



## Two Simplified Pictures of Putin's Russia, Both Wrong

Vladimir Shlapentokh

As we all know, stereotypical images tend universally to dominate mainstream political discourse. The world recently glimpsed opposing images of America conjured by Republicans and Democrats. Both viewpoints, however, converged in supporting the major tenets of American democracy. This is not the case today in President Vladimir Putin's Russia.

Indeed, analysts who belong to the same Russian mainstream—even close friends and colleagues—offer diametrically opposed images of their country. One viewpoint is pessimistic, as propagated in a few liberal periodicals such as *Novaia Gazeta* and *Moskovskie Novosti* and the radio station Ekho Moskvy. It can also be found in some less ideologically driven newspapers, such as *Moskovskii Komsomolets*, and even the solidly neutral *Izvestia*. The opposing viewpoint is “realistic,” even positive, and it emphasizes the stability of Putin's regime. The “realistic” view of the developments in Russia has been advanced by the country's main television channels, as well as by such newspapers and weeklies as *Komsomolskaia Pravda*, *Argumenty I Fakty*, and *Trud*.

To convey the highly charged differences between these major viewpoints, let us resort to an impressionistic comparison: take as a point of reference the ideological distance between the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal*. In the Russian context, the ideological distance that separates *Novaia Gazeta* and *Trud*, or Channel One and Ekho Moskvy is probably 10 to 30 times greater than between these two publications. The closest American analogue is

probably the chasm between a Trotskyist pamphlet circulated in Detroit and the *Detroit News*.

Russian writers of the pessimistic persuasion assume the universality of democracy and the market economy, and assess Russian developments using democratic standards. Russian writers in the second, “realist” camp see their country from a perspective that may be described as a version of the Eurasian ideology. This ideology assumes Russia has a unique role in history, determined by its size, its geographic identity spanning Europe and Asia, its ties to the Muslim world, its historical traditions, and even by its climate, an argument that became popular in Russia after the publication in 2000 of the popular Russian author Dmitry Parshin's book, *Why Russia Is Not America*.<sup>1</sup> “Realists” insist Russia has a unique place in history and should have its own specific political and economic order. They believe Russians are not only unable but unwilling to adopt the Western mode of life. By all accounts, the “realists” express the views of President Putin and his inner circle.

### *The Pessimists*

The pessimists paint an extremely gloomy picture. Grigorii Yavlinskii, the leader of the liberal party Yabloko, regards his country as geared toward “the destruction of all state institutions,” and believes Russia is facing a new economic crisis. Gary Kasparov, the world chess champion, who is now the chairman of “Committee 2008,” a sort of central headquarters for bold

Russian liberals, said in December that “if events develop at the same speed as they did in the last eight months, in 2005 the political power in Russia will collapse as a result of internal processes, without any effort from outside.”<sup>2</sup> Another liberal leader, the former head of the oil giant Yukos, Mikhail Khodorkovsky (even pro Putin media recognize him as “a serious political figure”<sup>3</sup>) delivered a New Year’s message from prison in his article, “Prison and the World: Property and Freedom,” which foresees a horrendous future for Russia if current trends persist. “The all-devouring bureaucracy will be confronted by savage crowds that invade the streets and destroy the fabric of society, demanding ‘bread and entertainment.’”<sup>4</sup> Liberal Russian analysts who are not directly engaged in the political struggle repeated the gloomy prognoses of these activists. Yurii Levada, a prominent Russian liberal and the head of a leading polling firm, declared that “the structures created in the last five years are in crisis,” and the authorities are “helpless” and “confused.”<sup>5</sup> His diagnosis was seconded by another leading liberal, the editor of *Moskovskie Novosti* Evgenii Kisilev, who says, “The system does not work.”<sup>6</sup>

