a malaise in Russian society at large. The remedy in the eyes of many senior military officers is the reintroduction of some form of basic military training in schools. This was a feature of secondary education during much of the Soviet period but had been allowed to lapse after the collapse of the USSR. Such a programme of training would, it is suggested, improve physical fitness and instil a sense of moral purpose and patriotism in young people, together with an appreciation of the work of the armed forces and an eagerness to serve in them.

While still acting President, Vladimir Putin introduced such a course of study, ‘Foundation of Military Service’, as part of a broader programme of ‘Patriotic Education of the Citizens of the Russian Federation’. The military training element was initially an optional subject but it met with a great deal of resistance on the part of both parents and teachers and as a result few schools actually offered the course. It was then made compulsory in 2003, but even this step did not ensure that the programme of patriotic education achieved its aims. Although military training is now a formal part of secondary education in Russia, those with personal experience of the course report that it is not taught effectively or taken seriously by the pupils (Webber and Zilberman 2006: 179–80, 186–7).

The evidence of public opinion polls, however, lends support to the argument that Russia did indeed become a militarised society during the leadership of Vladimir Putin. According to monthly polls conducted by the Russian Public Opinion Research Centre (VCIOM) in 2007, between 41 and 46 per cent of Russians surveyed expressed approval of the army. This compared favourably with a number of other institutions such as law enforcement agencies, political parties and the judiciary, although the media were rated more highly (VCIOM 2007). In February 2008 nearly 75 per cent of Russians surveyed told VCIOM that they regarded the army as capable of protecting Russia from a real, external threat of war, and this figure has been steadily increasing from 60 per cent in 2005 to 67 per cent in 2007 (VCIOM 2008).

But while these surveys indicate that many Russians have an attachment to the idea of the military, perhaps linked to its role as a symbol of a strong Russian state, there is a very large discrepancy between these expressions of support and the unwillingness of young men to join the army and of parents to entrust their sons to its care. Similarly, approval of the armed forces was not sufficient to persuade millions of parents and teachers to devote valuable time during the school day to military training when they were given the choice, and once made compulsory the subject has not proved popular. In other words, while the Russian state exerts pressures on society towards greater acceptance of the military and its values in everyday life, the response of society has been more complex than simple acceptance or rejection.

Chapter 15

Classifying Russia’s Politics

STEPHEN WHITE

It was relatively easy to classify a political system of the Soviet type. It had a number of well understood characteristics, not only in the USSR but in all the countries that followed its example. There was a single (or at least dominant) ruling party, normally called a communist or workers’ party. There was public ownership of at least the most important sectors of the economy, including natural resources, heavy industry, banking and finance, and in most (but not all) cases agriculture. The party itself was dominated by its leadership, a small group of (usually) elderly men united in a body called the Political Bureau or Politburo. The entire political system was based on ‘democratic centralism’, which was meant to provide for broad discussion but in fact meant hierarchical subordination; and the party itself played a ‘leading role’, which meant in practice that its decisions were mandatory in every sphere— in elected institutions, in economic management, and in the wider society.

In fact, a system of this perfectly hierarchical kind was something of an oversimplification even in the Stalin years, and from the early 1950s there were moves towards a greater degree of consultation between regime and society within a framework of ‘socialist legality’. The party began to emphasise the ‘Leninist norms’ that had supposedly been practised in earlier years, the boundaries of debate were widened, and the leadership became a more collective one although a single person, the party leader or General Secretary, was normally dominant. There was still no element of electoral choice, but legislative bodies at all levels began to meet more often, there could occasionally be criticism of the performance of government ministers (the party had nothing to gain from tolerating incompetence), and a developing committee system began to scrutinise legislation more seriously than ever before. The decisive moment in these developments was the 20th Congress of the Communist Party in 1956, with its denunciation of Stalin and the repressive system he had created, and it was the inspiration for a group of ‘children of the 20th Congress’, including Gorbachev, who believed it had shown there could be a socialism that was also democratic.
In the end, for reasons we explore in this volume, there was no ‘third way’, and the start of the 1990s saw the repudiation of Marxism–Leninism, the end of communist rule, and the collapse of the USSR itself as all of its fifteen republics gained or restored their independence. But at least in Russia, it was an ambiguous transition. There was no overt rejection of the union itself – at any rate, a ‘renewed federation of equal sovereign republics’ had overwhelming public support when it was put to the vote in a referendum in March 1991, and the attempted coup in August of that year was followed by a series of attempts to construct a looser form of union among the remaining republics, other than the Baltics (which had formally seceded from the USSR at the start of September). Indeed, a large majority of Russians, according to the survey evidence, still regret the demise of the USSR and are in favour of the closest possible (voluntary) association of all of the former Soviet republics, especially the Slavic ones. Their reasons are not entirely sentimental – the USSR was a human and not just a political union, and when it broke up about 25 million Russians were left outside their ‘own’ republic. It was also an economic unit, and many believe a heavy cost has been paid for the breakup of long-standing patterns of interaction across what used to be a single market.

