

# CURRENT HISTORY

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*“The Kremlin’s nervousness over the upcoming presidential succession, although camouflaged by oil wealth and passed over in silence by the renationalized or intimidated mass media, is plain to see.”*

## After Putin, the Deluge?

LEON ARON

Democracy is an unpredictable, often maddeningly slow, and contradictory affair. Apparently, these flaws were among those that Russian President Vladimir Putin intended to redress when he set out to mold the highly imperfect, raucous, poor, but real and developing democracy that he inherited in 2000 into something simpler, more homogeneous, more manageable, and allegedly better suited to Russia’s “national tradition.” Because of this, the modifiers “managed” and “sovereign” have come to be attached to the Kremlin’s descriptions of the political system that the present regime is attempting to forge. What happens, though, to such a system when the prospect of political succession arises?

In practice, the terms “managed” and “sovereign” have come to stand for sharply increased control over politics, some key sectors of the economy, and the mass media—the effect of which has been to weaken and subvert the mediating institutions that endow both the process and the result of a political transition with legitimacy. The shock absorbers of democracy—local legislatures and executives, press and television, parliament, and the opposition—have been severely eroded or eradicated. As a result, the foundation of the “vertical of power” (as the new system of Kremlin primacy is called) may prove to be rather shallow, and the stairs going down gnarled and unable to bear much weight.

To this generic authoritarian handicap that complicates succession, today’s Russia adds two serious burdens. The first is the centuries-old Russian and Soviet political tradition, some fea-

tures of which Putin’s predecessors, Mikhail Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin, tried to overcome, but which Putin (who has rued the disappearance of the Soviet Union as “the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the twentieth century”) seems to admire and emulate. Successions were hardly smooth even under the czars, with quite a few legitimate claimants to the throne (or even those already sitting on it by right) strangled, drowned, stabbed, or forced to retire into monasteries. Heirs apparent were particularly unfortunate in the Soviet era: Not one ever managed to consolidate power, and all eventually yielded to those whom the previous ruler had never intended to install. Vladimir Lenin never wanted Josef Stalin to succeed him; Stalin would not have chosen Nikita Khrushchev; Khrushchev, overthrown in a coup, did not anoint Leonid Brezhnev; Brezhnev could hardly have wished for Yuri Andropov; nor Andropov for Konstantin Chernenko; nor Chernenko for Gorbachev.

The other burden that poses an obstacle to legitimate political transition in Russia is the sheer enormousness of the stakes involved. Russia has always been, at least in part, a patrimonial state in which political power has translated into direct ownership or at least control of property. In the Soviet days, government bureaucracy was the sole manager of the immensely rich land. Yet never before, either under the czars or the general secretaries, was the jackpot at once so huge and so liquid, both literally and metaphorically, as it has been in the past few years, with an average of seven million barrels of oil flowing daily through Russia’s pipelines, bringing in over \$140 billion annually (close to \$200 billion if gas export revenues are included). This sort of prize greatly multiplies the intensity and uncertainties of the political competition.

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## WILL HE STAY OR WILL HE GO?

Before examining the mechanics and complications of succession, however, its probability ought to be considered. Today, no one but Putin himself knows for certain if he is staying or going. All the rest of us can do is to assess the odds for either outcome.

The case for staying is straightforward: Fueled by record oil prices, the Russian economy is growing very nicely and, with it, so are personal income and the standard of living. The president is very popular. The political opposition, largely incapable of publicly criticizing the regime because of the suppression of private political contributions and the blocking of access to television, has been weakened and marginalized. The parliament has been made subservient to the Kremlin. In such circumstances, amending the constitution to allow presidents a third term (or even to do away with term limits altogether), with or without a national referendum, would not be a particularly difficult feat to accomplish.

Yet, while public opinion surveys indicate that pluralities or even majorities wish for Putin to stay on, there is also significant opposition to changing the constitution in order to allow for a third term in office, let alone abolishing term limitations. This ambiguity matters because, facile taxonomies aside, Russia is still far from being an “unfree” police state like North Korea, Cuba, China, and Saudi Arabia. Indeed, one of the reasons for Putin’s popularity is that, on matters about which sizable segments of his countrymen feel strongly, he very rarely has gone against public opinion. In some cases, following public protest, the Kremlin has quickly retreated and adjusted course—for example, with welfare reform, which incompetently monetized in-kind welfare benefits; and with an unpopular proposal to ban imported cars with right-side steering wheels.