“The general political climate among the Russian elites has become immensely depressing in recent times,” according to the prominent Moscow journalist Mikhail Rostovskii. He insists that the authorities, who have “only instincts but no strategies,” are involved in ludicrous endeavors, such as the cancellation of the holiday celebrating the October (Bolshevik) Revolution, meaningless or dangerous undertakings, such as the decision to abandon the election of provincial governors, or even stupid actions, such as the destruction of Yukos.<sup>7</sup> The authors of a report produced by Stanislav Belkovsky’s Council on National Strategy accuses the state of “lacking a strategy and goals.” The report focuses on the Kremlin’s chaotic economic policy.<sup>8</sup> Even *Expert*, a pro-business weekly, which is usually friendly toward the Kremlin, declared on the eve of

the new year in an editorial with the sarcastic title, “We Do Not Rebel against the Authorities,” that the current persecution of one company after another (for instance, the mobile telephone firm Vypelkom and the bank Russian Standards) “puts in doubt the survival of the country.”<sup>9</sup>

Liberal authors vie with each other in their use of grim terms to describe Putin’s Russia: “a frozen country,” “the ice period,” “theater of the absurd,” “the civilization decline,” “a country sinking in the swamp,” “a self-destructive political power.”<sup>10</sup>

The liberals deplore almost every aspect of Russian life and condemn the domestic and foreign policies of the Kremlin. They point to the slackening of economic growth, suggesting that the country has made no move toward modernization and has entered a period of “liberal stagnation,” an allusion to “Brezhnev’s stagnation” in the second half of the 1970s.<sup>11</sup> They point to the miserable state of science, education, and culture and talk about Putin’s “alienation from all active people in the country and the elites in general.”<sup>12</sup> Boris Nemtsov, a well-known Russian liberal, and the prominent political scientist Lilia Shevtsova mocked Putin’s administrative innovations, particularly his centralization policy. They predict the disintegration of Russia as a result of these innovations. In their view, Putin’s system of “vertical power,” based on the Kremlin’s direct control over the governors and the presidents in the national republics, is rotten and will collapse at the first serious test, as was the case with former president Leonid Kuchma in Ukraine.<sup>13</sup>

The liberals speak of the Kremlin’s total failure in Chechnya, particularly in connection with the tragic terrorist siege of a school in Beslan, and its general inability to guarantee security. (They do, however, support Putin’s aggressive stance toward international terrorism.)

With a special fervor, the pessimists used the developments in Ukraine and the breakaway Georgian region of Abkhazia—

where Moscow, despite its seemingly total control, could not get its candidate elected—to prove their thesis that the regime’s fate is already “written on the wall.” While supporting Ukraine’s sovereignty, which sets them apart from a great majority of Russians, they mock the Kremlin’s failure to install its political candidates. They were particularly harsh in regard to Putin’s awkward intervention in the recent presidential election in Ukraine.<sup>14</sup> Critics faulted Moscow’s overt intervention in the campaign, seemingly based on the incorrect assumption that Ukrainians could be as easily manipulated by money and “administrative resources” as Russians. For the liberals, “the orange revolution” is a real people’s movement for democracy, directed against corruption. To the prominent liberal deputy Vladimir Ryzkov,<sup>15</sup> Moscow was evidently foolish to assume the Kremlin’s candidate would win and thus jeopardize relations with the opposition victor.<sup>16</sup>

Politicians and journalists with access to liberal newspapers castigate everybody in Putin’s government. The pollster Yurii Levada describes the government as a collective of “helpless people” who can only “change offices.”<sup>17</sup> The investigative journalist Alexander Minkin derogates Putin’s retinue regularly in his serial, “Letters to the President.” Minister of Defense Sergei Ivanov, the head of the Federal Security Service, Nikolai Patrushev, the speaker of the Duma, Boris Gryzlov, and the economics minister German Gref have all been criticized for their alleged incompetence.<sup>18</sup> Prime Minister Mikhail Fradkov has provoked contempt.<sup>19</sup> Liberal critics do not spare even Putin himself. They worry not only about his KGB past, but also about his interest in siphoning money (or, more elegantly, “financial streams”). They have even suggested—as one journalist did at a seminar abroad in October 2004—that “the maximization of his control over money” is Putin’s main motivation. Stanislav Belkovsky, an analyst with liberal ties, al-

