake of internal violence, electoral chicanery, and attacks on free speech?

While this is a common picture of the current state of affairs in Russia, it is misleading and fails to take into account the circumstances surrounding

Putin's accession to the presidency or the experiences of the past year and a half. Although any evaluation of Russian democracy in 2002 is necessarily incomplete, it is possible to ask the more immediate question of whether events in Russia are moving in the right or wrong direction: forward toward democracy or backward toward the sort of gray, Brezhnev-era bureaucratic authoritarianism that so many Russia watchers fear. Halfway through Putin's first term as president, there are reasons to be concerned. There are more reasons, however, to be optimistic.

THE CAUTIOUS PRESIDENT

One difficulty in assessing the current state of democratic progress under Putin is that the man himself has been, since his first days in office, a kind of inkblot test for Russians; many see in him what they wish (or fear), even though Putin initially did little either to gratify his supporters or to inflame his critics. Even as he came to office, Russian liberals criticized him for his putatively authoritarian ways, while the Russian far right tried to paint him as a dupe in league with the West to sell out what was left of post-Yeltsin Russia. (After the 2000 election, the ultranationalist and anti-Semitic newspaper *Zavtra* made its feelings clear by announcing Putin's victory in an edition featuring a reproduction of a Bosch painting of hell on its cover.) Most Russian citizens have been more measured and hopeful about Putin than either the right or left. Polls in 2002 show that they continue to regard Putin, as they did in 2000, to be a new start, a distinct change from the chaos and corruption that accompanied the Yeltsin era. Most reject the idea that he is merely continuing Yeltsin's policies,

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and his popularity, despite the growing drag of the Chechen war, remains remarkably high.

Despite this popularity and the reserve of political capital it represents, Putin was at first hesitant to capitalize on it and take any far-reaching steps, with the obvious exception of the war in Chechnya. This was surprising since he had run for office in 2000 by cultivating an image of decisiveness and competence that was reinforced by the relentless military attacks he ordered on secessionist rebels in Chechnya. After his first year in office, Putin could claim very little that had been accomplished, and even senior legislative leaders complained that the new president had failed to galvanize the government into greater activity. This was a somewhat unfair criticism, given that the 2001 session of the Duma, the Russian parliament's lower house, did manage to address many pressing issues on Putin's agenda, including laws on private property and a balanced budget—and with relative efficiency, compared to some of its predecessors.

One reason for Putin's slow pace in 2001 is that he apparently adopted a "rose garden" strategy of protecting his position and popularity by reaping credit, merited or otherwise, for the improving condition of the Russian economy in the first year of his presidency. While such an approach is hardly admirable, it is not unfamiliar to citizens of the Western democracies: high popularity and good economic news are not usually incentives for politicians anywhere to undertake complicated or risky initiatives, and certainly not in Russia, where legislating is a complicated and thorny business under the best of circumstances.

A more immediate source of Putin's cautiousness may have been the *Kursk* disaster of 2000, which provided the new president an object lesson in how quickly the popular mood can sour. In the summer of that year, the Russian submarine *Kursk* sank with all 116 hands during an exercise in the Pacific (the sinking is now confirmed to have been caused by the explosion of a mishandled weapon onboard). Putin's government initially attempted to seal the incident in secrecy, and Putin himself remained on vacation away from Moscow while Russian divers struggled to get to the stricken submarine and the Russian navy stubbornly refused to ask nearby Western naval vessels for help. The resulting public relations disaster was eventually papered over, but Putin learned an early lesson as president: the

Russian public is fickle, tense, and easily angered. (Putin would rather put the whole incident behind him: he did not attend, or comment on, memorial services and the unveiling of a dramatic monument marking the tragedy's second anniversary in 2002.)