There is less regret that communist rule has disappeared – at least, in the sense of a single ruling party with a dominant position in the society – and indeed much of this had already begun to disappear in the Gorbachev years (there were multi-candidate elections from 1989 and by 1990 the party’s leading role had been abolished and opposition parties had been fully legalised). By the late summer of 1991 the Communist Party had been banned and its property sequestered; by the end of the year the USSR itself had disappeared, and a new constitution was approved shortly afterwards that committed a newly independent Russia to a whole series of liberal principles including private ownership, multiparty democracy and civil liberties of all kinds. Not just had the USSR been left behind; so too had the elected soviets on which communist rule had been based, and which predated the October revolution itself. Russia was now a ‘democratic federal legal based state with a republican form of government’; the constitution even began, in words that appeared to borrow the famous opening of its American counterpart, ‘We the multinational people of the Russian Federation …’

This was hardly ‘communist rule’, even if many of those in leadership positions had been prominent during the Soviet years – Yeltsin himself had been a member of the Politburo and his prime minister for most of the 1990s, Viktor Chernomyrdin, had been a member of the party’s Central Committee; there was no other way to be politically active, and not in prison, during the Soviet period. But at the same time it was hardly ‘democracy’ in the sense in which it was understood elsewhere, in spite of the optimistic assumptions that were made by Western governments as the Yeltsin administration repudiated Marxism–Leninism and shifted the economy with unprecedented speed into the hands of private owners. Initially, there was broad agreement that the Russian system must be at least ‘in transition to democracy’ – after all, it had taken Western countries themselves a long period of time to establish a rule of law, extend the franchise and secure the rights of ordinary citizens. But as the Putin leadership consolidated itself, it began to appear that any movement was in the other direction; not only this, the new leadership made clear that it had no intention of establishing a ‘second edition’ of the political system of the United States or the United Kingdom but rather a system that was closer to Russia’s own traditions and circumstances.

All of this left analysts in some difficulty in the early years of the new century, and as Putin was succeeded by Dmitri Medvedev in a presidential election that Western observers regarded as unsatisfactory and yet at the same time a reasonably accurate reflection of the public mood. Was this a variant of democracy – ‘hybrid’, ‘partial’, ‘defective’, or some other kind of ‘democracy with adjectives’? Would it not be better, some began to argue, to abandon the assumption that Russia and the other former Soviet republics were best understood in the language of ‘democracy’ – or even ‘transition’ – simply because they were no longer under communist rule (the most eloquent statement of this view was Carothers 2002)? Wasn’t this just as deterministic and culture-bound as the assumption the Soviet leadership had made in its own time, that the first socialist countries would inevitably be followed by others until the entire world was under communist rule? But if Russia and the other states that it resembled were not ‘democracies’ or very obviously ‘in transition’, how were their contemporary politics to be understood?

**Issues of institutional design**

Formally, at least, the constitution of December 1993 had marked a significant step forward. It was a constitution that committed the new state to ‘ideological pluralism’, ‘political diversity’ and ‘multiparty politics’, and there could be no ‘compulsory ideology’ of any kind. A whole chapter dealt with the rights and freedoms of the individual, including equality before the law, and equal rights for men and women. There were guarantees of personal inviolability and privacy. There was freedom of conscience, including the right to practise and to ‘disseminate religious and other views and act according to them’. The state itself would be a secular one, with a strict separation between the churches and the
temporal authorities. There was freedom of movement, within and across national boundaries. Press freedom was guaranteed, and censorship as such was abolished. In the courts, similarly, all had the right to a qualified defence lawyer, and were presumed innocent until proved guilty.

There were some provisions, indeed, that went further than established practices in many of the liberal-democratic countries. There was a commitment to freedom of information that allowed citizens to access whatever information was held about them by any organ of government unless security considerations dictated otherwise. There was a more general commitment to the 'generally recognised principles and norms of international law', and in the event of any disagreement international norms were to have precedence, which was a remarkable qualification of national sovereignty. And there were economic guarantees: the right of private property was protected by law, including the right to hold and to dispose of property and pass it on by inheritance. This included specific recognition of private ownership of land, on a basis to be established by subsequent legislation, and the right of citizens to engage in business. All these rights, moreover, were entrenched: in other words, they could not be amended without a complicated procedure involving a constitutional conference and (normally) a referendum.

At the same time there were grave weaknesses in Russia's new institutional design. For a start, it had been unilaterally imposed, after the order had been given to suppress the Russian parliament in September 1993 and then, in early October, to bomb it into submission. The president had no authority at this time to dissolve parliament, or suspend its sittings; indeed, the constitution as it stood at the time specifically prohibited him from doing so. Yeltsin had taken an oath of allegiance to this constitution when he was inaugurated as Russian president in July 1991. And although he found himself in a difficult position in the early post-communist years, facing a parliament that was hostile to much of what he wanted to do, it was still this parliament that had elected him its chairman in 1990 and then given him extraordinary powers. A more balanced set of proposals was beginning to emerge in the discussions that followed, up to the constitutional conference that met in the summer of 1993 whose outcome was a draft that Yeltsin himself described as 'neither presidential, nor parliamentary'. Indeed there were attempts to mediate even after the president had imposed his own preferences in a television broadcast on the evening of 21 September. But once the parliament had been taken by force and its leadership had been imprisoned, there was little reason to qualify what became an even more strongly presidential final draft.

The new Russian constitution, in the form in which it was adopted in December 1993, was a seriously unbalanced one. Formally, there was a separation of powers. The president had powers in relation to the Duma and the Duma had powers in relation to the president, both of them protected from abuse by an independent judicial system. But the president's powers, it became clear, were extraordinarily extensive in theory and practice: in particular, his power to dismiss the government, as Yeltsin did five times between March 1998 and August 1999, and as Putin did twice (in February 2004 and September 2007), without reference to public or parliamentary opinion. It was because of these far-reaching powers that Russia was often held to have not just a presidential system, but a 'super-presidential' one (see for instance Holmes 1993–4; Colton 1993; Fish 2005). As Yeltsin himself acknowledged after the new constitutional draft had been published, 'I don’t deny that the powers of the president in the draft constitution are considerable', he told Izvestiya (15 November 1993: 4), ‘but what do you expect in a country that is used to tsars and strong leaders?’

