



Putinism

By Leon Aron

Throughout Russia's history, the weakness of institutions and laws has ensured that the successor regimes rarely, if ever, turn out as intended by the previous ruler. Instead of continuity, the national tradition of highly personalized government often produces a very different political organism ostensibly from the same institutional framework. Yet with former president Vladimir Putin's staying on as a kind of regent—prime minister to the dauphin-president Dmitri Medvedev, at least for the next few years, the ideology, priorities, and policies of the Putin Kremlin—what might be called Putinism—are almost certain to inform and guide the Medvedev administration. Part I of this Outlook discusses the components of the new Russian authoritarianism, and parts II and III examine the elements of “Russia, Inc.”—the corporatist state that Putin has built—and the factors that may affect Russia's economic performance, stability, and foreign policy in the future.

Part I: The New Russian Authoritarianism

In one of the most memorable examples of conceptual elegance and parsimony in the social sciences, Samuel Huntington defined the many and often very different authoritarian regimes simply as lacking the common “institutional core” of democratic systems.¹ The latter, in turn, are defined as states in which the “principal offices” of the government are chosen through competitive elections in which the bulk of the population can participate.²

In a more detailed portrayal, Huntington characterizes democracies as permitting the selection of the “most powerful” national decision-makers in “fair, honest and periodic elections, in which candidates freely compete for votes.”³ Conversely, in “undemocratic systems,” opposition is not permitted to participate in elections, or it is “curbed and harassed,” its newspapers are “censored or closed down,” and votes are “manipulated or miscounted.”⁴

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After several years of the state's systematic recovery of ownership, or at least firm control, of the country's politics and key sectors of the economy, the parliamentary election of December 2007 (for which, a Russian observer suggested, “voting” would be the proper description, not “elections”)⁵ and the March 2008 presidential election (for which “voting” would be just as appropriate a characterization) have confirmed beyond a shade of doubt the present Russian regime's close correspondence to Huntington's shorter and longer definitions of authoritarianism. Dmitri Trenin, deputy director of the Carnegie Moscow Center and one of the most objective and insightful observers of Russian domestic and foreign policies, wrote last year that “the Kremlin has assumed the role of the creator of all public life. It has built parties, managed elections, planted seeds of ‘healthy’ civil society, organized youth, and developed ideological constructs.”⁶ In a more extended account, another Russian commentator characterized the system as one in which the president is the only independent political subject, while the provincial governors can be removed without so much as an explanation; all regional parliaments (the Dumas) are largely packed with deputies from the “party of power,” United Russia,

and thus make decisions “following a phone call from the presidential administration” or the governor appointed by the Kremlin.⁷ Those in the judicial branch “won’t even dare think” of defying the executive; the opposition has been squeezed not just to the periphery of the political process but outside of it, and the most popular of the media, television, is subject to the constant scrutiny of the Kremlin “curators.”

Tolerance and Repression. Thus, Russia today has most of the characteristics of classic authoritarianism. While the effective political challenges to the regime have been eliminated, the state (unlike totalitarian regimes, including the Soviet Union) does not seek to control every aspect of civil society and individual life. It is content with securing noninterference in its affairs rather than demanding total and incessantly reaffirmed allegiance. Similarly, there is no elaborate, codified, and strictly enforced “official” ideology or a party guided by it. Apolitical pursuits and voluntary associations of a professional, cultural, or religious nature are permitted to exist outside of the state’s purview; so long as the arts do not touch on national politics, censorship is rare, as it is in book publishing and the mass media. Foreign travel, foreign residence and return, and study abroad are unimpeded. Most important, unlike totalitarian regimes, this authoritarian regime does not seek physical annihilation (or at least incarceration) of all opponents. As the references in this *Outlook* attest, while most of the regime’s leading critics are permanently excluded from television and mass-circulation newspapers, they have until now been permitted to publish abroad or in such relatively obscure media as the Internet sites visited mostly by the oppositional intelligentsia.

Yet for many of those who persist in trying to influence national politics, repression, although select, is real, systematic, and pitiless. Under Putinism, opponents are portrayed as contemptible traitors who wish their country ill. As Putin stated at a pre-election rally last November:

Those who oppose us . . . have totally different tasks and different visions of Russia. They need a weak, sick state. They need a disorganized and disoriented society—in order to make their deals behind our back, in order to receive nice payoffs at our expense. And, unfortunately, there are still those who look for crumbs [Putin used the verb *shakalit*,

or “looks for food jackal-like”] near foreign embassies, foreign diplomatic missions, [and who] count on the support of foreign foundations and governments, not the support of their own people.⁸

Unsanctioned demonstrations—and virtually all demonstrations by the opposition are routinely disallowed—are often suppressed with shocking brutality.⁹ Several opposition activists have been physically assailed and some beaten unconscious. They and members of their families are harassed at home and on the streets and brought up on false criminal charges. Weapons and drugs are planted on them, and they are accused of “assaulting” and “injuring” police officers, espionage, and “extremism.”¹⁰ In violation of the progressive 2001 Criminal Procedural Code, bail is routinely denied, and pretrial detention—which Russian and international human rights organizations repeatedly compare to torture—can last for months or even years. The use of punitive psychiatry has been renewed, and several members of the opposition in the past year have been forcibly committed to psychiatric wards.¹¹ Human rights activists estimate that there are dozens of political prisoners in Russia today.¹²

Punishing the Recalcitrant. When the regime seeks to make an example of the recalcitrant, it can be cruel, even sadistic. Such is the case of Harvard Law School graduate Vasily Aleksanyan, who was arrested in April 2006, five days after becoming executive vice president of the nearly decimated Yukos, which used to be Russia’s largest and most transparent private firm. Aleksanyan was charged with embezzlement and laundering \$433 million. A few months later, he was diagnosed with AIDS, but he continued to be kept in a prison hospital that had no treatment. Although not convicted of any crime, he has been in custody for over two years.