luded to the Kremlin as a mafia, in which “the authorities today are concerned first of all with the accumulation of financial streams in their own accounts.”<sup>20</sup> Yulia Latynina, a prominent economic analyst, discussing the recent and suspicious auctioning of the oil company Yugaskneftegaz, a subsidiary of Yukos, could not help but allude darkly to the president’s participation and his use of KGB techniques. Victor Gerashchenko, a highly respected banker and current chairman of the board at Yukos, echoed the same thought.<sup>21</sup> Gary Kasparov was even blunter. In a Russian newspaper, he characterized people in the Kremlin as concerned “only about their personal enrichment and keeping their offices.”<sup>22</sup> In a *Wall Street Journal* article, he ascribed the government’s recent attack on the mobile telephone firm Vypelkom to the intrigues of the rival company Megaphon, which is “closely connected with Mr. Putin,”<sup>23</sup> or at least, (according to *Izvestia*), to Minister of Information and Communication Leonid Reiman, who is close to the president.<sup>24</sup> The fact that the Kremlin did not resort to the re-nationalization of Yukos—which had been widely expected—but simply gave this jewel of the Russian economy to a friendly private company underscored in the mind of liberal critics the egotistical interests of the masters of the Kremlin.<sup>25</sup>

This analysis of Russian life is mitigated in some degree by a belief that the people’s ire will soon erupt. The journalist Alexander Kolesnichenko began his article, “The Despair Syndrome,” which appeared in *Izvestia* by suggesting that “the situation in Russia is either tense or on the verge of an explosion.”<sup>26</sup> Levada believes that “the current situation cannot last long since neither the elites nor the mechanism of power can sustain it.”<sup>27</sup> Dmitry Oreshkin wrote that “20–25 percent of the Russians, with their orientation toward Western values, are getting nervous and are trying to consolidate their forces.”<sup>28</sup> Some predict that Putin’s high approval rating will soon collapse,

pointing out that the favorability rating of Tsar Nicholas in January 1917, one month before he was deposed, was probably no less than 80 percent.<sup>29</sup>

Even relatively sober journalists as Yevgenia Albats still believe in “the restiveness” of the Russian people and their potential for revolt, following the example of the Ukrainians.<sup>30</sup> Liberal politicians believe, or pretend to believe, in the efficacy of “Committee 2008” as well as other similar efforts that, with the support of the intelligentsia and even the masses, will halt Russia’s slide into totalitarianism. They also believe that the business community, despite its demoralization after Khodorkovsky’s arrest, will join in the fight against the regime.<sup>31</sup> Developments in Ukraine have especially heartened Russian liberals. Some predict that “a flowers riot” in Red Square will follow the “rose revolution” in Georgia and the “orange revolution” in Ukraine.<sup>32</sup>

Liberals also contemplate other scenarios that might bring an end to Putin’s rule, even as they assume he will do everything possible to stay in power after his second term ends in 2008.<sup>33</sup> Several writers archly warned Putin about the intentions of the “hawks in the power ministries” who want to replace him with “a harsher leader.”<sup>34</sup>

However, none describe Russia’s imminent future as bleakly as Communists and nationalists who are now allied to an extent with the liberals in their critiques. Starting from different premises, they hate Putin, whom they still regard as a promoter of liberal economic ideas, though they recognize that he is also a promoter (if a passive one) of their imperial views.