In a recent poll conducted by the All-Russian Center for Public Opinion, 38 percent of Russians agreed that “Russia is part of Europe” and that the fates of the two are “linked tightly.” Although those who think Russia is a “special Eurasian civilization” constituted a plurality (47 percent) among all respondents, in the “twin capitals” of Moscow and St. Petersburg—where all Russian revolutions have occurred and power disputes have been settled—

the “Europeans” accounted for 47 percent and the “Eurasians” only 40 percent.

There is a very good chance that, much as many of them like Putin, the “Europeans” would resent what is known in Russian political discourse today as the “Lukashenization” of Russia: a scenario in which the country becomes a pariah of Europe, like Belarus under Aleksandr Lukashenko’s dictatorship. With the loss of membership in the Group of Eight almost certain to follow the addition of a third Putin term, Russia’s exclusion from the “civilized world” would likely be regarded by millions as an insult to national dignity.

Of course, the direct political impact of domestic and international outcry could prove non-threatening in the short run. Inside the country, initial public disapproval might not translate into concerted protest, just as the abolition of the election of governors and of independent (non-party) candidates for the Duma (the lower house of the legislature) in 2004 and 2005 did not. The Kremlin also might hope, with some reason, that dependence on Russian gas would greatly weaken Europe’s critical resolve, as would the West’s

continuing reliance on Russia’s cooperation in nuclear nonproliferation (especially in the case of Iran) and the global war on terror. As happened on numerous occasions throughout Soviet history (after the crackdowns in Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968, for instance), the *pogovoryat-i-zabudut* (they will talk and they will forget) script could again play out.

Still, the third-term option carries uncertainty. It is a gamble. And if there is one thing we know about Putin—a careful apparatchik from the middle ranks of a giant bureaucracy called the KGB—it is that risk-taking is not his preference.

## DIMINISHING OIL RETURNS

As a deterrent to extending his term in office, the hazards of immediate political fallout pale in comparison with possible developments in the longer term. One peril is the price of oil. No one knows what it will be, but anyone presiding over a largely oil-driven national economy (at least one-third of the Russian state budget comes from oil and gas revenue) must be constantly concerned about the enormous range in possible valuations.

By the end of a third Putin term in 2012—when the relinquishing of office would be made even more

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difficult by the calcification of the power structure and the entrenchment of the ruling elites—top experts predict a price-per-barrel “spread” of \$20 to \$120. It is widely assumed among Russian economists that a precipitous decline in the price to below \$40 per barrel would have profoundly negative consequences for the economy and standard of living—possibly resulting in a recession, if not a crisis.

While a slump in oil prices is a possibility, a decline in the rate of output growth is a virtual certainty. This prospect is rooted in ideologically driven changes in Russia’s economic policy. The country’s two most efficient and modern private companies, Yukos and Sibneft, have been absorbed by corrupt, non-transparent, and wasteful state-controlled companies: Gazprom and Rosneft. As a result, after expanding by an average of 8 percent per year between 1998 and 2004, Russian oil production grew by 2.4 percent in 2005, and the rate has not improved since. (In 2005, for the first time, oil export volume fell in *absolute* terms.)

The antiquated state-owned pipeline monopoly is incapable of keeping up with repairs of its 30- and 40-year-old stock. Economic expansion has sharply increased domestic demand for energy, while inefficient equipment and subsidized domestic prices for gas, oil, and electricity have all resulted in additional and wasteful domestic consumption, further reducing the resources available for export.

The west Siberian fields, which produce the lion’s share of Russian oil, are inching toward exhaustion, necessitating a shift of exploration and production to the far north and northeast. The extremely difficult weather and soil conditions in those areas, including permafrost, will require new technology and higher salaries, and the tens of billions of dollars in investment required may take decades to recoup. Yet state funding has been very slow to materialize, and most of it seems destined for potential boondoggle projects (such the Eastern Siberia–Pacific Ocean pipeline) that are motivated by political and bureaucratic considerations rather than by an economic rationale. These projects are bound to experience enormous cost overruns and interminable construction.

