

## ARTICLE

# Political Leadership and Transitional Democracy in the Russian Federation: Challenges and Prospects

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## **Abstract**

There are international and Russian observers who view the contribution of Russian president Vladimir Putin to the development and democratization of the Russian Federation in a positive light. However, there are others who do not share this view. They are concerned that the path to democracy made possible by the collapse of the Soviet system has been derailed. This paper explores the role and impact of Russian political leadership on the transitional democratic process in the Russian Federation to provide a clearer basis for evaluating Putin's record. Several sections examine the status and the role of the state, civil society, economy, media, and human development in the transition of the Russian Federation from a totalitarian state to a democratic polity. The evidence shows that Putin, although in power for nearly eight years, has not merely failed to ensure an adequate transition towards liberal democracy, but has consolidated an autocratic regime that substantially deviates from the liberal democratic reforms he was charged with continuing. It is argued that the outcomes of political, social and economic reforms under Putin are likely to have a negative effect on Russia's long-term development.

## Introduction

*If liberty and equality, as is thought by some are chiefly to be found in democracy, they will be best attained when all persons alike share in the government to the utmost.*

Aristotle<sup>2</sup>

Democracy and human rights are considered to be fundamental prerequisites for a sustainable development and long-term peace. Nowadays, many societies of the world experience mass violations of human rights and conflicts which pose a considerable obstacle towards building liberal democratic states. Human rights violations are often particularly severe in the periods of transition during which societies are undergoing significant political, social, and economic transformations. One of the greatest examples is the case of the Soviet Union where the communist system failed to address and regulate grave economic, social and political problems, which led to the disintegration of the country and numerous violent conflicts such as Trans-Dniester Region, Azerbaijan-Armenia, Georgia, and Chechnya amongst others.

Any transformation is a highly complex process which requires elaborate and sharp political leadership that is able to draw the nation together and provide an all-encompassing identity as part of the nation-building process. The role of leadership throughout history has been central for all societies and states in defining and shaping most of the sociopolitical processes. It is the leadership that substantially determines the course of wars, peace and destiny of entire nations.

Despite some skepticism about the reality and importance of leadership, all social and political movements require leaders to initiate and lead them. As Gardner noted that for a society to function, its people must share beliefs and values regarding the standards of acceptable behavior. Leaders can revitalize those shared beliefs and help keep the values fresh. "They have the role in creating the state of mind that is the society". They conceive and articulate goals that move

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2 Oxford Dictionary of Scientific Quotations, *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, 2005.

people from their own interests to unite for higher ends.<sup>3</sup> Bass holds that leadership has been conceived as the focus of group process, as a matter of personality, as a matter of inducing compliance, as the exercise of influence, as particular behaviors, as a form of persuasion, as a power relation, as an instrument to achieve goals, as an effect of interaction, as a differentiated role, as initiation of structure, and as many combinations of these definitions.<sup>4</sup>

In the context of the rapidly globalizing world, the importance of universally accepted frameworks of rules and regulations that are able to address basic people's needs such as freedom and security, and can be applied internationally has become extremely relevant. Throughout the history of humanity myriad of forms of government have been explored from tribalism to monarchy, communism, autocracy and democracy yet none of them, except democracy, proved to be able to offer peaceful and sustainable development, where every single citizen would have equal rights for political participation and benefit from national wealth. In spite of certain criticism of democracy it is, nevertheless, a political system that is the most conducive to the sustainable development which is rather meeting the needs of majority than privileged minority. Describing democracy Winston Churchill noted that - "Democracy is the worst form of government except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time".<sup>5</sup>

In fact, democracy is a system of an open political decision making and it is, in many ways, a system of conflict management that provides predictable procedures in which collective decisions can be taken without the risk that losing a political battle will mean grave misfortune, imprisonment, or even loss of life. Democracy is promising because the principles, institutions, and rules associated with democratic practice seek to manage inevitable social conflicts in deeply divided and less conflicted societies alike.<sup>6</sup> However, establishment of democracy is a highly

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<sup>3</sup> Gardner, J.W., "Renewing: The leader's creative task," *Leadership Paper* No.10, Washington, DC: Independent Sector, 1988.

<sup>4</sup> Bass, B.M., *Bass and Stogdill's Handbook of Leadership, Theory, Research and Managerial Applications*, London: The Free Press, 1990, p.11.

<sup>5</sup> Churchill. Winston L. S., <http://theorem.ca/~mcole/Churchill.html>.

<sup>6</sup> Sisk. Timothy D. , "Democracy and Conflict Management," at *Beyond Intractability: A Free Knowledge Base on More Constructive Approaches to Destructive Conflict*, Boulder, CO: University of Colorado, 2003.

complicated process and to lead societies safely to democracy requires creation of democratic institutions, free and just elections and, most importantly, building capacity of political leadership, fostering liberal democratic culture and traditions.

The Russian Federation represents a vivid example of a transitional democracy where a historical legacy of strong autocracy is believed to be one of the dominant factors which hampers democratization processes in the Russian Federation as well as informs the political culture, and the relationship between the people and the State over many centuries. With this in mind, this paper tries to explore the challenges and prospects of democratization of the Russia Federation by focusing on the role of ‘political leadership’ in consolidating vital democratic institutes such as rule of law, human rights, independent media, free and just elections, open participation of civil society in political life. This research paper argues that the post-communist political leadership in the contemporary Russian Federation under Putin’s government has not proved to be efficient in developing a liberal democratic state and, at the same time, has not managed to introduce another adequate political system that would be able to overcome serious social and economic problems.

### **Russia in the 21<sup>st</sup> century**

More than fifteen years after the fall of the Soviet Union, Russia remains a key player in world politics. Still the largest country in the world in terms of physical geography, Russia is home to more than 140 million persons. Its natural assets include substantial energy and mineral resources. Russia is a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council (along with China, France, the United Kingdom, and the United States) and is an important actor in a number of other international organizations, including the Group of Eight (Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the UK, the US, and the Russian Federation). The international community recognizes Russia as one of the five nuclear weapons states (the others are China, France, the UK, and the US). It possesses the world’s largest stockpile of weapons of mass destruction. It is

no surprise then that the progress of Russia's social, economic and political transition from totalitarian socialism to democratic capitalism is of great interest to the international community.

The security and potential proliferation of weapons of mass destruction is perhaps the most frequently voiced concern by international observers in Russia's transitional period. It is widely understood among experts and intellectuals that weak states with high levels of corruption are at marked risk for losing control over their military-industrial assets. The market in weapons is one of the most profitable in the world; it is therefore naïve to assume that extremist groups and rogue states do not desire to obtain weapons of mass destruction and materials for manufacturing such weapons. Given Russia's immense stockpile of weapons and weapons-making materials, as well as the proliferation of terrorist networks and activities around the globe, the country's internal state of security and stability deservedly draws special scrutiny.

