

# The State and the Public Sphere in Russia

ELENA CHEBANKOVA

**Abstract:** This paper explores the structural problems of the public sphere in Russia during the Putin–Medvedev era and discusses the possible directions of its evolution.

**Keywords:** civil society, democratization, public sphere

The public sphere is a central feature of a modern liberal society. Some literature on political philosophy claims that it should promote popular control over the government, to be exercised by means of public opinion formed in a free critical environment. The public sphere today, however, has many structural problems. It falls under the influence of economic and political elites. Thus, it becomes a means of popularizing and imposing “appropriate” behavioral patterns within the economic and political domains. This article discusses how the state and hegemonic elites influence the public sphere in Russia. It is divided into four sections. The first section discusses historical and theoretical dimensions of the public sphere. The second section examines how trivial culture emerges and colonizes the public domain. The third and fourth sections delineate the problems of political and socioeconomic domination. I conclude that the values and behavioral patterns that the state and elites propagate in the public domain could impede ongoing economic and political modernization.

## Theoretical Aspects

Charles Taylor writes that the public sphere is a “common space in which the members of society meet, through a variety of media (print, electronic) and also by face-to-face encounters, to discuss matters of common interest and thus to be able to form a common mind about those matters.”<sup>1</sup> The public sphere is conceptually distinct from both the state and the economy. Academic theorists decouple the private domain from the state, and see it as the bulwark between the authority and society.<sup>2</sup> They claim that the state has to be

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Elena Chebankova is a Research Fellow in Politics at Wolfson College, Cambridge, and a Lecturer in Politics at the University of Lincoln. © 2011 World Affairs Institute

receptive to the demands of the public sphere but should stand apart from its functioning processes. Institutional mechanisms, such as a free press; freedom of speech, assembly and communication; rights of petition and suffrage; and property and privacy rights should secure the autonomy of the public space.<sup>3</sup>

The public sphere is also conceptually distinct from the official economy. It is not “an arena of market relations but rather one of discursive relations; it is a theatre for debating and deliberating rather than buying and selling.”<sup>4</sup> Finally, the public sphere is also distinct from civic networks, although it is connected to them. Taylor considers this an important feature, since it allows society to function as a whole, both “outside the ambit of the state” and “beyond the free multiple associations.”<sup>5</sup>

In his *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, first published in Germany in 1962, Jürgen Habermas claims that the public sphere saw its “golden age between 1860 and 1730”<sup>6</sup> and slipped into decline thereafter. Habermas argues that at the time, the public sphere corresponded to a structural ideal, which encompassed three main features: universal accessibility, a strict separation between the public and private realms, and openness to critical argument.<sup>7</sup> Compliance with this ideal ensures that all participants of the public debate are equal and that the social status of speakers, or related matters, is kept private and has no influence on discussions. In other words, the public sphere remains homogenous. In this case, opinions emerge from rational reasoning and all aspects that are relevant to the public good are discussed. Nothing is protected from criticism.<sup>8</sup>

Blurring the boundaries between the public and private domains predetermined the departure from this ideal.<sup>9</sup> The progression of capitalist relations, class struggle and stratification of society ensured the new interpenetration between the public and private domains (“re-feudalization,” in the Habermasian lexicon). Private individuals from conflicting backgrounds began competing within the public space.<sup>10</sup> Economically disadvantaged classes appealed to the state for protection. Various subaltern strata demanded equality. The state gained new “formative” functions in compensating economically weaker groups and guiding the changes in the structure of society.<sup>11</sup> The public became a client of the state, thus destroying the potential for resisting the authority. Furthermore, economically powerful groups with privileged access to the media created industries around lucrative sociopolitical issues and infiltrated the state. They began “constructing” their audience<sup>12</sup> by deploying ‘staged forms of publicity.’<sup>13</sup> Thus, a “public sphere that formerly emerged from the structure of society” is now produced circumstantially on a case-by-case basis.<sup>14</sup> Critical reasoning crumbled as a result and the public sphere ceased to fully serve its original purpose. Today, it fails to control the state in the desired fashion.

These themes remain central to contemporary political philosophy and public sphere theorizations. We can select two of the most important issues, which will be relevant to our subsequent discussion on Russia:<sup>5</sup> the commodification of public life, and political and socioeconomic domination. The Frankfurt School of Philosophy, helmed by Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer and Herbert Marcuse,<sup>16</sup> defines commodification as the process that subjugates nature to the production of commodities. These authors claim that the commodification of public life is responsible for the new interpenetration between the public and private domains.

Adorno and Horkheimer argued that no area, public or private, was left untouched by the ceaseless production of unnecessary goods, trashy films, simplified music, and commercial advertising. The newly emerged “culture industry” obtained a logic of its own, and,

operating as an increasingly independent force, colonized the public sphere becoming an instrument of political domination. Horkheimer writes:

Consumers are the workers and employees, the farmers and lower middle class. Capitalist production so confines them, body and soul, that they fall helpless victims to what is offered to them. As naturally as the ruled always took the morality imposed on them more seriously than did the rulers themselves, the deceived masses are today captivated by the myth of success even more than the successful are. Immovably, they insist on the very ideology, which enslaves them.<sup>17</sup>

Hannah Arendt and Richard Sennet,<sup>18</sup> whose writings appeared before the English translation of *Structural Transformation*, concurred with these thoughts. Sennet lamented the emergence of the so-called “intimate” society, focused solely on pursuit of private pleasures, while Arendt repelled domesticity and consumerism that clouded rational reasoning and deterred people from political activity.<sup>19</sup>

Bringing trivial issues into the public domain facilitates this process. Large companies, in pursuit of their commercial interests, exclude smaller media outlets from the market so as to eliminate competition<sup>20</sup> and, instead of fostering critical debates, focus on delivering simplified commercial programs that are devoid of quality.<sup>21</sup> Trivialization is seen through the proliferation of glossy magazines, vulgarization of popular culture, exposing the public to the influence of inauthentic ideas, and the inclusion of trivial matters in the pages of serious political newspapers.<sup>22</sup> The state colludes with financial elites. This dynamic creates a society of consumers rather than citizens,<sup>23</sup> thus helping to contain the public protest. For as long as the citizens are focused on pursuit of material wealth, the political and economic elites are left to their own devices, conducting the policies of their choice.<sup>24</sup>

Political and socioeconomic domination is the second most important issue. The contemporary public sphere fosters a new sociopolitical hegemony, in that the ruling classes—the wealthy, politically empowered, and those belonging to ethnic and cultural majorities—dominate the public space. They therefore have the ability to “persuade the oppressed groups to give their assent to an unfair social structure by creating and circulating ideas” in the public domain.<sup>25</sup> Consequently, Marxist and feminist critics of Habermas argue that the public sphere should not be homogenous. Societies are stratified, and the single public space is incompatible with pluralistic aspirations of post-modern democracies.<sup>26</sup> A decentralized “nested public sphere,”<sup>27</sup> or even multiple “public spheres”<sup>28</sup> in which subaltern groups can interact and articulate their wishes, offers fairer participation opportunities. In his later writings, Habermas conceded these criticisms. He admitted that the public should be charged with the task of providing a safety net for the economically marginalized and with responsibility for responding to the efforts of private struggles to establish “the generalizable significance of diversity.”<sup>29</sup> This trend is clearly under way in the post-modern and post-industrial West.