The authorities reportedly sought from Aleksanyan evidence that would help them initiate new trials and convictions of Yukos’s former principal shareholders, Mikhail Khodorkovsky and Platon Lebedev (currently serving eight-year sentences), in order to extend their incarceration by between ten and twenty years. As Aleksanyan later told the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation, in December 2006 he was offered freedom and medical treatment in exchange for giving the prosecutors “the types of statements their superiors will like.”¹³

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They “tried to convince me every which way that I must do this,” Aleksanyan said, “but I can’t bear false witness; I can’t falsely implicate innocent people. I refused.”¹⁴

Regarding the prison authorities’ statement that Aleksanyan had “refused” medical treatment, he told the court, “Whoever says that—I want him to [live in] my body for ten minutes, so he can experience the hellish torture I am going through.”¹⁵ The head of Putin’s own Human Rights Council called Aleksanyan’s situation “simply monstrous.”¹⁶ The European Court of Human Rights appealed to the Russian authorities four times to transfer Aleksanyan “immediately” to an AIDS clinic.

Two weeks after Aleksanyan was finally transferred, under guard, to a regular hospital this past February (following a hunger strike by Mikhail Khodorkovsky), the authorities permitted a visit by Nikolai Svanidze and Genry Reznik—two members of the Kremlin’s highest consultative body, the Public Chamber—and Russia’s human rights ombudsman, Vladimir Lukin. They found Aleksanyan almost blind and sick with lymphoma. He was confined to a tiny room with an armed guard sitting next to his bed day and night. The guards were changed every two hours, saluting one another, stomping their boots, and loudly reporting, thus never allowing Aleksanyan uninterrupted sleep. He told the visitors that until they came to see him, he was at all times shackled to his bed by a chain attached to his wrist. In the previous two weeks, he had been taken to a shower in the corridor, handcuffed, three times.¹⁷

Authoritarianism—Plus

Along with the characteristics of traditional authoritarianism, Putinism has exhibited a number of distinct features. Whether they coalesce into a kind of protofascism, as has recently been suggested,¹⁸ remains to be seen, but their similarity to well-known components of a fascistic polity is fascinating, and the tendency bears watching very carefully.

The “National Leader.” Putinism has evolved into a manifestly and intensely personalized system of rule with power increasingly stemming from personal authority rather than that of office. Putin’s popularity has been central to the regime’s legitimacy. Last year, he was proclaimed a “national leader” by leading politicians and the mass media, and his “plan” (*plan Putina*) was declared to be “Russia’s plan” (*plan Rossii*), although the contents were never disclosed. Last year, a midday rally at Luzhniki Stadium, Moscow’s largest stadium, was officially titled “Forum of the Supporters of the President of Russia.”¹⁹

Putin’s official image has been imbued with physical vigor, youthfulness, and swagger. Last fall, widely circulated photographs featured Russia’s president half-naked, with a muscular, glistening torso, holding a periscope rifle with a hunting knife on his belt. The frequent vulgarities that Putin seems to delight in using during press conferences and speeches, especially to foreign journalists, seem intended to underscore his machismo and disdain for liberal “softies.”

Putin’s “stepping down” from the presidency and becoming prime minister has changed nothing in his preeminence in Russian politics. His acceptance of the chairmanship of United Russia this past April *without having ever been a party member* was designed to signal this supremacy. While some analysts saw in Putin’s new position parallels with the Soviet system in which the president (chairman of the Supreme Soviet) and the prime minister were largely ceremonial positions, and the power resided in the extraconstitutional office of the general (or first) secretary of the party, leading Kremlin propagandist Sergei Markov was frank in noting that the leadership of United Russia “strengthens Putin’s political weight as national leader.”²⁰ Although Medvedev was “the leader of the state and of the Russian Federation,” Markov added, “the political leader of the country remains Putin.”²¹ Even before Putin’s party chairmanship, a strong majority of Russians had come to the same conclusion: six out of ten respondents in a national survey agreed that “despite Medvedev’s election, the power will remain in the hands of Putin and his entourage,” as compared with two in ten who thought otherwise.²²

Stoking the Sense of Loss and Imperial Nostalgia. In the 2005 State of Russia address, Putin called the fall of the Soviet Union “the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century.”²³ Following this unambiguous assessment, the democratic revolution of 1987–1991 and the attempts to build the institutions of democracy and liberal capitalism in the 1990s have been uniformly labeled by leading politicians and the mass media as times of “national humiliation,” “a failed state,” and, most of all, “chaos.”²⁴

By contrast, the Soviet past has been increasingly portrayed as a time of success that should make true patriots proud of the global military superpower and multinational empire, which the world treated with respect and trepidation. Terror that killed millions, crushing poverty, starvation, aggression, and wars are mentioned rarely, if at all. The positive invocations of the Soviet past are ubiquitous: the music of the national anthem, endless serials on the

state-controlled television glorifying the *chekists* (secret police), and a creeping rehabilitation of Stalin and Stalinism in history textbooks. In this pastoral version²⁵ of the past, everything was better, and there was more of it, in Soviet days—tanks and hockey teams, missiles and movies, cruisers and bread.

Even telecommunication was superior. Reprimanding the ministry of informational technologies and communication for its failures and exhorting the Russian business community to create a “people’s telephone,” First Deputy Prime Minister Sergei Ivanov averred in 2007 that Soviet Russia had been “second in the world in informational technologies” and that “we can and must regain the position we lost.”²⁶ According to a 1987 article in *Pravda*, only one Soviet family in five had a telephone, and people waited for decades, often without success, to have a phone installed at home.²⁷ One wonders to which country, in Ivanov’s estimate, was Soviet telecommunication “second.”