The Duma also enjoyed a direct mandate, but its influence over the executive was very limited. Its ‘consent’ was needed for the appointment of a new prime minister, but if that consent was withheld three times it was automatically dissolved. It could pass a vote of no confidence in the government, but if it did so twice in three months the president could either replace the government or else dissolve the Duma and call new elections. The president, for his own part, could dismiss the entire government at any time, for any reason. And although he could be impeached, it was with a great deal of difficulty. Under the 1993 Constitution an action of this kind could only be taken in the event of treason or a crime of similar gravity, and after the Supreme Court and Constitutional Court had both confirmed that there was a basis for proceeding. Even when the president was unable to exercise his powers effectively because of bad health or other reason, as was occasionally the case under Boris Yeltsin, he remained disproportionately powerful. Presidential elections, inevitably, became a contest for the state itself (although it was only in 1996 that the incumbent faced a serious challenge), the constitution became a set of rules of the game that those who held power found most congenial, and parliamentary elections had only marginal significance – certainly, they had nothing to do with 'winning power'.

On the face of it, a more balanced set of constitutional arrangements came into effect in the spring of 2008 with the formation of the Putin–Medvedev (or was it Medvedev–Putin) ‘tandem’. Putin himself, speaking to the foreign press later in the year, pointed out that the prime minister was now the leader of a party that had an overall majority in the Duma, and suggested that this was a sign of the 'increased influence of parliament'. But the 'final word remain[ed] with the President' (Izvestiya, 2 June 2008: 2). Medvedev, for his part, insisted that a parliamentary republic was simply not appropriate for Russia, at that time or in the
future, although it could be considered again in ‘two or three hundred years’ time’ (ibid. 12 December 2007: 3). Russia, he told interviewers, had ‘always developed around a strong executive authority. These lands have been gathered over the centuries, and they can’t be governed any other way’ (Versiya 25 February 2008: 12). For some, the example of Ukraine was instructive: the changes that had taken place since the ‘Orange revolution’ at the end of 2004 had strengthened the prime minister as against the president, but left it unclear who really determined (for instance) foreign and defence policy. The result was indecision and a continuing struggle for personal ascendency.

The ‘tandem’ was in any case some distance from a French semi-presidential system, with a prime minister who could (and sometimes did) represent an oppositional party and who had to command a majority in the assembly as well as the confidence of the president, in a system in which the parties themselves were autonomous and the elections genuinely competitive. So long as the entire process, in Russia, was controlled by the governing authorities, there was little prospect of a parliament that would hold them effectively to account. All that had taken place, from this perspective, was a redistribution of responsibilities within a relatively small and homogeneous ruling group who were all the beneficiaries of a system in which state officials were increasingly involved in the management of the largest companies as well as government itself. It mattered little, in such circumstances, if the constitution was amended in December 2008 to require the government to present an annual report to parliament. It was far more important that the parliament itself would in future be elected for a five-year and the president for a six-year term; on top of the abolition of the single-member constituencies and the direct election of governors, the effect was to open up an even wider gap between ordinary citizens and the government that spoke in their name.

Countervailing forces of all kinds were poorly developed in early post-communist Russia. There were plenty of political parties, but the authorities regulated them closely under an increasingly restrictive law and made sure that their own ‘party of power’ – latterly, United Russia – was normally dominant (see Chapter 5). It took a commanding majority of seats in the Russian parliament after the 2003 election, and latterly absorbed other smaller parties as well as individual deputies in a manner that made it even more reminiscent of the Communist Party of the Soviet past. A registration exercise meanwhile reduced the numbers of parties themselves by about half, ostensibly because they had failed to demonstrate a minimum membership of 50,000 but (in the view of those that were disappointed) for political reasons as well. And yet how else, other than by a functioning party system, were Russian voters to be given an organised choice of political alternatives? There were trade unions as well, and they repeatedly made clear that they could bring millions into the streets on ‘days of action’. But levels of membership were a fraction of what they had been in the Soviet period, and in any case the trade union leadership had a substantial stake in the status quo through the range of properties they managed and the salaries they were able to command.

The press might have represented another check on executive authority, but its circulation had fallen dramatically since the late Soviet years and its ownership was increasingly in the hands of Kremlin-friendly oligarchs (see Chapter 7). A very few titles – for instance, Novaya gazeta, a twice-weekly paper supported by ex-President Gorbachev – offered an alternative view; and there were some national dailies that permitted a diversity of opinion, such as the mildly liberal Nezavisimaya gazeta, the business paper Kommersant and the long-established and serious-minded Izvestiya. But their circulations were hardly on the kind of scale that could represent even a potential challenge to Kremlin authority (respectively 40,000, 113,000 and 150,000 copies daily in 2009). Television was a far more potent form of influence, but for this reason it was even more closely controlled; other technologies were available, but their reach was much less than in other developed nations (there were three or four times as many internet users in the United Kingdom and the United States, relative to population, and many more had telephone mainlines, although Russia was ahead of the United States in mobile phone ownership: UNDP 2007b: 273-4). The result was that whole areas of the political agenda remained in partial or total obscurity: such as human rights abuses in the North Caucasus, government corruption, organised crime, and police torture.

