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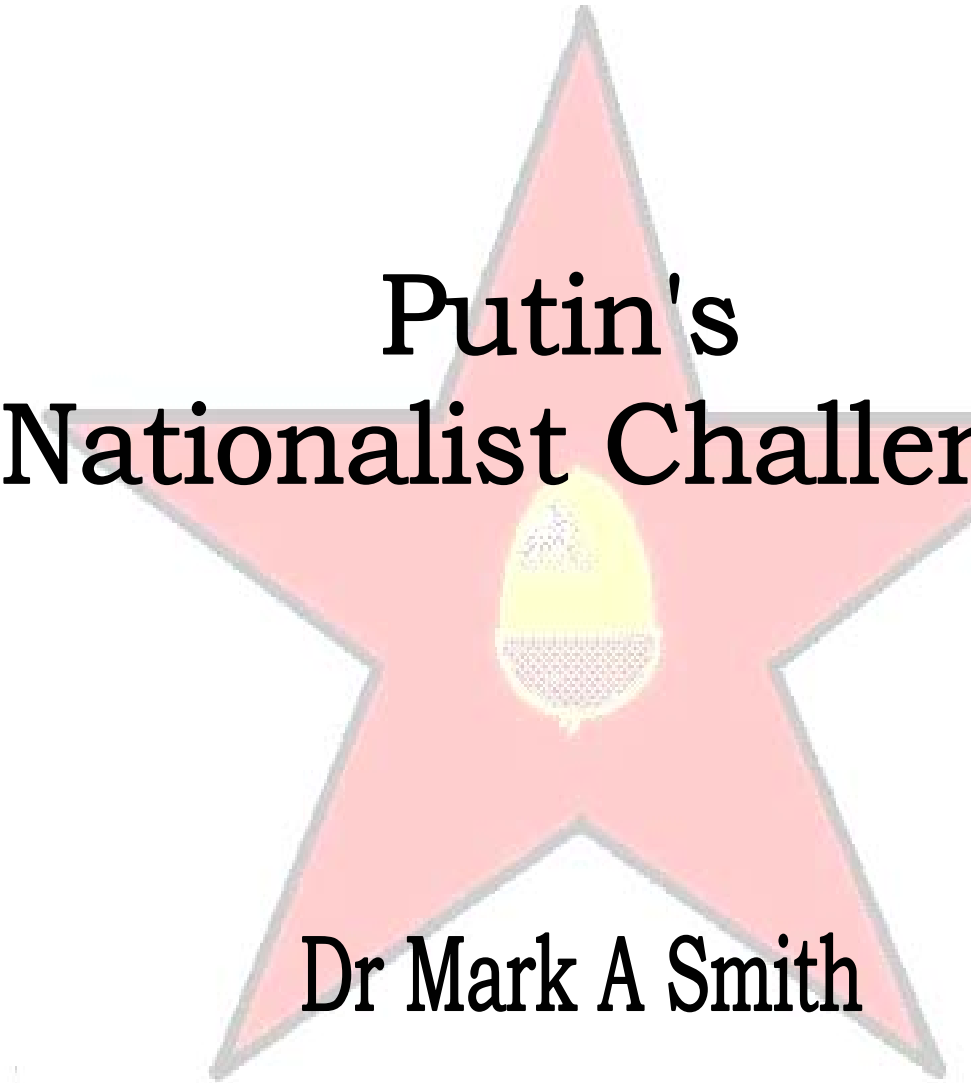

Putin's Nationalist Challenge

Dr Mark A Smith

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Executive Summary

* Putin is increasingly dominating the political system, which is becoming more authoritarian.

* Administrative reform has been implemented in order to streamline the state with limited success.

Three key issues:

  * Could "mild authoritarianism" be replaced by a harsher form of rule?

  * What will happen in 2008, when the next presidential elections are scheduled, and Putin will be constitutionally obliged to step down?

  * Could the scenario of the "orange revolution" in Ukraine be repeated in Russia?