While Gazprom and Rosneft have been busy snatching assets and accumulating mountains of debt to pay for them, private Russian and foreign companies are unlikely to be in the mood for expensive long-term commitments such as would be required for the new energy projects. In addition to punitive taxes that kill the incentive to

invest in greenfield exploration and development, the judicial murder of Yukos has prompted the owners of the top private companies to cut back sharply on such investments—or, like Sibneft’s Roman Abramovich, to sell out and leave the oil business altogether.

Foreign energy corporations are now prevented from development and production-sharing in the largest—and therefore most profitable—deposits. They also have been chastened by the government’s successful pressure to “renegotiate” existing agreements. Royal Dutch Shell’s multibillion-dollar Far East natural gas venture, Sakhalin-2, had to sell shares to Gazprom at bargain-basement prices. TNK-BP had to sell Gazprom its entire stake in the giant east Siberian Kovykta natural gas field.

Thus, even without a drop in the price of oil, the all-but-inevitable slowdown in Russia’s energy production after a period of uninterrupted growth could spell political trouble for the Kremlin’s next occupant. Putin presumably is very well aware of this prospect.

## POLITICAL TIME BOMBS

Russia’s next administration is almost certain to be plagued as well by a host of problems stemming from postponed structural reforms, neglect of human capital, and worn-out infrastructure. Among these difficulties is, first, Russia’s commodity-dependent economy. Despite regular, almost ritualistic calls for a shift away from commodity exports to a knowledge-based, high-technology, modern economy, the goal has been subverted by a number of factors, including the fear of private initiative and the emphasis on state ownership, Russia’s rampant corruption, and bureaucratic impediments to private wealth creation and development.

A second political time bomb is the government’s continuing neglect of so-called human capital. Today’s disregard of social needs can no longer be excused by the state’s penury resulting from an inability to collect taxes, as it was in the 1990s. Russia’s gross domestic product in current prices grew from \$276 billion in 1994 to \$979 billion in 2006. Yet a leading Russian physician recently estimated that 70 percent of Russian medical equipment is “worn out” and the availability of drugs is 30 percent to 40 percent below the need. In education, similarly, sharp increases in government revenues have brought no proportionate augmentation in funding, as a share either of the state budget or of GDP.

Apart from much-needed salary increases for doctors and teachers, “national projects” on health and education, unveiled with great fanfare in 2005, have done very little structurally to reform the almost entirely state-based, impoverished, rigid, and backward health care and education systems inherited from the Soviet Union. In an August 2006 national survey conducted by the Levada Center, 70 percent of respondents said they and their families could not count on getting “good” health care, while 53 percent said the same about their (or their children’s and grandchildren’s) chances of getting a “good” education. Experts have concluded that Russia is, in effect, disinvesting in human capital.

A third set of difficulties certain to afflict the Kremlin in coming years stems from plunging life expectancy, depopulation, and accidents. Again, no longer explainable by the alleged “catastrophe” of the 1990s, life expectancy in Russia, especially among men, is still below that of most third world nations. Together with a very low birth rate, reduced life expectancy accounts for a continuing steep population decline. The much-touted “stability,” “order,” and oil wealth have done nothing to stem mortality. Indeed, fewer Russians died in 1995 than in 2005, and population declined faster between 2001 and 2005 than between 1996 and 2001. After going down between 1996 and 1999, the number of deaths per 100,000 people climbed steadily in the years that followed.

Russia also is a world leader in industrial and traffic accidents and fires, like the March 2007 explosion at a Siberian mine that killed 110 people, or the blaze in March 2006 that killed 63 residents of a state home for the elderly. Passenger planes crash with regularity, killing or maiming hundreds every year. “The falling planes, the exploding mines, the burning hospitals, the traffic deaths . . . [all are] results of the lack of responsibility,” a Russian newspaper recently declared.

Fourth, there is a looming pension crisis. A 2002–3 partial privatization of pension contributions, designed to address the plummeting worker-to-retiree ratio—which today is down to 1.7 to 1 and before long could drop to 1 to 1—was meant to ensure meager but universal pension coverage for tens of millions of future retirees, most of whom would have no other savings. Yet pension privatization has been all but sabotaged in recent years by the mistrust of the markets, excessive regulation, bureaucratic incompetence, and an informational vacuum.

As a result, five years after the law on private pension accumulation was passed and four years after the key implementation mechanisms were put into place, 90 percent of future retirees still have not chosen a private investment management fund. The nearly bankrupt pay-as-you-go pension system is in critical condition, with returns on obligatory salary deductions, managed by the state, well below the rate of inflation.