Two thoughtful left intellectuals, Sergei Kara-Murza and Sergei Glaziev, use the same language as the liberals, whom they ironically dislike and blame for all Russian disasters. Kara-Murza writes that Putin has placed the country “on the verge of a deep crisis.” Glaziev contends that the Russian president “provokes destructive processes in the country” and speculates that “he looks at

himself in the mirror all day, instead of gathering broad and objective information about the world.”<sup>35</sup> Several authors on the left describe Putin as the one who botched the electoral transition in Kiev.<sup>36</sup>

Among leftists, Alexander Prokhanov, a rabid nationalist, is the boldest. He blurts out what more timid souls only say privately after a few glasses of vodka. After a long period of ostracism by the Moscow establishment, Prokhanov now regularly takes part in the mainstream liberal media. In December 2004, he appeared as a guest on the prestigious radio station Ekho Moskvy three times. In an editorial in *Zavtra*, which he edits, Prokhanov characterized the situation in Russia as “pre-revolutionary,” prophesying that Putin’s head will be “cut off.” Prokhanov insists everyone is “against Putin” in Russia, including the “humiliated governors,” the oligarchs, the liberal intelligentsia, the nationalists, and the Russian people as a whole. He says that Putin’s regime might come to an end because of “terrorist acts” or “a hysterical Western campaign against Putin as a politician who cannot control the country” with its “missiles, nuclear stations, aerodromes, and bridges.” He foresees strikes in the defense industries as well as student riots.<sup>37</sup>

The picture limned by Russian liberals and their incongruous allies, the nationalists and Communists, has been accepted at face value by some Westerners. A recent editorial in *Business Week* was titled “The Unraveling of Putin’s Power.”<sup>38</sup> Zbigniew Brzezinski, a former national security advisor, concurred in the *Wall Street Journal*, asserting that “Putin’s regime is an anachronism.”<sup>39</sup>

Among liberal Russian analysts there is a group whose members may be termed the “ultimate pessimists.” These are people who believe that the movement of their country toward “the totalitarian past” is virtually unstoppable. A famous Russian intellectual, Alexander Gelman, insists that the Kremlin’s strategy will bring “a steady and planned retreat from democracy.”<sup>40</sup> These

bitter realists, all Westernizers, believe no developments within Russia can undermine Putin's power in the near future. They fear Russia does not have an elite opposition that can take control of the country if necessary. These elites, as the politician columnist Leonid Radzikhovskiy writes, are only "a pale copy of the ruling elite," distinguished by "incompetence, irresponsibility and state nihilism."<sup>41</sup> Still, few can compete with the pessimism of the *Izvestia's* columnist Sergei Leskov, who, in an article titled "Walpurgis Night," worries that Russia is losing its common sense and self-control and is moving toward a period of "crazy delirium."<sup>42</sup>

#### *"Realists" and the Kremlin's Disposition*

In the opposite corner are the politicians and journalists who serve the Kremlin and might be labeled "aggressive realists." Without denying the problems facing the country today (which they usually attribute to former presidents Mikhail Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin) they describe Russia as a great nuclear power and a stable country. They evince their nostalgia for the Soviet empire and an open hostility toward the West, particularly the United States. They consider Putin's policies, domestic and international, as the best possible under the given circumstances.<sup>43</sup>

The political scientist Alexander Tsipko, an especially eloquent member of this group, has declared in many articles that the Western model of democracy has not only failed in Russia but inflicted immense harm. For Tsipko, a reversion to authoritarian rule is the single hope for the country.<sup>44</sup> A similar argument was implied by Putin himself, who in December justified "the choice made by Russia to follow its own optimal road of development," explaining that "it is impossible today to gather in the same place 145 million Russians," as was done in the ancient Russian cities Novgorod and Pskov.<sup>45</sup>

Aggressive realists, along with the Kremlin and those in the "power min-

istries," have "high contempt for public movements," writes the Moscow journalist Alexander Budberg.<sup>46</sup> They believe that ordinary people can only play a destructive role when they become involved in politics. They openly profess their contempt for democracy and their belief that elections are rigged in America and Western Europe. These were the sentiments of Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov during his exchange with former secretary of state Colin Powell in Sophia in December 2004.<sup>47</sup> President Putin faulted the American elections, which he declared were not any better than "in Ukraine and Afghanistan." In America "intimidation of voters" was the same as in those countries.<sup>48</sup>