Another point of interest is the country's political and ethnic diversity. The Russian Federation is composed of 86 federal subjects (48 provinces, 21 republics, more than 15 districts and autonomous regions and two federal cities, Moscow and St. Petersburg). Over 1,000 nationalities and ethnic groups, most of which are indigenous peoples who inhabit the regions comprising the Russian Federation for centuries, constitute its population. Such a mix of ethnic groups makes nationalist movements and internal conflicts more likely, especially when the government fails to ensure recognition of and equal rights for national and religious minorities. Ethnic conflict heightens the risk of civil war, which in turn is likely to cause out-migration, affecting the stability and security of neighboring provinces and states. Antagonized by a long history of Tsarist and Soviet repressions, Chechnya is a striking example of the potential for violent nationalist movements associated with regional instability. Though relatively subdued presently, the North Caucasus still experiences bouts of violence.

The former Russian Minister of Nationalities Affairs Valery Tishkov stated that inter-ethnic tensions in Russia are triggered by unequal status of citizens – representatives of various ethnic groups as well as unequal conditions for development of different cultures where dominant

position belongs to the majority (cultural-ethnic) represented by the Russians (ethnic Russian) on the All-Russian level and, in the most Russian Federation republics, to the so-called 'titled' nations (Tatars, Bashkirs, Chuvashi, Dagestanies, Chechens and etc.). In the present situation ethnicity, apart from cultural identity function, is now playing the role of therapy for curing historical trauma as well as a mechanism of political mobilization of civil society; as an instrument of struggle for power and for the access to resources.<sup>7</sup>

In March 2006, the Council on Foreign Relations, a US-based nonpartisan and nongovernmental organization studying regional and international development, released a report, *Russia's Wrong Direction*, which detailed many of the major international concerns regarding Russia's reforms and development. The report concludes:

Despite rapid economic growth and social transformation, Russian political institutions are becoming neither more modern nor more effective, but corrupt and brittle. As a result, Russia's capacity to address security concerns of fundamental importance to the United States and its allies is reduced. And many kinds of cooperation—from securing nuclear materials to intelligence sharing—are undermined. Today, Russia seems stable, but its stability has a weak institutional base. The future of its political system is less predictable—and the country's problems are less manageable—than they should be.<sup>8</sup>

One factor that has been used to explain the shortcomings of democratization processes in the Russian Federation is the country's historical legacy of strong autocratic rule. Many analysts contend that this legacy fundamentally informs Russia's political culture. To be sure, from before the Romanov Dynasty through the Soviet period, a succession of authoritarian regimes has ruled the Russian people. Israeli political analyst Shlomo Avineri argues,

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<sup>7</sup> Tishkov, Valery, "Ethnology and Politics", *Politics of Multiculturalism*, Moscow, 2001, p.41.

<sup>8</sup> Council on Foreign Relations, "Russia's Wrong Direction: What the United States Can and Should Do", *Task Force Report*, No. 57. New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 2006.

While none of the post-communist countries, with the exception of Czechoslovakia, had been a consolidated democracy prior to 1939 or 1945, they all had representative and liberal traditions embedded in their institutions, social structures and self-understanding. Russia lacked these structures. There was very little in Russian historical traditions and memory (again: both real and constructed) on which a Russian liberal and democratic state could be built: no historical representative institutions, no ingrained traditions of tolerance or pluralism.<sup>9</sup>

University of Stanford political science professor Larry Diamond notes, “at the third wave of world democratization which began in 1974, there were 41 democracies among the existing 150 states. Of the remaining 109 states, 56 (more than half) of them subsequently made a transition to democracy, and of those 56, only Pakistan, Sudan, and Russia are not democracies today.”<sup>10</sup>

President Putin, in his public speeches, often uses democratic rhetoric to reassure both domestic and foreign audiences of his democratic positions and views. During the 2006 G8 Summit, for example, he stated, “As to democracy and freedom of media: I think, I am confident—without development of democracy and freedom of press, without development of institutes of civil society Russia does not have [a] future.”<sup>11</sup> Moreover, in defense of government behavior in the current period, status quo leaders stress the uniqueness of Russia and the need for a distinctive and special approach to democratic practice—a practice that administration specialists call “Sovereign Democracy.” One of the most influential Kremlin advisers, Vladislav Surkov, explains that sovereign democracy is not too different from the democratic practices of Western countries. According to Surkov, the term conveys two messages. First, the current regime is democratic. Second, the international community must accept and respect the government’s claim that it is democratic. State elites regard any attempt to verify Russia’s claims about its

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9 Shlomo Avineri, “To Russia, with skepticism”, *Australia’s e-journal of social and political debate*, 10 November 2006, <http://www.onlineopinion.com.au>.

10 Larry Diamond, “A Universal Democracy”, *Polity Review*, (2003), pp 3.

11 Vladimir Putin, “Speech about the Democratic Future of Russia”, delivered at *the 2006 G8 Summit* in St. Petersburg, Russia, 2006.

democratic character as meddling in Russia's domestic affairs. As Putin puts it, “fundamental democratic principals, democratic institutes must be adapted according to the realities of the Russian context, to our traditions and history. *And will we do it by ourselves.*”<sup>12</sup>

As controversial as he is in many circles, Putin can boast of supporters within and without the country. One of the leading specialists on Russia, Richard Sakwa, writes,

Putin’s coming to power, in the beginning of new millennium, signified the beginning of the period of changes. Putin had to face the legacy of the Yeltsin’s hybrid modernization. The government was trying to adapt to various forms of development chosen in the past. The state that emerged under Putin’s administration has begun to rescuing Russia from the marsh of the “transitional” period and moving the country towards normality.<sup>13</sup>

Former president Mikhail Gorbachev, the man who set Russia’s transformation from communism to capitalism in motion, also sympathizes with Putin, saying,

Under Putin’s governance, Russia got out of a chaos and can proceed along the path of democratic reforms. Today, Russia is being often criticized and accused in exerting pressure on the media and diverging from democracy. At the same time, only few admit that during the Yeltsin’s epoch the country was falling apart while the west was applauding. It was the time of the shooting down the parliament in 1993, the time of the “elections without a choice” in 1996, the time of oligarch-bureaucratic control over media, growing poverty etc. The critics became sharper when Russia began getting up from the knees. These critics were sometimes relevant, but often too hasty and unacceptably knocking. They tell us that Russia in its very nature is unable to adopt democratic

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12 BBC, “*Putin will adapt democracy to ‘realities’*,” February 22, 2005 (emphasis added).