The situation is especially dire for those born before 1967. They are excluded from the partial privatization, such as it is, and continue to depend entirely on the pay-as-you-go system. While the number of workers continues to fall, by 2010 pension expenditures are estimated to increase by 50 percent to \$70 billion (Russia’s entire 2007 state budget is around \$270 billion) merely to maintain pension payments of 25 percent of a worker’s average salary. (This measly pension-to-salary ratio is the lowest in Europe. The next lowest is Britain’s, at 40 percent.) Some in the government already talk about raising the pension age as the only solution—something that the estimated 17 million expecting to retire in the next 10 years are likely to resent and actively, perhaps even violently, protest.

### A PERFECT STORM?

Corruption and crime constitute still more political time bombs facing the next president. Today’s corruption, both in terms of its penetration and the amounts of money involved, makes the graft of the 1990s look like child’s play. As Putin correctly noted this February, “There is no other effective way of combating corruption than the development of civil society and the freedom of mass media.” Russia occupied 82nd place (out of 90) in the ranking of Transparency International’s Corruption Perceptions Index in 2000. In 2006, it ranked 121st (out of 163), immediately behind Albania, Kazakhstan, Yemen, and Zambia. As for crime, the past six years have seen a 10 percent increase in the number of murders in Russia and a 73 percent rise in drug-related crimes.

In addition, the next administration will inherit the restive North Caucasus. While Chechnya is temporarily pacified (not by the Russian army, but by former rebels who switched sides), the North Caucasus—especially its largest autonomous republic, Dagestan—is increasingly ungovernable.

Finally, there is the near-dysfunctional Russian military. Russia’s conscription-based conventional armed forces are a relic of its czarist and Soviet

past—a combination of a prison and a torture chamber. And yet, like other structural reforms, the transition to a modern, mobile, well-equipped, and well-trained volunteer force—a transition that millions of Russians have consistently supported and that Putin promised at the beginning of his first term—has been scrapped. Again, the lack-of-money explanation can no longer be taken seriously: The cost of transition is estimated at \$4 billion, while the government’s “stabilization fund” from a windfall of tax revenues has amassed \$107 billion. With the middle class avoiding induction like the plague, there has been a sharp increase in draftees who are illiterate, addicted to drugs, or have criminal records—hardly an effective force for defending the country against looming threats from Islamic terrorism and ethnic strife.

Following the erosion of mediating democratic institutions, the center of political gravity in Putin’s Russia has shifted to the very top. Thus, alongside the increasing control that rests with the Kremlin today comes the responsibility for anything that goes wrong anywhere in the country. In the calculation of pros and cons for a third term in office, the distinct possibility that at least some of these simmering crises might boil over should be a cause for considerable concern. The chance of these crises arising in concert with diminishing oil revenues makes for a truly troubling scenario—a kind of perfect storm in Russian politics and economics.

The first casualty of this change of political climate could be the Kremlin’s ability to continue with its preferred mode of political control: buying the allegiance or at least the neutrality of political and media elites, and pacifying a discontented population with concessions and handouts. This, in turn, raises the very alarming prospect of a shift to outright and routine intimidation and repression, to which the regime thus far has resorted only selectively. The obvious dangers of such a course are something that Putin, both by training and temperament, would clearly prefer to avoid.

## “OPERATION SUCCESSION”

In the end, like a participant in a televised game show, Putin is faced with two choices. He can leave with the impressive gains he has amassed, includ-

ing his widespread popularity, a record of stability and economic growth, and a reportedly very substantial fortune—while he is still relatively young and has the good health to enjoy it all. Or he can opt for what is behind the curtain, which could bring even more of the same—or some very real hazards. At the moment, leaving seems preferable. I would put the odds at 55 to 45.

Yet, in the winner-take-all system that Putin has forged, and with the astounding size of the spoils that will go to the victor and his supporters, a decision to comply with the constitution and retire will hardly infuse Russian politics with certainty and tranquility. Meanwhile, at least until the end of this year, the Kremlin will be increasingly preoccupied with complicated and chancy games of succession management.

To be sure, the polls continue to show that a strong majority will support a candidate endorsed by the president. In a January 2007 public opinion survey, 60 percent of respondents said they would support Putin’s choice. But largely because of

his own efforts at erecting barriers between civil society and political power, even such support does not guarantee the elites’ compliance and the success of what might be called “Operation Succession.” By severely constraining the range of political choices available to voters, the Kremlin may have gained short-term predictability, but it has sacrificed a great deal of the lasting security that legitimacy confers.