Tsipko, along with Mikhail Leontiev, the most unabashed champion of the Kremlin, unequivocally support its centralization of power and Putin's cancellation of gubernatorial elections.<sup>49</sup> They believe such steps are necessary for the salvation of Russia. They also support the increased state intervention in the economy, exemplified by the action against Yukos, and the arrest of its chief executive. Some aggressive realists, such as Dmitry Rogozin, the leader of the Kremlin's party Motherland, demand even harsher policies. They condemn big business as anti-national, controlled mostly by non-Russians who export their money to the West, where they are ready to flee at the first sign of a problem.<sup>50</sup>

They believe Russia faces a mortal threat from the West. Reverting to Stalin's concept of Russia as a besieged fortress, they contend that "the cold war in fact never ended," a thesis supported by most aggressive realists.<sup>51</sup> Writers like Tsipko and Alexei Kiva, describe the threat posed by the United States as more serious than that of terrorism. In fact, as their post-Beslan comments illustrate, they even connect terrorism to the United States.<sup>52</sup>

Developments in Ukraine, which they see as sponsored and controlled by the West, particularly by Washington, are the

strongest evidence of these hostile intentions and a powerful reason for supporting Putin's foreign policy.<sup>53</sup> The leading political analysts Viacheslav Nikonov, Sergei Markov, Alexei Pushkov, and Alexander Dugin (a notorious champion of the Eurasian ideology) as well as such politicians as Duma deputy Konstantin Zatulin, vehemently supported Putin's intervention in Ukrainian politics.<sup>54</sup> Some bluntly declared what Putin could not say himself: "Ukraine is our country," said the television journalist Mikhail Leontiev, and thus Russia can do anything it wants, even sending tanks to Kharkov. Leontiev's hatred of the West extends to Poland. He does not scruple from using ethnic slurs against the Poles, whom he refuses to forgive for conquering Russia in the seventeenth century. He describes Poland as a Western "stooge" in its role as an intermediary in the Ukrainian crisis. Other realists emphasize Poland's strong lobby in the U.S. Congress, with its own anti-Russian designs, including the annexation of the western Ukraine.<sup>55</sup> With their imperial contempt for former Russian satellites (even Slavic ones), realists do not spare their "junior brothers" from ethnic slurs. Leontiev described former Ukrainian president Leonid Kuchma and the participants in the "orange revolution" as sly: "typical Ukrainians." A former leading Kremlin official jokingly considered Kiev's joining NATO as a benefit to Russia because the "Ukrainians will steal everything in two weeks."<sup>56</sup>

In their worst scenario, the aggressive realists imply that Ukraine is not a viable state. To save ethnic Russians from inevitable discrimination, they propose the annexation of the eastern and southern parts of Ukraine.<sup>57</sup> These realists cite the support in opinion polls of almost half of their countrymen who believe that Ukraine is "our country," while only 18 percent consider Ukraine as a sovereign state.<sup>58</sup>

Aggressive realists put even greater stress on the alleged spread of the "orange revolution" to Moscow as the West's major

goal. To these analysts, with their deep mistrust of ordinary people, it is self-evident that the humiliation of Russia in Kiev has been implemented by American special services, a repetition of the "rose revolution" in Georgia against former president Eduard Shevardnadze.<sup>59</sup> With few exceptions, they dismiss all the evidence of the enthusiastic popular support of Viktor Yushchenko.<sup>60</sup> As summarized by one newspaper article, "If we give up Ukraine this year, next year it will be Russia."<sup>61</sup>