This discussion has a direct bearing on Russia. It is important to clarify at the very beginning that the depoliticization and trivialization of public life in this country has two independent, but somehow interconnected, origins. First, during the late—and arguably even mid-to-early—Soviet period, the public valorized the private sphere and distrusted the public domain. Material deprivation and the public request to develop a modern consumer culture fuelled this trend. There is no common consensus among scholars as to when the public consumer request fully surfaced. Leonty Byzov claims that the Soviet public formed

a request for establishing a mass consumer society with an individualistic system of values in the late 1960s and early 1970s.<sup>30</sup> Other observers go a step further. In his “Great Retreat” thesis, Nicholas Timasheff<sup>31</sup> examines the emergence of hedonistic tendencies within the Soviet society from 1935 onward. Alexander Lukin theorizes that the Russian “public political ideal,” which concentrated on the achievement of high living standards, surfaced in the 1940s.<sup>32</sup> He, however, supports Byzov by claiming that the late Soviet society viewed material wealth as the most important policy objective and regarded liberalization as the means to this end. Regardless of timing, these dynamics created conditions that made it very easy to depoliticize and “commodify” public discourse in the post-Soviet era.<sup>33</sup>

Second, it is important that with the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russia adopted capitalist and liberal democratic institutional blueprints. Even though many institutional practices diverged from the ideally envisaged models, the very existence of those models influenced and shaped some specific rules of the game and corresponding behavioral patterns. Thus, with the introduction of capitalist market economy and liberal political institutions we could rightly expect the emergence of a public sphere with its associated ills and benefits. At this point, the two independent origins could finally meet at one end. The vast academic literature on these political and economic transitions insists that the relationship between institutional processes and structures is mutually reinforcing.<sup>34</sup>

This means that, on the one hand, the adoption of a Western institutional structure led to the emergence of a public sphere in Russia and determined its subsequent Western-style developmental trajectory. On the other hand, Russia’s specific sociohistoric features and the initial conditions of its socioeconomic transition modified that trajectory and sharpened its structural problems. Indeed, while in the West many of the trends discussed above evolve independently, or with the help of natural market forces, in Russia the state plays a prominent role and directs them. The public sphere therefore becomes instrumental in creating a certain climate of public opinion, establishing “appropriate” behavioral patterns, and influencing people’s preferences.

In what follows, I will deal with these issues empirically. The first subsection discusses the commercialization and trivialization problems. I will claim that the state took an active part in promoting these trends with a view to sustaining the extant structure of political and economic relations. In the second subsection, I will argue that the Russian public sphere is too monolithic, perhaps adhering in this way to the original Habermasian ideal, but failing nonetheless to answer the post-modern aspirations of equality and universal participation.

### **Trivia, Commodification, and the New Middle Class Culture**

The Russian state colludes with companies and leads the commodification process. The main thrust of this strategy is to create a situation in which public matters are marginalized and secondary, thus serving political stability and elite autonomy. As a result, the ideology, which acclaims the rapid accumulation of wealth and an uncritical political stance, colonizes the public domain. Private concerns of family, business, work and consumption absorb most citizens’ energy. The trivialization of the public domain acts as a backbone of modern Russian consumerism and fosters the public aversion to politics. Trivial matters dominate reading, the Internet and television segments. They have obtained threatening proportions and have restricted the creation of a generation capable of scientific, technological, and sociocultural modernization.

The production of glossy magazines was the fastest growing sector of Russia's media business during the 2000s. The president of the International Federation of Magazines, Donald Commerfield, claims that out of 72 countries uniting the Federation, Russia is the fastest-growing glossy magazines market.<sup>35</sup> He links this to the fact that such magazines contain no political information and reflect the values and lifestyle of modern Russia. Accordingly, the share of those who read books and newspapers has been in steady decline. The Levada Center claims that 46 percent of adult Russians do not read books and 37 percent do not read newspapers.<sup>36</sup> More importantly, the nature of readership has changed. The same research shows that, instead of literary and sociopolitical books, Russians read "female" stories (28 percent of the 2008 poll respondents), romantic novels (19 percent), detective stories (24 percent), and adventures and fiction (23 percent). Some venture outside of this to cooking, health and beauty books, encyclopedias, or tour guides. The most popular journals involve female fashion (35 percent); television programs (28 percent); crosswords (19 percent), cars, hunting, gardening and home improvement (16 percent); and humor (11 percent). Science-education issues interest only 14 percent of readers.

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The Internet has followed this trend. Data from 2008 shows that entertainment resources are in the lead, with some 10.2 million people visiting such sites every month. This comprises 41.3 percent of the Russian Internet audience. Free music and film providers dominate with 80.8 percent of the Internet audience. Video resources such as rustube.ru, youtube.com, and smotri.com closely follow the lead. Television programs, sport, and male-related topics (construction and home improvement, hunting, shooting, and the like) share third place.<sup>37</sup> It is also important that Russia's Internet is the fastest-growing media segment in Europe, faster than such thriving Internet markets as those in Spain and Ireland. E-market research reveals that, at the end of 2008, Russia had some 40 million active Internet users; the prognosis is that by 2012, some 59 million people will be using the Internet in the country. This is almost 72 percent more than in 2007.<sup>38</sup> At the same time, the Rumetrica analytical agency states that between 2004 and 2008 the fastest-growing Internet sectors were confined to the commercial, entertainment, and real estate sectors, while politics, culture, education, and information were the least growing domains. Table 1, below, details these data.

Trivia also dominates television. Some programs are exact replicas of their Western counterparts. *Dom (The House)* is a *Big Brother* remake, while *Davai Pozhenimsia (Let's Get Married)* resembles *Blind Date* and *Pust Govoriat (Let Them Talk)* is a replica of various celebrity talk shows. Some are uniquely Russian inventions, such as the *Chastnyi Detectiv (The Private Detective)* program, which invites a suspicious wife or a husband to hire a private detective and expose a cheating spouse on national television. More importantly, the vast majority of popular television programs portray lifestyles that are not

readily available for the majority of the population. Many productions—*Karmelita*, *Bogataia Masha*, *Tatianin Den*, *Liubov-Morkov*—show country houses, cars, clothes, and domestic attributes that are not readily accessible to the upper- and middle-class in the West. Yet all this is casually portrayed as an average, or at least commonplace/professional, lifestyle in Russia. Female-focused series often show “success” stories of lower-income girls who have married rich business executives and thus have found personal happiness. In the best-case scenario, these trends engage the population in the ongoing consumer race, emphasizing the importance of financial success in the new economic environment. In the worst-case scenario, they leave a bitter after-taste of economic oppression and helplessness. Both outcomes lead to disengagement from politics and an aversion to public activity.

