

# GOVERNMENT AND POLITICS IN RUSSIA

## AUTHORITARIAN OLIGARCHY, ILLIBERAL DEMOCRACY, OR BUDDING LIBERAL DEMOCRACY?

Between 1945 and 1991 global politics was defined by intense competition between two superpowers: the Soviet Union and the United States. The competition encompassed almost all areas of the world and affected a broad range of economic, political, social, and cultural patterns. As a result, when the Soviet Union surprisingly and suddenly collapsed in 1991, the reverberations were heard everywhere. In the wake of its demise, its component republics broke apart, leaving the Russian Federation as the largest piece, with a population cut in half, but with a land space that allowed it to remain geographically the largest country in the world.

The first president of the Russian Federation was **Boris Yeltsin**, a former member of the Soviet Politburo who declared the end of the old Soviet-style regime. The “**shock therapy**” reforms that he advocated pointed the country in the direction of democracy and a free-market economy. Yet Yeltsin was an uneven leader, often ill or under the influence of alcohol, who reverted to authoritarian rule whenever he was lucid. A small group of family members and advisers took control from the weakened president, and they ran the country as an **oligarchy**, granting themselves favors and inviting economic and political corruption. However, despite this development, a new constitution was put in place in 1993, and regular, competitive elections have taken place since then.

A new president, **Vladimir Putin**, was elected in 2000 and 2004 without serious conflict, but many observers are still wary of the continuing influence of the oligarchy. Putin often acted aggressively in containing the oligarchs’ political and economic powers, and followed a clear path toward increasing centralization of power. As the election of 2008 approached, Putin followed the Constitution of 1993 by stepping down after two terms, but he announced his intention to stay on as prime minister under the new president, **Dmitri Medvedev**. Is Putin’s continuing influence in policymaking a signal that Russia is again becoming an authoritarian state and that its fling with democracy is now over?

Modern Russia, then, is a very unpredictable country. Its historic roots deeply influence every area of life, and Russia has almost no experience with democracy and a free market. Is liberal democracy finally taking hold in Russia, or is the new regime just a smoke-and-mirrors imitation of the old historic authoritarianism that has characterized Russia for centuries? Or perhaps it is possible that Russia is settling in as an illiberal democracy, with direct elections and other democratic structures in place, but with little hope of strengthening the democratic principles of civil liberties and rights, rule of law, and an independent judiciary. No one knows at this point, but Russian history and political culture leave room for all three paths. Slavic roots provide a strong tendency toward autocratic rule, but the desire to modernize and compete for world power has been apparent since the late 17<sup>th</sup> century, and Russia is certainly influenced by the recent democratization of so many other countries of the world.

## SOVEREIGNTY, AUTHORITY, AND POWER

For most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, public authority and political power emanated from one place: the Politburo of the Communist Party. The Politburo was a small group of men who climbed the ranks of the party through *nomenklatura*, an ordered path from local party soviets to the commanding heights of leadership. When the Soviet Union dissolved, its authority and power vanished with it, leaving in place a new government struc-

ture with questionable legitimacy. Still, the political culture and historical traditions of Russia are firmly entrenched and have shaped the genesis of the new regime, and undoubtedly will determine the nature of its future.

## LEGITIMACY

In the earliest years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the legitimacy of the Russian government was at very low ebb, partly because the regime change was so recent, and partly because the change appears to be a drastic departure from the past. However, there is growing evidence that the system has stabilized since Vladimir Putin was first elected president in 2000. It is unclear at this point how far Putin and his successor, Medvedev, might retreat from democratic practices to reestablish some of the old authoritarianism from Russia's traditional political culture.

Historically, political legitimacy has been based on strong, autocratic rule, first by centuries of **tsars**, and then by the firm dictatorship of party leaders during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Under communist rule, **Marxism-Leninism** provided the legitimacy base for the party, with its ideology of **democratic centralism**, or rule by a few for the benefit of the many. Although it theoretically only supplemented Marxism-Leninism, **Stalinism** in reality changed the regime to **totalitarianism**, a more complete, invasive form of strong-man rule than the tsars ever were able to implement. After Stalin, two reformers – Nikita Khrushchev and Mikhail Gorbachev – tried to loosen the party's stranglehold on power, only to facilitate the downfall of the regime.

In its attempt to reconstruct the country's power base, the **Constitution of 1993** provided for a strong president, although the power of the position is checked by popular election and by the lower house of the legislature, the **Duma**. The institution of the presidency only dates to the late 1980s, but the Duma actually existed under the tsars of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Yeltsin attempted to strengthen the Constitution's legitimacy by requiring a referendum by the people to endorse its acceptance. In its short history, the Constitution's legitimacy has been seriously tested by attempted coups and intense conflict between President Yeltsin and the Duma. However, the 2000 presidential transition from Yeltsin to Putin went smoothly, an accomplishment that may indicate that the Constitution may be more resilient than it seemed to be a few years ago. Under Putin government operations stabilized significantly.

## HISTORICAL INFLUENCES ON POLITICAL TRADITIONS

Several legacies from Russian history shape the modern political system:

- **Absolute, centralized rule** – From the beginning, Russian tsars held absolute power that they defended with brutality and force. One reason for their tyranny was based on geography: the Russian plain was overrun and conquered by a series of invaders, including the Huns, Vikings, and Mongols. The chaos caused by these takeovers convinced Russian leaders of the importance of firm, unchallenged leadership in keeping their subjects in control. Centralized power also characterized the Communist regime of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Some observers believe that Vladimir Putin steered the country back to this style of leadership.
- **Extensive cultural heterogeneity** – Until the 17<sup>th</sup> century Russia was a relatively small inland culture, but even then, the numerous invasions from earlier times meant that the area was home to people of wide cultural diversity. This **cultural heterogeneity** was intensified as Russia rapidly expanded its borders, until by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the empire stretched from the Baltic Sea to the Pacific Ocean. Since then, the borders of Russia have been in an almost constant state of change, so that ethnicities have been split, thrown together with others, and then split apart again. The name “Russian Federation” reflects the diversity, with countless “republics” and “autonomous regions” based

on ethnicity, but with borders impossible to draw because of the blend and locations of people. This heterogeneity has always been a special challenge to Russian rulers.

- **Slavophile v. Westernizer** – In the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, American diplomat George Kennan identified this conflicting set of political traditions as a major source of problems for Russia. The Slavophile (“lover of Slavs”) tradition has led to a pride in Slavic customs, language, religion, and history that causes Russia to resist outside influence. This tendency to value isolation was challenged first by **Tsar Peter the Great** in the late 17<sup>th</sup> and early 18<sup>th</sup> century. He used the western model to “modernize” Russia with a stronger army, a navy, an infrastructure of roads and communication, a reorganized bureaucracy, and a “**Window on the West.**” The window was St. Petersburg, a city built by Peter on newly conquered lands on the Baltic Sea. His efforts to build Russia’s power were followed by those of **Catherine the Great** of the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, so that by the time of her death, Russia was seen as a major empire. However, their efforts set in place a conflict, since the affection for Slavic ways did not disappear with the changes.
- **Revolutions of the 20<sup>th</sup> century** – The long, autocratic rule of the tsars suddenly and decisively came to an end in 1917 when **V. I. Lenin’s Bolsheviks** seized power, and renamed the country the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. Communist leaders replaced the tsars, and they ruled according to socialist principles, although the tendency toward absolute, centralized rule did not change. The old social classes, however, were swept away, and the new regime tried to blend elements of westernization (industrialization, economic development, and technological innovation) with those of the Slavophile (nationalism, resistance to western culture and customs). A second revolution occurred in 1991, when the U.S.S.R. dissolved, and its fifteen republics became independent nations. The Russian Federation, born in that year, is currently struggling to replace the old regime with a new one.

## POLITICAL CULTURE

Russia’s political culture has been shaped by its geographic setting, cultural orientation, and conflicting attitudes toward the state.

## GEOGRAPHIC SETTING

Geographically, Russia is the largest country in the world and encompasses many different ethnicities and climates. Its republics and regions border the Black Sea in the southwest, the Baltic Sea in the northwest, the Pacific to the east, the Arctic Ocean to the north, and China to the south. Its borders touch many other nations with vastly different political cultures and customs. Russia is also one of the coldest countries on earth, partly because of northern latitude, but also because so many of its cities are inland. Ironically for a country of its size, warm water ports are few, and its history has been shaped by the desire to conquer countries that have blocked Russian access to the sea. Russia has many natural resources, including oil, gas, and timber, but much of it is locked in Siberia, frozen and very difficult to extract. However, in recent years these resources have been developed, and have fueled significant economic growth.

## EASTERN ORTHODOXY

Early in its history, Russians cast their lot with the flourishing city of Constantinople, establishing trade routes in that direction, and adopting the Eastern Orthodox religion. As Constantinople’s influence waned, the influence of Western Europe increased, but Russia’s orientation meant that it did not share the values generated by the European Renaissance, Reformation, Scientific Revolution, and Enlightenment. Instead of individualism, Russians came to value a strong state that could protect them from their geographic vulnerabilities. In contrast to Russian **statism**, the West developed a taste for a **civil society**, or spheres of privacy

free from control by the state. Eastern Orthodoxy also was inextricably linked to the state, so the principle of separation of church and state never developed. Even when the Communist state forbade its citizens to practice religion, the acceptance of government control remained.

### **EQUALITY OF RESULT (contrasted to equality of opportunity)**

The Communist regime instilled in the Russian people an appreciation for equality, a value already strong in a country of peasants with similar living standards. Russian egalitarianism has survived the fall of the Soviet Union, and most Russians resent differences of wealth or income. This “equality of result” is very different from western “equality of opportunity” that sees “getting ahead” as a sign of initiative, hard work, and talent. As a result, the Russian political culture is not particularly conducive to the development of capitalism.

### **SKEPTICISM ABOUT POWER**

Despite their dependence on government initiative, Russian citizens can be surprisingly hostile toward their leadership. Mikhail Gorbachev found this out the hard way when he initiated *glasnost* – a new emphasis on freedom of speech and press – in the 1980s. He received torrents of complaints from citizens that almost certainly contributed to the breakup of the Soviet Union. Today surveys show that citizens have little faith in the political system, although people seemed to have much more confidence in Putin than in any other individual leaders or institutions. While he was president, Putin’s approval ratings remained between 70 and 80 percent, but no other public officials have had comparable approval rates, including governors of regions, army generals, Duma members, or the police. The Russian people also appear to have little confidence in nongovernmental leaders, such as entrepreneurs, bankers, and media personalities.

### **THE IMPORTANCE OF NATIONALITY**

Even though cultural heterogeneity has almost always been characteristic of the Russian political culture, people tend to categorize others based on their nationality, and they often discriminate against groups based on long-held stereotypes. Russians generally admire the Baltic people for their “civility” and sophistication, but they sometimes express disdain for the Muslim-Turkic people of Central Asia. In return, governments in those areas have passed laws discouraging Russians from remaining within their borders. Anti-Semitism was strong in tsarist Russia, and today some nationalists blame Jews for Russia’s current problems.