#### *Variation on a Theme*

Along with aggressive realists, a prominent role in the Russian political discourse belongs to their allies: "critical, or liberal, realists," whose views in some cases are similar to those of "pure liberals." While strongly disagreeing with liberals, whom they despise as political failures, and rejecting their gloomy scenarios, the prominent sociologist Olga Kryshtanovskaia and two well-known Moscow journalists, Yulia Kalinina and Alexander Budberg, share the belief that democracy has no future in Russia, but they come to this conclusion bitterly. It is unfortunate, they contend, that Russia seems unable to break from its vicious historical circle and join "the normal countries" in the world where, as one author writes, "democracy for any administration is a supreme value." They even praise "the unbelievable civic maturity" of the Ukrainian people, though they remain skeptical about the positive consequences in Ukraine, particularly with respect to Russia.<sup>62</sup> But they acknowledge the Russian reality and support Putin's regime as the best alternative. They do not ignore the country's problems, but unlike the liberals, they see Russia's problems as insoluble in the short term.

They are as nostalgic about the past as "the majority of the citizens." Alexander Budberg is convinced that the West is at best alien and at worst an enemy. Most of them, like Budberg, are certain that American policy in Ukraine "is directed at least

partially against Russia” and that “Russia has full rights to intervene in Ukrainian affairs no less than America and Europe.”<sup>63</sup> But they rebuke Putin for his mild policy toward the United States, and for failing to press for the restoration of a mini-Soviet Union. In essence, they support Russia’s special rights in Ukraine but deplore mistakes (one article is titled “The Ukrainian Schizophrenia”) the Kremlin committed in pursuing legitimate national goals. Like the liberals, they mock Putin’s two trips to Kiev during the election campaign, his attendance at a parade of the Ukrainian army, his two congratulatory messages to the failed Russian candidate, Viktor Yanukovich, whom he endorsed despite the fact that Yanukovich has been jailed twice in the past. Critical realists attribute these blunders to Putin’s determination “to rule Russia alone” and to his servile advisers who persuaded Putin to become personally involved in the Ukrainian election.<sup>64</sup>

### *The Persistence of Putin’s Regime*

In the author’s view, both pictures of Russia are right—and wrong. Liberals are assuredly right in their description of Russia’s economic, social, and political ills. They are also right that “the prestige of Russia in the world declined with the rate of the ruble in the beginning of the 1990s.”<sup>65</sup> The realists indeed deceive themselves—and President Putin—in concocting an upbeat image of Russian society. The liberals, however, are mistaken when they predict the imminent demise of Putin’s regime, while the realists have grounds for their confidence in its survival.

Those foreseeing a rapid demise of the present regime misunderstand the role of legitimacy for any political system, democratic or not. President Yeltsin prevailed over Gorbachev for this reason. Yeltsin was elected in 1990 by a free popular vote, while Gorbachev in 1989–90 preferred to be elected by the tame Soviet parliament. Yeltsin thus was able to challenge the Russian par-

liament, which he even shelled in October 1993, because he was perceived as a legitimate elected leader. Yeltsin’s perceived legitimacy led to the country to accept his chosen successor, Vladimir Putin, then an obscure politician. Russians regarded the continuity of the Kremlin’s power as an antidote against possible anarchy. It was striking that during the stormy days of the “orange revolution” in Ukraine, the legitimacy of Leonid Kuchma, the incumbent president, was acknowledged even by his ardent opponents, and Kuchma himself played an important role resolving the electoral crisis.

As an elected two-term president, Putin, like Yeltsin, is seen as a legitimate leader and symbol of order, Russia’s problems notwithstanding. By the end of 2004, Putin continued to be trusted by almost 70 percent of the Russians polled.<sup>66</sup> It is implausible to imagine Putin’s overthrow by unconstitutional means. There are no serious signs of active hostility to Putin among power holders. Yuriy Luzhkov, Moscow’s mayor, is probably the only leading official openly to belittle the government; he did so during the December 2004 meeting of the governors of the Central Federal District in Moscow. He does not, however, criticize the president personally, and a few days before the meeting he called Putin an “absolutely irreplaceable leader.”<sup>67</sup> Still, suppose a plot against Putin succeeded. The new leadership could only survive through mass repression and would have to inspire mortal fear among both the people and the elites—something that the previous plotters against Gorbachev and Yeltsin could not do, even with the backing of the Soviet KGB and the army. The day after a coup, Russia would cease to exist; all the major regions and non-Russian republics would proclaim their independence and autonomy. The perpetrators would confront gigantic economic problems, including the new relations with the West and private business, and the immediate threat of hunger, as all available food-stuffs would disappear from the shelves.