A Besieged Fortress. A Russia beset by external enemies bent on undermining its “territorial integrity” and “sovereignty” and seeking to claim the country’s natural wealth has been the regime’s article of faith and a key propaganda theme. The Kremlin’s main ideologist and a deputy head of presidential administration, Vladislav Surkov, has accused those “who consider the non-violent collapse of the Soviet Union [to be] their success” of trying to “destroy Russia and fill its enormous space with many weak quasi-states.”²⁸ The malfeasants’ main goal, Surkov contended, was to “annihilate Russia’s statehood” using allies from inside. In what he called a “de-facto besieged country,” Surkov has also found “a fifth column,” its ranks filled with the “left and right radicals” who have “common foreign sponsors” and who are united by “the hatred of what they claim to be Putin’s Russia but, in fact, of Russia herself.”²⁹

Speaking in May 2007 at the military parade to celebrate the sixty-second anniversary of victory in World War II, Putin likened the perpetrators of “new threats” to Russia to the Third Reich because of “the same desire to impose *diktat* on the world.”³⁰ (Everyone in Moscow that day understood the unnamed evildoer to be the United States.³¹) Last November, on the other main

national holiday, the Day of Reconciliation, Putin again spoke of “those who would themselves like to rule all humanity” and who “insist on the necessity of splitting [Russia]” because it has “too many natural resources.”³²

Islamic terrorists, too, are but a tool in the hands of Russia’s old enemies. As Putin said in the September 2004 address to the nation in the aftermath of the Beslan school hostage-taking and the death of 334 civilians—186 of whom were children—“some want to tear a juicy piece out” of Russia, and others, who see Russia as “a threat” that “must be eliminated,” are helping them.³³ “Terrorism,” he continued, “is only a means of achieving these objectives.”³⁴ According to Surkov, “the detonation of our southern borders as [a] means of weakening Russia” was used many times in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.³⁵

The Kremlin views virtually everything happening around Russia today as a plot against it. Even Russian fishermen are not safe from foreign predators. In the words of then-first deputy prime minister Medvedev, “we must revive the navy . . . to protect our fishermen.”³⁶

In this worldview, the future deployment of ten missile interceptors in Poland and a radar installation in the Czech Republic has produced grave concern for Russia’s safety, despite the U.S. invitation to Moscow to deploy observers on the ground and the promise not to “activate” the site until Washington and Moscow certify that Iran actually possesses the threatening missiles. With its untested technology, this scrawny outfit—which a prominent Russian arms control specialist has recently judged to be “incapable of threatening anyone, perhaps including Iran”³⁷—is said by the Kremlin to be capable of hindering Russia’s nuclear arsenal with its 2,480 nuclear warheads on 704 long-range ballistic missiles.³⁸

Rigged by Russia’s enemies, Trojan horses have multiplied into herds. The antiauthoritarian revolutions in Georgia in 2004 and Ukraine in 2005 are dangers—and so, as in the Soviet days, are the West’s human rights organizations and election observers. At his last press conference as Russian president this past February, Putin suggested that, instead of “teaching us democracy,” those in the West who are concerned about human rights and liberties in Russia “should teach their wives how to make

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shchi,” or Russian cabbage soup.³⁹ It is instructive to compare this statement to then-Soviet foreign minister Eduard Shevardnadze’s interview with a Soviet newspaper in May 1989:

It does not make sense to call following common sense a “concession to the West.” . . . Is it in the interest of the West that the Soviet people have in their possession the entire range of liberties, which constitute human rights? It is you and me who need them first and foremost, it is our children. . . . Without developed and guaranteed human rights there is no and could not be democracy, there is no and could not be a lawful state.⁴⁰

Unchallenged in national politics and the mass media, the “besieged fortress” propaganda appears to be taking root, just as it did in Soviet days. If in 1998 only one-third of the Russians surveyed thought their country was under a “military threat from other countries,” this year, over half believed that it was, while the proportions of those who did not see the danger went from 59 to 38 percent.⁴¹

A Foreign Policy of Resurgence and Retribution.

Recovering at least some of the assets lost in the “catastrophe” of the Soviet Union’s demise and exacting a retribution for alleged past humiliations seem to have become key objectives of Russian foreign policy. Fervor to reassert territorial sovereignty, seen as threatened, led Russia last summer to drop a titanium replica of its national flag on the bottom of the Arctic Ocean at the North Pole. The zeal to demonstrate recovered military might has led to the dispatch of Tu-95 (“Bear”) propeller-driven, strategic bombers with 1950s design and technology to “patrol” the airspace on the borders of the NATO member countries, as well as to the “buzzing” (that is, overflying unusually close) of a U.S. aircraft carrier by two “Bears” this past February.⁴²

The formerly diverse bilateral U.S.-Russian agenda—energy security, nuclear nonproliferation, the global war on terrorism, the containment of a resurgent authoritarian China, Russia’s integration in the world’s economy—has been deliberately and systematically whittled down by Moscow to what it was in Soviet days and what the Kremlin now wants it to be: arms control.⁴³ Russia’s most authoritative independent military analyst, Alexandr Gol’tz, has noted that the country’s foreign policy is “increasingly concentrated on military problems and based on the [policy of] containment.”⁴⁴

Russian foreign policy has steadily grown truculent and, in many instances, pointedly anti-Western, as in the cases of Iran and Kosovo. In the process, the Kremlin has begun to tamper with some key structures of post-Cold War European security: the intermediate missile force agreement, signed by Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev in 1987; the 1990 treaty on conventional forces in Europe between the Warsaw Pact and NATO; and the 1991 START nuclear arms accord. Moscow has threatened to “abandon” the first, has “suspended” its participation in the second, and has hinted at renegotiating the third when it expires in 2009.