* There is now a strong possibility that Putin may either attempt to stay in power after his second term expires in 2008, or attempt to create an interim leadership from 2008 to 2012, and then return to power.

* Any post-2008 leadership is likely to be more nationalist and authoritarian.

Putin's Nationalist Challenge

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The Russian political system has been going through a process of subtle evolution since Vladimir Putin was first elected president in 2000. In 2000, major changes were made to the structure of centre-regional relations:

- Putin created seven federal districts, headed by a plenipotentiary representative, appointed by the president, and solely accountable to him. The plenipotentiary representative's main task is to ensure that federal government policy is being carried out by the regional leaderships. During the Yel'tsin period, many regional leaders had often ignored federal law, and elevated regional law above it.

- The regional leaders were removed from the upper house of the Russian parliament, the Federation Council, and the president acquired the legal power to dismiss regional governors who defied federal law.

These measures had the effect of enhancing the power of the central government over the regions. Since then, Putin has been able to increase further the power of the centre in ways which have undermined the fragile democratisation process of the 1990s.

A further significant evolution took place as a consequence of the terrorist outrage in Beslan, North Osetia in September 2004. Following this incident, the Putin leadership made the following key changes:

- Regional governors would no longer be elected. They would instead be appointed by the president, and this choice would then be approved by the regional legislature.

- The entire Duma would in future be elected by proportional representation (PR). Currently half of the Duma's 450 seats are elected on a PR basis, the other half being single member constituencies.

The constitution already gives the president enormous powers, and the ability of the legislature (ie the Federation Council and the Duma) to check the president is extremely limited. Both of the above measures, which became law in December 2004, had the effect of further strengthening Putin's domination of the political system. Appointed regional leaders are not likely to defy the president. A Duma elected entirely on a PR basis is likely to produce an even more pro-Putin Duma than exists at present. The abolition of single member constituencies means that independent deputies, particularly from small, anti-Putin parties will no longer be elected. Under a PR system, it will only be possible for deputies from the larger parties to be elected. As most of the large parties and factions are pro-Putin, then the Duma will be dominated by a pro-presidential majority. The Communist Party of the Russian Federation is an anti-Putin party, but it poses no serious challenge

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to the current Russian leadership. The changes to the law on parties that were approved in December 2004, which stipulate that a party must have at least 50,000 members (previously the minimum necessary was 10,000), and their regional branches at least 500 members, make it harder for any small anti-Putin party to survive. The amended law therefore gives an advantage to pro-Putin parties, particularly Yedinaya Rossiya.

By the end of 2004, then, the Putin leadership had succeeded in creating a largely submissive legislature (which was already weak in relation to the executive), and in ensuring that future regional leaderships would be beholden to the president. Moreover, Putin has since 2000 virtually destroyed the independent electronic media, and the legal case against former Yukos president Mikhail Khodorkovskiy has ensured that the Russian business community will be unlikely to challenge the Russian leadership politically.

Alongside the moves outlined above, academics Igor Sutyagin and Valentin Danilov received long prison sentences on trumped-up charges of espionage in 2004. According to the lawyers in their cases, the academics were tried by specially selected juries. Danilov was acquitted and then retried by a new jury. Their sentences were harsh (15 and 14 years, respectively). The Russian state has therefore after four years of Putinism become significantly more repressive.[1]

