

Where Is Russia Going? Putin's Second Term

VLADIMIR BROVKIN

The title of our journal—*Demokratizatsiya*—identifies a key question in contemporary Russia: Is Russia going along a path of democratization or is it treading along a path of authoritarianism?

In recent months, a genuine debate has been unfolding in American scholarship over this fundamental question. There is no consensus, however; convincing arguments are being advanced on both sides. Those who praise Putin's accomplishments point to the healthy economy, reduction of national debt, favorable ratings from international economic agencies, and steady economic growth in Russia. In addition, some scholars follow the advancement of judicial reform with keen interest. In the four years of Putin's presidency the country received a new criminal code, criminal procedural code, alterations of the political system and political process, land code, and labor code. Several other code changes are on the way. Introduction of the rule of law requires having laws in the first place, and Putin certainly has introduced those laws. Even the most skeptical observer would have to agree that the adoption of these laws is a tremendous achievement and that few presidents can boast that kind of four-year record.

However, the critics assert that despite these achievements, the glass is "half empty and leaking," as Michael McFaul has stated.¹ The main criticisms of Putin are in the area of democratization. It is asserted that Putin has

- wrecked the independent press,
- incarcerated his political opponents,
- emasculated both houses of parliament, and
- undermined a useful and necessary counterweight to central power in Russia by weakening the governors.

Vladimir Brovkin is an American scholar of Russian affairs and has published several books on the Russian revolution, civil war, and other aspects of Soviet history, including *Russia After Lenin: Politics, Culture, Society, 1921–1929*. Dr. Brovkin received his PhD from Princeton University and has taught at Harvard University for ten years. He currently teaches at the Department of International Relations of Urals University in Ekaterinburg, Russia.

The charges do not end here. Some also levy the more serious charges of rigging elections and weakening political parties and civil society.

Because there are so few who are willing to advance counterarguments, and such arguments need to be made to be fair, this introduction to the spring issue of *Democratizatsiya* attempts to bring them to light.

1. The charge that Putin weakened the press rests primarily on the fact that control of NTV and *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* was taken from the powerful oligarchs Vladimir Gusinsky and Boris Berezovsky. It is assumed that freedom of the press is best guaranteed when controlled by independent, wealthy magnates. The counterargument is that media outlets under Gusinsky and Berezovsky were not free—that they were manipulated in favor of specific interest groups and that the independent magnates were criminal mafia bosses who had stolen billions of assets from the Russian state. By depriving those kinds of people of media control, Putin did Russia a favor. The defense of these oligarchs comes from the fallacious assumption that independent businessmen are better than the state. International media organizations assert that the Russian press is free—especially in Moscow and St. Petersburg, which were the most free, and in the autonomous ethnic republics, which were the least free.

2. The incarceration of Mikhail Khodorkovsky can hardly be seen as equal to the persecution of a political opponent. Here again, the former oligarch has amassed a fortune through the unscrupulous manipulation and theft of national resources. The Menatep bank, which he headed was well known for its connection to stolen Communist party funds and the former KGB. The bank was heavily involved in the speculation with government short-term bonds (GKO), money laundering, and other financial crimes. It is a blessing that the man is in prison and that his empire is crumbling. It is interesting to consider why Putin is not doing the same to other oligarchs. The answer is that it would trigger capital flight out of Russia and even sharper critique from the West. The West is quite comfortable keeping and hiding Berezovsky, the Godfather of the Kremlin under Yeltsin, from Russian law. The financial crimes he was involved with were conducted in England, but British law enforcement is in no hurry to prosecute him. Recently Roman Abramovich received a huge bill for back taxes. This is probably the way that other oligarchs will be treated in the future.

3. McFaul asserts that regional barons served as a counterweight to central power, and therefore, their emasculation weakens democratization. This argument is based on the assumption that any regional authority is better than a central one. It is an assumption that projects Western reality and American historical experience onto Russia. In reality, regional authority in Russia has always been a source of despotism. Today, as under Yelstin, the regional bosses in many parts of the country are indistinguishable from mafia bosses dispensing privileges, favorable contracts to their family's companies, and natural resources to their clans and friends. One of Putin's greatest achievements was curbing their power. That is a great step towards democratization.