Most worrisome in the long run might be Russia’s evolution toward what is known in the theory of international relations as a revisionist power, as has been noted in these pages.⁴⁵ Up until a year ago, it could be said that, while railing at the score, Russia was not seeking to change the rules of the game. This is no longer certain. As Putin told an international conference in February 2007, “We have approached that watershed moment, when we have to think seriously about the entire architecture of global security.”⁴⁶ Ten months later, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov blamed NATO, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, and the Conventional Forces in Europe treaty—the cornerstones of European stability and Russian bugbears, all—for unspecified “major problems.”⁴⁷ The “moment of truth” has arrived, Lavrov declared: Moscow intends “to clear out”—that is, to dismantle—the offending institutions, or, as a Russian news agency put it, to “break up the old system of international security.”⁴⁸

Spymania. Under Putin, the budget for security services has increased almost tenfold, from \$4 billion to \$39 billion.⁴⁹ Inaugurated by the trumped-up charges and shamelessly rigged spy trials of Igor Sutyagin, the arms control researcher at the United States and Canada Institute in Moscow, and Valentin Danilov, professor at the Krasnoyarsk State Technical University and expert on satellite technology,⁵⁰ spymania today reportedly has ensnared up to fifteen scientists who have been charged with or convicted of espionage.⁵¹

Ideological “Subversion” as a National Security Concern. The struggle against alleged ideological subversion has been added to the duties of security services. Last year, leading Russian politicians accused the British Council, a cultural and educational organization financed by the British government, of being a front for spies. In a

speech to Federal Security Service (FSB) officers last January, Putin called on the security agency to “increase its work to gather information about attempts to interfere with our internal affairs” in connection with the upcoming presidential election campaign.⁵² Two months later, FSB director Nikolay Patrushev accused unnamed Russian nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) of assisting terrorists. In turn, both the NGOs and the terrorists were being helped by “foreign non-governmental organizations.”⁵³ In response, a prominent Russian human rights activist, Irina Yasina, suggested that “the people who are with Patrushev—they are supposed to believe that we are surrounded by enemies, surrounded by spies.”⁵⁴

Being Anti-West as New Russian Patriotism. At the conclusion of the meeting with German chancellor Angela Merkel this past March, Putin asserted that the West should not expect an “easier” time in dealing with Medvedev than it has had with him because, like Putin, the president was a “Russian nationalist,”⁵⁵ implying that a Russian patriot is by definition prone to disagreements or even conflict with the West.

The notion of the “common European home”—with its rule of law and the moral imperatives of liberty and justice that were so popular in Russia in the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s—has been discarded. Criminals convicted in the West or wanted as suspects in Western nations are fêted. Vitaliy Kaloev, who stabbed to death a Swiss air traffic controller whom he held responsible for a crash that killed his wife and children, was given a hero’s welcome and is now deputy minister in the government of the autonomous republic of North Ossetia. Last December, Andrei Lugovoy, who is sought by Scotland Yard as the chief suspect in the murder of the FSB defector-turned-dissident Alexandr Litvinenko, was “elected” a Duma deputy.

Ethnicity as Identity. Whereas Boris Yeltsin always used the word *rossiyanin*, or “citizen of Russia,” to describe his own nationality and that of his compatriots (as opposed to *russkiy*, which describes ethnic Russianness), the present administration appears to be shifting to representing the country emphatically and dominantly as the state of ethnic Russians. In the instance described above, Putin used *russkiy* to describe Medvedev (and himself) as “Russian nationalists.” (The word “nationalist” was

edited out on all Russian television channels and changed to “patriot” on the presidential website.⁵⁶)

The Russian Orthodox Church, it appears, is being gradually elevated to the state religion, which the constitution explicitly prohibits. The church has been granted a spiritual monopoly in the armed forces, and classes in Orthodox Christianity have been made mandatory in many regions of the country. In August 2007, Russia’s Council of Muftis issued a statement opposing the introduction of such a course in all state schools.

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Growing Ethnic Violence. The discrimination of and physical attacks on Asians, Africans, and Caucasians (that is, people from the Caucasus region) are a perennial

feature in Russian cities and towns. Following a sharp worsening of relations with Georgia after the 2004 Rose Revolution and in response to the arrest by Georgian authorities of four Russian military officers on charges of espionage in September 2006, Russia expelled over two thousand ethnic Georgians from Moscow and other large cities. A prominent Russian journalist and member of the Public Chamber has recently blamed the murders of Central Asians, which he claims occur in Moscow once or even twice daily, on the “situation of intolerance and aggression.”⁵⁷ He called for “a completely different” environment: one “of tolerance toward people of different appearance, different ethnicity and religion.”⁵⁸ He was echoed by the editor of Russia’s only remaining opposition daily, *Novaya gazeta*, who claimed that in the first three months of 2008, “a mass fascist terror” throughout Russia killed 38 people and injured 113 and wondered why the FSB was doing such a poor job preventing these crimes.⁵⁹

Government-Funded “Patriotic” Youth Organizations. In December 2007, the Third All-Russia Convention in Defense of Human Rights “expressed a grave concern” about the country’s “evolution toward fascism.”⁶⁰ Human rights activists were particularly alarmed about the establishment, with the Kremlin’s support, of youth organizations that are “purposefully indoctrinated in a leadership cult, [in] rejection of modern democratic principles, and [in] rampant hatred of the West and [domestic political] opposition.”⁶¹

Such organizations, the activists charged, were used “ever more extensively” for political police purposes, and their actions bespoke “unbridled xenophobia, violence, and political hooliganism.” The setting up of

children's organizations in support of the head of state, the convention concluded, was a "blatant violation" of the constitution.⁶²

Part II: Sultanistic Corporatism

Slightly over two years ago, Andrei Illarionov, who had just resigned as Putin's personal economic adviser, noted that Russia was constructing the "corporatist" state model, with cabinet members or key presidential aides "chairing corporation boards or serving on those boards."⁶³ As used by Illarionov, "corporatism" (or "corporative state") deviates from the classic meaning of "collaboration" in search of "class peace," when the state (as in Benito Mussolini's Italy) mediates between the key institutional economic actors, especially the main industrialists and trade unions.

Yet Putinism does correspond to a broader definition of corporatism as "the institutionalized tendency of recognizing vital [economic] groups and bringing them into a privileged stable relationship of 'collaboration' in a particular policy area."⁶⁴ In the Russian case, this means an activist state that, while refraining from across-the-board renationalization, has regained majority ownership or complete control (through the so-called state corporations or *goskorporatsii*) over most technologically advanced or profitable sectors of the economy: what the Chinese functionaries, whose record of authoritarianism and modernization the Kremlin seems to admire, designate "pillar" or "lifeblood" industries.