Administrative Reform

Alongside growing authoritarianism, administrative reform has been a major objective of the Putin leadership in its second term.[2] In July 2003, Putin signed decrees on administrative reform for the period 2003-2004. The move to do so probably stemmed from the notion he outlined in his Internet essay *Russia on the threshold of the new millennium* as far back as December 1999, when he became president. In this essay he talked of creating a more efficient state machine in order to facilitate Russia's modernisation and integration into the international economic system. He made the same point in his state of the nation address to the Federal Assembly in April 2005. Closer integration with the EU and membership of the World Trade Organisation have been key goals of Putin's foreign policy, and a more efficient state machine would make these goals more realisable. The Russian state had become bloated during the Yel'tsin period, and it was felt (particularly by German Gref, Minister of Economic Development and Trade) that a more streamlined administrative structure was necessary if a market economy was to operate effectively in Russia. The state machine was not to interfere in areas where interference was unnecessary. Some departments and ministries were copying the functions performed by others; this process of "doubling" was to stop. The functions of state departments was therefore to be more precisely delineated. The demarcation of powers between the federal centre and the regions was also to be clearly defined. Financing of state programmes was to be more closely tied to results, and the civil service was to be reformed.

In March 2004 Putin issued a decree that reduced the number of government agencies. The decree disbanded 13 federal ministries, two state committees, one federal commission, four federal services and four agencies. This left a total of 17 ministries. There was one deputy prime minister instead of six. The president was in charge of the activities of five ministries, five federal services and two federal agencies. These were: the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Emergencies Ministry, the

Foreign Ministry, the Ministry of Defence and the Ministry of Justice. The president was also in charge of the State Courier Service, the Foreign Intelligence Service, the Federal Security Service, the federal service for control over the trafficking of narcotics and psychotropic substances (formerly the State Committee for Control over the Trafficking of Narcotics and Psychotropic Substances) and the Federal Guard Service. The president was also to be in charge of two agencies - the Main Directorate of Special Programmes of the President and the presidential affairs directorate. Other ministers were appointed by the prime minister (who is appointed by the president), and were directly subordinate to him.

In April 2004, the government launched the next phase of administrative reform. The number of departments within ministries was to be significantly reduced. A minister was to have no more than two deputies. The overwhelming majority of governmental and interdepartmental commissions would be "reduced to departmental level". Prime Minister Mikhail Fradkov said the number of officials in the government would be drastically reduced. Deputy prime minister Aleksandr Zhukov said that as a result of the administrative reform, the overall number of civil servants in ministries, federal services and directorates would be reduced by 20 per cent.

It is too soon to judge the effectiveness of administrative reform, as the entire programme will run until 2010. The number of personnel within ministries has been reduced. Some have argued that this has made ministries less effective, as they have lost functions and it has not been clear who should assume the new responsibility for these functions. It was intended that some functions carried out by state bodies would be transferred to the private sector, but apparently no such transfers have taken place.[3]

The Future of Managed Democracy

The term “managed democracy” has been used to describe the post-communist Russian political system, with the emphasis on the term “managed” rather than “democracy”. The enhancement of presidential power over the political system has now reached a level where the term “mild authoritarianism” is probably a more accurate term than “managed democracy”. There are now no independent power centres of any significance within the Russian political system. Three major issues have emerged in domestic Russian politics:

- Could “mild authoritarianism” be replaced by a harsher form of rule?
- What will happen in 2008, when the next presidential elections are scheduled, and Putin will be constitutionally obliged to step down?
- Could the scenario of the “orange revolution” in Ukraine be repeated in Russia?

Could “mild authoritarianism” be replaced by a harsher form of rule?

Given the trends of the last five years, the emergence of a harsher form of authoritarianism is quite plausible. The conflict in the North Caucasus, the Nord-Ost theatre siege in Moscow in October 2002, and the Beslan school siege in September 2004 have all given Putin reasons to move in a more authoritarian direction. Any future terrorist outrage is likely to have the same effect. So far the

leadership has not resorted to the imprisoning of political opponents as has been the case in Belarus and the Central Asian states, although the use of legal charges against Yukos officials and the Danilov and Sutyagin trials give grounds for arguing that such developments can not be ruled out. Serious political discontent could also push the leadership in a more authoritarian direction. The protests that took place in early 2005 over the monetisation of welfare benefits in several cities revealed a considerable degree of discontent that could under certain circumstances pose a serious threat to regime stability. The decision to raise pensions taken in the immediate wake of the protests gives the impression of a leadership that is not wholly confident of its own stability. In January 2005, finance minister Aleksey Kudrin admitted that protests had forced the government to make some concessions in its welfare reforms. Further protests could mean that the Putin leadership may be facing a legitimacy crisis.

