Chapter One

Political Leadership

Richard Sakwa

[It] is clearly too early to assert that, this time, Russia will complete her real convergence with the West. But it is not too early to assert that, in the normal course, she hardly has anywhere else to go. . . . As has ever been the case since Peter, if Russia wants to be strong, she will have to Westernize. With her Communist identity gone, and with no other ideological identity possible, she has little choice but to become, as before 1917, just another “normal” European power, with an equally normal internal order.

—Martin Malia

The Putin phenomenon remains an enigma. A man with legal training, he spent a large part of his formative adult years in the security apparatus; following the fall of the communist system in 1991, he threw in his lot with the democratic leader of St. Petersburg, Anatoli Sobchak. Elected president for the first time in March 2000, Putin presided over the development of a market economy and endlessly reiterated his commitment to democracy, yet following reelection for his second and constitutionally defined last term in 2004, the system veered ever closer toward some form of state capitalism. Dirigisme in the economy was accompanied by ever more suffocating restrictions on the free play of political pluralism and democratic competition. Putin came to power committed to the “normalization” of Russia, in the sense of aligning its internal order to the norms practiced elsewhere and establishing Russia’s foreign policy presence as just another “normal great power,” yet there remained something “extraordinary” about the country. Putin left the presidency as prescribed by Russia’s constitution, and in May 2008 power was transferred to his nominee, Dmitri Medvedev, but Putin then took up the duties of prime minister and was thus able to ensure that “Putinism after Putin” would continue.
RECONCILING CONTRADICTION

Russia under Putin emerged as a dual state. Elements of this were already evident under Yeltsin, but the divergence between the formal constitutional order, the rule of law, and autonomous expression of political and media freedoms, on the one hand, and the instrumental use of law and attempts to manage political processes, on the other hand, became ever wider. Putin’s administration was careful not to overstep the bounds of the letter of the constitution, but the system of “managed democracy” conducted itself with relative impunity and lack of effective accountability. It was firmly located in the gray area of para-constitutionalism, a style of governance that remains true to the formal institutional rules but devises various strategies based on technocratic (rather than democratic) rationality to achieve desired political goals. Putin’s para-constitutionalism did not repudiate the legitimacy of the constitution but in practice undermined the spirit of constitutionalism. The interaction of real constitutionalism and nominal para-constitutionalism in Russia can be compared to the development of the dual state in Germany in the 1930s. Ernest Fraenkel described how the prerogative state acted as a separate law system of its own, although the formal constitutional state was not dismantled. Two parallel systems of law operated: the “normative state” operated according to sanctioned principles of rationality and impartial legal norms, while the “prerogative state” exercised power arbitrarily and without constraints, unrestrained by law.²

The contrast between a prerogative and a constitutional state (I shall use this term for clarity in place of “normative” state) provides a useful key to interpreting development in postcommunist Russia. In Russia, the fundamental legitimacy of the regime is derived from its location in a constitutional order which it is sworn to defend. However, in certain cases—as in the Yukos affair, when the head of the oil company, Mikhail Khodorkovsky, was imprisoned and the company dismembered—elements of the prerogative state have emerged. The interaction between the constitutional and prerogative states in Russia became the defining feature of the regime. Although the rule of law in Russia remains fragile and, as the Yukos affair amply demonstrated, was susceptible to manipulation by the political authorities, no fully fledged prerogative state emerged. Neither, however, has a fully fledged rule of law state, and thus Russia remains trapped in the gray area between a prerogative and a genuine constitutional state. The regime is able to rule by law when that suits its purposes, but the struggle for the rule of law, even by prominent members of the administration itself, is far from over.

Two political systems operate in parallel. On the one hand, there is the system of open public politics, with all of the relevant institutions described in the constitution and conducted with pedantic regulation in formal terms. At this level, parties are formed, elections fought, and parliamentary politics conducted. However, at another level, a second para-political world exists based on informal groups, factions, and operating within the framework of the inner court of the presidency. This Byzantine level never openly challenged the leader but sought to influence the decisions of the supreme ruler. This second level is more than simply “virtual” politics, the attempt to manipulate public opinion and shape electoral outcomes through the pure exercise of manipulative techniques.³ However, by seeking to reduce the inevitable contradictions that accompany public politics into a matter of technocratic management, Putin inevitably exacerbated the contradictions between the groups within the regime. Putin placed a high value on civil peace, and thus opposed a return to the antagonistic politics typical of the 1990s, but this reinforced the pseudo-politics typical of court systems. The suffocation of public politics intensified factional processes within the regime.

Medvedev, as we shall see, came to power committed to strengthening the constitutional state vis-à-vis the prerogative state, above all by strengthening the rule of law and tackling corruption. That this was his top priority reinforces the argument that the interaction between the two levels is the key to understanding contemporary Russian politics. Medvedev, moreover, was not so burdened by the concerns of Putin's presidency. He was less scarred by the bitter disappointments of the Yeltsin and Putin years, when it appeared that “strategic partnership” with the West could only be achieved at the cost of Russia’s perceived interests as a great power and as a distinct civilization. The origin of the dual state lies in the nature of the modernization program pursued by Putin’s leadership. It was genuinely committed to the development of Russia as a modern state and society comfortable with itself and the world. At the same time, it sought to overcome the failings of what it considered the excesses of the 1990s under the leadership of president Boris Yeltsin, notably the pell-mell privatization, the liberalism that gave rise to inequality epitomized by the enormous wealth of a handful of “oligarchs,” and the “anarchic democracy” characterized by the hijacking of the electoral process by business-dominated media concerns and regional elites.
Three main themes emerge from this. The first is the remedial element, Putin’s policy agenda emerged not only out of the legacy of seventy-four years of communism and the way that it was overcome, notably the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991, but also the need to overcome the perceived excesses of the 1990s, above all the development of inequality, mass poverty, oligarch domination of the media, and the excessive ambitions of the new business elite. The second feature is the type of developmental program that Putin ultimately favored, with a strong role of the state to ensure that the business of business remained business, not politics, and for the state to remain firmly in control of economic policy making, accompanied by support for national champions in the energy, military defense, and manufacturing sectors. The third feature is the political managerialism designed to counter what was perceived as the irresponsibility engendered by an untutored democratic process, a theme that provoked an obsession with security by the siloviki (representatives of the security and military) in Putin’s team. These three elements combined to create a profoundly tutelary regime that was in some ways reminiscent of the “trustee” democracy practiced in Singapore. While there is much talk of a hegemonic presidency, and undoubtedly the presidency is the core of Russia’s political system, hegemonic processes are far deeper than that. The administrative regime exerted a distinctive type of political guardianship over society.