To achieve a satisfactory outcome for the succession, Putin will have to find answers to two questions: How can he minimize resistance to his designated successor by the many and powerful “losers” and their multiple clients among the political, economic, and security bureaucracies whose power the president has done so much to bolster? And how can he protect his own power and wealth in retirement from depredations by the many enemies he has already made and the many more he will earn by his choice of a successor?

No matter how many promises are being made to presidential hopefuls and their salivating client retinues about the fair sharing of power and wealth, the vertical of power is a sparse, even austere structure. After the political and economic recentralization of the past few years, there are

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simply not enough top rent-generating offices in Russian politics or in the state-controlled sector of the economy—including Duma committee chairmanships (where the going rate for introducing legislation is reported to be a million dollars) or governorships; tax police and customs; and chairmanships and directorships in oil, gas, metals, and the automotive and aviation industries—to be handed out as consolation prizes to all the ambitious claimants. In the words of Mark Urnov, one of the most astute Russian political observers, “The struggle [will] intensify, those who have failed to become heirs will have nothing to lose. The bets have been placed, the only thing to do is to fight.”

There are no lame ducks in Russian politics today—only dead ones. Therefore, Putin’s designation of a successor (and, consequently, the final decision on his departure) must be delayed for as long as possible to prevent those who will be passed over from coalescing and perhaps even reaching out to the pro-democracy opposition. Such an alliance would be the Kremlin’s worst nightmare: an escalating popular movement for unmanaged, free, and fair elections, akin to the Ukrainian Orange Revolution of 2004–05.

Thus, Sergei Ivanov was promoted in February 2007 from minister of defense to first deputy prime minister to counterbalance the earlier heir apparent—also a first deputy prime minister—Dmitry Medvedev. And this is hardly the end. The succession game continues today. One could do worse than to bet a modest amount in rubles (steadily rising against the dollar) that in the end neither Medvedev nor Ivanov will get Putin’s endorsement. Both men, meanwhile, have accumulated powerful allies, clients, and enemies throughout the vast state bureaucracy (what one Russian critic recently called “slurpers from the highest trough”).

### A DARK GRAY HORSE?

So who will get the nod? As with Putin’s decision to stay or to leave, the answer to this central question of Russian politics today is unknown. But a strong argument could be made in favor of an eleventh-hour choice of a dark horse. The bureaucracies would be stunned and forced to turn on a dime to decide, within days, whether and how to reach across the old battle lines, enter an opposition alliance with erstwhile competitors, and

retrain their very heavy guns on the newcomer. Yet, for many, the temptation to try to join the new favorite would be just as strong. Without a political base (a “machine,” to borrow from the vocabulary of American urban politics of the early twentieth century) of his own, without a “team” ready and waiting to take over all the plum posts, and with no chits to be called in for past favors during a long climb up the greasy pole to the top, the latest recruit might have many places at the trough to offer. A potential opposition could be weakened by defections even before it was fully formed.

Choosing a dark horse that is also “gray” (that is, someone with no known strong political preferences, except for loyalty and obedience, and not much charisma, like the former Prime Minister Mikhail Fradkov) would go a long way toward solving Putin’s second strategic problem: ensuring a peaceful retirement. The need for Putin’s

support in taming Moscow’s notoriously obstreperous, cynical, and venal officialdom could effectively make the retired president a co-ruler, or at

least a veto-wielder on certain key issues, for the first few years.

In such a scenario, someone from outside Moscow would serve better. The governor of a significant province is a good bet, such as St. Petersburg’s Valentina Matviyenko. In Russia’s perennial obsession-competition with America, such a choice would have the additional benefit of being Russia’s response to Hillary Clinton: The Soviet Union beat the United States in launching the first woman into space, so why not the first one in the president’s office? Among other dark horse candidates bruited about in Moscow are Sergei Naryshkin, the deputy prime minister and deputy chairman of the largest state-controlled oil company, Rosneft; and Vladimir Yakunin, the head of the Russian railway monopoly. (As this issue was going to press, Putin’s nomination of an obscure law enforcement official, Viktor Zubkov, to replace Prime Minister Fradkov added another dark horse candidate to the mix and lent further credence to this scenario.)