It was also clear that independent-minded journalists would be at some risk if they inconvenienced the rich and powerful. The case of Anna Politkovskaya, shot dead in October 2006 in what appeared to be a contract killing, made headlines across the world; her outspoken writings on the Chechen war, and on the Putin system as a whole, had made her a lot of enemies. But she was one of very many examples of attacks on journalists, some of them from her own newspaper, Novaya gazeta. In November 2008 a former colleague, now the editor of a local paper in the Moscow suburb of Khimki, was assaulted near his home and left unconscious; he survived in hospital, but lost a leg. He had been a persistent opponent of the local administration, criticising its plans to drive a new road through a local forest and demolish a war memorial that stood in the way (Guardian, 18 November 2008: 19). Another casualty was Kommersant’s military correspondent, Ivan Safronov, who leapt out of a fifth-floor window of the block of flats in which he lived in an apparent case of suicide, but following his discovery of sensitive information about
Russian arms sales to Iran and Syria that could have embarrassed senior officials (ibid. 10 March 2007: 19).

In early 2009 it was the turn of a human rights lawyer, Stanislav Markelov, who was shot dead in the middle of the afternoon on a busy street in Moscow city centre. Markelov had worked, like Politkovskaya, for Novaya gazeta. The killer also shot a trainee journalist, employed by the same paper, who had been walking him to the metro and had tried to give chase when the killer opened fire; she died later in hospital. As well as his work as a journalist Markelov had represented the family of a young Chechen woman who had been raped and then murdered in 2000 by a drunken Russian army colonel, Yuri Budanov, in a case that became something of a cause célèbre. Budanov had been given a ten-year sentence, in the face of fierce opposition from army generals and nationalist groups, but was released early; Markelov had just announced that he would be appealing against the decision to the Russian Supreme Court (Guardian, 20 January 2009: 16). Russia was one of the most dangerous countries in the world in which to carry out such duties, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists; between 1992 and the end of 2008 there were 49 deaths, behind only Iraq and Algeria (see www.cpj.org); on other, more inclusive counts there had been more than 200 (see www.ifj.org).

Perhaps most fundamentally, the rule of law remained uncertain (see Chapter 8, which takes a more positive view). Judges, certainly, were ‘independent’ and ‘inviolable’ according to the Constitution. But the Constitutional Court, which was supposed to regulate the behaviour of the president as well as of the highest levels of government, was appointed on the nomination of the president himself. Under the previous constitution, up to 1993, the Constitutional Court had been elected by the Congress of People’s Deputies and it had countermanded the president’s decisions on several important occasions (the fullest study is Trochev 2008). As long as the appointment of judges was (in practice) in the hands of government, it was unlikely that the courts would protect the rights of ordinary citizens if they were injured by the authorities themselves, and unlikely that individual ministers would be held to account for their decisions and if necessary for any wrongdoing. Perhaps the central theme of President Medvedev’s various addresses to the nation, even before his election, was ‘legal nihilism’: the disregard of law, and the damage that was done to the economy and to public life by its routine violation. But until the administration of justice was more clearly separated from government itself, there would hardly be a qualitative improvement.

The press was certainly full of cases in which the rights of ordinary citizens had been seriously violated by the rich and powerful. Lawyer Inna Yermoshkina, for instance, was not unduly bothered when she found a group of police officers was waiting by the entrance to her apartment building when she returned home one evening in May 2008. But when the plain-clothes officers surrounded Yermoshkina and her husband and a uniformed officer ordered their arrest, she realised that things were rather more serious. She was handcuffed, placed in a police car and assaulted; her husband was meanwhile escorted up to their apartment, where the police confiscated documents she had gathered about relatives of senior city and government officials, supposedly in connection with a fraud investigation. ‘That will teach you not to step on the toes of important people’, she was told. In practice, Yermoshkina concluded, she was being targeted because of a series of complaints about the corruption that appeared to be widespread in the granting of licences to practise as notaries—relatively few were issued, so that earnings were very high, and Yermoshkina had complained that too many of the licences were being given to the relatives of powerful officials instead of lawyers who were well qualified but politically unconnected (Moscow Times, 3 October 2008: 1–2).

Assessing ‘democracy’

No political system has yet achieved a perfect balance between the powers that governments need to do their job and the mechanisms that are available to allow citizens to hold them to account. But experience to date has certainly suggested that the rights of individual citizens are more likely to be at risk if the powers of governments are excessive and if the mechanisms that are available to check them are unduly weak. There have been many attempts, since at least the time of Aristotle, to identify the defining characteristics of forms of government on this basis, usually by comparing the degree of authority that rulers are allowed to command and the number of people that are allowed to exercise it. Perhaps the most successful in recent years have been those that have avoided general judgements about ‘democracy’ and still more so a numerical scale in order to concentrate on a particular set of rights that can be assessed with some degree of objectivity across a range of countries, in all of which the government will ideologically have made a formal commitment to the rights in question under international law.

One of the most systematic of these inquiries is conducted by Amnesty International, a non-governmental body established in the 1960s whose particular concern is the treatment of peaceful protest. According to its statute, Amnesty has a ‘vision of a world in which every person enjoys all of the human rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights [of 1948] and other international human rights instruments’ (see
www.amnesty.org.uk). It works through a network of national branches and a much wider network of individual members, drawing for the most part on their subscriptions and taking great care to avoid financial support of any kind that might compromise its independence. It seeks not only to identify and document human rights abuses, particularly the arrest and maltreatment of ‘prisoners of conscience’ who have refrained from the advocacy of violence, but also to mobilise international opinion so that abuses are quickly remedied and innocent victims released from incarceration. It publishes an annual report as well as a whole series of statements on individual countries and human rights concerns, drawing on a full-time staff and periodic field visits.