In April 2005, the head of the presidential administration, Dmitry Medvedev, expressed concern over the possibility of Russia falling apart if the country's various political elites (ie regional elites) were not consolidated. This assessment was used by Medvedev to justify the abolition of elections for regional governors.[4] This scenario could also be used to justify the imposition of further authoritarian controls. Putin spoke in his state of the nation address in April 2005 on the importance of democracy. However given the trends in Russian politics since 2000, it is difficult to take such statements seriously.

What will happen in 2008, when the next presidential elections are scheduled, and Putin will be constitutionally obliged to step down?

Unlike Yel'tsin in 1999, Putin in 2008 will still be a relatively young man for a politician, and, all things being equal, will be in good health. Will he therefore be tempted to try to remain in power beyond 2008, even though he is limited by the constitution to serving only two presidential terms? There is no real tradition in either Soviet or post-Soviet Russian politics for leaders voluntarily stepping down. It has also been suggested that the Putinite power system has been designed solely for Putin, with no real intention of transferring power to a successor. Khrushchev and Gorbachev were forced to step down, and Yel'tsin did so only once he was convinced that Putin would win the presidential election. Might Putin be tempted to alter the constitution as Aleksandr Lukashenko did in Belarus to run for a third term?

Some have suggested that Putin could become prime minister after 2008. According to this scenario, the constitution would be altered to create a figurehead presidency, with the prime minister becoming the real locus of power. The prime minister would be chosen by the Duma (which is likely to have an even stronger pro-Putin majority after the next Duma election, scheduled for December 2007). In this way, Putin could remain in power.[5] A variant of this scenario is that the president remains the main locus of power in the political system, and is elected by the parliament. This would be a replication of the law on appointing governors, which was adopted after Beslan in 2004, and could be used as a means of keeping Putin as president. It has been claimed that the Kremlin is working on preparing a new constitution which would replace the existing one in 2007. The task of amending the constitution has been made easier by the emergence of a more submissive legislature since 2003. It is also possible that a terrorist outrage or other major incident could be used as a pretext for postponing elections beyond March 2008. One other possible scenario discussed is that Putin stays in power after 2008 in order to prevent an extreme nationalist leader coming to power. This has been suggested by chairman of the Federation Council Sergey Mironov.[6] The

Rodina movement led by Dmitriy Rogozin could possibly be portrayed as an extreme nationalist threat by the Kremlin.[7] The continuation of Putin in office after the end of his second term seems now to be an increasingly credible scenario.

However if Putin operates within the framework of the current constitution, then he would presumably seek a suitable successor. The current defence minister Sergey Ivanov has been seen as a suitable Putinite successor, but he has stated that he has no interest in the presidency. Putin is unlikely to make his preference clear until a few months before the election, perhaps in the second half of 2007. If he follows the pattern made by Yel'tsin in 1999, then he will appoint his successor prime minister. In April 2005, Putin repeated his previous statements that he will not run for president in 2008. However he did state that there was nothing to stop a former president from running a third time not in succession, implying that he could seek election as president in 2012. For this scenario to be credible, whoever is elected as president in 2008 would have to be little more than a Putinite puppet. Another option is that he chooses an incompetent successor who would then step down before 2012, so resulting in pre-term presidential elections, in which Putin could stand, or an elected opposition successor fails, with the same result.

Could the scenario of the "orange revolution" in Ukraine in 2004 be repeated in Russia?