**TABLE 1. Distribution of Internet Resources Growth, 2004–2008**

Runet sector	Number of Sites		Growth (percent)
	2004	2008	
Commercial	16,909	41,061	142.8
Entertainment	17,769	34,466	94.0
House and family	4,053	9,344	130.6
Auto industry	2,756	6,169	123.8
Information	3,725	6,050	62.4
Real estate	1,056	3,380	220.1
Other	41,594	56,179	35.1

This also contrasts with the ideological ends of many Soviet-era productions, which stated that happiness and success are possible through personal development, education and professional achievements. Two contrasting “female” stories are particularly interesting. The popular *Milkmaid from Hatzapetovka* drama (2007) depicts a village girl who won the heart of an oligarch by wearing an expensive dress given to her by a rich friend; her personal qualities only become apparent after she wears the appropriate clothing and learns upper-class manners. The timeless *Office Romance* (1973), on the other hand, is a romantic comedy featuring the life of an intellectual director of a research institute. An unexpected love affair transforms her from an unattractive researcher into a beautiful woman. In this case, clothing, beauty, and female happiness arrive after her personal qualities become apparent, and not the other way around—as is the contemporary trend to depict. This difference in ideological priorities does not come as a surprise. The Soviet authorities focused on the creation of a scientific intelligentsia that could sustain technological progress in competition to the West. I do not claim that the modern Russian state should embark on Soviet-style indoctrination patterns. Nevertheless, the Soviet state was successful in popularizing scientific and cultural professions in the public domain, which resulted in the emergence of a formidable stratum of world-class scientists.

These features of the public sphere have had an impact on the climate of public opinion

and professional preferences of the growing middle class. First, being poor has become socially unacceptable. Sixty percent of the 2008 VTsIOM respondents insisted that they belonged to the middle class. The reality, however, was different. Just 17 percent of the population had an income comparable with European middle class standards.<sup>40</sup> This positive self-identification showed the success of the ideological trends promoted in the public domain. Second, the attitude toward the rich and financially successful has changed considerably. The Moscow Institute of Sociology claims that, while in the 1990s 65.7 percent of the population thought that economic elites were greedy and unfair, the number of those who shared this view had decreased to 25.9 percent in 2004. Similarly, 65.3 percent of the 1990s respondents thought that economic elites were corrupt, against 29 percent of those who thought the same in 2004. More interestingly, only 2.8 percent of the 1990s respondents thought that economic elites had good entrepreneurial skills and adhered to the principles of fair competition, against 33.5 percent of those who thought the same in 2004.<sup>41</sup> Finally, and more importantly, Russia's middle class began to form outside the education, science, and high technology sectors. Three employment sectors recruited the new middle class and witnessed a substantial increase of workforce between 1990 and 2004: trade and catering (increase from 5,869,000 to 11,431,000 workers), finance, credit, and insurance (from 402,000 to 934,000 employees) and state administration (1,602,000 to 3,211,000).<sup>42</sup> Representatives of these professions are more likely to adopt a conformist rather than critical stance towards state policies as long as such policies do not threaten uninterrupted accumulation of wealth.

We cannot ascribe these developments solely to the workings of the public sphere, since economic factors have played their role. Nevertheless, the role of the public domain in shifting the popular interest to the consumer domain has been significant. Television was in the lead. Eighty-three percent of the 2000–2005 Levada Center respondents watched TV every day; 13 percent watched once per week; and only 1 percent watched less than once per month.<sup>43</sup> Moreover, people trusted the media. Forty-seven percent of the 2004 Levada Center respondents thought that the state did not restrict the media, and 45 percent trusted the radio, television, and printed press. The Levada Center data further shows that 42 percent of the 2006 poll's respondents suggested that Russian television was now the most interesting, while 28 percent chose the Soviet period, and only 11 percent opted for the Perestroika years. Similarly, 39 percent of the respondents thought that the state told more truth on TV during the Putin presidency, 39 percent thought that the state never told the truth on television, and only 6 percent thought that truthfulness was at its apex during the Yeltsin and Gorbachev periods.<sup>44</sup>

### **The Domination Problem**

Now to the problem of sociopolitical and economic domination. Russia's public sphere is too monolithic and fails to reflect the existing societal stratification. The nature of this stratification is both political and economic. Politically, this means the division between the rulers and the ruled. Russia's financial elites and state administrative apparatus constitute the rulers, while small and medium-sized businesses, the employed workforce, and destitute social security beneficiaries fall within the ruled. Economically, this is the division between the middle and upper classes and those who only aspire to join such ranks. The hegemonic state, bureaucratic elites, and upper economic classes dominate the public sphere. Thus, it becomes a monolithic realm that allows for the discussion of

state problems only by economically advanced citizens. Let me detail both types of this domination.

### Political Domination

The state dominates the public domain politically. This is seen through the four most important themes. First, the state fosters debates on important subjects within the public domain, but all the while acting as the principal agenda-setter. Thus, instead of promoting a “discourse of reason on and to power,” the public sphere fosters a discourse of reason “by power.”<sup>45</sup> Second, the state often creates a manageable, or “engineered,” form of pluralism

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in the public domain.<sup>46</sup> Third, the state uses the public sphere for acclamation of its own actors and policies, and, by doing so, deploys various forms of “political advertising.” Finally, state bureaucratic factions pursue their private interests in the public domain. This leads to the emergence of “staged forms of publicity,” to use the Habermasian terminology. The public sphere is therefore “produced circumstantially” on a case-by-case basis, serving the expedient interests of the main state actors.

First, it would be an overstatement to argue that the state focuses solely on pursuing its private goals at the expense of public preferences. Rather, the state is concerned about public opinion. The problem, however, lies in the nature of this relationship. In ideal circumstances, the public sphere should guide the government by using the critical opinion formulated outside the state power.<sup>47</sup> In Russia, this opinion, while formulated outside the ambit of the state, makes its way into the public domain under state supervision. The state collects such opinions through specialized polls and surveys, as well as through the medium of the Internet.<sup>48</sup> It subsequently processes these views, selects the most important themes, and only then introduces them to the public domain. This strategy enables the state to control and supervise public discourse. More importantly, the state selects those subjects that could benefit the positions of the extant political actors. Thus, if public preferences coincide with state interests, the subject receives a green light to enter the public space, and, in particular, its televised dimension. Many subjects discussed on national television have emerged in this particular fashion. They include the topics of modernization, patriotism, and the Edinaya Rossiya (United Russia) hegemony.

Indeed, the subject of modernization was introduced because the wishes of the state and the public converged. The public was disillusioned with bureaucratized institutions, corruption, and the lack of political alternatives.<sup>49</sup> The 2008 economic crisis also revealed that the economy was overly reliant on oil revenues and that industrial diversification still remains a distant goal. Following the 2008 drop in oil prices, Russia’s economy shrunk some 7.9 percent, marking the single largest decline among the world’s leading economies.<sup>50</sup> Against the backdrop of these developments, the state was worried about the possibility of public unrest in the regions. The government appreciated the existing



disaffection potential, and decided to instigate structural reforms instead of allowing the public discontent to slip out of control. Stylistically, this was done in a liberal fashion that could placate those who lamented the constrictive nature of Russia's political system. It is significant that many Russian commentators observed that by proposing the modernization doctrine in the liberal *gazeta.ru* pages, President Medvedev acted as a critical citizen, not as the head of state.<sup>51</sup> This was tantamount to admitting that the usual public sphere outlets, such as the television and the printed press, were not capable of hosting critical discussions. Medvedev-citizen felt skeptical about the current system of governance and focused on the most pressing problems of modern Russia, such as corruption, administrative dominance, the lack of legalism, and an inefficient economy. He critically appraised Russia's history and called for the creation of a state who serves the interests of the people, not the other way around. Medvedev also invited the public to leave commentaries on this subject in his personal web page.<sup>52</sup>