The result is what scholar Nicolas Gvosdev has called "Russia, Inc."⁶⁵ The "merging" of business and bureaucracy, the "etat-ization" of large private capital, and its "fusion" with the bureaucratic elite are said to be "the norm [for] all the levels of power," according to independent Russian observers.⁶⁶ In Trenin's words, those "who rule Russia today, own Russia."⁶⁷

Sultanism. Max Weber called authoritarian regimes distinguished by patronage, nepotism, and cronyism "sultanistic."⁶⁸ This label captures the tendency for Putin's personal friends, former colleagues, or aides to control most of the "state corporations" and ostensibly private companies majority-owned by the state. According to a Russian business daily, in the beginning of this year, "political and personal allies" of the president headed the boards of companies that together accounted for 40 percent of Russia's economy.⁶⁹

President Medvedev, formerly Putin's chief of staff and first deputy prime minister, is chairman of Gazprom,

Igor Sechin, deputy chief of the presidential administration, heads Rosneft, the largest state-owned oil company. Deputy Prime Minister Sergei Naryshkin, who attended the KGB foreign intelligence training center with Putin in the 1980s,⁷⁰ is the chairman of Channel One, Russia's largest television network, and also the head of the United Shipbuilding Company, which includes all of Russia's civilian and navy docks.⁷¹ (Naryshkin is also charged with broad government oversight of Russia's foreign trade.⁷²)

Putin's other long-time associates Vladimir Yakunin and Sergey Chemezov are, respectively, chairman of Russian Railways and general director of the arms export monopoly Rosoboronexport, which last year earned an estimated \$7 billion. Putin's old friend from Leningrad-St. Petersburg days, billionaire Leonid Reiman, is the minister of information technologies and communications and is believed to be the majority owner of the leading cell phone company Megafon.⁷³ Another of Putin's comrades, Gennady Timchenko, is the head of the Swiss-based oil-trading company Gunvor. Unknown a few years ago, the company controls the export of one-third of Russia's oil, which is valued at around \$40 billion a year.⁷⁴

The Janissary Caste. In the Russian version, sultanism is distinguished by its almost caste-like character: nearly all of the top officers (and reputed owners) of "Russia, Inc." began their careers, like Putin, in the mid-1970s to early 1980s in the KGB domestic or foreign intelligence divisions and, in many cases, continued in its successors, the FSB and SRV (*Sluzhba vneshney razvedki*, or the External Intelligence Service). In keeping with Weber's simile of sultanism, this group, whose powers and wealth grew continuously during Putin's presidency, may be called a Janissary corporation after the elite corps of the Ottoman Empire's army and the sultan's guards, whom the sultan personally led into battle and with whom he generously shared the booty.

In the officially "cursed" 1990s, the entry to the infamous "oligarchy" was open to anyone with enough money. Openly competing under the eye of a free and aggressive media, in politics the oligarchs backed different candidates and blocs and made the 1999 Duma election "the most competitive contest in Russian history."⁷⁵ By contrast, the entry into the Putinist elite is virtually restricted to those with a past in the security and intelligence services, and the new "oligarchs" were said by a prominent Russian observer to be "bound" in secrecy,

“the total cover-up” being a sine qua non for all those “admitted to government service.”⁷⁶

Beginning with the four most powerful men in Russia besides Putin and Medvedev—the two Kremlin deputy chiefs of staff, Sechin and Viktor Ivanov; First Deputy Prime Minister Ivanov; and FSB director Patrushev—the number of KGB alumni in the top and middle ranks of the Russian government is estimated at six thousand.⁷⁷ Among them are such top bureaucrats and corporate directors as the aforementioned Yakunin and Chemezov, as well as the chairman of the State Committee for the Control and Circulation of Narcotics (roughly the equivalent of the Drug Enforcement Agency), Viktor Cherkesov, who headed the St. Petersburg directorate of the FSB in the 1990s and served as the FSB’s first deputy director under Putin from 1998 to 1999. (Chemezov served with Putin in Dresden, East Germany, as did the head of the Federal Customs Service, Andrey Belyaniniov.⁷⁸)

The “Velvet Re-Privatization”: From the “Useless” to the “Useful.” The owners of Russia’s largest firms and enterprises seem to have been divided into the “useful” (*nuzhnye*)—that is, those deemed politically loyal and willing to “share”—and the “useless” (*nenuzhnye*), those who are looked at with suspicion.⁷⁹ The former are allowed to prosper and expand, while many of the latter live under various degrees of pressure to sell at least some of their assets to the state or the “useful” tycoons. Last fall, an insider plausibly revealed the details of what he called the “velvet re-privatization,” in which the assets are “transferred” from the “useless” to the “useful.”⁸⁰

The palpably fraudulent court proceedings against Yukos and its principal shareholders, Khodorkovsky and Lebedev, and the company’s subsequent bankruptcy and the sale of its most profitable divisions to the state-owned Rosneft (which, until Sechin took over as chairman, was among the smallest and least profitable companies and had even been slated for sale) were to teach Russian entrepreneurs a lesson. “Private property, while it has grown and developed substantially, remains provisional,” noted a prominent Russian expert, “subject to redistribution if an owner experiences conflict with the state or with people close to powers that be.”⁸¹

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The most recent of such conflicts involved Russia’s third largest oil company, the Russian-British TNK-BP. Last summer, the authorities revoked the firm’s license to develop the giant Kovykta natural gas field in southeast Siberia and pressured it to sell the rights to Gazprom. TNK-BP reluctantly agreed to the sale but not to the price offered. On March 19, 2008, the firm’s Moscow offices were locked down, and the police searched for documents pertaining to an “ongoing” investigation of tax evasion in the amount of 6 billion rubles (\$254 million). The next day, the FSB arrested a TNK-BP employee, who was charged with attempts to “obtain classified information for foreign energy companies.”⁸² At the same time, the visas of the firm’s over two hundred foreign employees were found to be invalid, and they were forced to leave Russia. In addition, TNK-BP’s largest oil field, Samotlor, in western Siberia, is under investigation by the Natural Resources Ministry. There is little doubt that these “operations” were shots across the bow in an effort

to make the firm more forthcoming on the Kovykta deal, as well as to force the firm’s four Russian principal owners to sell their stakes to Gazprom or Rosneft and to lower BP’s share, currently at 50 percent.