13 Richard Sakwa, *Putin: Choice of Russia*, Moscow: Olma Press, 2006, p.16 and p.172.

principals and procedures as well as to create civil society and give in its “imperial ambitions.” I cannot agree with this. Russia is a country in transitional democracy.<sup>14</sup>

However, based on his actions, both domestic and international media describe Putin as yet another authoritarian leader in Russia’s long history of authoritarian leaders. Most of the criticism about Putin’s governance issues from a reluctance to rationalize Putin’s rigid state policies, concentration of power in military-intelligence elite, and deviation from liberal democratic reforms that have emerged under his leadership. On the matter of the third concern, the liberalization process which began in the late 80s (thanks to Gorbachev’s policies of glasnost and perestroika) gave hope to the people for the establishment of a liberal democratic state. In recent years, however, observers have accused the Kremlin of pulling back from democratic reforms and, worse, centralizing power and suppressing dissent. One of Russia’s more notable political economists, Mikhail Delyagin, argues,

One of the most prominent characteristics of the contemporary Russia is dramatic degradation of human capital. In the recent years, the government literally freed itself from any responsibility of its citizens. The essence of Putin’s “guided democracy” lies in provision of total freedom to bureaucracy in exchange to loyalty. Democracy, as an institute of coercion of state’s responsibility to the society is virtually extirpated and in reality widely perceived as synonym of deceit and theft.<sup>15</sup>

How should we judge the debate? In describing Russia today, it is important to emphasize that Russia has traveled far down the path to democratization in a relatively short period. After 70 years of totalitarian state socialism, where Marxist-Leninism was the only permitted ideology, Russia has managed to establish a federal presidential republic with democratic institutions,

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14 Mikhail Gorbachev, “About pluralism and glasnost in the new Russia,” *Rossiiskaya Gazeta*, Moscow, September 6, 2006.

15 Mikhail Delyagin. *Russia after Putin*, Moscow: Rikurs, 2005, p.23, p.59. Dr. Mikhail Delyagin is one of the most prominent economists in Russia. He is a director of the Institute of the Globalization Problems and worked for many years as an advisor for Boris Yeltsin’s government as well as several governmental ministries.

including a constitution, free elections, free speech, and so forth. But a state in transition must be careful not to rest on its laurels—and especially it must not backslide.

Is establishing democratic institutions, holding elections, and forming multi-party governments sufficient to claim a democratic polity? The remainder of this paper will consider this and other questions by examining in several sections the following features of Russia's transition to democracy: the process of government and the party system; the character of Russia's system of mass media (television, radio, and print media); the problem of corruption at all levels of government; and the living conditions of ordinary Russians. To understand the causes of shortcomings and failures of transitional democracy process, one must examine the status and the role of the state, civil society, media, economy and human development in the transition of Russia from a totalitarian state to a democratic polity.

### **Russia's Emerging Democratic Polity**

“Indeed, you won the elections, but I won the count.”

- Forty-fifth President of Nicaragua Anastasio Somoza Debayle

The Russian Federation has a multiparty political system with a strong presidency, a government headed by a prime minister, and a bicameral legislature, a Federal Assembly consisting of a lower house, the State Duma, and an upper house, the Federal Council. Both branches have constitutionally delegated responsibilities and tasks. In this separation-of-powers model, one branch checks and compliments the other. In theory, such a system is supposed to be able to ensure full representation of all political entities and provide for the efficient and effective formulation and implementation of acts, decrees, laws, and policies. But in practice, the Federal Assembly has not proven to function adequately. Moreover, it has demonstrated a certain inability to withstand outside manipulation and pressure.

Furthermore, the recent public administration reforms have facilitated a growing concentration of presidential power, as well as the proliferation of pro-presidential political actors in the

parliament and the government. In 2005, direct gubernatorial and regional leaders elections were eliminated. The president now suggests the candidates to the parliament. If the parliament fails to ratify the suggested candidates three times, the president has constitutional right to dissolve the parliament. Through this process, the president's protégés and proponents ensure that the president's interests prevail in the parliament.

Political manipulation is evident in the shifting of party representation in the Federal Assembly. Putin's closest comrades and most active supporters formed what has become the largest and the most influential party: United Russia. Putin largely credits himself with the party's success: "I directly participated in creation of United Russia. I helped that party to grow and develop."<sup>16</sup> Although a relatively new political party in the Russian parliament, United Russia has made substantial gains in recent federal and local elections due. Created in 2001, at the time when there were other powerful parties, it polled a respectable 37 percent of the party vote in 2003. Today, United Russia holds 69 percent of seats in the parliament (303 seats of the 450).<sup>17</sup> United Russia has become a political giant that influences the State Duma, defines priorities, shapes policies, and dictates the rules. Crucially, it is a thoroughly pro-Putin party. Boris Gryzlov, the speaker of the state duma and the chairman of United Russia, recently stated, "Our goal is to ensure the succession of the Putin's course."<sup>18</sup> Thus, the authentic purpose of the multi-party political system—to foster healthy debate and a plurality of viewpoints—has been undermined by political manipulation.

## **Mass Media**

The Russian constitution and laws guarantee freedom of speech and the press. Nevertheless, according to the Freedom House Country Report 2005:

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16 Vladimir Putin, "United Russia (official website)", January 2, 2007, <http://www.er.ru/news.html?id=117970>.

17 The official website of the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation, the State Duma, available at <http://www.duma.gov.ru>.

18 Boris Gryzlov, Press Release from The United Russia (official website), 08 May, 2007, retrieved from <http://www.edinros.ru/news.html?id=120349>.

The Russian media are losing the limited freedom they once enjoyed. During the 1990s, NTV news broadcasts were relatively free to criticize the government, though they remained under the control of powerful business groups. Since Putin came to power at the beginning of 2000, this situation has deteriorated dramatically. Now, the state maintains extensive control over electronic media, where most of the population gets its information.<sup>19</sup>

Government pressure on the media persists, especially during the last couple of years, resulting in numerous infringements on these rights. Faced with continuing financial difficulties, as well as pressure from the government and large private companies with links to the government, many media organizations find their autonomy severely constrained. State and local governments now either completely or partially own approximately two-thirds of the country's 2,500 television stations. Moreover, the government indirectly influences private broadcasting companies through partial ownership of several commercial structures. The government uses its controlling ownership of all national television and radio stations, as well as the majority of influential regional ones, to restrict access to information about issues the state regards as sensitive or embarrassing. Media freedom advocates view this trend as clear evidence of the government efforts to expand control over media before the 2007-08 parliamentary and presidential elections. In another crucial development, government-friendly corporations have acquired more than 40 percent of newspapers and other periodicals. This state-corporate partnership buttresses direct and indirect government control.

The presidential elections campaign in 2004 exposed the vulnerability of Russian media to political manipulation. The state-controlled media demonstrated a clear bias in favor of the incumbent in news presentation and coverage of the campaign. According to a 2004 Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) report,

On a technical level the elections were organized with professionalism, particularly on the part of the Central Election Commission (CEC) [but] the process overall did not adequately reflect principles

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<sup>19</sup> Freedom House, "Russia County Report", *Executive Summary*, 2005.

necessary for a healthy democratic election. The election process failed to meet important commitments concerning treatment of candidates by the State-controlled media on a non-discriminatory basis, equal opportunities for all candidates and secrecy of the ballot.<sup>20</sup>

An alarming indicator of the degradation of free press in Russia is the status of the country's journalists. According to the International News Safety Institute report, called "Killing the Messenger," Russia is the second deadliest country for journalists after Iraq,<sup>21</sup> an astonishing fact considering that Russia, unlike Iraq, has not been in a state of war since the Second World War. According to the report, the most common cause of journalist's deaths, namely assassination, is associated with both conflict and with unstable countries such as Colombia and Russia, in which the distinctions between lawlessness, civil unrest, and civil war are not always readily apparent.<sup>22</sup>

The assassination of the Russian journalist Anna Politkovskaya in October of 2006 demonstrates the extent to which journalists in Russia are allowed to question government policy and practice. Anna Politkovskaya had become internationally known due to her outspoken reporting on the conflict in Chechnya and human rights violations and corruption, reporting in which she was highly critical of the Russian government and military, as well as the pro-Moscow government in Chechnya. The Moscow Union of Journalists characterized her killing "a new attack on democracy, freedom of speech and openness in Russia."<sup>23</sup>

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20 Russian Federation OSCE/ODIHR Final Report, *Presidential Election*, March 14, 2004, p. 2

21 International News Safety Institute, "Killing the Messenger", *Report of the global inquiry by the international news safety institute in the protection of Journalists*, Brussel: International News Safety Institute, 2006, p.11. "The top ten bloodiest countries over the past 10 years were Iraq, Russia, Colombia, Philippines, Iran, India, Algeria, the former republics of Yugoslavia, Mexico and Pakistan" from "Killing the Messenger."