Amnesty, deliberately, provides no kind of score or ranking; nor does it assume that the established Western democracies are beyond criticism. In the United Kingdom, for instance, Amnesty was concerned in its 2008 report that individuals continued to be returned to states where they would face a real risk of torture on the strength of unenforceable ‘diplomatic assurances’. It also believed that secrecy in the implementation of counter-terrorism measures was leading to ‘unfair judicial proceedings’; and there were ‘continued failures of accountability for past violations’, including ‘alleged state collusion in killings in Northern Ireland’. The United States continued to hold hundreds of foreign nationals at its naval base in Guantanamo, the vast majority without charge and without the ability to challenge the legality of their detention. The Central Intelligence Agency continued to follow policies of secret detention and interrogation, and a number of videotapes of these interrogations, which might have provided incriminating evidence, had been destroyed. On top of this there were ‘serious failings in state, local and federal measures to address sexual violence against Native American women’; there was evidence of discrimination in a variety of areas, including policing, the operation of the criminal justice system and housing rights; and the death penalty was still applied (see www.thereport.amnesty.org).

But although there was no explicit comparison, it was clear from successive reports that there was much more to worry about in post-communist Russia. The Russian authorities, Amnesty found, were ‘increasingly intolerant of dissent or criticism’ and increasingly inclined to call it ‘unpatriotic’. There had been a ‘crackdown on civil and political rights’, particularly during the run-up to the December 2007 parliamentary election. Given the strict control that had been established over television and other media, public discontent tended to find an outlet in demonstrations of various kinds; but these were the flashpoint during the year for political protests, with police detaining demonstrators, journalists, and human rights activists, some of whom had been beaten. There had been an increase in racially motivated attacks, in which at least 61 people had lost their lives. And all kinds of abuses had been taking place in Chechnya, some of which were being considered by the European Court of Human Rights, which ruled that Russia had been responsible for enforced disappearances, torture and extrajudicial executions in fifteen cases during the year. Serious human rights violations, according to Amnesty, were ‘frequent’; detainees were tortured in order to extract ‘confessions’ as well as for other reasons; and violence against prisoners was widely practised.

The same kinds of concerns appeared in other reports, such as those produced by the New York-based organisation Human Rights Watch (see www.hrw.org). Founded more than thirty years ago, Human Rights Watch is ‘dedicated to protecting the human rights of people around the world’, aiming to ‘prevent discrimination, to uphold political freedom, to protect people from inhumane conduct in wartime, and to bring offenders to justice’. Like Amnesty, it produces an annual report as well as the results of a series of more specific investigations. And like Amnesty, it found much that was troubling as Putin’s second presidential term came to an end. Medvedev’s election, they found, had not resulted in improvements in the rule of law or the environment for civil society, with the government ‘continuing to crack down against independent groups and activists’. Amendments to the law on extremism allowed any politically or ideologically motivated crime to be designated in this way, and the law was itself being used arbitrarily to initiate cases against NGOs, activists and the independent media, including internet sites and blogs. All of this was an ‘unmistakable part of the Russian government’s efforts to weaken – in some cases beyond recognition – the checks and balances needed for an accountable government’.

Amnesty, Human Rights Watch and (among others) the US State Department in its annual reports on human rights around the world avoid any explicit comparison between one country and another, still more so any attempt to attach a numerical value to their respective performance. A rather different approach is taken by Freedom House of New York, which has been producing its Comparative Survey of Freedom since the early 1970s and which aims at an ‘annual evaluation of political rights and civil liberties anywhere in the world’ that can be expressed in two seven-point scales (see www.freedomhouse.org). For Freedom House, political rights are the ‘extent that the people have a choice in determining the nature of the system and its leaders’, and civil liberties are the ‘freedoms to develop views, institutions and personal autonomy apart from the state’; both of these are in turn derived from a more detailed and continuously revised checklist of criteria. Based on these scores, countries could be classified as ‘free’ (if they averaged between 1 and 2.5), ‘partly free’ (if they averaged between 3 and 5), or ‘not free’ (if they averaged between 5.5 and 7).
It was clear, on the basis of these criteria, that the end of communist rule had brought about no dramatic or lasting improvement (see Figure 15.1). The USSR, in the Brezhnev years, had been 'not free', but in 1990, while still under communist rule, it was judged to have become 'partly free'. The new union treaty that was under consideration at this time, Freedom House explained, was based on human rights and the creation of a democratic state based on popular representation and the rule of law. All the fifteen republics had declared some form of sovereignty, and the Soviet parliament had adopted laws guaranteeing freedom of the press and freedom of conscience (Freedom Review, January–February 1991: 8). Russia, as a Soviet republic, had a higher score, and so did early post-communist Russia, but it never became more than 'partly free' in terms of the Comparative Survey, and its rating was already falling as the decade advanced. In 2004, at the end of Putin's first presidential term, the score fell again, this time into the 'not free' category. By 2009 Russia was still considered 'not free', with a score of 6 for political rights and 5 for civil liberties; this placed it just above Iran and Iraq, at exactly the same point on the scale as Angola, Cambodia, Egypt, Rwanda and several other Asian or African countries. Of the fifteen former Soviet republics, only the Baltic states and Ukraine were considered to be 'free' at this time. Armenia, Moldova, Georgia and Kyrgyzstan were 'partly free'; and all the others, including Russia, were 'not free'.