Its size and the British connection at least bought TNK-BP a bit of negotiating time and room for maneuver. But Russian owners who reportedly decline offers that must not be refused are generally not as lucky. Last year, the owner of oil company Russneft, Mikhail Gutseriyev, had to flee the country to avoid arrest on the (by now) standard charge of tax evasion. The owner of the leading cosmetic chain Arbat Prestige, Vladimir Nekrasov, is in jail awaiting trial for the alleged nonpayment of \$2 million in taxes. A Russian commentator on the Nekrasov case has pointed to a “large number of people” who would like to “encroach” on the detained entrepreneur’s profitable business and has predicted that the owner of Arbat Prestige would probably be let free “in exchange” for his business. Another Moscow observer called the affair “a racket,” an attempt “to take away his business.”⁸³

In Gutseriyev’s case, the persistent “suitor” was one of the Kremlin’s favorite oligarchs and Russia’s second-richest man, the aluminum magnate Oleg Deripaska, who in July 2007 declared that he was ready—nay, willing—to

give his estimated \$23 billion fortune to the government at any moment. “If the state says that we must give up our companies,” Deripaska said, “we will give them up. I do not separate myself from the state.”⁸⁴

The “Useful” Magnates. By contrast, in 2005 the St. Petersburg–based Rossiya Bank, whose co-owner Yuri Koval’chuk is a close friend and reportedly the “personal banker” of the president, purchased a giant media empire, which used to belong to Gazprombank. The holding included four of the leading national television channels; the country’s largest circulation newspaper, *Komsomol’skaya pravda*; as well as dozens of local television and radio stations and newspapers. Last December, Koval’chuk was expected to add, for \$150 million, the national daily *Izvestia* to his empire. (Koval’chuk’s son, Boris, formerly an adviser to then–deputy prime minister Medvedev, today heads the department of “priority national projects” and thus is in charge of the trillions of rubles budgeted for developing select areas of science and technology.)

Similarly, the “useful” Deripaska’s RUSAL (which stands for “Russian Aluminum”) corporation has bid for a 25-percent stake in another metal giant, Norilsk Nickel—the world’s largest producer of nickel and palladium—held by the apparently “not-so-useful” oligarch Mikhail Prokhorov. Naturally, the “offer” has been “accepted,” and the deal closed in the last week of April. Deripaska’s stake in Norilsk Nickel is likely to continue to grow, perhaps until he owns the majority of the company.

Part III: Fissures and Pitfalls: Legitimacy, Stability, Longevity

Institutional Debility. The Kremlin’s manipulation and subversion have systematically eroded or destroyed the legitimacy of all the key political and social institutions: the parliament, the local governments, the courts, and the media. Early this year, the majority of the respondents in national polls viewed these entities as incapable of either “defending people’s social and economic rights and liberties” or enforcing “the equality of all citizens before the law.”⁸⁵ Three weeks before the December 2, 2007, Duma election, 60 percent of those surveyed were “not sure” if elections in their country were conducted “honestly.”⁸⁶ Most Russians feel that they are incapable of controlling the country’s government.⁸⁷

The only political institution that was perceived as rightful and somewhat effective was the Putin presidency.⁸⁸ This is likely to change with Medvedev’s ascendance to

the office, since almost half of the respondents in a national survey last January believed that it was Putin (47 percent), rather than the voters (19 percent) or the candidates themselves (8 percent), who would determine the election’s outcome.⁸⁹ Immediately after the presidential election, 80 percent of the respondents said that Medvedev had been “brought to power” by “the people that are in power today” and not by the “regular voters” (13 percent).⁹⁰ In addition, it is widely assumed, both by the experts and the public at large, that the election results have been significantly altered to ensure the 70 percent majority for Medvedev. (The only uncertainty is the precise extent and geography of the fraud.⁹¹) As a result, in the first week of April 2008, Putin was trusted by 48 percent of those polled and Medvedev by 12 percent.⁹²

“Performance Legitimacy.” Amid the widespread mistrust of the institutions and alienation from power, the regime’s principal bases of legitimacy and the key pillars of political stability are economic expansion and a steady improvement in the standard of living, which meets the expectations of a population used to steady growth. One of the keenest Western observers of Russia’s economy and politics, Anders Åslund, a senior fellow at the Peterson Institute, has even asserted that “[t]his system has no other legitimacy than economic growth.”⁹³ Huntington called this “performance legitimacy.”⁹⁴

Quite impressively sustained until now—the economy has expanded at an average of nearly 7 percent in the past ten years, GDP has grown sixfold in nominal dollar terms, and average monthly wages are eight times what they were in 2000—“performance legitimacy” renders the regime vulnerable to destabilization in the case of a sudden economic downturn. It is almost certain not to be able to weather a crisis as successfully as Russia did in 1998, when, in the aftermath of a financial crisis and ruble devaluation, the country’s president, freely elected in a fierce competition against the communist candidate, handed the prime ministership and the government over to the center-left opposition, which dominated the freely elected parliament.⁹⁵

In the meantime, the need for the Medvedev presidency to accrue popularity and legitimacy quickly is likely to prompt the continuation of last year’s generous budgetary outlays for “national projects” and salary and pension increases. In the absence of equally significant growth in labor productivity (which, according to Putin’s chief economic adviser Arkady Dvorkovich, is 12–15 percent that of “developed countries”⁹⁶), government

spending is bound to fuel further the already considerable inflation.