22 International News Safety Institute, "Killing the Messenger", *Report of the global inquiry by the international news safety institute in the protection of Journalists*, 2006, p.17.

23 The Guardian, "The Only Good Journalist," 10 October 2006.

Another dimension in Russian media affairs is criminality. Russian Ministry of Interior General Alik Khabibulin argues that the criminal element exerts a significant amount of control over the media in the Russian Federation:

Criminality won the information war: now, it is controlling the media; it has considerable technical means of getting the necessary information, which are not accessible to the most of the law-enforcement structures; it has unlimited access to the governmental information resources; ...actively counteracts and prevents the spread of information about itself using all forms of intelligence service and reconnaissance as well as other ways of moral or physical elimination of those, who interfere.<sup>24</sup>

Alik Khabibulin's speech raises several questions: What are the criminal groups to which this high-ranked law-enforcement official refers? Who forms these groups and how do they obtain "unlimited access" to governmental information? Is he suggesting that these groups are government officials? Who else can employ the intelligence service apart from intelligence itself? These are questions that demand further research.

### **Corruption and the Rule of Law**

When assessing the rule of law in Russia, it is necessary to account for the corruption that strikes and impairs the state from within. The legislature becomes the most vulnerable target, manipulation of legislation subsequently affecting other structures. In Russia, corruption has expanded dramatically. Russian General Prosecutor Uri Chaika states, "Unfortunately, we cannot say that corruption is attributed to only certain sectors of the government. Corruption has penetrated into all levels of authority and has becoming systematic. It [is] demonstrating itself in

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<sup>24</sup> Alik Khabibulin (Militia General-Major), *Public speech at the Academy of the Economic Security under the Ministry of Interior of the Russian Federation*, Press-Service, Newspaper "Shield and Sword", 19 January 2007, <http://www.mvd.ru/press/interview/4556/>.

all spheres of public administration where any financial or materials assets are being distributed.”<sup>25</sup>

Corruption played a role in two tragedies in Russia in 2004—in the August bombings that brought down two planes, killing 90 people, and the Beslan school attack. In these events, corruption made it possible for the terrorists to carry out their deeds. The bombers entered the aircraft just prior to takeoff by buying tickets from a scalper and paying a US\$30 bribe to an airline official. Additionally, some of the terrorists told the Beslan hostages that they had paid bribes to bring their two trucks into the school compound. By the end of the year, five police officers were facing charges of negligence connected with the attack.<sup>26</sup>

In February 2006, the parliament ratified, by absolute majority, the United Nations Convention against Corruption, which the international community adopted in 2003 (it was in force in December 2005). That same day, Interior Minister Rashid Nurgaliev said that corruption threatens Russia's national security. “Today the scale and degree of corruption impacts on various aspects of state and public life and not only threatens the country's internal security, but causes considerable damage to Russia's image abroad,” he said. He added that, in 2005, his ministry investigated 34,500 cases of corruption, a growth of seventeen percent over the previous year.<sup>27</sup>

Perhaps the worst corruption exists in law enforcement. President Vladimir Putin, speaking at a meeting with senior police officers, criticized the two million strong ministry for corruption and the inability to stop rampant criminality. Putin has publicly noted that public trust in the police is much lower than for other law enforcement agencies, and state and public institutions. According to the president, people who turn to the police for help often face indifference, and sometimes

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25 Uri Chaika, The Russian Federation General Prosecutor Office (official website), January 30, 2007.

26 Freedom House, “Russia Country Report”, *Executive Summary*, 2005.

27 Victor Yasmann, “Russia: Fight Against Corruption Starts With Interior Ministry,” *Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty*, Friday, February 24, 2006.

have their rights directly violated by Interior Ministry officials. He also accused the Interior Ministry of low levels of professionalism and called on it to root out corrupt police officers.<sup>28</sup>

But anti-corruption rhetoric has done little to stem the rising tide of corruption and cronyism. The number of corrupt officials is growing, the size of bribes is increasing, and although ordinary people and businessmen try to avoid giving bribes, government officials continue to take and demand bribes. According to new data on corruption obtained in a recent large-scale survey, the volume of bribery has grown from 36 billion dollars in 2001 to 319 billion dollars in 2005.<sup>29</sup> Judging from the results of the survey, half of Russian citizens during their lifetime find themselves in a situation where it is clear to them that they won't get anywhere if they don't give a bribe. That number has grown from 50 percent in 2001 to 55 percent in 2005. Over the past four years, the average size of the bribe per operation has grown from 62 dollars to 97 dollars. Thus, people give bribes more seldom, but dollar amount of bribes is greater, and as a result government officials receive three billion dollars a year from citizens to do what they should have done free of charge. The relatively weak flow of bribes from people to government officials is more than compensated for extortion from businessmen. In 2001, observers were greatly surprised by the volume of corruption, which comprised two-thirds of the country's budget. Now it surpasses the budget by 2.66 times. According to the organization Transparency International, in 2005 Russia ranked 95th out of 145 countries for corruption, close to such countries as Iran, Iraq, Kazakhstan, Sudan and Libya. In 2006, it moved further down to 121st place, standing with countries like Rwanda, Honduras, Gambia and Philippines.<sup>30</sup>

A research representative at the ROMIR Monitoring Agency Nikolai Popov claims that most Russian citizens and businessmen are of the opinion that corruption has increased and broadened during the past four years. In a survey he was implementing with few partnering agencies, he formulated several research questions on the corruption perception as well as the causes of

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28 Ibid.