There is a profound historical reality behind the emergence of the guardianship system. As in so many other “third wave” countries that have embarked on the path toward greater political openness since 1974, democracy in Russia was forced to create the conditions for its own existence. This is a type of giant boot-strapping operation described by Ernest Gellner in his work on the development of civil society in Russia and other postcommunist countries. The social subjects of capitalist democracy were being created in the process of the establishment of capitalist democracy, a circular process that engendered numerous contradictions. The relationship between the various subsystems of a dynamic democracy has still to be devised. However, the tutelary role of the regime tended to become an end in itself, and its necessary developmental functions came to substitute for and impede the development of autonomous structures in society. Thus there was a profound ambivalence about Putin’s leadership and the nature of his developmental agenda, an ambivalence that is characteristic of Russia’s long-term modernization in which adaptation to the technological and economic standards of the West has been accompanied by resistance to political Westernization.

Medvedev was well aware of these dilemmas, and while committed to continue the broad outlines of “Putin’s plan” (the term used in the 2007–2008 electoral cycle to describe Putin’s policy agenda, later called “Plan 2020”)—economic modernization and the creation of a more competitive diversified economy, international integration, social modernization, and efficacious political institutions—Medvedev changed the emphasis from “manual” management toward greater trust in the self-managing potential of the system. In his Civic Forum speech on January 22, 2008, he called for the struggle against corruption to become a “national program,” noting that “legal nihilism” took the form of “corruption in the power bodies.” Medvedev returned to this idea on January 29 in his speech to the Association of Russian Lawyers, calling on his fellow lawyers to take a higher profile in society and to battle “legal nihilism.” He clearly had two evils in mind: corruption in the traditional venal sense, characterized by the abuse of public office for private gain, and meta-corruption, where the judicial process is undermined by political interference, known in Russia as “telephone law,” and which had been most prominently in evidence during the Yukos case, which itself had given rise to the term “Basmanny justice.”

In a keynote speech to the Fifth Krasnoyarsk Economic Forum on February 15, 2008, Medvedev outlined not only his economic program but also his broad view of the challenges facing Russia. He focused on an unwieldy bureaucracy, corruption, and lack of respect for the law as the main challenges facing the country. He insisted that “freedom is better than lack of freedom—this principle should be at the core of our politics. I mean freedom in all of its manifestations—personal freedom, economic freedom and, finally, freedom of expression.” He repeated earlier promises to ensure personal freedoms and an independent and free press. He repeatedly returned to the theme of “the need to ensure the independence of the legal system from the executive and legislative branches of power,” and once again condemned the country’s “legal nihilism” and stressed the need to “humanize” the country’s judicial system. Renewed confrontation with the United States (but not, it should be stressed, to the same extent with the European Union), especially evident during the Five-Day War of August 2008 with Georgia, however, threatened to derail Medvedev’s aspirations as the country once again, as in Soviet times, appeared faced with a choice between modernization and militarization.

THE CHARACTER OF LEADERSHIP

More than a decade and a half after the fall of the Soviet regime, there is no consensus about the nature of the system emerging in the country. A whole arsenal of terms has been devised in an attempt to capture the hybrid nature of Russian reality, including “managed democracy,” “managed pluralism,” “liberal authoritarianism,” and many more. Following the Orange Revolution in Ukraine in late 2004, the presidential administration launched the term “sovereign democracy” to indicate that Russia would find its own path to democracy, and that democracy in the country would have Russian
characteristics. This was a theme Putin stressed in his state of the federation speech on April 25, 2005. He took issue with those who suggested that Russia was somehow not suited to democratic government, the rule of law, and the basic values of civil society: “I would like to bring those who think like that back to political reality. . . . Without liberty and democracy there can be no order, no stability and no sustainable economic policies.” Responding to Western criticism, however, Putin stressed that the “special feature” of Russia’s democracy was that it would be pursued in its own way and not at the price of law and order or social stability: “Russia . . . will decide for itself the pace, terms and conditions of moving towards democracy.” In other words, while the content of policy would be democracy, its forms and the tempo of development would be a directed and managed process, a division that helped sustain the dual state in Russia.