### **POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC CHANGE**

In contrast to Britain, Russia has almost always had difficulty with gradual and ordered change. Instead, its history reflects a resistance to change by reform and a tendency to descend into chaos or resort to revolution when contradictory forces meet. The most successful tsars, such as Peter the Great and Catherine the Great, understood the dangers of chaos in Russia, and often resorted to force in order to keep their power. The 19<sup>th</sup> century tsars faced the infiltration of Enlightenment ideas of democracy and individual rights, and those that tried reforms that allowed gradual inclusion of these influences often failed. For example, Alexander II, who freed Russian serfs and experimented with local assemblies, was assassinated by revolutionaries in 1881. The forces that led to his assassination later blossomed into full-blown revolution, the execution of the last tsar, and the establishment of a communist regime. Likewise, the late 19<sup>th</sup> century tsars’ attempts to gradually industrialize Russia were largely unsuccessful, but Joseph Stalin’s Five-Year Plans that called for rapid, abrupt economic change led to the establishment of the Soviet Union as one of two superpowers that dominated the world for a half century after the conclusion of World War II. In the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, Mikhail Gorbachev’s attempts to reform the political and economic systems failed, and change again came abruptly with a failed coup d’état, and the sudden collapse of the Soviet Union.

Russia's history is characterized by three distinct time periods:

- **A long period of autocratic rule by tsars** – Tsars ruled Russia from the 14<sup>th</sup> to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Control of Russia was passed down through the Romanov family from the 17<sup>th</sup> century on, but transitions were often accompanied by brutality and sometimes assassination.
- **20<sup>th</sup> century rule by the Communist Party** – Communist rule began in 1917 when V.I. Lenin's Bolsheviks seized control of the government after the last tsar, Nicholas II, was deposed. The regime toppled in 1991 when a failed coup from within the government created chaos.
- **An abrupt regime change to democracy and a free market in 1991** – President Boris Yeltsin put western-style reforms in place to create the Russian Federation.

The two transition periods between time periods were sparked by revolution and quick, dramatic change. The Slavic influence has brought some continuity to Russia's history, but in general change has rarely been evolutionary and gradual. Instead, long periods of authoritarian rule have been punctuated by protest and violence.

## TSARIST RULE

The first tsars were princes of Moscow, who cooperated with their 13<sup>th</sup> century Mongol rulers, and were rewarded for their assistance with land and power. But when Mongol rule weakened, the princes declared themselves "tsars" in the tradition of the "Caesars" of ancient Rome. The tsars were autocratic from the beginning, and tightly controlled their lands in order to protect them from invasion and attacks. The tsars also headed the **Russian Orthodox Church**, so that they were seen as both political and religious leaders. Early Russia was isolated from western Europe by its orientation to the Eastern Orthodox world, and long distances separated Russian cities from major civilizations to the south and east.

## WESTERN INFLUENCE

In the late 17<sup>th</sup> and early 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, **Tsar Peter the Great** introduced western technology and culture in an attempt to increase Russia's power and influence. From his early childhood, he was intrigued by the West, and he became the first tsar to travel to Germany, Holland, and England. There he learned about shipbuilding and other types of technology. He brought engineers, carpenters, and architects to Russia, and set the country on a course toward world power. **Catherine the Great**, who originally came from Germany, ruled Russia during the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, and managed to gain warm water access to the Black Sea, an accomplishment that had eluded Peter. Both looked to the West to help develop their country, but neither abandoned absolute rule. Catherine read widely, and was very interested in Enlightenment thought, but she checked any impulses she had to apply them to her rule. Instead, she became an enlightened despot, or one who rules absolutely, but with clear goals for the country in mind. Tsars after Peter and Catherine alternated between emphasizing Slavic roots and tolerating western style reform, although none of them successfully responded to the revolutionary movement growing within their country during the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

## NINETEENTH CENTURY TSARS

Russia was brought into direct contact with the West when Napoleon invaded in 1812. Alexander I successfully resisted the attack, but at great cost to the empire. Western thought also influenced Russian intellectuals who saw no room for western political institutions to grow under the tsars' absolutism. Their frustration erupted in the **Decembrist Revolt of 1825**, which was crushed ruthlessly by Nicholas I. By mid-century the Russian defeat in the **Crimean War** convinced many of the tsar's critics that Russian ways were indeed

backward and in need of major reform. Nineteenth century tsars reacted to their demands by sending the secret police to investigate and by exiling or executing the dissenters.

Of all the 19<sup>th</sup> century tsars, the only one who seriously sponsored reform was Alexander II. However, even though he freed Russia's serfs and set up regional *zemstvas* (assemblies), the increasingly angry *intelligentsia* did not think his actions went far enough. Alexander II was assassinated in 1881 by his critics, and his son Alexander III reacted by undoing the reforms and intensifying the efforts of the secret police.

## THE REVOLUTION OF 1917, LENIN, AND STALIN

The most immediate cause of the Revolution of 1917 was Russia's ineffectiveness in fighting the Russo-Japanese War and World War I. Tsar Nicholas II was indeed in the wrong place at the wrong time, but he also was a weak ruler who had no control over the armies. The first signs of the revolution were in 1905, when riots and street fighting broke out in protest to Russian losses in the war with Japan. The tsar managed to put that revolution down, but the state finally collapsed in 1917 in the midst of World War I. Russian soldiers were fighting without guns or shoes, and mass defections from the war front helped send the state into chaos.

### LENIN AND THE BOLSHEVIKS

By the 1890s some of the revolutionists in Russia were **Marxists** who were in exile, along with other dissidents. However, according to Marxism, socialist revolutions would first take place not in Russia, but in capitalist countries like Germany, France, and England. At the turn of the century, Russia was still primarily an agricultural society with little industrial development. In his 1905 pamphlet *What Is To Be Done?*, **V. I. Lenin** changed the meaning of Marxism when he argued for **democratic centralism**, or a "vanguard" leadership group that would lead the revolution in the name of the people. Lenin believed that the situation in Russia was so bad that the revolution could occur even though it was a non-industrialized society. Lenin's followers came to be called the **Bolsheviks**, and they took control of the government in late 1917. Russia was then renamed the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.

By 1918 a civil war had broken out between the **White Army**, led by Russian military leaders and funded by the Allied Powers, and the **Red Army** led by Lenin. The Reds won, and in 1920 Lenin instituted his **New Economic Policy**, which allowed a great deal of private ownership to exist under a centralized leadership. The plan brought relative prosperity to farmers, but it did not promote industrialization. Would Lenin have moved on to a more socialist approach? No one knows, because Lenin died in 1924 before his plans unfolded and before he could name a successor. A power struggle followed, and the "Man of Steel" that won control led the country to the heights of totalitarianism.

### STALINISM

Stalin vastly changed Lenin's democratic centralism (also known as **Marxism-Leninism**). Stalin placed the Communist Party at the center of control, and allowed no other political parties to compete with it. Party members were carefully selected, with only about 7% of the population actually joining it. Communists ran local, regional, and national governments, and leaders were identified through *nomenklatura*, or the process of party members selecting promising recruits from the lower levels. Most top government officials also belonged to the **Central Committee**, a group of 300 party leaders that met twice a year. Above the Central Committee was the **Politburo**, the heart and soul of the Communist Party. This group of about twelve men ran the country, and their decisions were carried out by government agencies and departments. The head

of the Politburo was the **general secretary**, who assumed the full power as dictator of the country. Joseph Stalin was the general secretary of the Communist Party from 1927 until his death in 1953.

### **Collectivization and Industrialization**

Stalin's plan for the U.S.S.R. had two parts: **collectivization and industrialization**. Stalin replaced the NEP with "**collective farms**" that were state run and supposedly more efficient. Private land ownership was done away with, and the farms were intended to feed workers in the cities who contributed to the industrialization of the nation. Some peasants resisted, particularly those that owned larger farms. These **kulaks** were forced to move to cities or to labor camps, and untold numbers died at the hands of government officials.

With the agricultural surplus from the farms, Stalin established his first **Five Year Plan**, which set ambitious goals for production of heavy industry, such as oil, steel, and electricity. Other plans followed, and all were carried out for individual factories by **Gosplan**, the Central State Planning Commission. Gosplan became the nerve center for the economy, and determined production and distribution of virtually all goods in the Soviet Union.

**Stalinism**, then, is this two-pronged program of collectivization and industrialization, carried out by central planning, and executed with force and brutality.

### **Stalin's Foreign Policy**

During the 1930s Stalin's primary focus was internal development, so his foreign policy was intended to support that goal. He advocated "socialism in one country" to emphasize his split with traditional Marxism, and he tried to ignore the fascist threat from nearby Germany and Italy. Stalin signed a non-aggression pact with Nazi Germany in 1939, only to be attacked by Germany the following year. Russia then joined sides with the Allies for the duration of World War II, but tensions between east and west were often apparent at conferences, and as soon as the war ended, the situation escalated into the Cold War. These significant shifts in foreign policy all accommodated his main goal: the industrial development of the U.S.S.R.

### **The Purges**

Joseph Stalin is perhaps best known for his purges: the execution of millions of citizens, including up to one million party members. He became obsessed with disloyalty in the party ranks, and he ordered the execution of his own generals and other members of the Politburo and Central Committee. Stalin held total power, and by the time of his death in 1953, many speculated that he had gone mad. His successor, Nikita Khrushchev, set about to reform Stalinism by loosening its totalitarian nature and publicly denouncing the purges.

## **REFORM UNDER KHRUSHCHEV AND GORBACHEV**

After Stalin died in 1953, a power struggle among top Communist Party leaders resulted in **Nikita Khrushchev** being chosen as party secretary and premier of the USSR. In 1956 he gave his famous **secret speech**, in which he revealed the existence of a letter written by Lenin before he died. The letter was critical of Stalin, and Khrushchev used it to denounce Stalin's rules and practices, particularly the purges that he sponsored. This denouncement led to **deStalinization**, a process that led to reforms, such as loosening government censorship of the press, decentralization of economic decision-making, and restructuring of the collective farms. In foreign policy, Khrushchev advocated "peaceful coexistence," or relaxation of tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union. He was criticized from the beginning for the suggested reforms, and his diplomatic and military failure in the Cuban Missile Crisis ensured his loss of control. Furthermore, most of his reforms did not appear to be working by the early 1960s. He was replaced by the much more conserva-

tive **Leonid Brezhnev**, who ended the reforms and tried to cope with the increasing economic problems that were just under the surface of Soviet power.