29 New data on corruption was obtained in a recent survey by the INDEM Foundation and the ROMIR Monitoring Company.

30 Transparency International, *Corruption Perceptions Index 2006*,  
[http://www.transparency.org/policy\\_research/surveys\\_indices/cpi/2006](http://www.transparency.org/policy_research/surveys_indices/cpi/2006).

corruption as they are understood by the population: Do Russian citizens and businessmen really denounce this social phenomenon? Do they believe that the fight against corruption is the number one priority for the economy and people's life? According to the survey, the major cause of corruption is "the corrupt character of the supreme power." Ninety-two percent maintain that this is the main reason for corruption. Only five percent regard it as not important. Businessmen hold the same view. It was named the most important cause by 91 percent of the entrepreneurs polled. Seventy-nine percent of the population says that leaders set a bad example, "the fish rots from the head," they assert. Eighty-four percent of citizens and businessmen name "the immorality of politicians and government officials" the main reasons for corruption. They claim that it is not the hard life in government offices and the ill will of businessmen and other applicants that force high and middle government officials to take bribes, but they go to work in bodies of power for personal profit and to enrich themselves through deals and machinations in which direct bribes are just part of the process.<sup>31</sup> Nikolai Popov states that according to the same survey, the Russian citizens name, among other important reasons for corruption, "the poor performance of law-enforcement agencies" (84 percent.). Businessmen give similar assessments. They also emphasize "the vague character of the laws, which gives government officials an opportunity to interpret them widely (91 percent of those polled).<sup>32</sup> It is important to mention that, in 2001, Putin was calling for the enforcement of "dictatorship of law," stressing that the state bureaucracy freedom to act on its own discretion was creating a breeding house for corruption.

In the Konrad Adenauer Foundation Report in 2006 on Rule of Law in the Russian Federation it is concluded that the reforms introduced over the past five years have resulted a significant improvement in the legislation relevant to the rule of law. In particular, the improvements have been made in the legal standards in the penal and civil process, penal prosecutions and the status of lawyers. Progress has been much less obvious with administrative reform. Nevertheless,

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31 Nikolai Popov, "Give and Take. Corruption in Russia is ineradicable, just as winter frost and the lack of good roads", *INDEM* (Russian NGO - "Information Science for Democracy"), available at <http://www.indem.ru/en/publicat/Popov/Give&Take.htm>.

32 Ibid.

altogether, the changes introduced over the last five years have been helpful in overcoming many of the deficit of the legislation of the 1990's.<sup>33</sup> It is also concluded in the report that, despite those significant improvements, the ultimate assessment of the report is that the state of the rule of law in Russia has not improved but declined over the past five years.<sup>34</sup>

### **Human Rights and Civil Society**

One of the most 'prominent' reforms carried out by Putin's government was law on NGOs that came into force on January 2006. The law considerably complicated the process and requirements for the registration of NGOs, giving the enforcement and intelligence structures a vast authority and power over decision making regarding registration or closure of NGOs as well as direct interference and random verification of the NGOs activities. The introduction was perceived (internationally and domestically) as a serious undermining of the Russian democratic development process with the long-term negative implications.

The state attitudes toward civil society deteriorated over the course of 2004. Putin's annual Address to the Federal Assembly, which is usually viewed as a guide for action by state officials, set an adversarial tone between the state and independent groups. The president used threatening language in regard to NGOs whose goals he described as "obtaining funding from influential foreign or domestic foundations" or "servicing dubious group and commercial interests." Putin said that many Russian NGOs do not make an effort to address Russia's most pressing problems, including basic human rights violations, because they do not want to offend their sponsors. By casting doubt on the patriotism of these groups, Putin opened them to attacks by regional officials and tax collectors who did not support their activities.<sup>35</sup>

President Putin acknowledged that NGOs can and do contribute to the well-being of society, but he added that their financing must be transparent and efforts to control them by "foreign

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33 Konrad Adenauer Foundation, "Rule of Law in the Russian Federation", *Report 2006*, Bouvier, 2006, p.245.

34 Ibid, pp.245-246.

35 Freedom House, "Russia County Report", *Executive Summary*, 2005.

puppeteers” would not be tolerated.<sup>36</sup> In this way Putin sought to promote NGOs that would cooperate more easily with the Kremlin. In June, for example, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov met with 48 NGOs that had gained a Kremlin seal of approval. Unlike previous conferences between officials and representatives of the NGO community, such as the 2001 Civic Forum, this meeting comprised a group of guests carefully screened to cull out prominent critical groups, such as Memorial, For Human Rights, and the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers. Groups like Memorial, which have documented Russian military abuses in Chechnya, are under severe pressure from the state.<sup>37</sup>

The situation with the human rights defenders and activists in Russia is also worrying. According to the International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights Report on Russian Federation the government of the Russian Federation has clearly failed to protect human rights defenders working on its territory, a violation of article 12.2 of the Declaration on Human Rights Defenders. In many cases, Russian officials of various level of government, (including the federal), have been either directly involved in abuses against human rights defenders or condoned such abuses. Furthermore, courts of the Russian Federation have largely failed to fulfill their duty as an independent branch of power to protect individuals against abuses by the federal, regional and local authorities.<sup>38</sup>

Severe human rights violations in the Northern Caucasus republics (Chechnya, Ingushetia, Kabardino-Balkaria and North Ossetia) have been regularly reported by Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and other international human rights organizations, and these reports have included numerous cases of torture, disappearance, and lawless execution (by intelligence or police officers).

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36 Andey Babitsky, “Russian NGOs under the heel of the new law”, 30 November, 2006, *Freedom News*, <http://www.svobodanews.ru/Article/2006/11/30/20061130173449563.html>.

37 Freedom House, “Russia Country Report”, *Executive Summary*, 2005.

38 International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights, “The Assault on Human Rights Defenders in the Russian Federation, Belarus and Uzbekistan: Restrictive Legislation and Bad Practices”, February 2006, p.17.

Another issue of concern is the rise of neo-fascism especially during the recent years. The new fascists, who are often called “skinheads,” used to be active in the biggest Russian cities but in the recent years their number is growing in many smaller cities. According to official figures, there are 10,000 skinheads in Russia. But human rights groups and experts contend the real figure is more than five times higher. The Moscow Bureau For Human Rights says skinheads were responsible for most of the racially motivated attacks and killings this year.<sup>39</sup> The skinheads openly commit violent attacks, beatings and murders, while the authorities remain ignorant of their actions. Amnesty International, in its report, noted that racist attacks and killings of foreigners and ethnic minorities in Russia are reported with shocking regularity. Victims include foreign students, migrant workers, asylum-seekers and refugees. Ethnic groups within Russia, in particular Chechens (as well our Caucasians) and Roma, have also been attacked, as well as children of mixed parentage and members of the Jewish community. Even ethnic Russians who are seen as sympathizing with foreigners or ethnic minority groups have also been targeted.<sup>40</sup> According to the Moscow-based NGO Sova Information Analytical Centre,<sup>41</sup> a minimum of 39 people have been murdered because of their ethnic origin so far in 2006. The real figures are probably much higher, because many racist crimes are not reported to the police or, if reported, are not registered as racist violence. Amnesty International holds the view that the Russian government has failed in its obligation to exercise due diligence in preventing, investigating and prosecuting race hate crimes. In particular, the police have in many cases failed to investigate and prosecute the race hate motivation of assaults and murders.

Radio Free journalist Claire Bigg argues that the authorities’ reluctance to fight ultranationalist groups has long angered human rights groups. She quoted Yurii Vdovin, an expert on hate crimes at the Citizens’ Watch human rights group in St. Petersburg, who accuses the authorities of knowingly encouraging racially motivated attacks. “These small mobs feel impunity and confidence that the authorities will let them off the hook,” Vdovin told RFE/RL. “The authorities

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39 Ibid.