The continuing debate about the character and direction of Putin’s leadership reflects a broader debate about the nature of the new system. Is Russia in “transition” to an arguably more democratic system, despite numerous detours and reverses, a perspective that can be dubbed the “democratic evolutionist” view? Or is Russia stuck in some postcommunist syndrome where democratic accoutrements adorn a society and polity that mimic the authority patterns of the earlier order, although aware that there can be no return to the previous system, the “failed democratization” approach? In the latter camp, Steven Fish is unequivocal: “By the time of Vladimir Putin’s re-election as president of Russia in 2004, Russia’s experiment with open politics was over.” One of the main reasons in his view for the re-creation of a monocratic system is the failure to free the economy from the grip of the bureaucracy. This has inhibited the development of a vibrant economy, notably in the small and medium business sector. Contrary to what critics of the privatization of the 1990s argue, Fish insists that more liberalization was required. The stunted development of an independent business sector deprived political life and the media of the sources of independent support, accompanied by widespread corruption and a corrosive venality in public life. The Yukos affair was a clear manifestation of the attempt to achieve economic goals (their validity is not our concern here) by administrative means. While Putin’s administration was clearly in favor of the creation of a capitalist market integrated into the world economy, it feared the free operation of market forces. In his 1997 doctoral dissertation, Putin had argued for the creation of national champions, and this long-standing policy goal was reinforced by the concerns of the siloviki in Putin’s team.

The institutional choices embedded in the 1993 constitution, above all the establishment of a “super-presidential” system, are considered by many to have driven Russia toward monocracy. On the basis of his Parliamentary Powers Index, Fish finds that Russia is considered semi-presidential on rather weak grounds, and that in fact it is super-presidential. Only the right of the lower house to approve the president’s nominee as prime minister gives it a tenacious claim to be semi-presidential, but the costs of rejecting the nomination three times are so high, namely dissolution and all the risks associated with a new election, that parliament would have to be suicidal to exercise its formal powers. However, defenders of the constitution, such as one of its authors, Viktor Sheinis, counter by arguing that the letter of the constitution has little to do with the issue; the key problem is that the spirit of constitutionalism is lacking. Democratic evolutionists see plenty of potential for the development of a more robust adherence to the spirit of legality, despite present setbacks.

The tutelary role of the regime may well have helped stabilize the state, but the quality of democracy was bound to suffer. The system in formal institutional terms is undoubtedly a liberal democracy, but practice often falls short of declared principles. The constitution of 1993 is a liberal document enshrining fundamental human rights, the rule of law, separation of powers, federalism, and accountable governance, but the powers of the executive are enormous and allow the emergence of a relatively autonomous power center unconstrained either vertically or horizontally. Elsewhere we have called this a regime system, to a degree unlimited by the constitutional constraints of the formal state order from above, and relatively unaccountable to the representative system from below. The Constitutional Court remains a serious and authoritative body, and there have been sustained attempts to give muscle to the independence of the judicial system, including the widespread introduction of jury trials. However, in practice, Putin’s administration, while certainly remaining within the letter of the constitution, undermined the motivating spirit of democracy, political pluralism, and judicial impartiality. There is thus rich ground for disagreement, since partisans of both the democratic evolutionist and failed democratization camps can always find evidence to support their case.

A number of countries can be described as “para-democracies,” where real power lies not with the constitutionally vested authorities but with groups outside the formal power system. This was the case, for example, in Greece following the end of the civil war in 1949 up to the military coup of 1967, with the formal democratic procedures vulnerable to interference by forces not subservient to the democratic process. Local bosses were able to carve out fiefdoms, and central government was prey to endless crises, with more than thirty governments between the end of the German occupation and 1967, and at all levels patronage relations prevailed. As in Russia, this system of controlled democracy was characterized by weak political parties, which were based on personalities rather than coherent programs. However, a fundamental difference with Russia is that in the latter there is no equivalent to repeated interventions by the military and the monarchy. Instead, in Russia the interventions come from within the system itself, and this endows the
formal institutions of the state with a fungibility that inhibits their hardening into more or less autonomous structures. Instead, they are permanently susceptible to pressure from the administrative regime. A controlled democracy, therefore, is not only a low-quality democracy but is also accompanied by the degradation of the state.

The geopolitical dilemmas facing Putin and Medvedev have a strong historical resonance. Frustrated by the failure to achieve a viable framework for political relations between the post-Soviet states in Eurasia, the resolute geopolitical struggle with external great powers (America, the European Union, China) in the region, and his exasperation with domestic liberal and democratic forces, Putin became ever more a legitimist of the type that Aleksandr I turned into in his final years. Putin’s innate antirevolutionism was alarmed by the emergence of social movement “network” revolutions, which adopted a number of colors (rose, orange, and tulip) but which in all cases threatened his sense of the proper order of things. As befiting a person from the security apparatus, he had a deeply conservative view of how political change should take place. At the same time, Putin was unable to understand why Russia was not treated as just another of the great powers; since in his view there was no longer anything to fear from Russia, he assumed that the West would have “the serenity of spirit to understand her more.” Putin believed, with justice, that Russia was developing according to the same universal laws as the West, but later and more slowly. The decline in ideological hostility of the communist sort made possible a qualitatively better relationship with the West, but the Cold War spirit on both sides intruded.

Part of the reason for the remaining “extraordinary” elements in Russian politics is the nature of adaptation to contemporary modernity. We can briefly characterize this as a process of partial and dual adaptation. Political adaptation is necessarily a partial process, since only in postcolonial and postwar contexts can one country try to copy wholesale the institutions of another. The nature and parameters of this difference need to be explored. Traditionalists insist that the gulf separating Russia from the West is enormous, and therefore favor yet another Sonderweg that would affirm Russia’s distinctive native traditions (samobytnost”). The security-focused part of the elite points to the danger to national security and national interests from full adaptation to external models. For economic liberals, the elements of difference are precisely those that are dysfunctional, and hence in their view Russia should adapt fully and unreservedly to the global economic order. The essence of Putin’s leadership was the attempt to negotiate a new balance between adaptation and affirmation. A system of “partial adaptation” emerged, appealing to Russian political culture and shaped by security concerns while at the same time integrating into the international economy. The partial nature of Putin’s adaptation strategy was derived in part from the traditional imbalance between economic and political facets of modernization, but also from the belief that excessive adaptation could be as dangerous as too little. While committed to a certain type of democratization, the Putin leadership insisted that democracy needs to be rooted in, and congruent with, national conditions.