When Brezhnev died in 1982, he was eventually replaced in 1985 by a reformer from a younger generation, **Mikhail Gorbachev**. Gorbachev was unlike any previous Soviet leader in that he not only looked and acted more “western,” but he also was more open to western-style reforms than any other, including Khrushchev. Gorbachev inherited far more problems than any outsider realized at the time, and many of his reforms were motivated by sheer necessity to save the country from economic disaster. His program was three-pronged:

- **Glasnost** – This term translates from the Russian as “openness,” and it allowed more open discussion of political, social and economic issues as well as open criticism of the government. Although this reform was applauded by western nations, it caused many problems for Gorbachev. After so many years of repression, people vented hostility toward the government that encouraged open revolt, particularly among some of the republics that wanted independence from Soviet control.
- **Democratization** – Gorbachev believed that he could keep the old Soviet structure, including Communist Party control, but at the same time insert a little democracy into the system. Two such moves included the creation of 1) a new Congress of People’s Deputies with directly elected representatives and 2) a new position of “President” that was selected by the Congress. The reforms did bring a bit of democracy. However, many of the new deputies were critical of Gorbachev, increasing the level of discord within the government.
- **Perestroika** – This economic reform was Gorbachev’s most radical, and also his least successful. Again, he tried to keep the old Soviet structure, and modernize from within. Most significantly, it transferred many economic powers held by the central government to private hands and the market economy. Specific reforms included authorization of some privately owned companies, penalties for under-performing state factories, leasing of farm land outside the collective farms, price reforms, and encouragement of joint ventures with foreign companies.

None of Gorbachev’s reforms were ever fully carried out because the Revolution of 1991 swept him out of office.

## A FAILED COUP AND THE REVOLUTION OF 1991

In August 1991 “conservatives” (those that wanted to abandon Gorbachev’s reforms) from within the Politburo led a coup d’état that tried to remove Gorbachev from office. The leaders included the vice-president, the head of the KGB (Russian secret police), and top military advisers. The coup failed when popular protests broke out, and soldiers from the military defected rather than support their leaders. The protesters were led by **Boris Yeltsin**, the elected president of the Russian Republic and former Politburo member. Yeltsin had been removed from the Politburo a few years earlier because his radical views offended the conservatives. Yeltsin advocated more extreme reform measures than Gorbachev did, and he won his position as president of the Russian Republic as a result of new voting procedures put in place by Gorbachev.

Gorbachev was restored to power, but the USSR only had a few months to live. By December 1991 eleven republics had declared their independence, and eventually Gorbachev was forced to announce the end of the union, which put him out of a job. The fifteen republics went their separate ways, but Boris Yeltsin emerged as the president of the largest and most powerful republic, now renamed the Russian Federation.



## THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION: 1991-PRESENT

Once the Revolution of 1991 was over, Boris Yeltsin proceeded with his plans to create a western-style democracy. The old Soviet structure was destroyed, but the same problems that haunted Gorbachev were still there. The **Constitution of 1993** created a three-branch government, with a president, a prime minister, a lower legislative house called the **Duma**, and a **Constitutional Court**. Conflict erupted between Yeltsin and the Duma, and the Russian economy did not immediately respond to the “**shock therapy**” (an immediate market economy) that the government prescribed. Yeltsin also proved to be a much poorer president than he was a revolutionary leader. His frequent illnesses and alcoholism almost certainly explain the erratic behavior that led him to hire and fire prime ministers in quick succession. Yeltsin resigned in the months before the election of 2000, and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin became acting president. Although Putin supported Yeltsin’s reforms, he was widely seen as a more conservative leader who many hoped would bring stability to the newly formed government. As his presidency progressed, many believe that Putin retreated significantly from the commitments that Yeltsin made to the establishment of a democratic system. The fact that he honored the Constitution of 1993 by stepping down as president at the end of his second term is countered by his remaining on as prime minister, and many believe that he still controls policymaking in Russia.

### MILESTONES IN RUSSIAN POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT

- 988 C.E.** Russian Tzar Vladimir I converted to Orthodox Christianity, setting Russia on a different course of development from Western Europe.
- 1613** The Romanov family came to power and ruled until 1917.
- 1689-1725** Peter the Great ruled Russia, bringing the dynamic of “Slavophile vs. Westernizer” to Russian political development.
- 1762-1796** Catherine the Great, the second great Westernizer, solidified and expanded Peter’s reforms, though she still ruled with an iron hand, as all Russian tsars did.
- 1917** The last tsar was deposed, and the Bolshevik Revolution put V.I. Lenin in control of the U.S.S.R.
- 1917-1921** The Russian civil war raged as many factions inside and outside Russia fought to oust Lenin from power. Lenin solidified his power in 1921.
- 1927-1953** Joseph Stalin ruled the U.S.S.R., reinterpreting the meaning of communism and instituting his programs of collectivization and industrialization.
- 1991** A coup against General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev failed, but also instigated a process that led to the collapse of the Soviet Union.
- 1993** The new Russian Constitution put in place the current regime.

## CITIZENS, SOCIETY AND THE STATE

Russian citizens are affected by many contradictory influences from their political culture. When questioned, most say that they support the idea of a democratic government for Russia, although many do not believe that one exists today. However, they also like the idea of a strong state and powerful political leaders, characteristics that help to explain the popularity of Vladimir Putin as a political leader.

### CLEAVAGES

The Russian Federation has many societal cleavages that greatly impact policymaking, including nationality, social class, and rural/urban divisions.

### NATIONALITY

The most important single cleavage in the Russian Federation is **nationality**. Although about 80% are Russians, the country included sizeable numbers of Tatars, Ukrainians, Armenians, Chuvashes, Bashkis, Byelorussians, and Moldavians. These cleavages determine the organization of the country into a “federation,” with “autonomous regions,” republics, and provinces whose borders are based on ethnicity. Like the breakaway republics of 1991, many would like to have their independence, although most have trade benefits from the Russian government that induce them to stay within the Federation. A notable exception is **Chechnya**, a primarily Muslim region that has fought for years for their freedom. The Russian government has had considerable difficulty keeping Chechnya a part of Russia, and the independence movement there is still very strong. In recent years, Chechens have been involved in terrorist acts, including the 2004 seizure of a school in southern Russia that resulted in gunfire and explosions that killed more than 350 people, many of them children. Almost certainly, other regions within Russia’s borders are watching, and the government knows that if Chechnya is successful, other independence movements will break out in the country. In an effort to gain legitimacy for the Russian government in Chechnya, a referendum was held to vote on a new constitution for the region. The constitution was approved by the Chechen voters, even though it declared that their region was an “inseparable part” of Russia. With Putin’s support, former rebel Ramzan Kadyrov became president of Chechnya in 2007, but the fighting has not stopped, with killings and kidnappings remaining quite common. The entire area of the Caucasus is currently restive, and Russia’s invasion of Georgia in 2008 increased tensions all across the region. In the summer of 2009, a suicide bomber tried to kill the president of Ingushetia, a republic that borders Chechnya, with a Chechen group involved in the Beslan school siege taking responsibility for the attack. Explosions and bombings increased all across the Caucasus later in the summer, and suicide attacks returned after a few years of relative calm.

### RELIGION

Tsarist Russia was overwhelmingly Russian Orthodox, with the tsar serving as spiritual head of the church. In reaction, the Soviet Union prohibited religious practices of all kinds, so that most citizens lost their religious affiliations during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Boris Yeltsin encouraged the Russian Orthodox Church to reestablish itself, partly as a signal of his break with communism, but also as a reflection of old Russian nationalism. Today most ethnic Russians identify themselves as Russian Orthodox, but they are still largely nonreligious, with only a small percentage regularly attending church services.

The growing acceptance of the church was demonstrated in 2007, when the Russian Church Abroad reunited with the Russian Orthodox Church. The Russian Church Abroad had split after the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, vowing never to return as long as the “godless regime” was in power. In a meeting in 2003 in New York, Putin met with leaders of the church to assure them “that this godless regime is no longer there... You are sitting with a believing president.” (*New York Times*, May 17, 2007). After the reunion in 2007 Mos-

**RELIGION AND ETHNIC GROUPS IN RUSSIA**

| <b>RELIGION</b>  | <b>ETHNIC GROUPS</b> |
|--|----------------------|
| <b>Russian Orthodox 15 - 20%</b>   | <b>Russian 79.8%</b> |
| <b>Muslim 10 - 15%</b>   | <b>Tatar 3.8%</b>    |
| <b>Other Christian 2%</b>  | <b>Ukrainian 2%</b>  |
| <b>note: estimates are of practicing worshipers; Russia has large numbers of non-practice believers and non-believers, a legacy of Soviet rule</b> | <b>Bashkir 1.2%</b>  |
|  | <b>Chuvash 1.1%</b>  |
|  | <b>Other 12.1%</b>   |

*Reference: CIA World Factbook, 2006 estimates*

cow still retained ultimate authority in appointments and other church matters, and many critics believe that the church is too much under government control. Other religions are represented in small percentages – Roman Catholic, Jews, Muslims, and Protestant. Since the current regime is relatively new and political parties have few ideological ties, no clear patterns have emerged that indicate political attitudes of religious v. nonreligious citizens. However, in the past Russia has generally followed a pragmatic combination of authoritarianism and flexibility toward minorities.

One pattern worth noting is the rapid rise in the Muslim share of the population in recent years. Russia has more Muslims than any other European state except Turkey, and some estimates show as many as 20 million Muslims in the country. Muslims are concentrated in three areas:



**Muslims in the Caucasus Region of the Russian Federation.** Karachai-Cherkessia (92%), Kabardino-Balkariya (78%), Ingushetia (63%), Chechnya (91%), and Dagestan (85%) all have heavy concentrations of Muslims, a contributing factor to the persisting unrest in the region.

1. **Moscow** – Muslims form a large share of laborers who have migrated to Moscow in recent years to find work.
2. **The Caucasus** – In this area between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea, many ethnicities (including Chechens) are Muslim. This area is often seen as a hot spot of trouble (along with Palestine, Kashmir, and Bosnia) for Muslims. The repression of Chechens, as well as intermittent violence in the entire region, was the biggest issue for Putin as he tried to cultivate Russia's role in global Muslim affairs. The region remains highly volatile today.
3. **Bashkortostan and Tatarstan** – Muslim relations with Russians are generally calmer in these two regions than in the Caucasus. Tatarstan's Muslim president, Mintimer Shaimiev, accompanied Mr. Putin around the Middle East in 2005, as the president tried to restructure Russia's image as a country supportive of Islam.

## SOCIAL CLASS

The Soviet attempts to destroy social class differences in Russia were at least partially successful. The old noble/peasant distinction of tsarist Russia was abolished, but was replaced by another cleavage: members of the Communist Party and nonmembers. Only about 7% of the citizenry were party members, but all political leaders were recruited from this group. Economic favors were granted to party members as well, particularly those of the Central Committee and the Politburo. However, egalitarian views were promoted, and the *nomenklatura* process of recruiting leaders from lower levels of the party was generally blind to economic and social background. Today Russian citizens appear to be more egalitarian in their political and social views than people of the established democracies.