40 Amnesty International, *Human Rights Concerns in the Russian Federation*, October 2006, p.5.

41 Sova Information - Analytical Centre (Moscow-based NGO), <http://xeno.sova-center.ru/>.

keep them because they very successfully channel people's dissatisfaction at their social and economic situation towards the idea that non-Russians are to blame. This is a well-known method, it has been used in many countries in various periods. But it can spin out of control."<sup>42</sup> Bigg also quoted Yevgenii Ikhlov, an activist at the All-Russian Movement For Human Rights, who agrees that the Russian government has an interest in turning a blind eye to hate crimes. Nationalism and hatred of foreigners, he said, is the only ideology the current government is able to offer to Russians. "Xenophobia has become a para-governmental ideology," Ikhlov said. "The government uses this because it is the only thing, apart from the war on international terrorism, that unites the government and society. The government is no longer a protector, a provider, a guarantor of law and order, or anything."<sup>43</sup>

The ignorance that has been demonstrated by authorities towards neo-fascists activities is confusing. Putin publicly denounced hate-crimes, xenophobia and racism but it had very little or no effect in practice. Moreover, the rapidly growing number of the skinheads, as well as their constantly improving organizational structure, gives a negative impression on the authority's role in promoting the neo-fascists. For instance, there number of cases when neo-fascists were granted official permission for public gatherings, marches and demonstrations where they were openly shouting out racist slogans and appealing to violent actions against all "non-Slavs." On 20<sup>th</sup> of April, the authorities sanctioned two meetings in the centre of Moscow to celebrate Adolph Hitler's birthday.<sup>44</sup> The director of the Moscow Bureau for Human Rights Alexander Brod said that, "Unfortunately, these meetings/marches become a norm. They used be organized secretly, yet today authorities often sanction such events".<sup>45</sup>

The Kremlin seems to be less tolerant towards opposition in contrast to the neo-fascist and their activities. Thus, the case of the cruel dispersal of the Dissenters' March organized in Moscow and

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42 Claire Bigg, "Russia: Hate Crime Trial Highlights Mounting Racism", October 25, 2005, *Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty*, 2007.

43 Ibid.

44 Russian News, "Nationalists event on 9th of May marched through the centre of Moscow", *NEWSru.com*, 10 May, 2007.

45 Alexander Brod, "Where the fascist come from in the country which defined fascists: Press Conference with Ria News", *Moscow Bureau for Human Rights*, retrieved on the 8th of May, 2007 from <http://www.antirasizm.ru/>.

St. Petersburg by the opposition has been thoroughly covered by international media. The Washington Post, for instance, published an article called “Russian Police Beat Democracy Activists” and similar headlines have been used by Associated Press and other media and press publications. In the Washington Post the dispersal of the Dissenters' March was commented as “The activists accused Putin's government of cracking down on the opposition, stifling freedom of speech and hampering democratic institutions by abolishing direct election of provincial governors and creating an obedient parliament”. A former Prime Minister Mikhail Kasyanov, who now heads an opposition movement, was quoted in the article saying, “The authorities are destroying...the constitutional structure, rights and freedoms.” “Unfortunately, we are going through a very difficult time in our country, but we will continue to fight for our rights.”<sup>46</sup>

Perhaps, as a result of wide publicity of such undemocratic act by the authorities, the chair of the Council for Human Rights and Civil Institutions Development under the President of the Russian Federation Ella Pamfilova has recently invited the Russian Internal Minister Rashid Nurgaliev to resign. She stated that, the power should allow the opposition not only to conduct manifestations and marches but also to participate at the elections. She explained her invitation to resign to Minister Nurgaliev by claiming that, “The law enforcement bodies were acting crudely and gave one more reason to accuse Russia of limiting civil freedoms”.<sup>47</sup> The Russian neo-fascists have never been treated with such brutality while the opposition has been regularly facing repressions. Such ‘favoritism’ or selective adherence to principles raises a logical question—who has a legitimate right to exist in the modern democratic state: neo-fascists or political opposition? Which is the ‘lesser evil’ and for whom?

### **The Material Life of Russians**

In his New Year speech, President Putin assured Russians that the social situation for most of them is improving. He repeatedly points out in public speeches that the Russian economy is

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46 The Washington Post, “Russian Police Beat Democracy Activists, Dozens Detained During March in St. Petersburg”, Sunday, March 4, 2007.

47 Ella Pamfilova, “The police was inadequate in its actions”, *The Civil Society Institutions and Human Rights Council under the President of the Russian Federation*, May 2007.

growing at a rate of 6-7 percent annually, which is, according to Putin, a higher growth rate than for the most developed European states.<sup>48 49</sup> However, it is well-known that Russia's economic performance is largely due to the high world oil prices. Russia is the second largest oil producer in the world.

In spite of the positive changes achieved during Putin's presidency, such as almost completely paying off of all external debts of the Soviet Union, the Russian economy does not seem to be improving. For instance, former economic policy adviser to President Putin Andrey Illarionov has been very critical about Putin's government. He pointed out at a basic comparison of with the former Soviet Union republics on the dynamics of GDP growth which provides a clear indication of the Russian economic performance. In particular, Andrey Illarionov noted 12 out of 15 republics of the Soviet Union have achieved high economic growth indexes in spite of the post-collapse shock (collapse of the USSR) and monetary default of 1998. He also claims that for the period since 1999 to 2006 countries like Armenia, Georgia, Belarus, Estonia, Tajikistan and others had approximately 1-2.5% economy growth rate and by 2006 their growth rates have increased up to 8-10%.<sup>50</sup> In fact, these countries unlike Russia do not have oil or gas resources or oil industry (which form almost 70% of the Russian budget), and even in the Soviet Union they were peripheral (less developed) regions. Although, they did not inherit Soviet debts, their economic performance clearly reveals the contrast and stresses inefficiency of the Russian government that did not prove to be able to manage the economy efficiently while having one of the world's richest natural resources (precious metals, oil, gas, diamonds, timber and etc.).

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48 Vladimir Putin, On-line public communication with the President Vladimir Putin, Kremlin, Moscow, October 25, 2006.

49 There is an argument about the economic growth rates of the European states that Putin compared with the Russian rates. A number of economists explained it by the fact that European economies have reached and accumulated a substantial monetary resource and have already built a strong developed economy. In other words most of the European states are already developed economies, which mean that the basis or the counting point is different from any developing country including Russia and that is why their economies have smaller growth rates.

50 Andrey Illarionov, "Looking for solution", *Radio Station "Echo of Moscow"*, 3rd of April, 2007.

A number of the most significant Russian economists and politicians, including Mikhail Delyagin, Grigory Yavlinskiy<sup>51</sup>, Andrey Illarionov, and Mikhail Kasyanov,<sup>52</sup> are highly critical of the political and economic course of Putin and his government. All of them agree with those views that regard Putin's model of the military state as inefficient. Intelligence personnel hold over 70% of the key governmental positions on all levels. For a country not in the state of war, the overwhelming presence of intelligence in the government and the public administration system causes a lot of shortcomings. This has been explained by the fact that intelligence personnel, by the nature of their work, have to use repressive or violent methods in implementing a set of goals and they widely practice and apply their methods on their civil service or public administration positions.