The strategy of partial adaptation is therefore a balancing act torn by its inherent dualism. On the one hand, it looks to the norms and standards prevalent in the countries of advanced modernity; on the other, it seeks to root the adaptive process in a native discourse (managed and interpreted, of course, by the regime) while refusing to succumb to nationalist insularism. This dualism characterizes most democratic institutions and processes in Russia and provides the conceptual basis for the dual state. The Putin strategy for political and economic modernization could not depend on the strata or institutions traditionally relied on by modernizing regimes, such as the army or Western-educated elites, and while forced in part to adapt to the social milieu in which it finds itself, it feared above all being absorbed by that milieu, in particular the social forces unleashed by the transition process itself. Thus even the practice of dual adaptation (to external modernity and domestic reality) is partial. Putin’s modernizing technocratic regime became increasingly isolated, and bereft of substantive support from abroad and unable to rely on the new sociopolitical forces in the land (big business and regional elites), it became increasingly reliant on epigones of the security apparatus and the bureaucracy, both of which were oriented to the power system itself. The existence of this bureaucratic mass provided scope for innovation, since it furnished critical support to the modernizing leadership, but at the same time it subverted the development of the autonomous agents of a genuinely modern society, while the striving for regulation and control by the securititas threatened liberty itself.

**PROBLEMS OF POWER CONCENTRATION**

Democracy in Russia is faced with the task of creating the conditions for its own existence; to which postulate Putin has implicitly added that this cannot be done by following the logic of democracy itself. Therein lies a further level of duality—between the stated goals of the regime and its practices—which permanently subverts the principles which it proclaims. Putin’s team dismantled the network of business and regional relationships that had developed under Yeltsin, and although in policy terms there was significant continuity between the two periods, where power relations were concerned a sharp gulf separates the two leaderships. Putin recruited former associates from St. Petersburg and the security forces, and on this he built a team focused on the presidential administration in the Kremlin that drove through the new agenda. The power of the most egregious political oligarchs was reduced,
and from their exile in London and Tel Aviv they plotted their revenge, further stoking the paranoia of the siloviki. With the fear of the oligarchical Jacobites abroad, instability spreading across the North Caucasus, and the specter of color revolutions, it is not surprising that the regime exhibited all the symptoms of a siege mentality, and its legitimism took an ever more conservative hue.

The Putin administration initially drew on staff from the Yeltsin team, notably Aleksandr Voloshin at the head of the presidential administration and Mikhail Kasyanov as prime minister. At the same time, a parallel administration was built up in the Kremlin, and gradually it dispensed with the services of Yeltsin’s old guard. This was accompanied by a shift in policy priorities in the middle period of Putin’s leadership. The “over-mighty subjects” had been tamed and now the Kremlin went on the offensive, not only to ensure its own prerogatives in economic policy and political life, but also to forge a new model of political economy where the state’s preferences predominated. The Yukos affair represented a major disciplinary act, not only ensuring that business leaders stayed out of politics, but also bringing the state back into the heart of business life. This was achieved not so much by renationalization as through “deprivatization.” Economic policy was no longer a matter for autonomous economic agents but had to be coordinated with the state, while the state itself became a major player in the economic arena (in particular in the energy sector) through its “national champions,” above all Gazprom and Rosneft.

The equivalent of deprivatization in the political sphere was “de-autonomization.” The ability of political actors to act as independent agents was reduced through a not-so-subtle and at times brutal system of rewards and punishments, while the economic bases of independent political activity were systematically dismantled. The “imposed consensus” of Russia’s elite, as Gel’man notes, was achieved through the Kremlin’s use of “selective punishment of some elite sections and selective cooptation of others.” As long as the Kremlin had adequate resources in material, political capital, and authority to rein in potentially fractious elites, the system could continue, but there was an ever present threat of defection. An unprecedented decade-long economic boom, accompanied by windfall energy rents, reinforced the position of the power elite. This allowed a new type of “neo-Stalinist compromise” to be imposed: the government promised rising standards of living in exchange for restrictions on independent popular political participation, a pact that could only be sustained, as Mikhail Gorbachev discovered to his cost in the late 1980s, as long as the economy could deliver the goods. A decline in primary commodity prices could threaten the support basis of the regime.

The fundamental problem of a concentrated power system is to ensure adequate renewal to avoid rendering itself so inward looking as to become dysfunctional. The reliance on a small coterie of trusted followers and the resulting weakness of competent personnel leads to reduced governmental capacity and poor policy performance. The chief mechanism used by the Putin administration to avoid this fate was to undertake periodic personnel reshuffles. There were four major episodes of these. The first on March 28, 2001, saw some of the most egregiously corrupt of the Yeltsin cohort purged, notably Nikolai Aksenenko from his post at the railways ministry, and the elevation of Putin’s allies, notably Sergei Ivanov, who was appointed defense minister. Coming exactly a year after his election, Putin asserted his authority over personnel, hitherto possibly limited by the terms of the transitional deal with Yeltsin. The second reshuffling, on February 24, 2004, saw the appointment of Mikhail Fradkov as prime minister to replace Kasyanov. The third, on November 14, 2005, signaled the beginning of an elite realignment in preparation for the succession in 2008. The former head of the presidential administration, Dmitri Medvedev, became first deputy prime minister, and the defense minister, Sergei Ivanov, became a deputy prime minister. Thus the two primary candidates for the succession were in place. They joined the liberal economist Alexander Zhukov, who had earlier been the only deputy prime minister. He also now brought in talented outsiders, including the governor of the energy-producing region of Tyumen, Sergei Sobyanin, as the new chief of staff. The fourth change, on September 12, 2007, saw Fradkov replaced as prime minister by Viktor Zubkov, accompanied by a limited cabinet reshuffle.