The president's address resulted in an avalanche of commentary and fostered genuine public debates.<sup>53</sup> *Vedomosti*, one of Russia's most authoritative dailies, established an online forum in which the public was invited to express opinions on the president's address. The forum required participants to fill out a form that included sections on the economy, the political system, demography, innovations, and corruption sections. The forum participants were invited to vote for the best proposals, which would be subsequently collated and forwarded to the Kremlin.<sup>54</sup> Many electronic outlets followed this lead. The public focused on ways of restructuring the extant sociopolitical system. Discussants agreed that modernization should be implemented by non-coercive means. In turn, it should rely on a new generation of people who had stakes in the high technology, education, innovation, and public activism sectors. The existing patron-client system of cadre selection was deemed dated and incompatible with the ends of modernization.<sup>55</sup>

Similar to the modernization theme, the self-preservation instinct led the state to discuss the problem of the Edinaya Rossiya administrative domination. That the public did not entirely approve of the party's hegemony was seen through the protest voting in some local elections, opinion polls, and the low level of electoral turnout. Indeed, only a quarter of the population took part in recent electoral campaigns at the local and regional levels.<sup>56</sup> Edinaya Rossiya lost a large number of votes in those areas where the opposition had political determination to win.<sup>57</sup> During the March 2009 regional elections, for example, the party underperformed in comparison to the 2007 parliamentary election results. Its votes declined from 81.03 to 80.4 percent in Tatarstan; from 96.12 to 72.3 percent in Kabardino-Balkariya, from 92.9 to 69.2 percent in Karachaevo-Cherkessiya; from 59.5 to 55.74 in Khakassiya; from 61.8 to 54.3 in the Briansk region; from 57.7 to 49.54 in the Volgograd region, and from 56.7 to 51.2 and 56.8 to 51.27 in the Arkhangelsk and Vladimir regions, respectively.<sup>58</sup> The party's overall victories did not detract from the surfacing of popular disillusionment with its style of governance.

The autumn 2009 regional parliamentary and local elections, in which Edinaya Rossiya won the majorities involving apparent violations of the electoral rules (the Moscow federal city and Dagestan are cases in point), produced a public outcry. The state reacted to these dynamics by allowing public debates on this theme. The January 22, 2010 State Council introduced an unprecedented (by the standards of the Putin period) discussion on the nature of Russia's political system. The State Council invited Russia's main opposition parties, including those that did not enter the State Duma. Every party was allowed

to deliver proposals on ways of improving governance, elections, and policymaking. The harsh criticism of Edinaya Rossiya's political dominance and its use of administrative methods was broadcast on Russia's main television channels.

Patriotism was another theme in which the state accommodated the climate of public preferences. The state gauged the public demand for a more patriotic stance. Sociological polls registered a steady growth of patriotic and conservative values since the end of the 1990s. The 2001 VTsIOM data shows that conservative categories of "order," "stability," and "justice" became dominant.<sup>59</sup> The usual moral attractions of the 1990s, such as "capitalism," "West," "business," "reform," "opposition," and "liberalism," had developed mostly negative connotations.<sup>60</sup> While ranking their main priorities, 95 percent of the VTsIOM respondents valued their families, 92 percent concentrated on personal happiness, 88 percent praised material wealth, 83 percent focused on patriotism.<sup>61</sup> Patriotic ideology occupied the single largest share of the 2006 Moscow Institute of Sociology poll answers, being supported by 26 percent of the respondents.<sup>62</sup>

The state benefited from this trend, in that patriotism and conservatism are ideologies that could contain public protest and help the public to consent to the extant system of governance. Hence the government actively promoted these values and deployed national television to achieve these ends. A number of patriotic films featuring Russia's valiant military history have been produced. The state partially financed some of these productions. These included *The 9th Company*, a popular depiction of the Soviet efforts in Afghanistan; *Spteznaz* and *Desantura*, series featuring the adventures of Russia's Special Purpose and Airborne Assault Forces; *Voina*, Alexei Balabanov's view on the war in Chechnya; *Marsh Brosok*, another Chechen subject production; *Brat*, a patriotic drama featuring the life of a Chechen war veteran; and many others. Similarly, a number of conservative-patriotic television channels have been established: the Orthodox *Spas*, military *Zvesda*, and *DTV* are cases in point. Old Soviet movies have also regained prominence.

The state also offered various patriotic themes for public discussion. The deputy head of the Presidential Administration, Vladislav Surkov, introduced the idea of "sovereign democracy" in February 2006. This doctrine employed anti-Americanism to justify its nationalistic stance. It condemned the aspirations of the neo-conservatives to secure the USA's domination within the global political arena.<sup>63</sup> In response to this, Surkov emphasized the need to pursue an independent foreign policy and praised the principles of non-intervention into the domestic affairs of other states.<sup>64</sup> The theme fostered heated public discussions on television, on the Internet and in the printed press. Eurasianism was another conservative ideology endorsed by the state. The doctrine saw Russia as a counterweight to the Euro-Atlantic civilization. Aleksandr Dugin was an active proponent of this idea. The Kremlin politically promoted Dugin and his Eurasian Youth Union organization in 2005. This was done in order to disseminate conservative-patriotic ideas that could limit the potential for the type of "colored" revolutions that had occurred in Georgia and Ukraine.<sup>65</sup>

In addition, the government adopted an ambiguous stance towards the Stalin era. On the one hand, the state admitted that Stalin was a dictator who sacrificed many lives in pursuit of his political ends. On the other hand, the authorities subtly popularized the idea that Stalin should also be given his due credit for technological and industrial modernization, as well as for the victory in the Great Patriotic War. This quiet rehabilitation of Stalinism resulted in the emergence of a more tolerant public stance towards this period. The number

of those who thought negatively of the Stalin era decreased from 43 to 23 percent between 2001 and 2008. The number of positive estimates decreased from 38 to 31 percent during the same period. More importantly, the percentage of indifferent people has grown from 18 to 47 percent. Levada Center sociologists claim that this state strategy helps to relieve the public from responsibility for the country's leadership, and thereby promotes an uncritical stance towards the government.<sup>66</sup>

As regards "engineered" pluralism, Taylor claims that many authoritarian and transitional states suppress and manipulate the public sphere.<sup>67</sup> At the same time, given the importance of the public sphere in modern life, these governments usually fabricate such a sphere. Thus, editorials appear in influential, albeit state-controlled, newspapers, and demonstrations gathering thousands of subservient citizens take place in support of governmental policies. The importance of this, Taylor argues, is that the "existence of the public sphere projects an image of a democratic society in which people can freely form their opinions and that these opinions can influence state policy making."<sup>68</sup> We cannot go as far as to claim that the public sphere in Russia is totally "faked." As we have discussed above, various debates take place in the newspapers, Internet, and television. However, some elements of the "faked" public sphere can be seen when pro-governmental demonstrations gather thousands of supporters on the streets of capital cities,<sup>69</sup> or when pro-Kremlin youth movements are allowed to express their opinions in the public domain with the vigor that would be denied to other organizations holding a more critical stance.<sup>70</sup>