Many observers of modern Russia note that a new socio-economic class may be developing within the context of the budding market economy: entrepreneurs that have recently amassed fortunes from new business opportunities. Although the fortunes of many of these newly rich Russians were wiped away by the 1997 business bust, many survived and new ones have emerged since then. Boris Yeltsin's government contributed to this class by distributing huge favors to them, and many believe that a small but powerful group of entrepreneurs sponsored the presidential campaign of Vladimir Putin in 2000. In the Putin era, oligarchs came under fire for various alleged and real illegal activities, particularly the underpayment of taxes in the businesses they acquired. Vladimir Gusinsky (MediaMost) and Boris Berezovsky were both effectively exiled, and the most prominent, Mikhail Khodorkovsky (Yukos Oil), was arrested in October 2003, sentenced to eight years in prison, with his company trying to protect itself from being dismantled.

## RURAL/URBAN CLEAVAGES

Industrialization since the era of Joseph Stalin has led to an increasingly urban population, with about 73% of all Russians now living in cities, primarily in the western part of the country. The economic divide between rural and urban people is wide, although recent economic woes have beset almost all Russians no matter where they live. City dwellers are more likely to be well educated and in touch with western culture, but the political consequences of these differences are unclear in the unsettled current political climate.

## BELIEFS AND ATTITUDES

In the old days of the Soviet Union, citizens' beliefs and attitudes toward their government were molded by Communist Party doctrines. At the heart of this doctrine was **Marxism**, which predicted the demise of the capitalist West. This belief fed into Russian nationalism and supported the notion that the Russian government and way of life would eventually prevail. The ideals of the revolutionary era of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century envisioned a world transformed by egalitarianism and the elimination of poverty and oppression. As **Stalin-**

ism set in, the ideals shifted to pragmatic internal development, and many of the old tendencies toward absolutism and repression returned. The collapse of the Soviet Union brought out much hostility toward the government that is reflected in the attitudes of Russian citizens today.

- **Mistrust of the government** – Political opinion polls are very recent innovations in Russian politics, so information about citizens' attitudes and beliefs toward their government is scarce. However, the limited evidence does reflect a great deal of alienation toward the political system. Most polls show that people support democratic ideals, including free elections and widespread individual civil liberties and rights. However, most do not trust government officials or institutions to convert these ideals to reality. Alienation is also indicated by a low level of participation in interest groups, including trade unions and other groups that people belonged to in the days of the Soviet Union. An interesting bit of contradictory evidence, though, is the high level of approval that President Vladimir Putin enjoyed. Other Russian public officials have not shared his popularity.
- **Statism** – Despite high levels of mistrust in government, Russian citizens still expect the state to take an active role in their lives. For most of Russian history, citizens have functioned more as subjects than as participants, and the central government of the Soviet Union was strong enough to touch and control many aspects of citizens' lives. Today Russians expect a great deal from their government, even if they have been disappointed in the progress of reform in recent years.
- **Economic beliefs** – Boris Yeltsin's market reforms created divisions in public opinion regarding market reform. Nearly all parties and electoral groups support the market transition, but those with more favorable opinions of the old Soviet regime are less enthusiastic. At the other end of the spectrum are those that support rapid market reform, including privatization and limited government regulation. The latter approach was favored by Yeltsin, and his "shock therapy" marketization was blamed by his critics for the steep economic decline that characterized the 1990s.
- **Westernization** – Political opinion follows the old divide of **Slavophile vs. Westernizer**. Some political parties emphasize nationalism and the defense of Russian interests and Slavic culture. These parties also tend to favor a strong military and protection from foreign economic influence. On the other hand, reform parties strongly support the integration of Russia into the world economy and global trade.

Economic beliefs and attitudes toward the West also shape attitudes about whether or not the modern regime should integrate elements of the old Soviet government into its policymaking. Some citizens are nostalgic about the "good old days" when everyone had a guaranteed income, and they are most likely to support the Communist Party that still exists within the party system. Some observers are seeing a generational split between those that remember better times under Soviet power, and those that have come of age during the early days of the Russian Federation.

## POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Russian citizens did actually vote during Soviet rule in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In fact, their voting rate was close to 100% because they faced serious consequences if they stayed home. However, until Gorbachev brought about reforms in the late 1980s, the elections were not competitive, and citizens voted for candidates that were hand picked by the Communist leadership. Gorbachev created competitive elections in the Soviet Union, but because no alternate political parties existed yet, voter choice was limited to the designated party candidate vs. anyone from within party ranks who wanted to challenge the official candidate. In some cases, this choice made a real difference, because Boris Yeltsin himself was elected as an "alternate candidate" to be president of the then Russian Republic.

After the economic crisis of late 2008, a series of protests were organized around Russia to criticize the government's economic policies as the economy sank to its lowest point since 1997. The largest was in Vladivostok, in the far eastern part of the country, where about 1000 protesters marched through the streets in late January 2009. The Russian Communist Party organized a rally in Moscow and called for a return of the centralized economic policies of the Soviet Union. The authorities approved the rally, and riot police officers watched the march but did not interfere. Other demonstrations against the government, as well as some in support, were held in several cities throughout the country, with none apparently turning violent.

Since 1991 voter turnout in the Russian Federation has been fairly high: higher than in the United States, but somewhat lower than turnout rates in Britain and France. Political alienation is reflected in the 50.3% rate in the 1993 Duma elections, but those elections followed a failed attempt by the Duma to take over the country. Voter turnout in the Duma election in December 2003 was just under 56%, and for the election in December 2007, the turnout was almost 64%. Meanwhile, voter turnouts for presidential elections declined between 1991 and 2004, with almost 75% of eligible citizens voting in the first round election in 1991, and less than 65% voting in 2004. However, the turnout in the presidential election of 2008 was almost 70%.

### CIVIL SOCIETY

Despite the relatively high voter turnouts, participation in other forms of political activities is low. Part of this lack of participation is due to a relatively undeveloped **civil society**, or private organizations and associations outside of politics. For example, most Russians don't attend church on a regular basis, nor do they belong to sports or recreational clubs, literary or other cultural groups, charitable organizations, or labor unions. Only about 1% report belonging to a political party. On the other hand, Russians are not necessarily disengaged from politics. Many report that they regularly read newspapers, watch news on television, and discuss politics with family and friends.

Civil society appears to be growing in Russia. Before the 1917 Revolution, little civil society existed because of low economic development, authoritarianism, and feudalism. Soviet authorities argued that only the party could and should represent the people's interests, and so state-sponsored organizations appeared in a **state corporatist** arrangement with the government clearly in control of channeling the voice of the people. The Russian Orthodox Church was brought tightly under control of the Communist Party. With the advent of *glasnost* in the 1980s, however, civil society slowly began to emerge, and since that time many organizations have formed to express points of view on many different issues, including the environment, ethnicity, gender, human rights, and health care. Despite the proliferation of these groups, the government has placed severe restrictions on their activities, especially on groups that are openly critical of the government's policies. Rather than directly attacking the groups, the government has used a number of tactics to weaken them, such as investigating sources of income, making registration with the authorities difficult, and police harassment.

### RUSSIAN YOUTH GROUPS

As president, Vladimir Putin created a handful of youth movements to support the government. The largest is **Nashi**, and others are the Youth Guard and Locals. All are part of an effort to build a following of loyal, patriotic young people and to defuse any youthful resistance that could have emerged during the sensitive presidential election of 2008. Nashi organized mass marches in support of Mr. Putin and staged demonstrations over foreign policy issues that resulted in the physical harassment of the British and Estonian ambassadors. For example, after Estonia relocated a Soviet-era war memorial in April 2007, Nashi laid siege to the Estonian Embassy in Moscow, throwing rocks, disrupting traffic, and tearing down the Estonian flag. Members of the group attacked the Estonian ambassador, and her guards had to use pepper spray to defend her.

Nashi's opponents deride the organization as a modern version of Komsomol, the youth wing of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Nashi receives grants from the government and large state-run businesses, so critics of the group see it as an arm of an increasingly authoritarian state.

## POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS

Russian history includes a variety of regime types, but the tradition is highly authoritarian. The reforms that began in the early 1990s are truly experimental, and only time will tell whether democracy and a free market economy will take root. Even if they do, the nature of the regime must take into account Russian political culture and traditions. Current political parties, elections, and institutions of government are all new, and their functions within the political system are very fluid and likely to change within the next few years. However, the Russian Federation has survived its first few rocky years, and many experts believe that at least some aspects of Russian government and politics are beginning to settle into a pattern.

Even though the Soviet Union was highly centralized, it still maintained a **federal government structure**. The Russian Federation has retained this model, and the current regime consists of eighty-nine regions, twenty-one of which are ethnically non-Russian by majority. Each region is bound by treaty to the Federation, but not all – including Chechnya – have signed on. Most of these regions are called “republics,” and because the central government was not strong under Yeltsin, many ruled themselves almost independently. In the early 1990s, several republics went so far as to make claims of sovereignty that amounted to near or complete independence. Many saw the successful bid of the former Soviet states for independence as role models, and they believed that their own status would change as well. Chechnya's bid for independence and the war that followed are good examples of this sentiment. Some regions are much stronger than others, so power is devolved unequally across the country, a condition called **asymmetric federalism**.

As president, Vladimir Putin cracked down on regional autonomy recently, ordering the army to shell even Chechnya into submission. Several measures that Putin imposed are:

- **Creation of super-districts** – In 2000 seven new federal districts were created to encompass all of Russia. Each district is headed by a presidential appointee, who supervises the local authorities as Putin sees fit.
- **Removal of governors** – A law allows the president to remove from office a governor who refuses to subject local law to the national constitution.
- **Appointment of governors** – Putin further centralized power in Moscow in late 2004 with a measure that ended direct election of the eighty-nine regional governors. Instead, the governors now are nominated by the president, and then confirmed by regional legislatures.
- **Changes in the Federation Council** – Originally the Federation Council (the upper legislative house) was comprised of the governors and Duma heads of each region. In 2002 a Putin-backed change prohibited these officials from serving themselves, although they were still allowed to appoint council members.
- **Elimination of single-member-district seats in the Duma** – Many minor political parties were able to capture Duma seats under the old rules that allowed half of the 450 seats to be elected by single-member districts and half by proportional representation. In 2005, Putin initiated a change to a pure proportional representation electoral system that eliminated candidates that were regionally popular.

As a result of all these changes, the “federation” is highly centralized.

## LINKAGE INSTITUTIONS

Groups that link citizens to government are still not strong in Russia, a situation that undermines recent attempts to establish a democracy. Political parties were highly unstable and fluid during the 1990s, and since Putin's election in 2000, more and more power has been concentrated in his party, so that after the parliamentary elections of late 2003 and presidential elections of early 2004, no strong opposing political parties were in existence. Interest groups have no solid footing in civil society since private organizations are weak, and the media has come more and more under government control.