Nonetheless, there have been positive repercussions from this more deliberate and cautious approach to governing, as seen in Putin's generally businesslike relations with the Duma in the session completed in July 2002. The Duma passed more than 100 bills, of which Putin signed 77. Although a larger number of bills had been signed into law in the spring 2001 session, legislation was handled in a more timely manner in 2002 and the final bills were more substantive, representing important progress on matters ranging from taxes to pensions, land codes, and military reform. (Also under way is one of Putin's most important projects, the much-

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needed and long-overdue reform of the Russian judicial system.) Although some Russian commentators feel that Putin has now "tamed" the Duma and

made it little more than an instrument of presidential will, even the president's critics grudgingly admit that the absence of the political trench warfare between the legislative and executive branches that characterized the Yeltsin years has led to a more routine and professional legislative process. Initial fears that the presidential system enshrined in the 1993 constitution would somehow render lawmaking irrelevant have proved unfounded, since Putin has been reluctant to circumvent the Duma with presidential decrees and the legislature, for its part, apparently takes more seriously the idea that its function is to legislate rather than agitate and obstruct.

REINING IN THE REGIONS

Putin's ongoing efforts to increase federal power relative to the regional governments have raised fears that his real agenda is the restoration of authoritarian control from Moscow, not least because the consolidated regional units he created for the purpose of presidential oversight just happen to coincide with Russia's military districts—an unsettling congruence in a country that is not prone to believe in coincidences. But this concern does not take into account the reality that no Russian president after Yeltsin could have allowed the informal, even shady, arrangements made between the center and the regions in the 1990s to continue.

Indeed, critics of Russian federalism have suggested that with 89 regions, the sheer number of federal subjects is literally ungovernable, and to this end Putin pushed for the creation of a supraregional structure to be overlaid on the existing regions. So far this “reform” has produced little in terms of greater efficiency and even less in the way of an authoritarian threat from the center, since the presidential representatives appointed to oversee these new super-regions have at times pursued their own agendas rather than acting as loyal emissaries of the Kremlin.

But the most evident federal attempt at a change in the balance of power with the regions came with Putin's efforts to alter the way the upper house of the Russian parliament, the Federation Council, is constituted. The previous practice of sending the top legislative and executive figures from each region *ex officio* to the Federation Council theoretically ended in 2002: after that, when a group of senators was scheduled to leave office, the first of each region's two seats on the Federation Council would be filled by a senator appointed by the regional governor (subject to a two-thirds veto by the regional legislature), while the second would be elected by the regional legislature itself. The current senators, however, have thwarted their own removal with a successful July 2002 court challenge in which they argued that legislation establishing two-term limits does not apply to terms begun before 1999, allowing some governors to run for a third and even fourth term. Still, it is likely that the power of the upper house—once considered an arrogant bastion of regional executives, and even derisively referred to by some disgruntled lower house legislators as the “Soviet of Governors”—will be further weakened by the various proposals to reconstitute the upper chamber, including calls to introduce direct election of senators.

What this will mean after 2002 is an open question, but Putin and his team apparently hope the restructuring of the Federation Council will undermine the power of the governors by forcing them to stay in their regions and govern instead of allowing them to go to Moscow, where they can pass laws that directly affect their political and personal interests back home. If this change, along with other pending bills reducing the power of the Federation Council, has its intended effect, it would not only shift the relationship between Moscow and the regions in favor of Moscow, but would also strengthen the power of the presidency and the Duma at the expense of the upper house. While this

may undermine the governors and their independent ways, it should raise the issue of whether the Federation Council will still be able to block intemperate legislation from the Duma—assuming, that is, the unlikely possibility that no changes occur to the structure of the Duma in the next few years.

The weakening of the Federation Council has been complemented by the creation of a body with much murkier status that has generated some anxiety among the Russian people. The State Council was established in September 2000 by presidential decree, but without much indication of its function. In theory, it is an “executive body” composed of regional governors and other heads of the republics that form the Russian Federation. It is scheduled to convene every three months in a “consultative role,” but what it can do (or is even supposed to do) beyond that is unclear. For now, the State Council promises access to the president, and Russia's top politicians seem fairly eager to participate in it—which in turn offers Putin another avenue to influence leaders who have been beyond the reach of the federal presidency (some regional leaders quickly suggested strengthening the power of the State Council, perhaps anticipating the progressive weakening of the Federation Council).

Ultimately, it is hard to see an authoritarian hand behind Putin's attempt to shore up the relationship between the center and its subjects. Many of Russia's regions have operated for the better part of a decade as virtual fiefdoms under strong local bosses, and it would have been a complete abdication of Putin's responsibility as the nation's chief executive to allow this to continue. (Perhaps the most damning criticism that could be made of Putin's efforts in this area is that they have amounted only to a partial success.) In any case, it is to be expected that Putin and his successors will try to strengthen the federal control that is constitutionally Moscow's proper role in the first place.