They have also pointed out numerous problems of the Russian economy. In particular they argue that the whole Russian economy has grown over-dependent on the extraction and export of natural resources. Such economic activities make the country extremely fragile in the face of the fall in world oil prices. Moreover, the Russian infrastructure and economic backwardness, compared to India or China, for example, is at least 20 years behind the norm for leading developing countries. This has happened, according to Delyagin, Yavlinskiy and Illarionov, because of the inefficient economic reforms, highly corrupt state structures, the impunity with which government officials act, omnipresent theft, and so on.

Political analyst Georgy Pankov recently reported that several members of the Russian government's economic section have started talking about a "Russian economic miracle." Experts said celebrating victory would be premature, as Russia's GDP per capita is only about \$7,000, which is comparable to Mexico. Calculated in terms of GDP (PPP) per capita, Russia is ahead of

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51 Grigory Yavlinskiy, "*Perspectives of Russia: economic and political overview*", Moscow, 2006. (Grigoriy Yavlinsky is one of the most prominent Russian politicians and economists who run for the presidential elections and a leader of "Yabloko" political party).

52 Mikhail Kasyanov if a former Prime Minister from 2000 to 2004 (now, the member of the opposition).

all countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), but its figures are half of the Baltic countries' indices, let alone Europe.<sup>53</sup>

However, Putin's administration strives to portray the current situation in Russia as a period of democratic reforms and economic development while the reality of everyday Russian life presents a very different picture. An accumulating body of evidence reveals a Russia split into two very different worlds: a small minority inhabits one, a world of wealth and luxury; the other, a world of social decline, with its millions of families locked in a desperate struggle for life's necessities.<sup>54</sup> According to government data, the income of the richest members of Russian society is fifteen times greater than those of the poorest members. In Moscow, the difference is 53 times greater. Russia ranks third in the world for the number of billionaires. These figures represent some of the highest levels of social inequality found among the world's leading countries. *Forbes* magazine calculates that, measured against the economic output of the country (\$458 billion), there are more billionaires in Russia (thirty-six) than anywhere else in the world. The total assets of the thirty-six richest Russians amount to over \$100 billion (or 25 percent) of the country's economic output. According to figures published by the World Bank at the end of last year, 20 percent of the Russian population lives below the poverty line, defined as a monthly income of thirty-eight dollars. Russia's National Statistics Office officially classifies a total of 31 million people (or 22 percent of the population) as poor. Other surveys, however, put the poverty rate at 40 percent or higher. The public sector employs most of the working poor, which includes teachers, physicians, and low-ranking civil servants. The occupations with the lowest incomes, which include those employed in the health services industry (such as nurses and medics), are of great social importance. The poor living conditions of those employed in these sectors contribute to a decline in the structures upon which a functioning society depends.

According to the Russian State Statistics Committee in 2004 only 10% of the population – the richest stratum of the Russian population was receiving over 30% of the entire country's

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53 Georgy Pankov, "Russia lacks public optimism for an economic leap", *RIA Novosti*, February 6, 2007.

54 Vladimir Volkov and Julia Denenberg, World Socialist Web Site, March 11, 2005, <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2005/mar2005/russ-m11.shtml>.

monetary income in the country while the poor were receiving less than 2% of the total income.<sup>55</sup> In 2007 Forbes Magazine reported a constant increase of number of the Russian billionaires (35 billionaires in 2005 and 60 in 2007).

Russia has one of the highest death rates in the world among working-age males. This is reportedly (by the World Bank and UNDP) due to poverty, abuse of alcohol and other substances, disease, stress, and a wide range of other afflictions are affecting Russia's population. The UNDP warned that Russia's population could fall by as much as one third over the next forty years. The World Bank, in its report, *Dying too Young*, concluded that Russian mortality rate, which is one of the highest in the world, has been triggered by not only unhealthy life styles but by the unstable socioeconomic and political situation in the country, a situation marked by political upheavals, reforms, monetary defaults, and inflation.

In October 2005, the federal statistics agency reported that Russia's population has shrunk by more than half a million people dipping to 143 million. Russia is the second country in the world by the number of immigrants from abroad, mostly from the former Soviet Union<sup>56</sup>, and immigration is increasingly considerably helped to sustain the country's population whilst the immigrants are regularly facing discrimination, abuse by police and so forth.<sup>57</sup>

It is also should not be forgotten that a stark inequality in income and property can be as much of a threat to democratic society as serious ethnic or culture differences. As Ksenia Yudaeva argues such threats are connected with a significant gap between the goals and tasks that various groups of the population have set for the government. While the wealthy part of the population is

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55 Ilya Nikolaev, "Poverty in Russia: economic analysis", *Analytical Report, Auditing-consulting company FBK, Moscow: Department of Strategic Analysis*, June 2005, p.18.

56 United Nations Expert Group Meeting on International Migration and Development, Population Division, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, July 2005.

57 US State Department, "Russia, Country Reports on Human Rights Practices", *Human Rights Report Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor*, Washington DC: US State Department, 2007.

interested in government protection of property rights, the poor have no objections to the "seize and divvy" approach or to the redistribution of wealth through some other means.<sup>58</sup>

## **Conclusion**

These major developments reflect the character of the transitional process in the Russian Federation. Many see these realities and make grim forecasts concerning Russia's future. A number of Russian and international analysts see a real possibility of revolution, disintegration, or the return of a military-police state in the next 20-30 years.

One of the most alarming indicators of the overall deterioration of the political situation in Russia is human rights abuse. The US State Department issued a 100 pages volume report on human rights violations in Russia. The socio-political climate was described as following:

Continuing centralization of power in the executive branch, a compliant State Duma, political pressure on the judiciary, intolerance of ethnic minorities, corruption and selectivity in enforcement of the law, continuing media restrictions and self-censorship, and harassment of some nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) resulted in an erosion of the accountability of government leaders to the population. Security forces were involved in additional significant human rights problems, including alleged government involvement in politically motivated abductions, disappearances, and unlawful killings in Chechnya and elsewhere in the North Caucasus; hazing in the armed forces that resulted in severe injuries and deaths; torture, violence, and other brutal or humiliating treatment by security forces; harsh and frequently life-threatening prison conditions; corruption in law enforcement; and arbitrary arrest and detention. The executive branch allegedly exerted influence over judicial decisions in certain high-profile cases. Government pressure continued to weaken freedom of expression and media independence, particularly of major national networks. Media freedom declined due to

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<sup>58</sup> Ksenia Yudaeva, *Democracy: The Problem of Inequality, Rough Crossing: Democracy in Russia*, Moscow: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2004  
p.78;

restrictions as well as harassment, intimidation, and killing of journalists. Local authorities continued to limit freedom of assembly and restrict religious groups in some regions. There were also reports of societal discrimination, harassment, and violence against members of some religious minorities and incidents of anti-Semitism. Authorities restricted freedom of movement and exhibited negative attitudes toward, and sometimes harassed, NGOs involved in human rights monitoring. Also notable was the passage and entry into force of a new law on NGOs, which has already had some adverse effects on their operations. There was widespread governmental and societal discrimination as well as racially motivated attacks against ethnic minorities and dark-skinned immigrants, including the outbreak of violence against Chechens in the northwest and the initiation of a government campaign to selectively harass and deport ethnic Georgians. Xenophobic, racial and ethnic attacks, and hate crimes were on the rise. Violence against women and children, trafficking in persons, and instances of forced labor were also reported.<sup>59</sup>

Judging from the US State Department report as well as from the many other reports by respected international organizations the socio-political and economic situation in Russia for last 6-7 years has not really improved and in some instances has obviously deteriorated despite of the Putin and his government reassurances.<sup>60</sup>

However, many others believe that Russia has been going through a painful but expected process of reconstruction and rehabilitation and will eventually emerge as a strong liberal democratic state.