## PARTIES

Most established democracies had many years to develop party and electoral systems. However, Russians put theirs together almost overnight after the Revolution of 1991. Many small, factional political parties ran candidates in the first Duma elections in 1993, and by 1995, 43 parties were on the ballot. Many of the parties revolved around a particular leader or leaders, such as the "Bloc of General Andrey Nikolaev and Academician Svyatoslav Fyodorov," the "Yuri Boldyrev Movement," or "Yabloko," which is an acronym for its three founders. Others reflected a particular issue, such as the "Party of Pensioners," "Agrarian Party of Russia," or "Women of Russia." By 1999 the number of parties who ran Duma candidates had shrunk to 26, but many of the parties were new ones, including Vladimir Putin's Unity Party. Needless to say, with these fluctuations, citizens have had no time to develop party loyalties, leadership in Russia continues to be personalistic, and political parties remain weak and fluid.

New election rules initiated by Vladimir Putin in 2005 solidified this trend toward fewer political parties. Before 2007, half of the Duma's 450 seats were elected by proportional representation and half by single-member districts. The rules changed so that all seats – starting in the 2007 election – are elected by proportional representation, with all parties required to win a minimum of 7% of the national vote in order to win any seats. Smaller parties with regional support lost representation, and only four parties gained seats in the election of 2007: United Russia, the Communist Party, the Liberal Democrats, and Fair Russia.

### United Russia

The party was founded in April 2001 as a merger of Fatherland All-Russia Party, and the Unity Party of Russia. The Unity Party was put together by oligarch Boris Berezovsky and other entrepreneurs to support then Prime Minister Vladimir Putin in the presidential election of 2000. The merger put even more political support behind Putin. United Russia won 221 of the 450 Duma seats in the election of 2003, although this figure underestimated the party's strength since many minor parties were Putin supporters or clients. Putin, running as United Russia's candidate, won the presidential election of 2004 with 71% of the vote with no serious challengers from any other political parties. In the fall of 2007, Putin announced his willingness to head the party list at the general Duma election in 2007. Since Duma election rules had been changed at his initiative in 2005 to pure proportional representation, this move insured that he would be elected to the Duma, and so eligible to become prime minister. United Russia gained more than 64% of the vote in the election of 2007, which translated to 315 of the 450 seats in the Duma. Putin's hand-picked successor, Dmitri Medvedev, won the presidential election of 2008 with about 70% of the vote, and "chose" Putin as his prime minister. Ideologically, United Russia is hard to define except that it is pro-Putin.

### The Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF)

The Communist Party of the old Soviet Union survives today as the second strongest party in the Duma, even though they have not yet won a presidential election. After the election of 1995, they held 157 of the



Duma's 450 members, and even though they lost seats in the 1999 election, the party remained an important force in Russian politics. However, the party's support dropped significantly in the parliamentary elections of 2003, winning only 12.6% of the vote and 51 of the 450 Duma seats. The party's leader, **Gennady Zyuganov**, came in second in the 1996 and 2000 presidential elections, but his percentage in the second round fell from 40.3% in 1996 to 29.21% in 2000. Zyuganov dropped out of the presidential election of 2004, and in July 2004, a breakaway faction led by Vladimir Tikhonov weakened the party further. In 2008, the party's candidate was again Zyuganov, who gained less than 18% of the vote, second to Medvedev's more than 70% of the vote.

The CPRF is not exactly like the old Communist Party, but it is far less reformist than other parties are. Zyuganov opposed many reforms during the Gorbachev era, and he continues to represent to supporters the stability of the old regime. The party emphasizes centralized planning and nationalism, and implies an intention to regain territories lost when the Soviet Union broke apart.

### **Liberal Democrats**

This misnamed party is by far the most controversial. It is headed by **Vladimir Zhirinovsky** who has made headlines around the world for his extreme nationalist positions. He regularly attacks reformist leaders, and particularly disliked Yeltsin. He has implied that Russia under his leadership would use nuclear weapons on Japan, and he makes frequent anti-Semitic remarks (despite his Jewish origins). He has also brought the wrath of Russian women by making blatantly sexist comments. His party was reformulated as "Zhirinovsky's bloc" for the 2000 presidential election, when he received only 2.7% of the vote. The party did pick up seats in the 2003 Duma elections, receiving about 11% of the total vote, as well as 37 seats. The rule changes for the 2007 elections did not impact the party's representation significantly, although they won 40 seats, a gain of 3 over the 2003 election.

### **Fair Russia**

Fair Russia was formed in 2006 by the merger of Motherland People's Patriotic Union with the Party of Pensioners and the Party of Life. The party is led by the Speaker of the Federation Council Sergei Mironov. Motherland formed in 2003 with the merger of 30 organizations, but its leaders quarreled over whether or not to challenge Putin in the 2004 presidential race, and the party split in two, with one faction forming Fair Russia. The party passed the 7% threshold in the Duma election of 2007 with 7.74% of the vote, enough to gain them 38 seats.

### **Reformist Parties**

Russia has two parties that have been consistently reformist, although both of them are in jeopardy of disappearing from the political scene before the next election.

- **Yabloko** has survived all elections since 1993, and it has been consistently reformist. Its name is an acronym for its three founders, but "yabloko" also means "apple" in Russian. It has taken the strongest stand for pro-democracy, and it generally does best among intellectuals who have supported reform since the days of Gorbachev rule. The leader – Grigori Yavlinski – came in third in the Russian presidential election of 2000, but he received only 5.8% of the vote. The party gained only 4.4% of the vote in the parliamentary elections of 2003, making it ineligible for seats under proportional representation. They won only 4 seats in the Duma, all from single-member districts. With the change in rules for the election of 2007 – all single-member-district seats were eliminated – Yabloko lost all its seats in the Duma.

- **Union of Right Forces** is not “rightist” in orientation. The name only implies that they are “right” in the sense of understanding the truth. It emphasizes the development of a free market, and backs further privatization of industry. They had 29 representatives in the Duma before the election of 2003, but like Yabloko, they received less than 5% of the vote, and had only 3 seats in the Duma, all from single-member districts. Like Yabloko, the Union of Right Forces lost all its seats after the election of 2007, since it won less than 1% of the total votes, well below the 7% floor set by the new rules.

Overall, since 1993 ideological parties have faded in importance and have been replaced by **parties of power**, or parties strongly sponsored by economic and political power-holders. For example, United Russia is Putin’s party, created by powerful oligarchs to get him elected. As long as Putin is in power, United Russia will be, too, especially since he was able to orchestrate who his successor would be in 2008. At the time of the election, Putin was tremendously popular, as was reflected in United Russia’s landslide in the Duma elections of 2007. The two elections confirmed that the party of power remains the voters’ choice.

## ELECTIONS

The Russian political system supports three types of national votes:

- **Referendum** – The Constitution of 1993 allowed the president to call for national referenda by popular vote on important issues. Even before the Constitution was written, Boris Yeltsin called for a referendum on his job performance. The people clearly supported his reforms, but his majorities were not overwhelming. The second referendum was held later in the year, and the people voted in favor of the new Constitution. A regional referendum was held in Chechnya in 2003 to approve a constitution for the area. The constitution was approved, including the phrase that declared Chechnya to be an “inseparable part” of Russia.
- **Duma elections** – Russian citizens have gone to the polls five times to elect Duma representatives (1993, 1995, 1999, 2003, and 2007). The Duma has 450 seats, and until 2007, half were elected by proportional representation, and the other half by single-member districts. As of 2007, the 225 single-member districts were abolished, so that all Duma seats now are assigned exclusively by proportional representation. Also eliminated was the “against all” option that allowed voters to reject all candidates. Parties must get at least 7% (raised from 5% before 2007) of the total vote to get any seats according to proportional representation. The election changes were initiated by Putin, who argued that the new rules would reduce the number of parties in the Duma and thus make policymaking more efficient. Since 1993 parties have merged and disappeared, so that only a few have survived to the present.
- **Presidential elections** – Presidential elections follow the two-round model that the Duma has. In 2000 Putin received 52.94% of the vote, so no run-off election was required, since he captured a majority on the first round. Communist Gennady Zyuganov received 29.21%, and no other candidates garnered more than 5.8%. Some observers have questioned the honesty of elections, particularly since the media obviously promoted Yeltsin in 1996 and Putin in 2000. A 2001 law seriously restricted the right of small, regional parties to run presidential candidates, so critics questioned how democratic future presidential elections might be. The presidential election of 2004 added credence to the criticism, since Vladimir Putin won with 71% of the vote, again requiring no run off. His closest competitor was Nikolay Khari- tonov, who ran for the Communist Party, and received less than 14% of the vote. In 2008 Putin was ineligible to run, but his chosen successor, Dmitri Medvedev, won the election with more than 70% of the vote.

## DUMA ELECTIONS OF 2007

| PARTY                      | % OF VOTES | SEATS | % OF SEATS |
|----------------------------|------------|-------|------------|
| United Russia              | 64.3%      | 315   | 70%        |
| Communist Party            | 11.57%     | 57    | 12.7%      |
| Liberal Democrats          | 8.14%      | 40    | 8.9%       |
| Fair Russia                | 7.74%      | 38    | 8.4%       |
| Agrarian Party             | 2.3 %      | 0     | --         |
| Yabloko                    | 1.59%      | 0     | --         |
| Civic Strength             | 1.05%      | 0     | --         |
| Union of Right Forces      | .96%       | 0     | --         |
| Patriots of Russia         | .89%       | 0     | --         |
| Patry of Social Fairness   | .22%       | 0     | --         |
| Democratic Party of Russia | .13%       | 0     | --         |

Reference: "Russia Votes," [www.russiavotes.org/duma/duma\\_today.php#](http://www.russiavotes.org/duma/duma_today.php#)

**Duma Election Results of 2007.** The new election rules changed the makeup of the Duma primarily by eliminating representation from minority parties. Before 2007, many parties had regional support that allowed them to capture a few Duma seats, but the new rules eliminated single-member-district seats, so smaller parties received no representation. For example, in the 2003 elections Yabloko earned 4 seats, the Union of Right Forces gained 3, and the Agrarian Party earned 2. None captured any seats in 2007.

## INTEREST GROUPS

Of course, interest groups were only allowed in the Soviet Union under **state corporatism**, controlled by the government. Decision-making took place within the Central Committee and the Politburo, and if any outside contacts influenced policy, they generally were confined to members of the Communist Party. When market capitalism suddenly replaced centralized economic control in 1991, the state-owned industries were up for grabs, and those that bought them for almost nothing were generally insiders (members of the *nomenklatura*) who have since become quite wealthy. This collection of **oligarchs** may be defined loosely as an interest group because they have been a major influence on the policymaking process during the formative years of the Russian Federation.