The system of "engineered pluralism" was the central element of this trend. It mainly affects television space. Vladimir Pozner, Russia's preeminent political journalist, lamented a situation in which he was denied the right to raise certain subjects and interview certain people in his *Vremena (Times)* program.<sup>71</sup> Other analytical programs, such as *Vesti Nedeli (News of the Week)*, *Geroi Dnya (The Hero of the Day)*, *Sudite Sami (Judge it Yourself)* and the like, host discussions among experts and politicians. While many themes are interesting, these debates' participants do not touch on certain subjects and avoid criticizing a select circle of persons. They often discuss how to best implement current state policies, as opposed to the nature of such policies or the system within which such policies originated. These debates usually pander to the traditional, and therefore "safe," split between Westerners and Russophiles, focusing on the external, and mainly Western, influence on Russia's domestic politics and culture. The *Poedinok (Duel)* program hosted by Vladimir Solovev deserves a qualifying observation. Its participants frequently touch upon important systemic issues and voice various criticisms. Yet, again, they carefully avoid discussing a select circle of persons involved in the highest echelons of the government. Programs that question the nature of the current political system have been taken off air. Of particular significance were the *Svoboda Slova (Freedom of Speech)*, *K Bareru*, and *Namedni (Today)* programs, led by Savik Shuster, Vladimir Solovev and Leonid Parfenov, respectively.<sup>72</sup>

The federal printed press has remained largely independent, though the limits of self-censorship have had to be observed. The examples of Raf Shkirov from *Izvestiya*, who published a photo report of the Beslan tragedy; the *New Times* magazine correspondent Natalia Morar, who touched upon the corruption subject; or the *Moskovskii Korrespondent* newspaper, which alleged that Putin was romantically involved with Russia's rhythmic gymnastics champion Alina Kabaeva, are all cases in point.<sup>73</sup> Similarly, a number of regional outlets have been closed for hosting discussions on themes inconvenient to the central government. At the

same time, we must give the state its due credit for allowing the existing liberal conservative papers to discuss controversial subjects from different angles. *Novaya Gazeta*, *Vedomosti*, *Kommersant* and *gazeta.ru* are cases in point. Many such outlets host blogs and video programs moderated by liberal experts. These discussions are free and usually critical of the extant political system. At the same time, these papers have very small production numbers, which means that they do not reach wide audiences. *Vedomosti* produces just 66,700 copies per day, and *Kommersant* 135,000 copies. Reading is limited to those who can purchase such papers in urban centers or who have Internet access.

Furthermore, the state uses the public domain for the acclamation of its policies and main actors. Political advertising has been one important technique in achieving this goal. Political advertising is the process by which the state subtly builds the “right” and “wrong” pictures of the world and forges support for its main actors in the public domain.<sup>74</sup> Extensive use of political advertising led many experts to argue that the televised media serves a communicative rather than informational purpose.<sup>75</sup> In this light, it is often addressed as the “means of mass communication,” as opposed to the “means of mass information.”<sup>76</sup> Some political advertising techniques have been deployed more frequently than others. Of particular interest are journalistic works based on emphatic interpretation of political events. This concerns hardliner analysis programs such as *Odnako (However)* and *Post-Scriptum (PS)*, led by prominent experts Mikhail Leontyev and Alexei Pushkov, respectively. Such programs claim that Russia perpetually faces external threats that mainly emanate from the West. This implies that the public should support the current political actors, who can protect the country’s national interests.

Establishing a rigorous pattern of news delivery has also served the purpose of sociopolitical advertising. The most significant news is usually followed by less important events. Thus the television always begins its coverage with activities of the President, and, since the 2008 presidential election, the Prime Minister. Political, economic and cultural life that takes place outside these two institutions concludes the news.<sup>77</sup> The message delivered by this technique is that the extant political system is effective and the current political actors are the most suitable people for their jobs. Exposing various failings in foreign countries is another way of favorably highlighting the virtues of the Russian system.<sup>78</sup> News programs eagerly cover natural disasters and economic problems experienced by other states, subtly comparing those with stability at home. This technique extends to the vilification of the near past as epitomized by the Yeltsin and Gorbachev eras.<sup>79</sup> These years of political turmoil and economic deprivation are contrasted with the current period of economic prosperity.

Political advertising is also used during the national electoral campaigns, when the access to media resources by different candidates depends on their political orientation. Instead of providing equal coverage of candidates’ programs, Russia’s televised media acts as a campaigner on behalf of governmental candidates from the pro-Kremlin *Edinaya Rossiya* party. Thus, while in 1999 people did not feel that the media played a large role in their political choices,<sup>80</sup> in 2004 55 percent of the population believed that the presidential election could be cancelled, as Putin’s victory was inevitable.<sup>81</sup> These trends were exacerbated at the regional level. Public relations techniques deployed during regional and local campaigns have been particularly sophisticated. These often made a mockery of the electoral process and have hollowed out public debates.

Some of these techniques have included introducing bogus candidates with identical

names, thus doubling or tripling the name of a runner-up and confusing the voters. Introducing a number of sparring candidates who would abstain from campaigning, in favor of certain other contenders, was another method. Implementing these tactics has become a profitable business. The electoral public relations market in Russia's regions was estimated at US\$300mln in 2004, with pricing for a gubernatorial seat ranging from US\$5mln-25mln, regional assembly deputy from US\$50,000-US\$300,000, and a state Duma deputy US\$50,000-US\$100,000.<sup>82</sup> The Edinaya Rossiya party often used the so-called "locomotive" method. This meant that regional governors lead the party electoral lists, with no intentions of taking up parliamentary mandates. Thus they act as the "driving engines" for their less prominent party members. Persistent attempts by the opposition to abolish the "locomotive" practice have engendered no interest from the ruling majority.

Finally, various state administrative factions manipulate the public space in pursuit of their sectional interests. They forge support and publicity around single-case issues and create an illusion of open discourse. Such "staged forms of publicity" leads to the formation of a "non-public opinion." This problem stems from the fact that state power in Russia is deeply factionalized. There are numerous power groups, such as the Surkov team, the siloviki, the liberals, the oil lobby, the regional groups, and so on.<sup>83</sup> Such groups often influence auxiliary state institutions through backroom negotiations. This leads to a situation in which these institutions advocate the positions of one faction or another within the public space. For example, the public chamber falls under the patronage of the liberal wing of the presidential administration, while the Surkov faction has the leverage over parliament and the judicial structures.<sup>84</sup> Igor Sechin, the oil lobby leader, stands behind the legal enforcement agencies.<sup>85</sup> Public discussions often reflect political tensions between those groups.