The Domestic Imperatives of Confrontation

In the past few years, Russian foreign policy has been increasingly assigned the critical task of boosting the regime's legitimacy by validating the "besieged fortress" propaganda theme to promote the consolidation around the Kremlin. Some of Russia's most respected independent analysts have noted the trend and the risks associated with it. For instance, "all of Putin's rhetoric [when he attended the NATO summit this past April] was intended for domestic consumption," one of them noted, while "threats to Russian security are rooted in the obsolete mentality of its military, not in NATO."⁹⁷ To these experts, Russia's foreign policy of the past few years looked "more hyperactive than successful" and bordered on "a foul" (*na grani fola*)—that is, on violating the rules of the game.⁹⁸

"Using the United States as a bogeyman for domestic political purposes," a top Russian expert warned, "could result in long-term estrangement between the two countries."⁹⁹ Yet while sporadic "détentes" are likely—and, following the Soviet tradition, an olive branch, or at least a twig, should be proffered by the Kremlin when the current power rearrangement is settled—no permanent amelioration in Russian foreign policy is likely until the regime feels secure enough to replace altercations and confrontations with other sources of legitimacy, primarily a broader political participation.

Corruption. "There is no other effective way of combating corruption than the development of civil society and the freedom of mass media," Putin correctly noted in early 2007.¹⁰⁰ Conversely, the ostensibly pandemic and growing corruption has been among the most damaging effects of the stifled political competition, the self-censoring mass media, and subverted and weakened political and civic institutions and courts.

In a September 2007 national survey, 64 percent of the respondents thought that there was as much or more "thievery and corruption" in Russia as there was when Putin was elected president in 2000, compared to 26 percent who thought that there had been diminution of pilfering.¹⁰¹ A study found stealing and bribery the highest among the law enforcement agencies (police, courts, prosecutors); education was second, with bribes routinely demanded and paid to gain college admission, followed

by health care.¹⁰² (The Russian Academy of Sciences estimated recently that 35 percent of all health care spending in Russia is lost to corruption.¹⁰³)

In the Transparency International ranking of countries' corruption levels, between 2000 and 2007, Russia sank from tying for eighty-second place to ranking 143 out of 179, behind Zambia, Ukraine, Egypt, and Georgia and next to Gambia, Indonesia, and Angola.¹⁰⁴ In the opinion of some Russian political experts, corruption has "reached the level of national catastrophe."¹⁰⁵

Yet the nature of the regime makes even diminishing bribery and theft (never mind "eradicating" them) a remote possibility. As the general secretary of the Russian Union of Journalists, Igor Yakovenko, explained this past February, to do so would require an independent parliament, an independent judicial system, and an independent mass media. "We have neither the first, nor the second, nor the third in Russia," he concluded. "Which is why the fight against corruption looks like [no more than] a ritual dance."¹⁰⁶

From 2000 to 2007, the state bureaucracy grew by an estimated 600,000 employees, almost doubling to 1.45 million.¹⁰⁷ Thriving "on the bureaucratic laissez-faire," corruption is said by the regime's critics to have reached the point when "the fear of retribution becomes not only an inevitable but the dominant motive" of state functionaries' behavior.¹⁰⁸ Like China, in the words of the late communist leader Chen Yun, Russia may find itself in a situation in which "not fighting corruption will destroy the country, while fighting it will destroy the regime."¹⁰⁹

Hindered Economic Modernization? Finished ("value-added") products constitute less than 10 percent of Russian exports, with commodities (mostly oil, gas, and metals) claiming the rest.¹¹⁰ Yet unlike small "petrostates," commodity exports cannot sustain the country, much less become the foundation of Russian economic modernization: the growing economy, its population, and its size are too big, requiring huge (and, by the developed countries' standards, wasteful) domestic energy consumption. But the kind of economy Russia wants and needs to have—knowledge-intensive and based on high technology—is almost certain to be hindered by the regime's unchallenged political and economic strategies.

Assessing the government's ambitious economic plans, experts from the Russian Academy of Sciences concluded recently that "the only rational path for changing the economic course is the presence of an opposition party . . . with new principles of economic

policy,” while the creation of “state corporations” leads only “to the redistribution of resources.”¹¹¹ Others think that at this stage of the country’s development, a lasting modernization breakthrough in Russia may not be possible to achieve without a “new social contract,” in which the regime is preoccupied not with the construction of the notorious “vertical of power,” but with fostering consensus and coalitions, transparency in politics and economy, the rule of law, entrepreneurial freedom, and local self-government.¹¹²

Potentially, the most damaging consequence of sultanistic corporatism may have been its impact on small and medium businesses, which in developed countries often spearhead innovation and growth (and employ most people) but in Russia lag far behind. Throughout Russian history, the actions of the central government are not only copied but also applied with added zeal and crudity in the provinces. Freed from political competition and voter supervision by the elimination of gubernatorial elections and accountable solely to the Kremlin, which appoints and dismisses them, the provincial governors (and, without doubt, heads of district administrations under them) are likely to apply the Yukos precedent to pressure the most profitable or promising businesses to “cooperate” and “share” or force them to sell to the “preferred” businesses.

Constricted Investment, Inflation, and Debt. The almost ritualistic exhortations on the subjects of “high technology” and “knowledge-based” economies notwithstanding, the government seems to be concerned mostly with cashing in on high commodity prices. The de facto expropriation of the profit from the exports of oil at above \$27 per barrel (of which the government keeps 90 percent) severely handicaps private funding of “green field” exploration by private firms, while the investment (and profitability) records of state-owned Gazprom and Rosneft have been relentlessly dismal. As a result, after dramatic growth between 2000 and 2004, the rate of oil production increases has steadily declined and, according to the minister of energy, this past April reached a “plateau” and “stagnation.”¹¹³ The diminution of production and exports in absolute terms is almost a certainty now.