## THE OLIGARCHY

The power of the oligarchy became obvious during the last year of Boris Yeltsin's first term as President of the Federation. The tycoons were tied closely to members of Yeltsin's family, particularly his daughter. Together they took advantage of Yeltsin's inattention to his presidential duties, and soon monopolized Russian industries and built huge fortunes. One of the best-known oligarchs is Boris Berezovsky, who admitted in 1997 that he and six other entrepreneurs controlled over half of the Russian GNP. Berezovsky's businesses had giant holdings in the oil industry and in media, including a TV network and many newspapers. He used the media to insure Yeltsin's reelection in 1996, and he and the "family" clearly controlled the presidency. When Yeltsin's ill health and alcoholism triggered events that led to his resignation in 2000, Berezovsky went to work with other oligarchs to put together and finance the Unity Party. When Unity's presidential candidate Vladimir Putin easily won the election with more than 50% of the vote in the first round, it looked as if the oligarchs had survived Yeltsin's demise.

Putin, however, has shown some resistance to oligarchic control. He has clashed with the entrepreneurs on several occasions, and when television magnate Vladimir Gusinsky harshly criticized Putin's reform plans, Gusinsky was arrested for corruption and his company was given to a state-owned monopoly. Both Berezovsky and Gusinsky are now in exile, but they still have close political and economic connections in Russia. In October 2003, Mikhail Khodorkovsky, the richest man in Russia and chief executive officer of Yukos Oil Company, was arrested as a signal from Putin that the Russian government was consolidating power. The government slapped massive penalties and additional taxes on Yukos, forcing it into bankruptcy. In 2009 the government pursued new charges against Khodorkovsky, so it is possible that he could remain behind bars for two more decades.

The other oligarchs heeded the warning from Khodorkovsky's example and largely withdrew from political activities, leaving Putin in control but probably with a narrower base of support from economic leaders. However, as the Russian economy sank during the recession that began in late 2007, oligarchs have found themselves heavily in debt and have looked to the state for loans. Even though the government has been cash-strapped as well, the economic climate has the potential for weakening the power of the oligarchs and giving the government more control over them. Putin's choice for president, Dmitri Medvedev, was Chairman of Gazprom until he was elected president of the Russian Federation in May 2008, and he was replaced at Gazprom by Viktor Zubkov, the prime minister who was in turn replaced by Vladimir Putin.

## STATE CORPORATISM

Under Putin's leadership **state corporatism**, where the state determines which groups have input into policymaking, has become well established. The Russian government has established vast, state-owned holding companies in automobile and aircraft manufacturing, shipbuilding, nuclear power, diamonds, titanium, and other industries. If companies appear to be too independent or too rich the government has not forced owners to sell, but has cited legal infractions (such as with Yukos) to force sales. Either government-controlled companies, or companies run by men seen as loyal to Mr. Putin, are the beneficiaries. Another term for such an arrangement is **insider privatization**.

## THE RUSSIAN MAFIA

A larger and even more shadowy influence than the oligarchs is known as the "mafia," but this interest group controls much more than underworld crime. Like the oligarchs, they gained power during the chaotic time after the Revolution of 1991, and they control local businesses, natural resources, and banks. They thrive on payoffs from businesses ("protection money"), money laundering, and deals that they make with Russian

government officials, including members of the former KGB. They have murdered bankers, journalists, businessmen, and members of the Duma.

The huge fortunes made by the oligarch and mafia offend the sensibilities of most Russian citizens, who tend to value equality of result, not equality of opportunity. In Russia's past, lawlessness has been dealt with by repressive, authoritarian rule, and these groups represent a major threat to the survival of the new democracy.

### STATE CORPORATISM IN RUSSIA

| State Owned Company                           | Chairman   | Benefits   |
|---|--|--|
| <b>Gazprom</b> (natural gas)                  | Viktor A Zubkov<br>(former prime minister)                           | Sibneft oil company<br>Sakhalin II oil company<br>(controlling stakes)<br>Yukos Oil assets |
| <b>Vneshtorgbank (VTB)</b>                    | Andrei Kostin<br>(close friend of Putin and on the board of Rosneft) | International investment opportunities; funding for power generation                       |
| <b>Rosneft</b> (oil)                          | Igor I. Sechin<br>(presidential deputy chief of staff)               | the Yuganskneftegaz oil fields (Yukos assets)<br>Refineries, oil fields from Yukos         |
| <b>Russian Technology</b><br>(weapons trader) | Sergey V. Chemezov<br>(former KGB colleague of Putin)                | Avtovaz, Russia's largest car maker<br>VSMPO, a titanium aircraft parts maker              |
| <b>United Aircraft Corporation</b>            | Sergei B. Ivanov<br>(first deputy prime minister)                    | Company created in 2006 by presidential decree   |

*References:* *The New York Times*, July 8, 2007, May 11, 2008; "Andrei Kostin's Russian Power Grab," *Forbes*, October 8, 2007, <http://www.rosneft.com/>, <http://old.gazprom.ru/eng/articles/article29605.shtml>, <http://www.vtbcapital.com>. It is interesting to note that the former Chairman of Gazprom was Dmitri Mevedev, the current president of Russia. The chart also reflects Russia's **patron-client system**, where individuals in power give favors to subordinates, in return for political support.

## THE RUSSIAN MEDIA

For years the official newspaper of the Soviet Union, **Pravda**, only printed what government officials wanted it to, and so it became an important propaganda tool for the Communist Party. After the coup of 1991 and the dissolution of the country, Pravda continued as an independent newspaper with more freedom of the press than the country had ever allowed. Under Putin, the government again tightened its hold on the press, but Pravda has reinvented itself as a tabloid with a huge audience. Today it has little to fear from official censorship because its investigative journalism tends toward exposés of incompetent police work, corrupt low-level officials, and dirty train stations. Its biggest stories focus on celebrities, such as fashion models, radio hosts, and a hockey player hit with a cake. For serious journalists, however, who want to investigate the top layers of political power, it is a different story.

During a joint press conference with Vladimir Putin in early 2005, two Russian reporters challenged comments by U.S. President George Bush about the lack of a free press in Russia. Of course, the reporters were hand picked to accompany Putin on his trip to the United States, but they argued that the Russian media often criticizes the government. It is true that newspapers and television stations are now privately owned in Russia, although the state controls many of them. There are also many instances of reporters commenting on political actions and decisions, but how much real freedom they have is not clear. One example occurred when the Kremlin used a state-controlled company to take over the only independent television network, NTV. When the ousted NTV journalists took over a different channel, TV-6, the state shut it down. Russian media circles also were suspicious of the alleged poisoning of Anna Politkovskaya, one of the most outspoken critics of the government's policies in Chechnya. In March 2007 correspondent Ivan Safronov, who worked for the business daily *Kommersant*, was killed in a fall from the window of his Moscow apartment.

The status of freedom of the press in Russia is illustrated by media coverage of the school seizure at Beslan in 2004. As the tragedy unfolded on a Friday, two of Russia's main TV channels did not mention what was happening until an hour after explosions were first heard at the school. When state-owned Russia TV and Channel One finally reported it, they returned to their regularly scheduled programs. However, NTV, which is owned by state-controlled Gazprom, did have rolling coverage for three hours, even though it started late.

State corporatism appears to be impacting the media business, just as it has oil, gas, aircraft building, and auto companies. For example, in May 2007 the Russian Union of Journalists was evicted from its headquarters in Moscow to make space for the Russia Today television channel. According to the general secretary of the RUJ, the eviction was based on an order from President Vladimir Putin to accommodate the expansion plans of the state-owned English-language channel, which aims to promote a positive image of Russia abroad. One newspaper, the *Novaya Gazeta*, has blatantly criticized the Russian government. Since 2000 five employees of *Novaya Gazeta* have died under violent or suspicious circumstances. The latest were in January 2009, when the newspaper's lawyer, Stanislav Markelov, and a young reporter, Anastasia Baburova were fatally shot by a masked gunman. The editor, Dmitri Muratov, put two of his reporters under armed protection and instituted a policy that any article with sensitive information was to be published immediately, reducing the benefit of killing the reporters. No one blames the government directly for the attacks, but the message is clear: don't criticize the government.

## INSTITUTIONS OF GOVERNMENT

The structure of the government was put in place by the Constitution of 1993. It borrows from both presidential and parliamentary systems, and the resulting hybrid government is meant to allow for a strong presi-

dency, but at the same time place some democratic checks on executive power. Its brief history has been stormy, but it is too early to say whether the difficulties centered on Yeltsin's ineffective presidency, or if they reflect inherent flaws within the system. The relationships among the branches have stabilized, but in Putin's administration the executive has clearly dominated the other branches, and Putin has commanded the executive branch.

## THE PRESIDENT AND PRIME MINISTER

The executive branch separates the **head of state** (the president) from the **head of government** (the prime minister). Unlike the Queen's role in British politics, the president's position has been far from ceremonial. Although the Constitution provided for a strong presidency, under Putin the president came to dominate the prime minister. However, since Putin stepped aside to allow Dmitri Medvedev to run for and win the presidency and Putin became prime minister, the relationship between the two positions is clearly changing.

Russian voters directly elect the president for a four-year term, with a limit of two terms. Since Russian political parties are in flux, anyone who gets a million signatures can run for president. In 1996, 2000, and 2004, many candidates ran on the first ballot, and in 2000 and 2004 Putin won without a second-round vote. In 2008, Medvedev also won without a second-round vote. The president has the power to:

- **Appoint the prime minister and cabinet** – The Duma must approve the prime minister's appointment, but if they reject the president's nominee three times, the president may dissolve the Duma. In 1998, Yeltsin replaced Prime Minister Kiriyenko with Viktor Chernomyrdin, and the Duma rejected him twice. On the third round – under threat of being dissolved – they finally agreed on a compromise candidate, Yevgeni Primakov. Putin was prime minister when he ran for president, and when he became president, he appointed Mikhail Kasyanov as prime minister. Kasyanov served for four years, and was eventually replaced by Mikhail Fradkov, and then Viktor Zubkov. Putin became prime minister in 2008.
- **Issue decrees that have the force of law** – The president runs a cabinet that has a great deal of concentrated, centralized power. For example, Putin created the state-owned United Aircraft Corporation by decree, a decision that the legislature had no control over. According to the **Constitution**, the Duma has no real power to censure the cabinet, except that it may reject the appointment of the prime minister.
- **Dissolve the Duma** – This power was tested even before the Constitution was put in place. In 1993 Yeltsin ordered the old Russian Parliament dissolved, but the conservative members staged a coup, and refused to leave the "White House." (the parliament building). He ordered the army to fire on the building until the members gave up, but the chaos of the new regime was revealed to the world through the images of a president firing on his own parliament. No such chaos has occurred under Putin.