These staged forms of publicity are elaborate. It is almost impossible to prove that the state has inspired, composed, orchestrated and manned these debates. A few examples are in order. The situation concerning the law on NGOs, which was enacted in December 2006, reflected struggles between the liberal and siloviki wings of the presidential administration. These tensions spilled into the public space and involved the newly formed public chamber and the parliament. A compromise was eventually found, with the liberals securing a range of amendments and the hardliners marginalizing the role of Parliament and the Public Chamber in the law enactment process.<sup>86</sup> It was often claimed that Vladislav Surkov staged the political conflict and televised publicity around the Butovo residential district in Moscow so as to discourage the Moscow mayor, Yuriy Luzhkov, from participating in the 2008 presidential race.<sup>87</sup> Surkov also hoped that the sovereign democracy idea would become a national ideology. He planned to entrench it by forging an elite consensus rather than by allowing a critical public discourse. His 2006 conference, organized under the patronage of the *Rossiiskaya Gazeta* newspaper, is an example.<sup>88</sup>

Business plays a particular role in this process. It also deploys the public space in pursuit of its financial interests. However, the dynamic of this process is different to that in the West, where business colludes with sectional interest groups and creates lucrative industries around fraught sociopolitical issues. Indeed, most media outlets belong to corporations with close links to the Kremlin. Gazprom purchased *Izvestiya* in 2005 and former governmental advisor Konstantin Remchukov, known for his association with Bazel, secured control over *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*.<sup>89</sup> In 2008, Gazprom sold the controlling stake in *Izvestiya* to the Rossiya bank, owned by Yuriy Kovalchuk, a personal friend of Vladimir

Putin. Furthermore, *Trud* and *Argumenty i Fakty* fell under the control of the pro-Kremlin Promsvyazbank, while the ownership of *Kommersant* passed to the steel tycoon Alisher Usmanov.<sup>90</sup>

Many administrative officials head large private and state corporations, and families of regional executives control the largest and most successful local firms in the regions. Moreover, people personally close to Russia's highest elite echelons own large and successful companies. The careers of Gennady Timchenko, Arkady Rottenberg and the Kovalchuk brothers have been widely discussed in the printed press.<sup>91</sup> Given that business has an interest in maximizing its profits, it refrains from constructive criticism of the state. Those firms that have intimate links to the state do not criticize the government for obvious "corporate loyalty" reasons. Those who do not have such links are nonetheless unwilling to criticize, under the post-Yukos business-political pact. In this latter case, compliance with the extant political system can ensure unimpeded functioning at home and abroad. Oleg Deripaska's interview with the Spanish *El Pais* newspaper is an example. Deripaska, whose business was dependent on state support, refused to admit that the Yukos affair was politically motivated and accused Mikhail Khodorkovsky of previously evading compulsory service in the Soviet Army.<sup>92</sup>

On the other hand, business is genuinely interested in transparent governance and an independent judicial system, given that the development of market relations, urbanization and investments have made the country's socioeconomic and political climate more complex. It has become clear that a complex industrial society such as contemporary Russia cannot be managed from a single center. Neither is it possible to pursue successful economic development within the corrupt administrative system. This business opinion, however, became transparent only when the state launched the modernization theme in the public domain. Thus, business seized the opportunity to advance its real preferences only when a permissible political climate emerged. The functioning of the Institute of Modern Development (INSOR) is an example. The Institute was established under the aegis of the Presidential Administration in 2008. President Medvedev demanded that the Institute provide an objective analysis of Russia's political system and propose genuine ways of advancing political and economic modernization. It is significant that big business finances this Institute through the interest is raised from capital investment.

The research results therefore reflect the opinion of Russia's industrial elite. It does not come as a surprise that the main thrust of the INSOR argumentation is liberal. The researchers claim that Russia needs political modernization, conducted simultaneously with technological improvement. They advocate the re-introduction of direct popular voting for regional governors, genuine freedom of speech in the televised media, introduction of equal conditions for all parties to conduct electoral campaigns, the forging of friendlier ties with the West, and eventual accession to NATO.<sup>93</sup> INSOR actively popularized these opinions in the public domain. The head of INSOR Igor Yurgens gave numerous interviews during January and February of 2010. These were published in *Rossiiskaya Gazeta*, *Novaya Gazeta*, *Vedomosti*, *The New Times?*, *gazeta.ru*, *rosbalt.ru*, *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, *polit.ru*, *Ekho Moskvy*, and the Pozner program broadcast on Channel 1. The Institute published 12 books and 20 research papers in 2009, and conducted 150 roundtables during the same year. It developed cooperation with European and American partners and drafted a program of "positive cooperation" with both parties.

### Socioeconomic Domination

The public sphere in Russia is monolithic in both its political and socioeconomic dimensions. It is impervious to the economically disadvantaged and subaltern groups. Speaking about modern societies, Charles Taylor distinguishes two socioeconomic rifts within the public domain.<sup>94</sup> The first rift stems from the modality of the class war, in which economically disadvantaged groups are excluded from equal participation in the public sphere. The second rift encompasses the resistance of subaltern groups to oppression by the majority culture. This rift is particularly prominent in the age of multiculturalism and political correctness.<sup>95</sup> Such rifts have differing weight in Russian society. The first rift has long been evident, while the second has only just surfaced.

First, the economically advanced have privileged access to the public sphere. This is particularly true within the readership and Internet segments. Economically disadvantaged groups, on the other hand, are confined to the television domain. The Levada Center<sup>96</sup> claims that the disintegration of the core outlets of the Soviet book redistribution system barred the majority from obtaining reading material.<sup>97</sup> Indeed, new private publishers are not interested in reaching the periphery audience. This occurs for financial reasons. Posting books and journals to remote places, where people cannot buy them, is costly and financially unjust. Thus, the public can purchase these products only in wealthy urban centers. Towns and villages whose populations are under 100,000 people do not have access to such materials. The system of public libraries has also disintegrated. The funding was limited during the 1990s, and the current government has not taken any steps to rectify this situation. Table 2 shows the decline in the number of public libraries between 1990 and 2006.<sup>98</sup>

**TABLE 2. Number of libraries in Russia, 1990–2006**

Variable	1990	1995	2000	2004	2006
Public libraries	62,600	54,400	51,200	49,900	770
Readers	71.9 m	60.2 m	59.6 m	58.2 m	0.8 m

The Internet is also confined to the economically advanced. VTsIOM claims that highly educated (28 percent) and economically successful (22 percent) citizens residing in large cities (22–25 percent) and in the richest areas, such as Moscow and St Petersburg (27 percent), use the Internet. Less-educated (97 percent), low-income (84 percent), and rural (81 percent) inhabitants have no access to the cyberspace.<sup>99</sup> This means that public opinion, formed in the Internet forums, reflects the concerns of the wealthiest citizens and ignores the problems of the lower income groups. A brief look at the *Lichnyi Opyt* (Personal Experience) discussions on *gazeta.ru* backs this suggestion.<sup>100</sup> These conversations concern the problems of the middle class. Discussants focus on travel, money, real estate, and family matters. Opinions are split between those who praise the West for its advanced material “culture” (cleanliness, efficient traffic regulations, high service standards, interpersonal etiquette), and simultaneously denounce the Russian way of life, and those who defend Russia by denouncing the West. A similar situation occurs in the forums of Russia’s most authoritative business daily, *Vedomosti*.

The differing access of Russia's new classes to the public domain is particularly salient for public discourse. This is for two important reasons. First, this situation excludes large segments of the population from critical debates. It leaves economically disadvantaged working class groups to consume filtered themes and engineered debates provided by televised media. The unequal access to the Internet and liberal newspapers is the biggest worry in that both contribute to the formation of a near-political society that is free from the "communicative" indoctrination of the televised media. At the moment, only the economically successful can partake in this relatively free discourse and influence the state through the normative power of a critical opinion. This situation is particularly beneficial to the state. Thus, the authorities turn a blind eye to such inequalities and promote the limited access to the advanced public domain in the fashion discussed above. This strategy helps to minimize, control, and contain free public debate, as well as to sustain the extant government popularity through the televised outlets.