The way Putin undertook these periodic personnel reshuffles was typical of his political style: a sudden and dramatic announcement, typically coming like a bolt from a blue sky. At the same time, they revealed the constraints he worked under. Even as president his word was far from law. Some 1,800 policy-relevant decrees issued by Putin during his eight years as president remained unimplemented, and to overcome resistance to his proposals he had to ensure that resistance within his administration was outflected. These reshuffles created a system that ensured the succession and endured beyond the parliamentary elections of December 2007 and the presidential elections of March 2008.

The reshuffles were accompanied by the strengthening of the “party of power,” United Russia (UR), which increasingly became the core of a “dominant-party” system. The establishment of UR represented a significant development, since it did not simply represent the existing power system but sought to set up an alternative structure in whose name a government could be formed. Fear of the autonomous development of an independent political force in the past ensured that no party of power managed to make a credible showing in a second election, but United Russia’s triumph in the December 2003 elections indicated that a new pattern of politics was emerging. This was confirmed by its even more convincing
victory in the December 2007 Duma election. The party emerged as an instrument in Putin’s struggle to bring regional executives to heel, but it began to take on a life of its own. The creation of a system of autonomous political actors came into contradiction with the attempt to subordinate it to the regime-state.

THE PARADOXES OF PUTIN’S LEADERSHIP

A paradox is defined as a self-contradiction that conflicts with preconceived notions of what is reasonable, possible, or true, but which is essentially well founded. Putin’s leadership is thus paradoxical in two senses: its self-contradictory internal characteristics, but also in the way that it is received and interpreted. The quality of ambiguity is thus inherent in Putin’s leadership, in domestic affairs as much as in foreign policy.

The polymorphous nature of Putin’s leadership is striking, and this was reflected in his ability to garner a broad and in some respects incompatible electorate in 2000. As Colton and McFaul put it, “So far as Putin’s electorate is concerned, the fascinating thing is how he tapped into the desire of so many Russians to avoid having to make these wrenching choices, as opposed to opting unreservedly for democracy (which very few were willing to do) or choosing autocracy (which most [Gennadi] Ziuganov [the head of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation] voters did not flinch at).”

Sixty-one percent of Putin voters in 2000 believed Russia could combine democracy and a strong state and 69 percent believed it could experience both democracy and economic growth.”

Putin’s approval rating throughout his presidency rarely dipped below 70 percent, and there was an extraordinary consistency over the years in popular views. Putin reflected the policy preferences of the population, with just under half supporting the continuation of reforms but with a stronger state role and ensuring popular welfare, while only 10 percent called for the continuation of reforms with a decreased role for the state, while another 11 percent supported the swift and decisive implementation of reform. Only 22 percent favored a return to the Soviet system.

Putin’s approach to politics was characterized by a number of features. Antirevolutionism was a theme stressed from the very first days of his leadership, and he remained consistent in upholding the principle of constitutionally endowed legitimacy and the ordered transfer of power. In his state of the nation speech to the Federal Assembly on April 3, 2001, Putin noted, “The past decade was a stormy time for Russia. It is no exaggeration to describe that time as revolutionary.” Against that background, the early years of the new century appeared calm in comparison. Although he insisted that the country should not be afraid of change, this should be justified by the situation.

People’s fears, he noted, were based on the logical chain: revolution was followed by counterrevolution, and “reforms are followed by counterreforms,” accompanied typically by a witch-hunt against alleged “culprits of a revolution carried too far.” Russia’s historical experience was rich in such examples. But then Putin unexpectedly concluded: “This cycle is over. There will be no more revolutions or counterrevolutions.”

This perhaps was an unconscious echo of the cry of Thermidorians throughout the ages, who seek to repudiate the excesses of the revolution while enjoying the fruits of its achievements. Russia’s revolution of the 1990s, of course, was of a distinctive type: seeking not to devise a new model but to graft an already functioning type of democratic capitalist system devised in the West onto Russia. It was, moreover, carried out largely “from above,” with the elements of popular mobilization of the late 1980s soon drying up and with a minimum of violence, the events of 1991 and 1993 excepted.

A second key principle of Putin’s leadership, following from the first, is his emphasis on legitimism, a feature we have touched on earlier. From the very first, he stressed that he would not change the constitution and would abide by its stipulations. In technical terms, he did just this, and his departure from the presidency in 2008 confirmed Putin as someone who ruled according to the letter of the law. Putin also appealed to the principle of legitimism in his relations with leaders in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). This led him to support what in any lexicon are authoritarian leaders, such as Islam Karimov in Uzbekistan and Aleksandr Lukashenko in Belarus. Of course, legitimism here was reinforced by issues of geostategic advantage, but the principle was also applied in cases where Russia’s national interests were less clear-cut. Putin’s overemphatic support for the succession of power from Leonid Kuchma to Viktor Yanukovych in Ukraine in late 2004 ignored the fact that the final winner, Viktor Yuschenko, had forged strong economic and political ties with Russia when he had been prime minister earlier. It may be noted that at this time Putin stuck his neck out in an unusually undiplomatic manner in support of George W. Bush’s reelection as U.S. president. It is very much part of his character to take a decision and then stick to it through thick and thin. Putin’s legitimist approach is therefore reinforced by his aversion to revolutionary changes of power.