Freedom House also produced an annual report, which made clear some of the reasons for this undistinguished showing. The Duma election in December 2007, in its view, had marked a 'new low in the Kremlin's manipulations of the political process'. Access for outside observers had been 'sharply restricted' and the campaign environment had favoured Kremlin-sponsored parties, which had won the 'vast majority of seats'. Not only this, but Putin had announced that he intended to remain on the political stage after his second presidential term came to an end in 2008, advantaging the figures from the security agencies usually known as the siloviki that he had appointed to top positions in the government and state-owned enterprises, and setting Russia on a 'firmly authoritarian course'. There were 'strict limits' on opposition political parties, public demonstrations, the media and non-governmental organisations, and no serious attempt had so far been made to address Russia's extensive corruption. The judiciary, meanwhile, suffered from inadequate funding and a lack of qualified personnel, and there were continuing reports of poor prison conditions and the 'widespread use of torture and ill-treatment by law enforcement officials to extract confessions', especially in the North Caucasus. A separate report found the Russian media 'not free', and in further decline.

**Democracy and 'sovereign democracy'**

All of these, admittedly, were 'Western' judgements. And consciously or otherwise, they reflected the assumptions of Western liberal democracy: in their focus on the individual rather than the collective, in their emphasis on procedural form rather than substantive outcome, and in the priority they attached to formal rights as against social and economic performance. Both East and West (and other countries) had agreed at various times to a common set of criteria, most notably the Universal Declaration of Human Rights that had been approved in 1948. But the Universal Declaration was itself a compromise, embracing both the Western 'liberal' freedoms and the communist world's emphasis on social and economic rights. The classic 'liberal' rights were all there, including equality before the law, freedom of movement, freedom of thought and conscience, freedom of expression and freedom of assembly, based on a
government that had been constituted by 'periodic and genuine elections'. But so too were the social and economic rights to which the USSR and its allies attached no less importance, including the right to work, to social security, and to a standard of living adequate for the health and wellbeing of himself and of his family'. Predictably, Western countries attached most importance to their comprehensive range of liberal and individual rights; the communist world (and some Catholic and Islamic countries) laid more emphasis on the extent to which they provided full employment and a comprehensive system of social welfare.

At first, it had seemed that Russia and the other post-communist countries would take the same view of these matters as their Western counterparts once they were no longer obliged to commit themselves to Marxism–Leninism. Hadn't the Cold War come to an end? Wasn't this supposed to represent the 'end of history'? But Russia and the other former Soviet republics had developed in rather different ways over long periods of time. For the most part, they had not experienced Roman law, with its insistence on the rights of private property, and they had no more experience of feudalism, which in its 'classic' Western form had provided a framework of reciprocal obligations that could develop into a rule of law. They shared a Christian religion, but it was Eastern or Orthodox Christianity, in which church and state were more closely associated and the individual conscience was less securely protected. In one influential view (Huntington 1993) the Slavic or Orthodox Christian world was a distinct 'civilisation', and one in which it was much less likely that liberal democracy would develop and be sustained than in the Christian West. None of this made it impossible for Russia and the other post-Soviet republics to move in a 'democratic' direction; but it meant that they were likely to do so more slowly and irregularly, or not at all, and in either case it was likely to be in a way that reflected their distinctive values and traditions.

There was accordingly some basis for Putin to insist, from the outset of his presidency, that Russia would and should attempt to be a second edition of, say, the US or Britain, where liberal values have deep historic traditions. Our state and its institutions and structures have always played an exceptionally important role in the life of the country and its people. For Russians, a strong state is not an anomaly to be got rid of. Quite the contrary, it is a source of order and the main driving force of any change.

Russians, Putin explained in his millennium address, had come to value the benefits of democracy, a state based on law, and personal and political freedom. But they were 'alarmed by the obvious weakening of state power' and looked forward to a 'certain restoration of the guiding and regulating role of the state, proceeding from Russia's traditions as well as the current state of the economy' – traditions that were collective rather than individual, and in which it was assumed that improvements in living conditions would come from the state rather than the efforts of individual citizens (Rossiiskaya gazeta, 31 December 1999: 5). 'From the very beginning', Putin told a group of journalists shortly afterwards, 'Russia was created as a supercentralised state. That's practically laid down in its genetic code, its traditions, and the mentality of its people' (First Person 2000: 186).

Putin was equally clear that Russia was and would remain a democratic country, but one that would choose its own way of realising the democratic ideal. The experience of the 1990s, as he put it in his millennium address, had 'eloquently testify[d] that a genuinely successful renewal of our homeland without excessive costs [could] not be achieved by the simple transfer to Russian soil of abstract models and schemes taken from foreign textbooks', or by the 'mechanical copying of other nations' experience' (ibid.: 212). Russia, he explained in his 2005 presidential address, had shared the common experience of other European countries, extending human rights, widening the franchise, protecting the weak and emancipating women, sometimes taking the lead in these developments. And Russia had chosen democracy

for itself, by the will of its own people. It started out on this path itself and, observing all the generally accepted democratic norms, [would] itself decide in what way – taking account of its historical, geopolitical or any other specific features – it [could] guarantee the realisation of the principles of freedom and democracy. As a sovereign country Russia can and will decide for itself on the stages and conditions of any movement along this path. (Rossiiskaya gazeta, 26 April 2005: 3–4)

It was a democracy, he told Slovak television, that would 'be adapted to the realities of contemporary Russian life, to our traditions and our history. And we will do this ourselves' (Nezavisimaya gazeta, 25 February 2005: 1).