There is no vice-president, so if a president dies or resigns before his term is up, the prime minister becomes acting president. This situation occurred in 1999 when Prime Minister Vladimir Putin took over presidential duties when Yeltsin resigned. Prime ministers are not appointed because they are leaders of the majority party (as they are in Great Britain); instead most have been career bureaucrats chosen for their technical expertise or loyalty to the president. However, since the presidential election of 2008 when Medvedev was elected president and Putin took the prime minister's position, there is little doubt that Putin is still in charge, and so even though Medvedev is the head of state, policies do not seem to have changed from those of Putin's presidency.

## A BICAMERAL LEGISLATURE

So far, the Russian legislature has proved to be only a very weak check on executive power. The lower house, the **Duma**, has 450 deputies, who since 2007, are all selected by proportional representation. The Duma passes bills, approves the budget, and confirms the president's political appointments. However, these powers are very limited, since the president may rule by decree, and the Duma's attempts to reject prime ministers have failed. In another confrontation with Yeltsin, the Duma tried to use its constitutional power to impeach him, but the process is so cumbersome that it failed. Although the Duma has been controlled by Putin because his party (United Russia) has most of the seats, it still wields some power in the drafting of legislation. Most legislation originates with the president or prime minister, just as it does in Great Britain and most other parliamentary systems, but the Duma debates bills that must pass the deputies' vote before they become laws.

The upper house, called the **Federation Council**, consists of two members from each of the 89 federal administrative units. Since 2002 one representative is selected by the governor of each region and another by the regional legislature. The Federation Council serves the purpose that most upper houses do in bicameral federalist systems: to represent regions, not the population as such. However, like most other upper houses in European governments, it seems to mainly have the power to delay legislation. If the Federation Council rejects legislation, the Duma may override the Council with a two-thirds vote. On paper, it also may change boundaries among the republics, ratify the use of armed forces outside the country, and appoints and removes judges. However, these powers have not been used yet.

## THE JUDICIARY AND THE RULE OF LAW

No independent judiciary existed under the old Soviet Union, with courts and judges serving as pawns of the Communist Party. The Constitution of 1993 attempted to build a judicial system that is not controlled by the executive by creating a **Constitutional Court**. The Court's nineteen members are appointed by the president and confirmed by the Federation Council, and it is supposed to make sure that all laws and decrees are constitutional. Under Putin, the court took care to avoid crossing the president. However, even the possibility that it might have independent political influence led Putin to propose moving the seat of the court to St. Petersburg, away from the political center in Moscow. The Constitution also created a Supreme Court to serve as a final court of appeal in criminal and civil cases. The court, though, does not have the power to challenge the constitutionality of laws and other official actions of legislative and executive bodies; the Constitutional Court has that power. Both courts have been actively involved in policymaking, although their independence from the executive is questionable. One problem is that most prosecutors and attorneys were trained under the Soviet legal system, so the judiciary currently suffers from a lack of expertise in carrying out the responsibilities outlined in the Constitution.

Vladimir Putin came into office with a mission to revive the great period of law reform under the tsars, including jury trial, planned for all regions except Chechnya by 2007. Russia brought in procedural codes for criminal and civil rights, and spent a great deal of money on law reform. However, the system is still very much in transition, and corruption is a serious problem. The advent of juries is a real change, but the presumption of innocence is far from a reality. The independence of the judiciary is still not apparent, especially since no courts challenged Putin in his pursuit of the oligarchs and the dismantling of their empires.

Movement toward the rule of law continues to be blocked by corruption in state and society and by the political tradition of allowing the security police to continue to operate autonomously. In the Soviet period, domestic security was carried out by the **KGB** (State Security Committee), but since 1991 its functions have



been split up among several agencies. The main domestic security agency is called the Federal Security Service, and no member or collaborator of the Soviet-era security services has been prosecuted for violating citizens' rights. Although the security police are generally regarded as one of the least corrupted of the state agencies, society-wide corruption is a major problem in Russia. One large-scale survey by a Moscow research firm found that at least half the population of Russia is involved in corruption in daily life. For example, people often pay bribes for automobile permits, school enrollment, proper health care, and favorable court rulings. This corruption not only impedes the development of rule of law; it also puts a drag on economic development, since so much money is siphoned off for bribes.

## THE MILITARY

The army was a very important source of Soviet strength during the Cold War era from 1945 to 1991. The Soviet government prioritized financing the military ahead of almost everything else. The armed forces at one time stood at about 4 million men, considerably larger than the United States combined forces. However, the military usually did not take a lead in politics, and generals did not challenge the power of the Politburo. Even though some of the leaders of the attempted coup of 1991 were military men, the armed forces themselves responded to Yeltsin's plea to remain loyal to their government.

Under the Russian Federation, the army shows no real signs of becoming a political force. It has suffered significant military humiliation, and many sources confirm that soldiers go unpaid for months and have to provide much of their own food. Even as early as 1988, under Gorbachev, Soviet forces had to be withdrawn in disgrace from Afghanistan, and in 1994-1996, Chechen guerillas beat the Soviet forces. More recently, the army partially restored its reputation by crushing Chechen resistance in 1999-2000.

One prominent former general, **Alexander Lebed**, gained a political following before the election of 1996, and Yeltsin had to court his favor in order to win reelection. However, most political leaders have been civilians, so a military coup appears to be unlikely in the near future. Even so, some observers are wary of a military takeover, especially considering the tentative nature of the current "democracy."

Recently Russia's army has reasserted its old vigor, with Putin's 2007 announcement that, for the first time in 15 years, the Russian Air Force would begin regular, long-range patrols by nuclear-capable bombers again. The move was seen by some observers as one of several signs that Russia is rising in strength and wishes to assert itself internationally again. Military spending has increased significantly over the past few years, and the invasion of Georgia in 2008 was successful, with soldiers who appeared to be better trained than those who fought in earlier wars in Chechnya.

## PUBLIC POLICY AND CURRENT ISSUES

The first few years of the Russian Federation were very difficult ones, characterized by a great deal of uncertainty regarding the regime's future. Any regime change creates legitimacy issues, but Russia's case was extreme, with public policy directed at some very tough issues and seemingly intractable problems. The abrupt change in leadership goals and style between Yeltsin and Putin also has made it difficult to follow continuous threads in policy over the years, although alternating between reform and authoritarianism is an old theme that goes back to the days of the tsars.

## THE ECONOMY

The Soviet Union faced many challenges in 1991, but almost certainly at the heart of its demise were insurmountable economic problems. Mikhail Gorbachev enacted his *perestroika reforms*, primarily consisting of market economy programs inserted into the traditional centralized state ownership design of the Soviet Union. These plans were never fully implemented, partly because dissent within the Politburo led to the attempted coup that destroyed the state.

Today leaders of the Russian Federation face the same issue: How much of the centralized planning economy should be eliminated, and how should the market economy be handled? Yeltsin's "shock therapy" created chaotic conditions that resulted in a small group of entrepreneurs running the economy. In 1997 the bottom fell out of the economy when the government defaulted on billions of dollars of debts. The stock market lost half of its values, and threatened to topple other markets around the globe. Meanwhile, the Russian people suffered from the sudden introduction of the free market. Under the Soviet government, their jobs were secure, but now the unemployment rate soared. The ruble – once pegged by the government at \$1.60 – lost its value quickly, so that by early 2002, it took more than 30,000 rubles to equal a dollar. The oligarchs and mafia members prospered, but almost everyone else faced a new standard of living much worse than what they had had before.

Between 1997 and 2007, the Russian economy steadily improved, particularly in the new areas of privatized industries, but it suffered a tremendous blow when oil prices plummeted in 2008. In 2004 the economy had shown strong indications of recovery, with a growth of about 7%, and the standard of living was rising even faster, although real incomes improved more rapidly in neighboring countries, such as the Ukraine. For example, very few people, rich or poor, had running hot water for several weeks in the summer of 2007 in Moscow because the plants and network of pipelines shut down for maintenance every year. Although Russia ended 2008 with GDP growth of 6% – down only slightly from 10 years of growth averaging 7% annually – many economic problems presented themselves after the global economic crisis in September 2008. The Russian stock market dropped roughly 70%, as Russian companies were unable to pay loans called in as the market fell. The government responded with a rescue plan of over \$200 billion for the financial sector, and also proposed a \$20 billion tax cut plan for Russian citizens. Even so, the ruble fell in value, while unemployment grew and production dropped. Many people are still disillusioned with the new regime, and question the wisdom of current policymakers.

Today Russia's economy is fueled by its huge oil and gas reserves, and the corporations (mostly state run) that own them. With recent decreases in oil and gas prices, these companies have been challenged, and the decreasing value of the ruble against the dollar and the euro has presented even more problems. To prepare for the eventuality of a price drop in oil, Russia put a significant amount of oil money into a Stabilization Fund as reserves for state spending, but even that has not kept the economy from declining. In 2009, Medvedev outlined a number of economic priorities for Russia including improving infrastructure, innovation, investment, and institutions; reducing the state's role in the economy; and reforming the tax system and banking sector. One priority is to diversify the economy further, since energy and other raw materials still dominate the country's earnings.

## FOREIGN POLICY

The Soviet Union held hegemony over huge portions of the world for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and when it broke apart in 1991, that dominance was broken. The 1990s were a time of chaos and humiliation for Russia,

as Yeltsin had to rely on loans from its old nemesis, the United States, to help shake its economic doldrums. As the 21st century began, the new president, Vladimir Putin, set out to redefine Russia's place in the world, a two-dimensional task that required a new interpretation of the country's relationship with the west, as well as its role among the former Soviet States.

### **Relations with the near-abroad**

The weak **Confederation of Independent States** unites the fifteen former republics of the Soviet Union, and Russia is the clear leader of the group. However, the organization has little formal power over its members, and Russia's motives are almost always under strict scrutiny by the other countries. Still, trade agreements bind them together, although nationality differences keep the members from reaching common agreements. These nationality differences also threaten the Federation itself, with the threat of revolution from Chechnya spreading to other regions. In short, the CIS is a long way from being a regional power like the European Union, and many experts believe that the confederation will not survive.

One of the most controversial recent moves of the Russian government in the near-abroad was Putin's involvement in the 2004 presidential elections in the Ukraine. According to challenger Viktor Yushchenko, President Putin promised heavy financing and political advisors for Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovich's campaign for the presidency. Putin himself went to the Ukraine twice to campaign for Yanukovich. Popular protests broke out after Yanukovich won, with claims that the election was fraudulent. The elections were held again, and Yushchenko's victory in this round further strained relations with the near-abroad.