Considering all the aspects of the Russian transitional process, I want to emphasize several points I believe are crucial.

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59 US State Department, "Russia, Country Reports on Human Rights Practices", *Human Rights Report Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor*, Washington DC: US State Department, 2007.

60 During the last On-line public communication with the President Vladimir Putin was repeatedly emphasizing the economic growth rates, improvements in the public administration system and judiciary, decreasing poverty, developing industry and etc. (On-line public communication with the President Vladimir Putin, Kremlin, Moscow, 25th of October, 2006).

First, it is not enough to establish democratic institutes such as free elections, parliament, and a constitution, as long as the civil society and, primarily, the government does not respect the constitution, battle corruption, and guarantee the rule of law. Democracy and justice are values that must pervade society in order for the transition to a free and open society that respects political rights and civil liberties to be successful. On the other side civil society must also reach a certain level of maturity in order to sustain a stable democratic polity. The American scholar Harley Balzer wrote recently that "it will require a regime change to achieve democracy in Russia." Leading Moscow Carnegie Centre Kseniya Yudaeva argued that "as for regime change, that is perhaps going too far. But a change in the way society thinks is necessary indeed. Neither parties nor will courts nor parliaments nor the media be able to gain strength and independence as long as citizens do not demand it".<sup>61</sup>

Second, a government that is limiting freedom of expression and speech, not only discredits itself by showing its weakness and fear to face critics and admit mistakes but, most importantly, it seriously undermines its own position. In other words, the media plays the role of a mirror that helps to adequately assess and hence respond to any problem or flows. Thus, the government loses its ability to recognize, evaluate and improve its performance. This was the case in the Society Union where the media was completely controlled by the state, entirely subjected to a strict censorship creating an information vacuum, camouflaging growing severe problems in economy and ideological crisis of the Soviet Communism and subsequently led to the collapse.

Third, the Russian government seems to be reluctant or makes very little effort to improve the situation with regards to human rights. The raise of 'blessed' neo-fascists as well as the boundless impunity of the law-enforcement structures along with unprecedented corruption and universally applied double standards pose the biggest ever threat for the whole existence of the Russian Federation as a state on the world map. Growing poverty, social inequality and horrifying social polarization also greatly contribute to the creation of the very dangerous climate within the state. Even comparing contemporary Russia with the Soviet Union one can easily

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<sup>61</sup> Yudaeva, 2004.

argue that a Soviet citizen, despite very limited political rights, was much better protected by the state from the criminality and from its law-enforcement institutes as well as he had a better social protection system and more social benefits (equal and free education and health systems accessible to absolutely all citizens).

Furthermore, it is worth mentioning that numerous reports on Russian elites (oligarchs, businessman, politicians and other wealthy people) have recorded that over the last 6-7 years this elite has been withdrawing and keeping their capital abroad (billions of dollars) which certainly represents a great sign of instability.

Russia is a country with a long history of upheavals, revolutions, dissents and wars which obviously dented in the mentality as well as influenced the political culture of Russian people. On such a complex background the ignorance or inability to respond and ensure the most essential needs of the majority of the people such as means of subsistence (growing poverty), basic security (impunity and arbitrariness of the law-enforcement structures), rule of law (omnipresent corruption) and health maintenance (disastrous degradation of health services) is likely to lead to mass discontent, open protest, riots and even to a revolution.

Such dangerous likelihood could be explained by the concept of path dependence. Theda Skocpol and Paul Pierson write that path dependence does not have yet a clear definition, but can express the idea that “outcomes at a ‘critical juncture’ trigger feedback mechanisms [negative or positive] that reinforce the recurrence of a particular pattern into the future.” In their view, the significance of path dependence is that:

Once actors have ventured far down a particular path, they are likely to find it very difficult to reverse course...The “path not taken” or the political alternatives that were once quite plausible may become irretrievably lost. ‘Path dependence analysis’ highlights the role of what Arthur Stinchcombe has

termed 'historical causation' in which dynamics triggered by an event or process at one point in time reproduce themselves, even in the absence of the recurrence of the original event or process.<sup>62</sup>

Finally, in 2008 Russia is anticipating presidential elections. How should Putin and his government assess their performance after almost 8 years in power? We can only guess what would be their self-appraisal. However, at least some Russian citizens appear to have formed their idea about the government. Do the Russians trust state institutions, do they consider them honest? This question was included into October opinion poll conducted by ROMIR Monitoring. All-Russia opinion poll embraced 1600 respondents aged 18 and above from more than 100 Russian cities and towns. According to the results of the poll half of Russian citizens (52%) do not trust any state institution. The respondents from cities with population 500 thousand – 1 million noted the dishonesty of main state institutions (58%). The respondents aged 35-44 a bit more often said that none of the state power structures can be considered honest. The same opinion was expressed by the participants of the survey with higher education (55%) and high income level (52%). So, what state institutions can be called honest? The research showed that every third respondent (30%) considers the President to be honest. This variant was chosen a bit more often than on whole in the sample by the respondents from North-West federal district (37%). As to the Far East federal district only every fifth respondent (21%) trusts the President – it is the smallest share in the sample. In towns with population less than 100 thousand people the share of those who consider the President honest is a bit larger than in the other types of settlements (35%). Head of State is called honest mainly by women (33%), pensioners (38%) and the respondents with primary education (37%).<sup>63</sup>

Most of the political analysts foresee the next Russian president as Putin's prototype (fostered and promoted by Putin) who will sit for one term and then Putin will come back to power again

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62 Pierson, Paul & Skocpol, Theda. 2002. "Historical Institutionalism in Contemporary Political Science", in Ira Katznelson & Helen V. Milner (eds), *Political Science: State of the Discipline* (New York: W.W. Norton), pp. 693-721.

63 ROMIR Monitoring, "Figures and Facts, Every second Russian citizen does not believe in honesty of the authorities", Moscow, 2006.

(Putin neither admitted nor denied such possibility). If such forecasts come true what his/her political course would be: a complete blueprint of Putin or someone with his/her own vision? Would a new president be able to resolve numerous social, economic and political problems or will he/she add the long list of problems inherited from the previous governors?

It seems that only time can give answers to these questions but, as for now, Russian people can only prepare themselves for the next round of battle for the right to a liberal democratic state on the coming presidential elections in 2008.