TACKLING THE OLIGARCHS

When asked by pollsters what they liked least about Yeltsin, most Russians mentioned their sense that he was surrounded by corrupt and powerful figures who were running the government to their own benefit. Putin knew early on that his image and credibility would rest to a considerable degree on distancing himself from the risk of being tainted even by the whiff of corruption. Moreover, by all accounts he genuinely (and understandably) disliked the idea that his administration could be seen as beholden to holdovers from Yeltsin's days in office, and he

resolved to make clear that he did not fear the group of men, the “oligarchs,” who had made their fortunes in the shadowy world of post-Soviet privatization. To this end, he attacked two of the most prominent magnates, Boris Berezovsky and Vladimir Gusinsky—men who controlled media empires, not coincidentally—and even went so far as to jail Gusinsky briefly. (He later claimed Gusinsky was detained without his knowledge, which is possibly true.)

Why did Putin’s government go after these men, and does it presage a broader attack on the freedoms of ordinary Russians?

Gusinsky and Berezovsky have made powerful enemies throughout the Russian bureaucracy, and to assume that their downfall was merely the result of a personal vendetta by Putin is too simplistic (especially given Berezovsky’s previous activity as a Putin ally). The most worrisome, but as yet unproven, theory is that Berezovsky is being deprived of his media outlets because he has hard evidence of a ghastly plot: that the string of apartment bombings in Moscow in 1999 that killed more than 300 people was actually engineered not by Chechen rebels, but by the Russian security service, the FSB, as a ploy to enable Putin to seize control of a frightened populace. (The FSB has returned the favor by making unsubstantiated claims that Berezovsky financed some Chechen rebel groups.) But even though Berezovsky has had ample opportunity to detail the charge (and some of the facts surrounding the bombings certainly raise questions), he has not been able to make the story stick either at home or with the foreign media. A more likely explanation is that as Putin decided to make an object lesson of Berezovsky—who even in a nation of new robber barons stood out for sheer brass—Berezovsky decided to retaliate by hinting at some of the dirty laundry he saw inside the Kremlin, and this in turn set in motion the events that would deprive him of his empire.

Bad blood between the president and Gusinsky clearly existed. Gusinsky had supported one of Putin’s presidential rivals early in 2000. But again, there is more to the story than just the hostility between the magnate and the president. Gusinsky, regardless of his political leanings, was in a precarious position of his own making even before Putin arrived. The ties between his media and banking holdings and the government-run gas giant Gazprom

(to which Gusinsky owed nearly a billion dollars) left him vulnerable to a kind of financial flanking attack: Gazprom called in Gusinsky’s massive debts to the conglomerate, leaving Putin in the position of depicting the entire incident as just another business affair even as the Russian government swallowed Gusinsky’s assets, including the popular (and independent) NTV television station. This was disingenuous on Putin’s part, but Gusinsky’s ties and debts to Gazprom were a time bomb that probably would have eventually gone off, Putin’s efforts notwithstanding.

Still, these two men were in fact singled out, and the government clearly had a strategy in doing so. The minicampaigns against the two oligarchs served several purposes at once: they intimidated the Russian journalistic community; they pried important media assets from the hands of those who were little better than the government opponents they were criticizing; and they allowed Putin to show that he was his own man instead of a puppet of the wealthy

entrepreneurs who many think run Russia anyway. The oligarchs are some of the least popular people in Russia, and for a Russian

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politician to attack them is politically a no-risk proposition (at least with ordinary Russians), something akin to American politicians who will occasionally engage in tirades against “big business” and “fat cats.” The difference in the Russian case is that these particular “fat cats” really can be as corrosive an influence on the market system as their opponents claim. Unfortunately, Putin apparently does not intend to bring the remaining oligarchs to heel; in 2001 a kind of truce took hold between them and the government, and by 2002 the president’s relationship with members of that group were even cordial. If the attacks on Gusinsky and Berezovsky were supposed to be the harbinger of a larger campaign, it has failed to materialize.