In relations with the former Soviet states, however, this did not made him a neo-Brezhnevian, and Russia’s lack of intervention in support of Askar Akayev at the time of the Tulip Revolution in March 2005 makes it clear that no updated version of the Brezhnev doctrine was in the offing. Opposition to the expansion of NATO to Ukraine and Georgia was considered resistance to an existential threat to Russia’s fundamental security interests and not an attempt to limit the sovereignty of these countries. Equally, intervention in South Ossetia and Abkhazia in August 2008 from the Russian perspective was considered a defensive reaction to the Georgian attack.
The third feature of Putin’s leadership is the one referred to above: Thermidor. If we consider Putin’s attempts to consolidate the state as a type of Thermidor, then it is indeed of a peculiar “soft” sort, if anything a counter-reform rather than a counterrevolution. Rather than explicitly repudiating the revolutionary regime of the 1990s, Putin in fact was hand-picked as that regime’s chosen instrument of succession. His aim was certainly not to undo the work of the 1990s but to give it a firmer legal and economic basis. He sought to perpetuate and consolidate the institutions of the earlier period, with the 1993 constitution at its center. Yet there are Thermidorian elements in Putin’s rule, reflected in the rejection of the polarized politics of the earlier period and attempts to build a genuine policy consensus. Above all, Thermidor signals the end of societal predominance and the attempt to insulate the state from direct social power. The nature of Putinite state restoration is certainly capable of contrasting interpretations, but there is a clear tension between a strong state, which in the contemporary world entails the development of a ramified constitutional order, and the strengthening of the power system associated with a particular elite configuration in a regime interposed between the state and society. This would be compatible with an appeal to the constitution in the form of a Rechtsstaat. Zakaria terms this an “illiberal democracy.” Russian idiom at first called this “managed democracy” and later “sovereign democracy,” while in the Singapore of Lee Kuan Yew and his successors, it is known as “trustee” democracy. The consolidation of the “vertical” of regime power has been accompanied by the loss of independence of the Duma, the Federation Council, and the judiciary, and the undermining of the federal system, all of which contributed to a weakening of the division of powers and the establishment of a new system of patronage politics. Oligarchic capitalism gave way to neopotrimonial bureaucratic capitalism with corporatist overtones.

The fourth of Putin’s paradoxes is his relationship to politics: a consummate politician, he was nevertheless antipolitical. He neutralized the irresponsible utopianism of the communist left while constraining the dangerous ambitions of the nationalist right. He retained the support of a large part of the population, the respect of important sections of the international community, and the loyalty of the bulk of the elite within the country. He drove through a reform agenda designed to turn Russia into a functioning market society. He also had a social agenda that raised living standards, ensured that wages were paid on time, and began to reorient welfare services toward more targeted needs, although as president he failed to push through pension reform, something that he was faced with as prime minister. When faced with mass public protest against the monetization of social benefits in early 2005, he acted like any good politician: he made a concession here, found a scapegoat there, and in general emerged relatively unscathed from the whole episode. The “Teflon” character of his leadership was particularly visible following dramatic and catastrophic episodes such as the Kursk disaster in August 2000, the Dubrovka theater siege in October 2002, and the Beslan school hostage crisis in September 2004, accompanied by a growing wave of insurgency throughout the North Caucasus. Although he managed to resolve the Chechen conflict, the price was a radical “Chechenization” that transferred power to native elites, allowing Ramzan Kadyrov from 2007 to consolidate an extraordinary sultanist form of personal power. Putin’s popularity endured through careful political management, political dexterity, and the ability to evoke trust by resonating with the people’s aspirations and self-image.

In international affairs, Putin gained much political mileage in the wake of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in the United States, and he cleverly avoided the pitfalls attending the Iraq War launched by the United States in 2003. However, U.S. plans to place elements of missile defense in Poland and the Czech Republic, announced in January 2007, represented a major threat to his vision of international relations, and his general sense that Russia’s views were being discounted provoked his robust speech asserting Russia’s interests in Munich in February 2007. International tensions once again threatened to derail domestic development.

Putin’s leadership was goal oriented, focusing above all on state rehabilitation, while the quality of the political process was a secondary concern. The stress on outcomes fostered a negligent attitude to the finer arts of public debate, winning popular support for policies, and engaging in the cut and thrust of election campaigns. The niceties of democratic politics were not his forte. On several occasions, he noted his distaste for what he considered the populist politicking that accompanies electoral campaigns. His personal distaste for public politics encouraged him to focus on set-piece, staged public events, notably the annual state of the nation speech, question and answer sessions with the people, and speeches at public events. The “malaise of antipolitics,” to use Ghia Nodia’s expression, is prevalent across the post-communist world, and Putin certainly shares this characteristic with Yeltsin. As Nodia puts it, “The Communist regime parodied and discredited things political, such as political parties, ideologies, institutions, and the notion of a ‘public good’ as such. The label of ‘falsity’ firmly stuck to the public sphere, and politics was a priori considered a ‘dirty business,’ with the values of goodness and truth sought only in the private domain.” Antipolitics in the post-Soviet world promoted the anarchic disintegration of the state by delegitimating its functions and role, and in certain Latin American countries it spawned various types of populism. However, Putin’s antipolitics are of a distinctive sort: Putin is resolutely a state builder and certainly not a populist. He did not flinch from adopting policies that threatened to damage his popularity, such as allying himself with American hegemonic power after 9/11, or pushing through the monetization of social benefits in early 2005. He was a conviction politician, fearless in pursuing policies that he believed to
be right and in Russia's national interests. This was the case, as he saw it, in deciding to launch the second Chechen war in September 1999, and his decision to endorse an American military presence in Central Asia, traditionally Russia's "back yard." The demarcation of the long border with China was not something designed to win popularity at home, yet it was undoubtedly in Russia's interests finally to put an end to the tensions that in the 1960s nearly led to war between the two "fraternal" socialist states.