4. In recent Duma elections, the favored sons of the West, the Yabloko and SPS

parties, suffered a crushing defeat, and Western friends of Russian liberals are shedding tears over the eclipse of Russian democracy. The truth is that SPS and Yabloko discredited each other in the election campaign and lost some of their voters. Privatization of natural resources into the hands of oligarchs is so unpopular it is not surprising that a party under Anatoly Chubais lost. There is nothing wrong with this stipulation, nor is it a blow to democracy.

In his article in this issue, Henry Hale discusses party building as campaign trick. Following McFaul's lead, he reconstructs the creation of the Unity/All Russia Party, which has become an obedient tool of the president in the Duma. He shows quite well that Unity is not really a party in the traditional sense but a conglomeration of governors who, fearful of losing their privileges, rallied to the side of Vlast power to preserve the remnants of their domain. Would it be better for the cause of democracy if the governors keep their independence and continue to build their fiefdoms? Why can a president not try to rally governors to his side in an informal alliance called Unity to advance his legislative agenda? Compare this with American elections. Does the U.S. president and presidential candidate not do pretty much the same thing? He goes around the country making sure that governors and senators support him, and in return, he endorses them. They approach companies for donations and then boast about how many millions they have raised. Why is that any more democratic than what Putin has done?

Gordon Hahn, in his excellent article, follows the political process in St. Petersburg in great detail. He also accuses Putin of building stealth authoritarianism. The charges against Putin are that he helped dislodge former governor Aleksandr Yakovlev and bring charges of corruption against certain people in Yakovlev's administration. He interfered in an active way to have his favored candidate elected in St. Petersburg. No doubt, he did all those things. To what extent does this amount to stealth authoritarianism? Why is bringing charges of corruption called authoritarianism? We should applaud Putin for finally starting a real fight against corruption. Why is removal of a notoriously dirty and corrupt Yakovlev a sign of stealth authoritarianism? There is no evidence that Putin broke any laws. He supported his candidate versus an incumbent. What is wrong with that?

In this issue, James Alexander likewise addresses the problem of center-periphery relations. He provides a record of federal reforms in Russia, typical for American political scientists. It is a formal story; there is no vision of the inside politics. One would not see the intricacies of local politics in Russia's regions in this article. The main point is that building federalism in a country like Russia should not be confused with federalism in Germany or the United States. Local elites in Russia perceive freedom from the center as freedom from control and freedom to enrich themselves while suppressing any criticism. One should not automatically assume that more autonomy is necessarily good under Russian conditions. Restoring the central power restored law in those regions.

Jonathan Riggs and Peter Schraeder in their most interesting article on political party systems are some of very few scholars who try to sound constructive. They provide a perceptive analysis of the evolving political party system in Russia and show how it could be improved to advance democratization. They show

that Russian political parties are not typical parties and that anybody who is somebody wants to have his own party. Duma deputies do strive not to serve the public but to advance their own interests. Parties promote their own, rather than society's interests. Riggs and Schraeder trace the recent development from protoparties to pseudoparties that advance the interests of elites. From this excellent and perceptive analysis, many, such as McFall, make an erroneous conclusion that Putin weakened democracy in Russia by undermining the parties. A more accurate explanation is that Russian political culture has not developed to the point of having political parties. Civil society must exist first, and then political parties will emerge. Riggs and Schraeder advance a number of meaningful reforms that would further the development of political parties. In that sense, their analysis is constructive. One only can add that with parties like those in Russia, one may lose interest in a parliament altogether. In the current conditions, the ad hoc Unity Party—an alliance of governors subservient to the president—is preferable to self-seeking cliques serving local mafias.

And finally, Tanya Narozhna presents a theoretical discussion of civil society in comparative perspective. It is a vivid picture of the skewed development of civil society in various counties of Eastern Europe. She describes the search for roots and belonging, as well as, wounds inflicted on these societies by communist authoritarianism, central economic control, Soviet domination, corrupt privatization, and the rise of the oligarchs. She demonstrates why disillusionment with liberal policies has set in and concludes that today the civil society is weak and atomized.

The main lesson that one may draw from these articles is that we should not project Western experiences onto Russia. We should not measure Russia by how closely it resembles the United States. We should abandon this arrogant and patronizing yardstick. Given its history and the depth of lawless corruption under the Communists and Yeltsin, Putin's Russia has made tremendous progress.

NOTE

1. Michael McFaul, "Russia's Glass is Half Full and Leaking" *RFE/RL Political Weekly*, March 15, 2004.