Second, there are no opposition leaders who could inspire a mass movement. During his five years in power, Putin systematically eliminated all rivals. His recent elimination of the provincial elections was aimed at barring even the remote possibility of a governor emerging as a popularly elected opponent. Putin learned from Gorbachev's tolerance of Yeltsin's rise as a second center of power. The Ukrainian "orange revolution" would not have occurred if former President Kuchma had eliminated Yushchenko. No Russian opposition figure even remotely compares to Yushchenko's status before the beginning of his election campaign.

In any case, the current Russian opposition, as Alexander Minkin has explained, is not a threat to Putin. Almost all the prominent members of the liberal or nonliberal opposition soiled their reputations in the past by supporting the corrupt actions of the previous government or the oligarchs. Nor, as Minkin notes, are they ascetic in their lifestyles. They turn up at numberless Moscow receptions, drinking champagne and eating caviar. Minkin also quite shrewdly notes that Russia's "false opposition" at bottom serves the interests of the Kremlin, "keeping the field of the opposition out of the hands of real fighters."<sup>68</sup>

Yet, the liberals are correct concerning the growing and widespread disenchantment with Putin's rule. Indeed, in 2004, as Levada's data showed, the percentage of Russians who agreed that their country is moving in the right direction, declined from 50 percent in January to 38 percent in November. The percentage of those who found that the political situation in the country is "good" and "calm" also declined from 35 to 20 percent.<sup>69</sup> According to another poll, the percentage of Russians who felt that 2004 was better than the previous year declined from 35 percent in December 2003 to 22 percent in December 2004.<sup>70</sup>

The massive protests by retired Russians against reduced social benefits in January

2005 indicated the depth of discontent. It was an unprecedented development in the post-Soviet period, and may have a serious impact. The refusal of the authorities to use force to dispel demonstrators may encourage other aggravated Russians to go to the streets. At the same time, the humble protests by the elderly confirmed the strength of the regime. Ultimately, the protest showed, as remarked by Leonid Radzikhovskiy on radio station Ekho Moskvy, that the margin of the regime's security is very wide. No national organization directed the anger of the retirees against the Kremlin. Even the Communist Party did not attempt to exploit the rising anger against the regime on a national scale. More importantly, the children and grandchildren of the elderly protesters did not join them in the streets; the babushkas were left to fend for themselves. A few days after the protests began, even the liberal media lost interest.

Taken together the January developments took their toll on Putin's prestige. In early 2004, 65 percent of Russians polled said they would have elected him as president, by January 15, 2005, the figure was only 43 percent. However, these data are not terribly important to the president. In 2000–03, his election potential was also below 50 percent. If an election were held today, Putin would garner 9 times more votes than the nationalist Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, 14 times more votes than the Communist Gennadii Ziuganov, and 43 times more votes than the most popular democratic candidate, Grigorii Yavlinsky.<sup>71</sup> Another indicator of Putin's status—the people's trust in him—has also declined. In January 2005, 27 percent had "trust in him," a sharp drop from 41 percent in early 2004. However, the number of respondents who said they "distrust the president" remained practically unchanged at 3 percent.

Tellingly, Putin is still "trusted" much more than any other Russian politician. Besides, the percentage of those who described



their mood at last year's end as "perfect" or "good" had dropped only slightly since 2003: from 61 to 57 percent. The percentage of those who assessed the material standing of their family as "good" or "decent" had also declined very little: from 63 to 61 percent.