The fifth feature, following from the above, is Putin's instrumental view of politics. Putin sponsored the development of the institutions of representative democracy, above all the creation of a viable party system and livelier regional legislatures, but these measures were vitiated by heavy-handed interventions. His antipolitics was of a distinctive sort, lacking an ideological basis but operating strictly at the level of technocratic functionality. While Putin was rhetorically committed to the development of democracy, he retained an instrumental view of its operation. He had a strong sense of the "public good," but the definition of the public weal remained outside the political process. His administration did not hesitate to use whatever administrative measures necessary to achieve the desired outcome. This was notably the case in Chechen policy: from the referendum on the new republican constitution on March 23, 2003; the election of Akhmad Kadyrov on October 5 of that year, when a number of less accommodating candidates were prevented from standing, through to the election of his successor, Alu Alkhanov, on August 29, 2004; the elections to the republic's parliament on November 27, 2005, when turnout figures were greatly inflated; and ending with the confirmation of Ramzan Kadyrov as president on March 2, 2007. As with so many of his policies, Putin's plans to restore normalcy to Chechnya were vitiated by the means chosen to implement them. Guardianship over the electoral process here and in Russia as a whole could not but weaken the legitimacy of the political system as a whole. Putin's administration in general, despite much Western commentary to the effect, was not bent toward the establishment of an authoritarian system, and neither was it simply interested in hanging onto power at all costs. It had a clear modernizing agenda, and thus it can be seen as a developmental regime. But like so many earlier programs of modernization from above, the means undermined the ends. Both democracy and modernization as a whole require the engagement of free actors and individuals to make the whole process self-sustaining and autonomous.

Putin's instrumental view of politics gave rise to a sixth feature, discussed above: para-constitutionalism. Putin's commitment to legitimism did not prevent him from developing a range of para-constitutional instruments. A number of institutions were created that, while formally not subverting the constitution, are not based on the constitution. These include the presidential plenipotentiary in the seven federal districts, the State Council duplicating some of the work of the Federation Council, and the Public Chamber taking up aspects of the work properly the preserve of the State Duma. Para-constitutional institutions are accompanied by a range of para-constitutional procedures, notably through the use of "administrative resources" in elections, frequent changes in the legislation regulating elections, changes to the way that the Federation Council is formed, and the abolition of competitive elections for regional governors. None of these actions may technically have contravened the letter of the constitution, but they all eroded the spirit of constitutionalism.

The seventh feature is Putin's emphasis on the leading role of the state in Russia's postcommunist modernization. In the postcommunist transitional period, the "dictatorship of the proletariat"—envisioned by Marx as the period of extralegal class dominance of the makers of the socialist revolution—in the 1990s gave way to the dictatorship of the executive designed to push through a modernization process that would ultimately render that dictatorship, as it would for Marx, redundant. But as with Marx, there was no time period suggested, and in any case, the "proletariat" and the "executive" are to a degree abstractions, and the real subject of the dictatorship in both the Soviet Union and postcommunist Russia was the bureaucracy. It was Putin's achievement not only to reconstitute the state but also to endow it with a renewed legitimacy drawn from its developmental agenda. Modernization is complemented by the idea that Russia has to act as an effective "competition state," locked in struggle with other powers for economic and geopolitical advantage. While the state's capacity to enforce rules remains limited, and the gulf between its claims to represent the universal interest of the public good and the empirical reality of self-seeking elites at the national and regional levels mired in corruption remains stark, the regeneration of the legitimacy of state interests is a major achievement. Indeed, the stick may well have been bent too far, and the legitimacy of pluralism, competing interest groups, partisan politics, and open-ended debate has been undermined. Putin's emphasis on modernizing Russia was filtered through partial and dual adaptation, and thus he is wary of political Westernization, and certainly of the influence of Western agencies, and this lingering insularity of the Soviet type has in turn fostered a residual spirit of the Cold War.

The Putin elite embodied a colonial image of state authority. Paternalism was deeply embedded in the operating code of the Soviet system, and the tendency to keep the population in a condition of political infantilism has been perpetuated. Just as colonial regimes typically act in loco parentis over their subject populations, so, too, the tutelary nature of the Putin regime failed to foster the spirit of citizenship and political responsibility among the Russian population. Putin's state building was reminiscent of Jacobin holistic or integrative republicanism, deeply opposed to anything that could fragment the unity of the single people. By the same token, vital republicanism, based on the lively interplay of political forces and a distinct concept of "the political,"
was eroded. The perpetuation, indeed intensification, of patrimonial features of governance exposed the failure of the Putin regime to embrace a more complex model of modernization, when changes from above are rooted in engagement from below. Ironically, the fragmentation that Putin’s administration so abhorred in society reemerged at the level of the regime. A system of bureaucratic pluralism and fragmented elite structures at the state level, each with its system of patron-client relations, indicated that Russia had failed to establish an autonomous political sphere, and instead politics was riddled with factional conflicts rooted in the socioeconomic order.34 The patrimonial party-building endeavor associated with the development of United Russia is a case in point, where the absence of political autonomy rendered the party lifeless and a subaltern agency to the regime.