Second, since the middle and upper classes dominate the public space, the most important sociopolitical problems, as well as the concerns of the largest share of the population, are not properly articulated. Thus, critical reasoning delivered to the state via independent public-sphere channels reflects the wishes of the wealthier part of society. At the same time, many important problems originate within the lower-income groups. In 2008, the middle and upper classes composed just 17 and 1 percent of the population respectively. The destitute, poor and proto-middle classes comprised 7, 24 and 51 percent of citizens.<sup>101</sup> The fact that social mobility mainly takes place between the poor, destitute and proto-middle classes supports this discussion further. Indeed, the proto-middle class almost doubled in size between 1998 and 2008, and grew from 45 percent in 2007 to 51 percent in 2008. This took place due to the reduction of the destitute from 28 to 7 percent and the poor from 41 to 24 percent.<sup>102</sup> The middle class, on the other hand, grows by as little as 3 percent per year.

Ignoring the sociocultural diversity within the extant classes is another problem. At this point, I would like to go back to the preceding trivialization discussion. Appealing to the common denominator of financial success and domesticity makes the public sphere impervious to the existing intra-class distinctions. At the same time, recognizing these distinctions is important, because Russia's current class stratification has yet to achieve a significant cultural impact. Therefore, members of the same class have varying concerns that cannot be reduced to the single denominator of common consumption. The new middle class is composed of different representatives of the former Soviet society with mixed educational and cultural backgrounds.<sup>103</sup> It also differs in terms of geographical, age and professional dimensions. The head of the Moscow Institute of Sociology, Mikhail Gorshkov, claims that this new middle class is composed of the private sector representatives, as well as the state bureaucracy formed during the Soviet era.<sup>104</sup> It also encompasses Moscow city inhabitants, whose culture and mentality are predominantly West European, as well as the periphery citizens, who look at things differently. Similarly, young middle class people embrace the new political and economic structure and are at odds with older generations that cannot shake off the sociocultural baggage of the Soviet past.<sup>105</sup>

The structure of the new poor is equally inconsistent. Gorshkov claims that Russia's new poor have not yet formed a self-sufficient social class, like that in the US and Western Europe.<sup>106</sup> Many engineers and scientists fell out of the middle class income bracket by living on a modest university salary or a pension and so joined the ranks of the poor.<sup>107</sup>



Additionally, while 67 percent of the employed proto-middle class and 75 percent of the employed poor are concentrated in small towns, these areas comprise some 60 percent of Russia's territory. Therefore, the culture and education of these people do not always reflect their income. Rather, this class identification is the result of structural unemployment, or circumstantial low-paid employment, in which citizens with higher education are forced to work in lower income jobs. Therefore, we cannot yet speak of a fully developed middle or working class culture. While the current economic stratification is apparent, it will take some generations to develop behavioral patterns, divorce living spaces into distinct residential areas, and form clear domestic habits to achieve a corresponding cultural stratification. Therefore, excluding the issues of intra-class diversity from the public domain can bottle up important societal contradictions and postpone the resolution of corresponding problems.

As to multiculturalism, Russia's politics of recognition have only just begun. Therefore, many Russians do not regard the issues of ethnicity, nationality, gender and sexuality as important factors in securing a higher socioeconomic status. Rather the issues of economic stratification overshadow these matters. The Moscow Institute of Sociology's research shows that only 7.9, 6.5 and 11.1 percent of the respondents thought that nationality, place of birth and gender respectively were important for achieving financial success.<sup>108</sup> At the same time, education, personal abilities, hard work and political connections were important for 49.1, 52.2, 44.4, and 48.2 percent of the respondents respectively. One situation relating to migrant workers exemplifies this dynamic. Representatives of minority cultures, they are deprived of essential rights. They live and work in inhumane conditions, and law enforcement officers, employers, and xenophobic groups habitually abuse them.<sup>109</sup> However, despite these injustices, we cannot strictly categorize this as a cultural recognition issue, in that only the poorest segments of ethnic minorities, the manual workforce, falls under such unlawful abuse.<sup>110</sup>

Wealthy representatives of ethnic minorities, on the other hand, encounter cultural oppression less frequently. Russia's highest state apparatus is composed of different ethnic groups. Sergei Shoigu is an ethnic Tuvins, while Vladislav Surkov is a Chechen. Russia's steel tycoon Alisher Usmanov is Uzbek, and the so-called "oligarchs" circle is mostly Jewish. Thus, while the cultural dimension is undoubtedly present, it is rather a problem of income stratification than ethnicity. Similarly, gays and lesbians enjoy interaction and recognition only among wealthier groups located in urban areas. There are numerous clubs, bars, meeting places, publication outlets and Internet resources available for these groups.<sup>111</sup> However, these exist only in rich city centers and are available to those who can afford to visit such places, buy appropriate literature, and connect to the Internet.<sup>112</sup> Thus, in order to obtain recognition Russia's subaltern groups have to affiliate with a higher income class, and only then can they place their claims for distinct cultural, gender or sexual orientation identity.

Our discussion has so far demonstrated that the rich and middle class groups dominate the public space. Other segments of the population, such as the poor, proto-middle class and subaltern groups, are excluded. This situation is likely to change in the future, since Russian society is gradually drifting toward the postmodern politics fostered by urbanization and the market economy. Perhaps in a few years we will be writing a different account, telling how these subaltern groups exert pressure on the public domain. At the moment, however, these dynamics are nascent. The voices of the lower middle classes are gradually

making their way onto the Internet. The recent wave of video addresses to the president and prime minister made by lower ranking militia officers prove this point. Their complaints led to contentious public debates on police reform.<sup>113</sup> The discussions accelerated the launch of a long-awaited militia restructuring, with Medvedev offering a wide range of measures in January 2010.<sup>114</sup> Similar attempts occur over the recognition of ethnic and sexual minorities. Proposals to establish a special trade union for migrant workers in the Sverdlovsk region, calls to create a theatre for guest workers in Moscow, or conflicts over gay parades are cases in point.<sup>115</sup>

A gradual class consolidation can help this trend. The process is slow but clear. Different behavioral patterns in the economic domain begin to emerge. For example, the number of lower income groups who use paid medical services, education or recreation services decreased from 57 to 34, 14 to 8, and 5 to 4 percent between 2003 and 2008.<sup>116</sup> Future expectations by the people concerned also indicate this class consolidation. Forty-eight percent of the destitute, 54 percent of the poor, and 47 percent of the proto-middle class do not expect any improvement in their financial well-being. Twenty-nine, 17 and 15 percent respectively expect that it will get worse. At the same time, 53 percent of the higher income groups expect to improve their financial positions in the near future.<sup>117</sup> At some point, this class consolidation will force corresponding groups to articulate their wishes more clearly. However, it may take some time until these groups' voices can make their way fully into the Russian public domain.