PRESSURES ON THE PRESS

The assault on the oligarchs does raise disturbing questions about the future of freedom of the press in Russia. In taking down Berezovsky and Gusinsky, Putin—or his minions, since his personal role in all this is unclear—also silenced some of the most important independent journalistic voices in the new Russia. Independent television stations such as NTV and TV-6 and newspapers such as *Novaia Gazeta* and *Nezavisimaia Gazeta* have come

under attack; the link between critical coverage of the Chechen war and the “business” actions taken to silence independent media is so obvious that Russian government attempts to deny it are embarrassing. And the pressure on the media goes beyond financial harassment, since journalism has become a physically dangerous profession in Russia: at least three dozen members of the media have been killed since 1999, many while investigating the upper echelons of Russia’s ubiquitous organized crime networks and their connections to the government.

The effect has been predictable, and undoubtedly one the government was hoping to see: a chilling of journalistic activity in the Russian Federation. Putin has been accused of wanting a “managed” democracy, and while this may not be quite true with regard to the overall scheme of political life in Russia, it seems almost to understate the degree of control he wants to exert over the press specifically.

The treatment of the press is an unequivocal black mark on the Putin record, and it is inextricably linked to the carnage in Chechnya, as will be seen. But the Russian government is finding that while it can intimidate journalists, it cannot stop the flow of information to its citizens since Russia is, like all modern nations, awash in international sources of information. The Kremlin can shut down NTV, but it cannot turn off CNN or the Internet (unless it is willing to take draconian measures that would provoke outrage so severe that it would almost certainly bring down the regime). The evident and ham-handed attack on Russian journalism, however unpleasant, is doomed to fail unless Putin’s government intends to seal off Russia from all foreign news and influences—something that is probably impossible and certainly foolish.

PUTIN AND CHECHNYA

Even observers who find much to applaud in the improving Russian economic and political situations point to Chechnya as the real test of the government’s commitment to a free and open society. It is a travesty, critics argue, to speak of the new freedoms of Russians in showplace cities like Moscow when other Russian citizens such as the Chechens are being savagely hunted and exterminated. Human rights advocates in Russia and the West rightly claim that human rights in the Chechen war are being violated on a breathtaking scale. The Russian campaign in Chechnya has been incompetent, brutal, and replete with what can only be described as war crimes. However, to use the conduct of the Chechen war as the ultimate bench-

mark of the government’s commitment to democracy ignores both the history of the conflict and the stakes for Russia if it is lost. This most recent incarnation of the 150-year-old Chechen–Russian conflict threatened, at one time, to tear apart the southern borders of the Russian Federation and establish a fundamentalist regime, a potentially Taliban-like entity, in the Caucasus.

Most Russians believe that the war had to be fought: the post-Soviet Russian Federation is a hodgepodge of republics, regions, and postage-stamp prefectures whose obedience to the central government varies widely. No Russian president would have had much choice about fighting the Chechen war; the Russian public would never accept a violent defection from the federation, and it remains in no one’s interest (including America’s) to see the creation of what would almost certainly become yet another Islamic terrorist state. While Russian conduct of the war is deplorable, the need to fight it was unavoidable.

If Putin’s own account is to be believed, he initially thought that the Chechen situation spelled the end, rather than the beginning, of his political career. In fact, he assumed that his appointment in 1999 as prime minister under such adverse conditions sealed his fate in politics, and so he set about rapidly trying to end the crisis in Chechnya, racing to complete what he saw as his historic mission to save the Russian Federation before he (like his two immediate, and quickly sacked, predecessors) was removed as prime minister. Putin viewed himself as attempting to prevent a Russian version of the Yugoslav catastrophe, in which the Russian state would finally disintegrate. Although it is tempting to assume that Putin was indeed using the violence in Chechnya as a way to create a military crisis and rally popular support behind the government, his policies in the Caucasus followed, rather than led, popular opinion.