CONCLUSION

Putin appealed to the principles of stability, consolidation, and reassertion of the prerogatives of the state. However, the concepts of consensus, centrist, and the appeal to “normal” politics were beset by a number of fundamental contradictions. These contradictions are reflected in the central problem facing any analysis of Putin’s leadership: the nature of his statism. It is not difficult to identify tensions in the “project” espoused by Putin, but these tensions became the source of much of his power. The issue is not simply that he was able to appeal to a variety of constituencies, many of which would be exclusive if his ideas were enunciated more clearly, but that the very nature of Putin’s statism was a mechanism to reconcile antagonistic and contradictory social programs. He transcended narrow party politics and affiliation with either left or right not by evasion, but by a distinct type of political praxis that was transcendent of the classic political cleavages of the age of modernity. It would be hard to label Putin’s policies as president or prime minister as either “left” or “right,” and the same applies to Medvedev. The label of “liberal conservative” has been used to describe Putin’s leadership, an oxymoron that typifies the contradictory nature of his leadership. In an age when politics is based less on interests or ideologies than on identities and values, Putin reconciled policies and groups that in an earlier period would have been in conflict. Putin’s style is antipolitical, although as a leader confronted by the need to reconcile conflicting interests and views, he proved a highly adept politician. Democracy in Russia was forced to create the conditions for its own existence, and this self-constitutive characteristic imbued political processes in the country with a contradictory dynamic.

Putin’s new statism carried both a positive and a negative charge. The normative resources of the constitutional state were balanced against the arbitrariness of the prerogative state managed by a security-minded regime. Putin emphasized “the dictatorship of law,” and thus encouraged the development of a genuine rule-of-law state, but it did not subordinate itself to the pluralistic political process enshrined in the constitution. Once again traditions of the “revolution from above” were perpetuated, and patterns of lawlessness and arbitrariness were replicated. Putin insisted that the 1993 constitution established a viable framework for the development of a new governmental order, but his leadership was characterized by the absence of the spirit of constitutionalism, and this in turn undermined faith in the evolutionary potential of the constitution. There were few restraints on presidential power, and parliament and society were unable to call the authorities to account. Medvedev’s key challenge was to overcome the gulf between the prerogative and the normative (constitutional) state and finally to achieve not rule by law but the rule of law.

The characteristic feature of modernity is the emergence of autonomous civic actors accompanied by attempts of the state to manage various transformative projects that entail the management and reordering of society. In this respect, Putin reflected the larger contradiction within modernity. It is a contradiction exacerbated in Russia by the clear tension between liberal democratic aspirations and the state’s inability to act as a coherent vessel in which these aspirations can be fulfilled. For this reason, many have argued that a strong state is an essential precondition for the development of liberalism,35 while others see it as the greatest threat to those liberties. This is a contradiction that lies at the heart of Putin’s liberal statism, and one that poses the greatest challenge for Medvedev.

SUGGESTED READINGS


NOTES

1. Martin Malia, Russia under Western Eyes: From the Bronze Horseman to the Lenin Mausoleum (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap, 2000), 411–12.


7. The “Plan” encompassed all eight of Putin’s state of the nation addresses as well as his “Russia at the Turn of the Millennium” article of December 30, 1999; his February 10, 2007, speech to the Munich security conference; and some other key speeches. See Plan prezidenta Putina: Rasvutstvo dii budushchikh prezidentov Rossii (Moscow: Evropa, 2007).


17. Malia explains Aleksandr I’s position as follows: “Hemmed in by his position as one of the chief architects and guarantors of the Vienna system, and increasingly frustrated by his failures to effect reform at home, [Aleksandr] became ever more preoccupied with preserving ‘legitimacy’ and the established order throughout Europe.” Malia, Russia under Western Eyes, 91.

18. Malia, Russia under Western Eyes, 167.


28. As Putin put it, “As far as all post-Soviet space is concerned, I am concerned above all about attempts to resolve legal issues by illegal means. That is the most dangerous thing. It is most dangerous to think up a system of permanent revolutions—now the Rose Revolution, or the Blue Revolution. You should get used to living according to the law, rather than according to political expediency defined elsewhere for some or other nation—that is what worries me most. Certain rules and procedures should mature within society. Of course, we should pay attention to, support and help democracies but, if we embark on the road of permanent revolutions, nothing good will come from this for these countries, and for these peoples. We will plunge all the post-Soviet space into a series of never-ending conflicts, which will have extremely serious consequences.” Vladimir Putin, “This Year Was Not an Easy One,” International Affairs (Moscow) 51, no. 1 (2005): 2.


30. E. B. Shestopal, Obrazy vlasti v post-sovetskoj Rossi (Moscow: Aleteia, 2004), esp. chap. 15.
Chapter Two

Parliament and the Dominant Party Regime

Thomas F. Remington

One of the most important constitutional reforms in Russia after the end of the communist regime was the establishment of the principle of separation of powers. Article 10 of the 1993 constitution stipulates: “State power in the Russian Federation shall be exercised on the basis of the separation of the legislative, executive and judiciary branches. The bodies of legislative, executive and judiciary powers shall be independent.” The reason this provision is so significant is that under the Soviet system, constitutional theory held that state power was “fused” in the soviets and that there could be no separation between the branches of state power: “all power to the soviets” meant that state power was unitary. All state power, though exercised through multiple instruments, derived from a single source and served a common purpose. In reality, state power did not flow from the soviets, of course; it was exercised by the Communist Party in the name of the soviets. But the party and state officials nonetheless adhered to the doctrine of the unity of state power, itself a legacy of tsarist absolutism. For this reason, the doctrine of constitutional separation of power represented a revolutionary break from the traditional model of Russian state power.1

In the Yeltsin period, there was some separation of powers in fact. To a large degree this was due to the weakness of the executive and the fact that the opposition forces were well represented in the legislature. The president’s inability to impose control over all parts of the executive and to enforce his will throughout the regions (in part because of the sharp divisions within the political elite) permitted opposition forces to exert influence over policy through parliament. It also allowed the Constitutional Court a degree of independence in adjudicating disputes arising between the other branches.2 At one point in 1998, in fact, President Yeltsin backed down in the face of adamant opposition from the Duma to his proposed candidate for prime minister and chose a figure (Evgeni Primakov) more acceptable to the