Another controversy erupted between Russia and Estonia in 2007 when the Estonian government removed a Soviet-era statue from a public place in its capital, Tallinn. The Estonian move met with a reaction from ethnic Russians living in Estonia, with hundreds of them attacking the main theater and the Academy of Arts in the capital. Events took a strange turn when computers went down all over Estonia the day after the protests. The Estonians accused Russia of orchestrating the computer attacks, and young protesters in Moscow reacted by attacking Estonia's embassy with eggs and harassing the Estonian ambassador. The old ethnicities of the culturally heterogeneous Soviet Union are still at odds, even though they are no longer united under one central government.

Most recently, Russia's relationships with countries in the near-abroad have been affected by its invasion of Georgia in 2008. Russian troops and armored vehicles rolled into South Ossetia, a "breakaway region" of Georgia that sought its independence. The move marked the growing aggressiveness of the Russian military, but it also reflected years of growing tensions between Georgia and Russia, especially between Georgia's president Mikheil Saakashvili and Putin. Georgia had long been viewed by Moscow as a wayward province, and after Georgia gained its independence when the Soviet Union fell apart, distrust grew, even though traditional bonds continued. However, Saakashvili allied Georgia with the United States, even naming a main road after George W. Bush. Russia responded by announcing its support for separatist regions of Georgia and then invaded South Ossetia and other areas of Georgia. A ceasefire agreement and a peace plan was brokered by Nicolas Sarkozy, the president of France and the European Union, but on August 26, 2008, Medvedev signed a decree recognizing South Ossetia and Abkhazia (another breakaway region) as independent states.



**The Troubled Caucasus Region.** The map above shows many points of conflict both within the Russian Federation and outside its borders. Chechnya has long been an area of conflict, where many still support Chechen independence from Russia. Georgia, now an independent country, has separatist problems of its own in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and Russia has supported those regions in their attempts to break away from Georgia. A root of the conflict is the variety of small cultural groups that have long inhabited the area, and over the years hostilities have built up among them.

### Relations with the West

The biggest adjustment for Russia is the loss of its superpower status from the Cold War era. The United States emerged as the lone superpower in 1991, and the two old enemies – Russia and the United States – had to readjust their attitudes toward one another. U.S. Presidents George H. Bush and Bill Clinton both believed that it was important to maintain a good working relationship with Russia. They also knew that the economic collapse of Russia would have disastrous results for the world economy. Both presidents sponsored aid packages for Russia, and they also encouraged foreign investment in the country's fledgling market economy. The United States and the other G-7 political powerhouses of Europe welcomed Russia into the organization, now known as the G-8, acknowledging the political importance of Russia in global politics. Russia supported France in blocking the UN Security Council's approval of the U.S.-sponsored war on Iraq in early 2003. Whether the move was a wise one is yet to be seen, but it does indicate Russia's willingness to assert its point of view, even if it opposes that of the United States. Russia is currently negotiating for membership in the World Trade Organization (WTO), a powerful body responsible for regulating international trade, settling trade disputes, and designing trade policy through meetings with its members. If Russia's bid to join the WTO is successful, it would almost certainly be a milestone in its integration with the international economic community.

Russia's relations with countries of the West and the near-abroad are defined more and more strongly by the clout of their oil and gas industries. In an ongoing dispute about gas lines that cross Ukraine, Belarus, and other nearby countries, Russia's state-run gas company, Gazprom, has institute gas price hikes that have been met by stiff resistance. In 2006, Gazprom reduced pressure in the Ukrainian pipeline system so that Ukrainian gas customers had no gas to use, even for basics, such as heating their homes. Europeans were affected because the pipelines eventually provide gas to them, and their governments put pressure on Putin's government until the pressure was restored.

Russia's relationship with Great Britain was strained in 2006 because of an espionage controversy in which a Russian businessman, Andrei Lugovoi, was accused of poisoning a former KGB officer and a Kremlin critic. The man became ill in Britain and was hospitalized there, and in a complicated case that involved British espionage as well, Britain demanded the extradition of Lugovoi from Russia to Britain so that he could stand trial there. When Russia stalled, relations between the two countries soured.

After the September 11<sup>th</sup> terrorist attacks, Putin's solidarity with the United States seemed to mark the beginning of a new era in Russian-American relations. However, the real breaking-point in Russia's relationship with America came after 2003. Putin saw America's invasion of Iraq as an intolerable encroachment on national interests, and he condemned President Bush for telling other people how to live. Meanwhile, the Bush administration insulted Russian pride by ignoring its relationship with the country, focusing instead on the war in Iraq. Tensions between the two countries escalated after Russia invaded South Ossetia in 2008. Putin had hoped that Bush would rein in Georgia's president as Saakashvili brushed off Russian prerogatives in the near abroad, and the attack affirmed Russia's strength. Barack Obama began his presidency by asserting his desire to "press the reset button" for relationships between the two countries, and his visit to Russia in the summer of 2009 resulted in a Russian agreement to open airspace to the U.S. for the Afghan War. However, Vice President Joe Biden offended the Kremlin by his public references to Russia's failing economy and a leadership that is "clinging to something in the past."

## **TERRORISM**

Just as has happened in the United States and Britain, Russia has had a number of acts of terror in recent years, with the Beslan school siege in southern Russia in 2004 being the most well known. Just prior to Beslan, a suicide bombing occurred near a subway station in Moscow, and bombs went off in two Russian airplanes almost simultaneously. As the government tried to break the Beslan siege by militants, 360 people died, many who were children. President Putin responded with a reform package to boost security. In an emergency gathering of regional and national leaders in late 2004, Putin argued that only a tighter grip from the central government would foil terrorists whose aim it was to force the country's disintegration. He laid out not just security measures, but also a sweeping political reform – top officials (including regional governors) would no longer be directly elected, but would be selected by the president, and then approved by regional legislatures. The Duma approved the president's plan later in the year. Terrorist attacks in the Caucasus calmed for a few years, but reasserted themselves in the summer of 2009.

## **POPULATION ISSUES**

In recent years, Russia has suffered a dramatic drop in its overall population. The population peaked in the early 1990s with about 148 million people, and the United Nations predicts that the country will fall to 116 million people by 2050, from the 141 million now, an 18% decline. The U.N. cites two reasons for the decline: a low birthrate and poor health habits. The low birth rate goes back to the Soviet era, when abortion was quite common and was used as a method of birth control. Economic hardship has not encouraged large

families, and health issues have also created a very high death rate of 15 deaths per 1000 people per year, far higher than the world's average death rate of just under 9. Alcohol-related deaths in Russia are very high and alcohol-related emergencies represent the bulk of emergency room visits in the country. Life expectancy is particularly low for men at 59, as compared to women's life expectancy of 72. The difference is usually attributed to high rates of alcoholism among males.

To combat this decline the Russian government is encouraging Russians who live abroad to return to their homeland. Moscow has spent \$300 million since 2007 to get a repatriation program started, and official estimated that more than 25 million people were eligible. Many are ethnic Russians who live in former Soviet republics, but the government is trying to attract people around the world. It is unclear how the financial crisis will affect the program's appeal, but many nearby countries have been hit harder than Russia. However, economic issues have discouraged many Russians from expanding the size of their families.

## **RE-CENTRALIZATION OF POWER IN THE KREMLIN?**

Some critics believe that Putin's reforms for the Duma and the selection of regional governors are more than a response to terrorism, but are part of a re-centralization of power in the Kremlin. Putin's party now has 2/3 of the seats in the Duma, and his government has taken important steps toward controlling the power of the oligarchs. The Kremlin now controls major television stations, as well as the Russian gas giant Gazprom. It is not clear whether these moves mark the beginning of the end of democratic experimentation in Russia, or simply a reaction to terrorism similar to those of the U.S. and British governments after major attacks in those countries. Another possibility is that Russia is simply going through yet another of its age-old alternations between reform and conservatism.

The presidential election of 2008 also provides evidence that Russia's political power remains centralized, even though the presidential succession technically went according to the provisions of the Constitution of 1993. Dmitri Medvedev was hand-picked by Putin, and Putin's new role as prime minister has not changed the fact that he still is in charge of the Russian political system.

## **DEVELOPMENT OF A CIVIL SOCIETY**

The notion of civil society starts with the acceptance of two areas of life: a public one that is defined by the government, and a private one, in which people are free to make their own individual choices. In a country with a strong civil society, people follow rules, operate with a degree of trust toward others, and generally have respectful dealings with others even if the government is not watching. Even though these ideals may not always be met, citizens are aware of both the rule of law in the public realm and their own privacy that exists outside it. Democracy and capitalism both depend on the civil society for their successful operation.

Russians do not necessarily share the assumptions that civil society rests on: the inherent value of life, liberty, and property. Instead, they have been much more influenced by traditions of **statism** – have a strong government or die. Their history began with this truth – survival amidst the invasions across the Russian plains and the rebellions of the many ethnicities depends on a strong, protective government. In the twentieth century, Russia became a superpower in the same way – through a strong, centralized government. Is it possible for stability, power, and prosperity to return to Russia through a democratic state and a capitalist economy?

In many ways the answer to that question tests the future of democracy as a worldwide political model. Were John Locke and other Enlightenment philosophers correct in their assumptions that it is in "human nature" to value freedom above equality? That people "naturally" have the right to own property and to live private lives? If so, can these values thrive among a people who have traditionally valued government protection

and equality? So far, the spread of democracy has taken many forms. If it takes hold in the Russian Federation, it is indeed a hardy, versatile, and potentially global philosophy.

## IMPORTANT TERMS AND CONCEPTS

asymmetric federalism  
 Berezovsky, Boris  
 bolsheviks  
 boyars  
 Catherine the Great  
 Central Committee  
 civil society in Russia  
 collective farms, collectivization  
 Confederation of Independent States  
 conflict in Chechnya  
 Constitution of 1993  
 Constitutional Court  
 Crimean War  
 CPRF  
 cultural heterogeneity in Russia  
 Decembrist Revolt  
 decrees  
 democratic centralism  
 de-Stalinization  
 Duma  
 equality of result in Russia  
 federal government structure  
 Federation Council  
 Five Year Plans  
 general secretary  
 glasnost  
 Gorbachev, Mikhail  
 Gorbachev's three-pronged reform plan  
 Gosplan  
 head of government, head of state  
 Khrushchev, Nikita  
 kulaks  
 Lebed, Alexander  
 Lenin, V.I.  
 Liberal Democrats  
 mafia  
 Marxism-Leninism  
 Medvedev, Dmitri  
 Mensheviks  
 nationality  
 near abroad  
 New Economic Policy

*nomenklatura*

oligarchy

*perestroika*

Peter the Great

politburo

proportional representation in Russia

Putin, Vladimir

Red Army/White Army

Russian Orthodox Church

secret speech

“shock therapy”

Slavophile vs. Westernizer

Stalinism

state corporatism

statism in Russia

totalitarianism

tsars

United Russia Party

“Window on the West”

Yobloko

Yeltsin, Boris

*zemstvas*

Zhirinovskiy, Vladimir

Zyuganov, Gennady