Insofar as Putin’s twin goals were to keep Chechnya under the Russian Federation’s flag and to stop the audacious raids of the rebel groups in the area, the campaign has been a military success. Two years later, the war has now bogged down into a grinding campaign against what is left of the Chechen resistance (it is little wonder that Putin wants to stifle media coverage of this brutal but ultimately desultory war). Russians generally support the idea of crushing the Chechens, but democracies tire easily of war and Putin has failed to gain a conclusive victory. He will face hard questions in 2004, with or without Russian media coverage, if he cannot con-

vince the electorate that the situation is better than the one he inherited in 1999.

If the war is not brought to an end, it could have a catastrophic effect on Russia's young democracy. The obvious danger is that the regime, bolstered by a public that seems to have a fairly high tolerance for violence against the Chechens, will institute evermore authoritarian policies as it tries to shield itself from the consequences of its decision to wage such a merciless campaign. The Kremlin's actions against the media are already a step in this direction, and the intimidation and even removal of opposition legislators and the smothering of human rights organizations are clearly possible and in some instances appear to have begun. Military brutality inevitably corrodes the society that practices it, and Russia is no exception. The ghastly dilemma Russia faces is that there is no clear exit from the Chechen war, since the unraveling of the Russian state that could be the long-term result of a successful Chechen rebellion would be just as much a disaster for democracy as the measures the regime is taking to prevent that dissolution. Fortunately, Russians do not seem inclined to mortgage their freedoms to the war effort, which for many has become a depressing affair that they only wish would end. Putin's popularity has not yet been strongly affected by the situation in Chechnya, but it would be encouraging if the pressures of the 2004 election were to force him to find a way out of the Chechen nightmare sooner rather than later.

THE CASE FOR OPTIMISM

There are scenarios under which Vladimir Putin's ascension to the presidency, and all the steps he has taken since, could be cast in a most threatening light: a cabal of Yeltsin's wealthy cronies pressures the old man to retire, handing power to a former KGB agent who goes on to win a sham election; after "legally" taking the presidency, the new leader systematically dismantles what few democratic institutions are left from the revolt against the Soviet system, turns on his former benefactors, grips the media by the financial throat, and places former intelligence-service colleagues in charge of the police and the military, as well as in positions of new authority that just happen to correspond to the outlines of national military districts. From there, any threat to the new president's power can be swiftly crushed through intimidation, economic pressure, or even the outright threat of military force. In 2004, "elections" are held as a formality, but Vladimir

Putin wins them—as he will continue to win them for as long as he cares to remain Russia's president.

No doubt, some in Russia and the West foresee this outcome, or something similar to it, although Russians remain generally optimistic about their political future. But Putin's actions and conditions in Russia in the early twenty-first century suggest that he is not inclined to this kind of dash for power and that he would find it almost impossible to pull off if he were.

The strongest case for optimism regarding the future of Russian democracy is to realize just how difficult it would be to turn back the clock. Russian elections are messy, often vicious affairs, but the Russian people now take it for granted that they will have them and that they matter—no small achievement in a nation that was a communist dictatorship only a dozen years ago. Scenarios in which Putin finds some way to abort or rig the 2004 election are plausible, but the probability of their success seems low: like Boris Yeltsin before him, Putin seems to realize that to govern, Russia's chief executive needs an actual mandate from the electorate or he risks violence and bloodshed in the streets. Press freedoms are under attack, but while journalists work in an atmosphere of fear, they still work, and information still flows into Russia from all sides. Entrepreneurs and other businesspeople long ago became accustomed to the ability to make their own decisions and to congregate with their colleagues abroad; even if the Kremlin believed it could figure out a way to sustain a free economy among an unfree people, Russia's capitalists would not easily acquiesce to the loss of that freedom. It would take a titanic—and unavoidably violent—effort to stop the forward motion of Russian democratic development.

Still, storm clouds hover over Russia's political skies, especially the war in Chechnya. But the ongoing institutionalization of democratic practices in the national government, including the routinization of such important functions as voting, legislating, and adjudicating, are all countervailing influences to the more corrosive and poisonous instincts of the Kremlin bureaucracy. The question is whether democratic consolidation or bureaucratic resistance will develop more quickly; so far, those who argue for the irreversibility of Russian democracy are on firmer ground than the critics who, while understandably concerned, have been warning repeatedly since 1991 that Russia is headed for disaster and whose predictions of doom have repeatedly gone unrealized. ■