Resisting the ruble appreciation due to the inflow of petrodollars, the government has kept the national currency artificially low in order to hold down the costs of oil and gas production and increase profits. This (in addition to increased government spending in the second half of 2007 and worldwide growth in the prices of food) has led to inflation, which reached 11.9 percent last year

overall, ranging from the 15 percent increase in the price of vegetable oil to the doubling of the prices for such staples as bread and powdered milk. In a national survey last October, between half and three-quarters of the respondents reported “major increases” in the prices of bread, flour, milk products, and meat.¹¹⁴ Despite the government’s “agreement” with the major food producers, exporters, and store chains to freeze the prices at least through this spring, in the first three months of this year, the prices on bread and milk products have grown between 5 and 8 percent.¹¹⁵ The year-over-year inflation for 2008 is now projected at 14 percent—the highest rate since 2002.¹¹⁶

In the meantime—apparently confident of the state’s holding its part of the sultanistic corporatism bargain and bailing them out because of political loyalty and personal ties to top bureaucrats and decision-makers—the country’s banks and industrial companies (primarily the state-owned or state-controlled ones) have gone on a borrowing spree, increasing overall private sector indebtedness from \$31 billion in 2003 to \$167 billion by the end of 2006—over 500 percent.¹¹⁷ With the Kremlin’s darlings, Rosneft and Gazprom, leading the way—they owe \$85 billion, up from \$37 billion two years ago, of which \$36 billion are in short-term loans due this year¹¹⁸—Russian companies must make a total of \$110 billion in payments¹¹⁹—or around 9 percent of last year’s GDP. While the private debt in Russia has not yet reached China’s mark of \$1 trillion in “bad” loans, the tendency may yet result in a similar outcome.

Clues to Russia’s Performance and Behavior

Putin’s ability to forge a political system stable enough to be bequeathed to a successor merits affixing his name to it as a distinct authoritarian regime. While exhibiting many familiar traits, which include select but resolute repression, Putinism displays a number of features that distinguish it from classic authoritarianism. Some—such as the emphasis on lost glory and imperial nostalgia, the “besieged fortress” outlook, spymania, and a foreign policy shaped by retribution and resurgence and serving as the principal basis of the regime’s legitimacy and the key factor of political stability—hew rather dangerously to fascistic polities. Others, such as corporatism and sultanism, are reminiscent of traditional authoritarian economic policies.

An analysis of these and other features of Putinism yields important clues about the regime’s performance

and longevity and Russia's behavior in the world. In the short run, the state's control of politics and the economy appears to be strengthened by the lack of competing political institutions, the "sultanistic" grip on the economy, truculence in foreign affairs, and the additional legitimacy stemming from the unchallenged view of a country with enemies at home and abroad. In the longer term, the same policies can also reliably be shown to lead to economic stagnation, political destabilization, and a dangerous deterioration of the country's external relations.

As a student of Marxist "dialectical materialism"—a required course at Leningrad State University, as it was in all other colleges and universities of the Soviet Union—Putin must be aware of such an evolution. As a successful authoritarian ruler, he no doubt will ignore this knowledge.

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16. Jonas Bernstein, "Aleksanyan's Plight: A Case of the 'Legal Nihilism' Medvedev Wanted to Fight?" *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, January 4, 2008.
17. Nikolai Svanidze, interview by Aleksei Vorob'ev, *Osoboe mnenie* [A Separate Opinion], Ekho Moskvyy Radio, February 22, 2008, available at <http://echo.msk.ru/programs/personalno/496586-econ/> (accessed February 25, 2008). Authorities also sought to make an example of thirty-five-year-old Svetlana Bakhmina—a mother of three- and seven-year-old boys and an in-house counsel to Yukos, shortly before it was driven into bankruptcy and acquired by the state-owned Rosneft. In December 2004, Bakhmina was interrogated as a witness in the state's "case" against Yukos. When she refused to give the testimony the prosecutors wanted, her status was changed from witness to defendant. She was placed under arrest and interrogated for six hours until she fainted. The same day she was charged with embezzling "over" 8 billion rubles' (\$340 million at the current conversion rate) worth of shares from a former Yukos affiliate in 1998. Bakhmina was too junior in 1998 to perpetrate so massive a fraud, and the alleged victim of the embezzlement, Tomskneft, publicly denied that the theft had taken place, repeatedly stating that it had no claims on the defendant. Nevertheless, after two years of pretrial detention, with her bail requests routinely denied, Bakhmina was sentenced in December 2006 to seven years in prison. Her lawyers' appeal for the young woman's release on the basis of the 2001 law that granted amnesty to women with underage children if their sentence was less than ten years was denied. The appeal to defer serving the sentence until Bakhmina's youngest son is fourteen was also turned down by the Moscow

City Court, which found that the children were adequately cared for by their father and grandmothers. In April of last year, one of Bakhmina's lawyers, Alexandr Gofshtein, was attacked by men in ski masks who beat him with baseball bats and broke both of his legs. After a long hospitalization, he continues to represent his client. See Grigory Pasko, "Political Prisoners in Today's Russia—Svetlana Bakhmina," Robert Amsterdam: Perspectives on Russia, Europe, and International Affairs, available at www.robertamsterdam.com/2007/01/grigory_pasko_political_prison_3.htm (accessed March 20, 2008); Marina Lepina and Vladimir Trifonov, "Svetlane Bakhminoy razreshili vyrastit' detey" [Svetlana Bakhmina Was Allowed to Raise the Children], *Kommersant*, August 25, 2006; and "Svetlana Bakhmina: rasprava" [Svetlana Bakhmina: Reprisal], *Pravda cheloveka v Rossii* [Human Rights in Russia], available at www.hro.org/editions/control/hodorkovski/2006/04/19-1.php (accessed March 20, 2008).

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88. Six weeks before the presidential election, 45 percent of the respondents were not sure that elections in Russia are conducted honestly, while 37 percent believed that they were. (Levada-Center, RFE/RL Newline, and InterMedia, "V Rossii vybory.") The president was seen as capable of defending people's rights by 49 percent of the respondents and of ensuring equality before the law by 43 percent. (Levada-Center, "Demokratiya v Rossii.")
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