The liberals' predictions about "Putin's Waterloo," to use the phrase of Evgenii Kisilev, who has estimated the remainder of Putin's political career at two years at best, nine months at worst, are very likely incorrect.<sup>72</sup> However, their gloomy diagnoses of many developments in the country appear sound. They are right to assert that Putin has vitally weakened major democratic institutions. The Russian economy, with its focus on the export of raw materials, shows no signs of serious modernization. In his December 2004 press conference, Putin avoided the major problems facing the country; such as the struggle against crime and corruption, the war in Chechnya, and major terrorist acts, such as the tragedy in Beslan. He focused instead on attacking the West in general and the United States and Poland in particular. Putin's nonchalance indicates that he is quite sure of his control over Russia.<sup>73</sup> His dealing in January with protests over social benefit reforms was superficial, and in his analysis he simply shifted the responsibility to the regions, which have no resources to satisfy the basic needs of retirees and others dependent on social benefits.

Though it is safe from obvious challenges, Putin's regime remains, his critics credibly argue, extremely inefficient and unable to cope with major problems, notably public concerns over security and the economy. Even if the accusations of some liberals alleging personal enrichment are only partially plausible, it is wise to recall a phenomenon well known during the early Middle Ages in Russia and in many developing countries in the contemporary world. The princes in Muscovy in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries did not distinguish between their private fortunes and the state's

coffers. More recently, leaders have egregiously sacrificed national interests to perpetuate their power. This was true in both Soviet and post-Soviet times. Yeltsin exploited his position as president to enrich his family, a circumstance that demoralized Russians in the 1990s. If Putin perpetuates, even in more moderate ways, Yeltsin's tradition of privatizing power, it is unlikely that he will enhance his standing at home or abroad.

With a weakened state machine and army, Putin's regime will not present a serious threat to the West, or to Russia's neighbors. As the Ukrainian events confirmed, Putin, despite his rhetoric, always retreats from any serious action that might jeopardize his relations with the West, and particularly the United States. Despite his blustering response to Western critics, he managed to extol Russia's relationship with the United States, asserting that "our relations are not those of partners, but of allies." Moreover, he praised President Bush as "a very decent and consistent man."<sup>74</sup>

The West's major problems with Russia derives not so much from the internal political evolution in Russia, which the West cannot influence, but from the need for Moscow's collaboration in the fight against international terrorism, and the need to safeguard nuclear and chemical weapons on Russian territory. In coming years, Russia will probably be seen by many observers as a peculiar society that combines totalitarianism with some individual freedoms and feudalism with an inability to enforce its own laws. Russia remains an extremely heterogeneous nation, not only socially but also territorially, as was aptly noted by the participants of the debates about Russia's future in *Literaturnaia Gazeta*. It has a "globalistic" zone that includes Moscow and Petersburg, the Russian provinces, and the non-Russian North Caucasus. Each of these territories belongs to a different historical epoch: the first, to the twenty-first century (a post-industrial Russia); the second, to the nine-

teenth and twentieth centuries (an industrial Russia); and the third, to the times of the patriarchal, pre-industrial Russia.<sup>75</sup> It is difficult to predict how long this strange social organism will persist. In any case, only the emergence of a new group of opposition elites could bring radical changes. Finally, it is impossible to fully exclude the possibility of a violent plot against the president by factions inside the army and security forces, trumpeting nationalist slogans. Such a plot would be a disaster for the country and would sow many troubles for the world. ●

## Notes

The author wishes to thank Joshua Woods for his editorial contribution to this article.

1. See Dmitry Parshin, *Pochemu Rossia ne Amerika*, Moscow, 2000.
2. Garry Kasparov's interview with *Novaia Gazeta*, December 27, 2004.
3. Yurii Sergeev, "Pismo na voliu," *Komsomolskaia Pravda*, December 29, 2004.
4. Mikhail Khdorkovskiy, "Tsurma I mor:sobstvennost I svoboda," *Vedomosti*, December 28, 2004.
5. See Yurii Levada's interview with *Novaia Gazeta*, November 15, 2004.
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