What was perhaps most distinctive in this vision was that the choice of political form should be for Russia alone and that it should avoid anything that weakened the state and allowed it to be manipulated from outside. This was a view that was widely shared across the defence and security officials, collectively known as the siloviki, who became an increasingly influential component of the leadership during the Putin years. But it also reflected an understandable reaction, not just in government, to the near-collapse of the state that had taken place during the Yeltsin years, and to the breakup of the Soviet Union that had preceded it.
Communism, Putin explained in his millennium address, had achieved a great deal; but Russians had paid an 'outrageous price' for a social experiment that had left them 'lagging consistently behind the economically advanced countries'. The Soviet state was a different matter, and Putin went as far in his 2005 presidential address as to describe its disintegration as the 'greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century'. Tens of millions of Russian citizens had found themselves outside their native territory, and an 'epidemic of collapse' had threatened to overwhelm Russia itself. Savings had been devalued; old ideals had been rejected; and many institutions had been dissolved or replaced much too hastily (*Rossiiskaya gazeta*, 26 April 2005: 3).

Concerns of this kind were greatly strengthened when a series of governments in the post-Soviet area were overthrown in the mid-2000s in what became known as the 'coloured revolutions'. Putin and those who shared his thinking were in no doubt that the entire process had been engineered in Washington, and that it was designed to shift as much as possible of the remainder of the Soviet Union into the Western sphere of influence. The 'Orange revolution' in Ukraine at the end of 2004 was particularly important. This was the largest of the other post-Soviet states, with a long common border and a substantial proportion of its citizens who were Russians by language or nationality; but in spite of Putin's open support for his opponent, it was the pro-Western candidate, Viktor Yushchenko, who eventually became president after extended and (as Moscow saw it) externally financed street demonstrations. Putin made clear, shortly afterwards, that he would not allow other countries to turn Russia into an 'amorphous state formation' that could be manipulated from outside in the same kind of way (*Nezavisimaya gazeta*, 25 February 2005: 1). And it was this experience that appears to have been the most direct inspiration for the restrictions that were increasingly imposed on Russian non-governmental organisations, and the attempt that began to be made to develop a coherent narrative of the larger purposes of the Putin presidency.

Gradually, particularly in the writings of presidential advisor Vladislav Surkov, an elaboration of this distinctively Putinist set of objectives began to take shape. It received the name 'sovereign democracy', understood as a form of rule that shared general democratic principles but combined them with the ability to take decisions without deferring to the views of other powers – in other words, real rather than nominal sovereignty. Surkov had already set out his views in a widely noted newspaper interview in late 2004. In the outside world, he told the paper, there were two groups of people: those who wanted a strong and prosperous Russia as a 'good neighbour and reliable ally', and those who were 'still living out the phobias of the cold war', who were trying to build on what they saw as their success in undermining the Soviet Union and whose aim was to 'destroy Russia and fill its enormous territory with numerous unable quasi-state formations'. The allies of this second group were a 'fifth column of left and right radicals' who had much in common, including their foreign sponsorship and their hostility to their own country (*Konsmol'skaya pravda*, 29 September 2004: 4).

The new term, 'sovereign democracy', came into public use in the spring of 2005, in a journalist's commentary on Putin's presidential address of that year. But there was 'no particular effort to conceal that behind this and many analogous publications stood Surkov and his colleagues' (Ivanov 2008: 236). In at least one authoritative exposition, sovereign democracy was a political regime that satisfied the following conditions (Filippov 2007: 446–7):

1. Responsibility for state decisions is placed by the Constitution in the hands of elected officials.
2. These officials are periodically selected in freely conducted elections that exclude any compulsion.
3. Practically the entire adult population has the right to elect public officials.
4. Practically the entire adult population has the right to seek election to public office.
5. Citizens have the ability to express their opinions without fearing political persecution.
6. Citizens have the right to receive information from alternative sources. Alternative sources of information are protected by the law.
7. Citizens have the right to set up independent associations and organisations, including political parties and associations of like-minded people.
8. The state is wholly sovereign. It has a monopoly on the legitimate use of force and raising of taxes, controls the territory and guarantees security, in other words, is in the full sense of the word a state. It controls the national economy, including strategically important sectors, infrastructure and communications. The significance of various branches may change over time: in the past the key means of communications was the railway, and in the future it may be cosmodromes, but the requirement of national control remains the same. If the national economy is dependent on foreign capital, imports or the fluctuations of the world market, a consuming country is not in a position to defend its interests ... Real sovereignty signifies the ability of a state in reality (and not just in declarations) to conduct its own independent domestic, foreign and defence policy, to conclude and dissolve agreements, to enter or decline to enter relations of strategic partnership, and so forth.
It was clearly this last, eighth point that was the most important and the most controversial.

'Sovereign democracy', as a concept, had opponents as well as supporters. Deputy premier Sergei Ivanov, a figure with a background in defence and security, was one of the most favourable, declaring sovereign democracy the 'quintessence of our internal order, implying the right of citizens to determine their country's policies themselves and to protect that right from outside pressure by any means, including the use of force'. It was one of a 'triat of national values', including a strong economy and military power. There was no democracy in the abstract; all democratic states had their own particular features, and indeed it was one of the main democratic values that states could make these choices for themselves (Izvestiya 14 July 2006: 4). Former prime minister Yevgenii Primakov, at the other extreme, was 'categorically opposed' to the use of the term as it could 'lead to the denial of such general human values as the separation of powers, freedom of choice and so on' (Profil' no. 27, 2006: 14). Rather more important, Dmitri Medvedev, at this time Ivanov's counterpart as first deputy prime minister, was also opposed to the new orthodoxy. 'Sovereign democracy', he thought, was 'far from an ideal term', as it combined two entirely different concepts; it would have been more correct to speak of 'genuine democracy', or of 'democracy within a comprehensive state sovereignty'. Apart from that it left a 'strange aftertaste' if the term democracy was qualified in any way (Ekspert no. 28, 2006: 59).