Yet the drawbacks of a “dark gray horse” scheme are just as obvious. Even with the benefit of surprise, such a candidate may invite intense competition, instability, or even a coup. And if he or she survived, the successor would be bound sooner or

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later to prove his or her legitimacy by gradually severing the ties and obligations to the patron. Gratitude in politics is a very uncertain commodity.

If, as the Russian newspaper *Izvestia* put it, “it is clear that Putin himself intends to rule after Putin,” the president may decide he needs a more explicit, perhaps even formalized, arrangement. One such policy has been pioneered by Russia’s mighty neighbor to the southeast, whose dictatorial transition to capitalism many of Putin’s supporters seem to admire. Although he formally relinquished party and government positions, Deng Xiaoping, the architect of China’s market evolution, was recognized by an elite consensus as the ultimate arbiter, and held the chairmanship of the Central Military Commission until 1990. Since then, the arrangement has been institutionalized by General Secretary and President Jiang Zemin’s retirement in 2003 after two five-year terms. Like Deng, Jiang retained control of some key levers of power as the military commission chairman for two years.

A still more explicit settlement might be centered on a constitutional change that would strengthen the office of the prime minister and weaken the presidency, as happened in Ukraine following the postrevolutionary compromise with the appointment of a Putin loyalist to the prime ministership. (A suggestion that Putin himself would like to hold such a position also has been floated in Moscow.)

## THE “IRONY OF HISTORY”

With so much uncertainty, it becomes imperative, while keeping the establishment off balance in regard to the succession, to reassert periodically the president’s authority. One such highly symbolic gesture was the appointment in February 2007 of Anatoly Serdyukov, a former head of the Federal Tax Service, who made his fortune in the furniture business, to replace Ivanov as minister of defense. It is hard to see this promotion as anything but a deliberate indignity visited by the former KGB lieutenant colonel on the Russian military, whose members still remember and deeply resent depredation at the hands of Soviet secret police. Another signal given by this institutional humiliation was that, at least until the presidential election next March, with the despised nonentity Serdyukov nominally in charge, the Kremlin intends to manage the armed forces directly, with no mediators.

At almost exactly the same time, however, Putin resorted to a tried-and-true tactic that seemed designed especially to appeal to the most atavistic

among the Russian elites: the security and military top brass who are nostalgic for the Soviet era. During the Soviet Union’s 70 years, anti-Western—especially anti-American—rhetoric was almost routinely deployed at moments of political or economic confusion or weakness. Stalin, for example—his country utterly devastated and bloodied, with millions starving and living in dugouts—launched the cold war in a February 1946 speech, and two years later blockaded Berlin. Khrushchev, his political position increasingly shaky at home, attempted to intimidate John F. Kennedy in Vienna in June 1961. In September 1983, Andropov welcomed a chance to consolidate his first year and dispel the (correct) rumors of his being barely alive by shooting down a Korean airliner.

The substance of Putin’s much-commented-on February 10, 2007, speech in Munich—in which he berated the United States for supporting NATO’s expansion to Russia’s border, for its conduct of the Iraq War, and for its missile defense plans in Eastern Europe—should have come as no surprise. But the shrillness and timing of the diatribe undoubtedly were chosen with domestic audiences in mind. Since then, Putin has raised the rhetorical temperature by threatening to retarget nuclear missiles at Europe and withdraw from the Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty.

Unhappy with the inherent disorderliness of Russia’s young democracy, Putin set out to fashion (and persuaded millions of Russian voters of the necessity of fashioning) a seemingly more governable, state-dominated system that would contrast with what the Kremlin’s propaganda labels the “disastrous” and “chaotic” 1990s. That decade saw radical reforms, good laws, and a revolutionary government that lacked institutions and resources to implement and enforce them. In place of that, the Kremlin has been busily constructing order without law. The liberty of a badly under-institutionalized democracy—unprecedented for Russia—has been supplanted with a “sovereign” or “managed” democracy with constantly diminishing liberty.

Yet the coming succession woes make the result fit the pattern of what Hegel called the “irony of history.” The Kremlin’s nervousness over the upcoming presidential succession, although camouflaged by oil wealth and passed over in silence by the renationalized or intimidated mass media, is plain to see. In the end, the oversimplified and emaciated “sovereign” democracy may prove far less reliable than its designers expected. ■