Clearly, in order to achieve greater equality, the government should forge alternative public spheres for subaltern and economically deprived groups, and expand the existing public sphere to reflect the cultural diversity within the classes. Public spheres generated for migrant communities and lower income groups with the limited access to information resources are particularly important. Migrant workers could bring their concerns about the legal enforcement agencies and extremism into a wider public debate. Similarly, lower income groups could articulate their demands on local governance and the welfare state. Finally, by recognizing cultural, and not only economic, diversity, of Russia's new classes could shift discussions from trivia to more important political matters. Clearly, the decentralization of the public sphere is consistent with progressive development. At the same time, the practical creation of such "multiple publics" requires institutional encouragement. The state must take upon itself moral, ethical and political obligations to ensure unimpeded functioning of these public spheres and enable subaltern groups to access these spaces.

The reality, however, is different. Instead of consciously fragmenting the public sphere, the state has adopted the policy of centralization. Most public sphere outlets become subject to central control. The legal dimension is particularly salient. The Russian labor code adopted in 2001 is unable to accommodate the functioning of independent trade unions and allow free expression of workers' will through strikes and industrial protests.<sup>118</sup> Similarly, the new version of the Law on NGOs, enacted on April 17, 2006, further diminished the "space" available for the articulation of public demands. The document stipulates that all such organizations must disclose their sources of funding and reveal their expenditure.<sup>119</sup> The media legislation was not conducive to the provision of viable public outlets for the expression of popular concerns. The enactment of the Information Security Doctrine in September 2000 was aimed at enhancing the state's control over the flow of information by exposing "irresponsible" coverage of events and the spread of "false" information.<sup>120</sup>

Furthermore, the Kremlin wished to secure control over academia. The new guidelines on foreign contacts for academics have been published (though without being enforced) and a few academics have been charged with espionage.<sup>121</sup> Since 2004, the government has been drafting a reforms package aimed at subordinating the Russian Academy of Science (RAN) to governmental control.<sup>122</sup> The Kremlin also proceeded to take a full control over Russia's most prominent think-tank and public opinion agency, VTsIOM.<sup>123</sup> Finally, legislative initiatives are being drafted to restrict the access of foreign investors to the Russian printed media and Internet resources.<sup>124</sup>

### Conclusion

The structural problems of the Russian public sphere fall into three main groups. First, trivialization of the public space creates a society of consumers rather than citizens. The state and business benefit from this trend, in that it contains public protest and helps maximize profits. Second, the state manipulates the public sphere politically. It colonizes the public space and acts as the agenda setter, the major player, and the arbiter. The state filters the most important societal problems into the televised space, thus partially reacting to the public mood. It also fosters "engineered" pluralism and allows inter-factional struggles to enter the public domain. Third, economic elites and the upper and middle classes dominate the public debate. This situation excludes large segments of the population from critical debates. It also creates a virtual picture of the societal reality, which encourages subaltern groups to give their assent to the ongoing sociopolitical domination. These problems are significant for the future of Russia's political system. It is evident that in order to achieve greater democratization, Russia must focus on creating a public sphere that is more rational, more decentralized, and more accepting of genuine public input. Reaching these goals may also aid the goal of political modernization that has been selected as a main priority by the Russian government.

This discussion also poses a number of theoretical and comparative-empirical questions that have implications for future research. The paper opens up an avenue for further testing in other, similar states with similar sociopolitical and economic conditions. In particular, it is interesting to analyze whether the development of the capitalist market economy in these countries results in the emergence of its auxiliary institutions, such as the public sphere, and whether such institutions would exhibit problems similar to those experienced by advanced Western democracies. Returning to the Russian context, it is interesting to discuss how the limitations of the public sphere impede the development of civil society, and investigate whether civil society could develop in the given political climate in principle. On a final note, it is particularly useful to establish whether the extant "liberal loopholes" of the public sphere in Russia have the potential to alter the political landscape of the country in the longer term.

## NOTES

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2. John Ehrenberg, *Civil Society: The Critical History of an Idea* (New York: New York University Press, 1999).

3. Luke Goode Jurgen Habermas, *Democracy and the Public Sphere* (London: Pluto Press, 2005); John Ehrenberg, *Civil Society: The Critical History of an Idea*, 219-21; and Jeane Cohen and Andrew Arato, *Civil Society and Political Theory* (Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 1992): 211-2. See also A. Giddens and Jurgen Habermas, in *The Return of Grand Theory in the Human Sciences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press): 123-139; Michael Roberts and Nick Crossley, *After Habermas. New Perspectives on the Public Sphere* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004); and Pauline Johnson, *Habermas: Rescuing the Public Sphere* (London: Routledge Press, 2006).

4. Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: a Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," *Social Text* no. 25/26 (1990): 56-80.

5. Taylor, "Liberal Politics and the Public Sphere," 259.

6. Jurgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge, MA: the MIT Press, 1989): 32.

7. Habermas, 36-7 and 52. Also see Pauline Johnson, 23-24.

8. Taylor, "Liberal Politics and the Public Sphere," 263.

9. Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. Some authors even argue that this ideal never existed such as Craig Calhoun in an, "Introduction: Habermas and the public sphere" in Craig Calhoun (ed.), *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992): 1-48. They argue we just did not have enough information on the structural problems of the public sphere of that age.

10. Habermas, 175.

11. Habermas, 29.

12. Habermas, 193.

13. Jurgen Habermas, "The Public Sphere" in Robert Goodin and Philip Petit (eds.), *Contemporary Political Philosophy: An Anthology* (London: Blackwell Publishers, 1997): 106.

14. Ibid.

15. In this categorization I partly followed Alan McKee's engaging introduction to the public sphere debate in Alan McKee, *The Public Sphere: an Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

16. Habermas himself was a student of Adorno but parted company with his mentor in the course of his work on the Structural Transformation. See Max Horkheimer, "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment and Mass Deception" in Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (London: Verso, 1999): 120-168; and Herbert Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966).

17. Max Horkheimer, "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment and Mass Deception" in Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (London: Verso, 1999): 133-4.

18. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958) and Richard Sennet, *The Fall of the Public Man: On the Social Psychology of Capitalism* (New York: Random House, 1978).

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23. Nicholas Granham, "The media and the public sphere" in C. Calhoun (ed.), *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge Massachusetts: the MIT Press, 1992): 374; Ian Connell, "Tales of tellyland: the popular press and television in the UK," in Peter Dahlgren and Colin Sparks (eds) *Communication and Citizenship: Journalism and the Public Sphere in the New Media Age* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991): 250; James Curran, "Rethinking the media as a public sphere" in Peter Dahlgren and Colin Sparks (eds) *Communication and Citizenship: Journalism and the Public Sphere in the New Media Age* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991): 46.
24. John Keane, *The Media and Democracy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991): 54.
25. Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: a Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," *Social Text* no. 25/26 (1990): 56-80; G. Eley, "Nations, Publics, and Political Cultures: Placing Habermas and the Public Sphere in the Nineteenth Century," in Craig Calhoun (ed.), *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1991): 289-339; Alan McKee, *The Public Sphere: an Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005): 10
26. Benjamin, Lee, "Textuality, meditation, and public discourse" in Calhoun (ed.): 416; Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: a Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," 66-70; Alan McKee, *The Public Sphere: an Introduction*, 140-2; Joan Landes, "The public and the private sphere: a feminist reconsideration" in Landes (ed.) *Feminism: the Public and the Private* (Oxford: OUP, 1998): 135-164.
27. Taylor, 279-80.
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