Surkov, in turn, expressed himself less interested in the term itself and rather more in what it represented. Only a people who had some overall idea of who they were and where they were going could develop organically. And only if they developed their own discourse, their own public philosophy, a national ideology that was acceptable at least to the majority and ideally to all, would they be taken seriously in the wider world. Sovereign democracy was just the first step in this process, and it made no claim to represent the 'truth in the final instance' (Izvestiya 31 August 2006: 1). They were 'not in some kind of philology club', he told a United Russia meeting the following month. What was important was the kind of policies that would give Russia back her status as a major world power that was independent not just on paper. Almost all the world's constitutions included a reference to sovereignty; but only a few dozen states were actually independent. The others had neither the military nor the economic capability that would allow them to make their own decisions and not do what someone else told them. 'Do we want to be a self-sufficient country', asked Surkov, 'or should we rely on other, more powerful nations for help? Who said that we should stop trying to be a sovereign people?' (ibid. 13 September 2006: 2).

United Russia was revising its party programme at about this time, and different views were being expressed about whether the concept of sovereign democracy should be included. In the event the party congress adopted a 'programmatic declaration' that called for a 'strategy of qualitative renewal of the country on the principles of sovereign democracy', and went on to define it in terms that were clearly reminiscent of those Surkov had suggested (Ivanov 2008: 249-51). It was also included in United Russia's manifesto for the December 2007 Duma election, in exactly the same words (ibid.: 287). Surkov and Medvedev had meanwhile agreed to bury their differences. As Medvedev explained, they were in complete agreement, with only 'terminological' differences between them. Democracy, as Medvedev put it, 'can be effective only in conditions of full state sovereignty, and sovereignty can achieve results only in conditions of a democratic political regime' (ibid.: 245). Whatever their apparent differences, it was reasonable to conclude that the political class agreed on the fundamentals: that a meaningful democracy was one in which decisions could be taken without being unduly influenced by the outside world; that this was more likely to be achieved in a country that was economically and militarily strong; and that any attempt to articulate an alternative was unhelpful, unpatriotic, and possibly subversive.

**Conclusion**

In the end, obviously, it was for Russians themselves to decide what kind of 'democracy', or any other political philosophy, they wished to adopt as the basis of their post-communist system. What could less readily be discounted was the accumulating evidence that the distribution of power in the years after Putin's accession had shifted so far towards the central authorities that the achievement of other objectives was in peril. It was understandable, after the near-collapse of the federation during the Yeltsin years, that later presidents would place a heavy emphasis on the effectiveness of government, which meant in practice the powers of the federal authorities in Moscow. It was understandable that they would have popular support in doing so, given the collapse in living standards that had accompanied the years of Yeltsinite 'reform'. And it was predictable that they would continue to have popular support in the years that followed, given high rates of economic growth that in turn were based on record oil prices on world markets.

But the system of government that consolidated during these years was centralised to such a degree that it generated problems of its own. If power was concentrated in the centre, it was the central authorities themselves that would be held responsible for any shortcomings. If institutions were
weak, there would be little attachment to the decisions they generated unless they seemed of individual benefit. If the parliament was wholly compliant, laws would be poorly scrutinised and ministerial incompetence would not be exposed in good time. If the courts were unduly influenced by politicians, those who could afford to do so would try to buy the decisions they wanted instead of accommodating themselves to the rule of law. And if political parties were another branch of state power, they would disproportionately recruit careerists. This was certainly true of United Russia, if Putin himself was to be believed. Speaking in November 2007 he complained that the party was not an ideal political structure, that it lacked a stable ideology or principles for which the overwhelming majority of members would be prepared to assert themselves, and that because it was so close to government it attracted all kinds of hangers-on (Rossiiskaya gazeta, 14 November 2007: 1).

There had been no resolution of these issues in the early years of the Medvedev presidency. And if there was going to be, it seemed likely that it would make more use of the mechanisms that had been developed in Western liberal democracies to deal with the same kinds of issues. The separation of powers would have to become a real one, so that courts became independent of government. A more even balance would have to be found between an over-powerful executive and an elected parliament. And elections themselves would have to become more genuine contests, without unreasonable barriers to participation and with independent institutions that could conduct them. The Russian tradition was indeed one in which the state had normally been strong, and paternalistic. But it had other elements as well – the city assemblies that had met in medieval Pskov and Novgorod; the self-governing peasant communities that Marx had seen as the harbinger of a communist society; the limited experience of parliamentary government that had accumulated in the early years of the twentieth century. If Russian politics was to be more effective in the future it was likely that it would draw on these indigenous traditions as well as the experience of other countries, and that they would be used to strengthen the accountability of government to those who gave it the authority to rule.

Guide to Further Reading

The listing that follows suggests a number of items that students and others may find useful to consult on the themes that are covered by each chapter of this book. Current developments in Russian politics are regularly considered in several academic journals such as Europe-Asia Studies (ten issues annually); the Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics (quarterly); Post-Soviet Affairs (quarterly); Communist and Post-Communist Studies (quarterly); and Problems of Post-Communism (six issues annually). Legal and constitutional issues across the post-communist countries generally are given particular attention in the Review of Socialist Law (quarterly). The Current Digest of the Post-Soviet Press (weekly, also available online) is a well-organised digest of translations from newspapers and journals. Other electronic resources are considered in the final section.

Chapter 1 Politics in Russia


Chapter 2 Semi-presidentialism and the Evolving Executive

Current information on the institutions, personalities, and politics of the Russian presidency, federal executive, and political system is most readily