At the moment this seems highly unlikely. Although measures such as the monetisation of welfare benefits are unpopular, Putin's own popularity levels currently remain high (although not as high as in the first term of his presidency). There is also no popular opposition figure around whom a strong anti-Putin movement could coalesce. This is in contrast to Ukraine, where Viktor Yushchenko was a well-established and popular opponent to the Kuchma/Yanukovich leadership. Similarly in Georgia in 2003, Mikheil Saakashvili emerged as a credible challenger to Eduard Shevardnadze. This is not to say that no such leader and movement could not emerge. Popular leaders can become unpopular, and regimes that appear to have tight control over electoral processes can lose control of them. This happened not only in Ukraine (2004) and Georgia (2003), but also in Serbia (2000) and now Kyrgyzstan (2005). Democratic forces in Russia have obviously been encouraged by the developments in Ukraine. Movements such as Committee 2008, possibly in alliance with groups such as the Union of Rightist Forces and Yabloko, will doubtless seek to emulate the Ukrainian PORA. The outcome of the "orange revolution" has not gone unnoticed in the Kremlin, given its clear support for Viktor Yanukovich in the presidential election. The legal moves against former president Leonid Kuchma also provide a clear example of the dangers of surrendering power.

Mikhail Kasyanov, who was prime minister under Putin from 2000 to 2004, has indicated that he may stand for president in 2008. He was born in December 1957, so making him almost six years younger than Putin. He became prime minister after Putin was elected president in 2000. He was appointed Finance Minister in May 1999, after having been made first deputy finance minister in February 1999. He became a department head in the Ministry of Finance in 1993. Prior to that he worked in the Economics Ministry, the State Economics Committee of the RSFSR, and Gosplan. Kasyanov has criticised the current leadership for taking Russia backwards, seeing a reversal of democratisation as one of its main defects. He currently seems to be the most credible challenger to Putin from the democratic camp. He was very critical in autumn 2003 of the approach taken by the Kremlin over the Yukos affair, which resulted in Putin stating that the government should not comment on this issue. At that time it was speculated that Kasyanov had

formed a de facto shadow cabinet, making him therefore a tacit opposition leader to Putin, rather than a loyal prime minister. Gennady Seleznev, who was Duma speaker from 1995 to 2003, has also said that he will be a presidential candidate in 2008.

Overall, it seems that the liberal "orange revolution" scenario is the least likely of the options, although it should be noted that much can change in three years. The Berisha leadership seemed unassailable in Albania in 1996 following its election victory, and yet it collapsed in 1997. However, democratic forces in Russia have found it impossible to unite, and it appears unlikely that Committee 2008 will succeed in uniting these forces. It would currently appear more likely that either Putin will find a way to remain in power after 2008, or a Putinite successor will replace him. Such a regime would probably maintain the authoritarianism that has developed during the Putin period, particularly after the Beslan outrage. Several extreme nationalist politicians such as Vladimir Zhirinovskiy and Alexander Dugin give Putin a positive evaluation. Putin's own spiritual adviser, Archimandrite Tikhon, is an extreme nationalist, close in political orientation to the Black Hundreds of the early 20th century in Russia. The loss of the support of the liberal intelligentsia means that the Putin leadership is likely to move further towards authoritarian nationalism.[8] The creation of the pro-Putin youth movement Nashi can be seen as an attempt to harness nationalist support, and to avoid being outflanked by other nationalist movements, such as Rodina.[9]

The main features of a Russian nationalist ideology as outlined by Russian nationalists in the post-Soviet period are as follows:[10]

- Patriotism as the highest value, and the flourishing of the Russian motherland.
- Anti-westernism, in particular anti-Americanism, rejection of western political values.
- Imperialism, as seen in the desire to dominate the former USSR, particularly the Slavic republics.
- Orthodox clericalism, or the desire to strengthen the authority of the Orthodox Church, and its influence over the state.
- Militarism, the desire to re-establish Russia as a super-power, and promote military values.
- Authoritarianism – rejection of liberal democracy, love of "strong power" and a "firm hand," reliance on a charismatic leader, desire to establish order and discipline.
- Cultural monolithism, rejection of individualism and encouragement of collectivism, condemnation of immorality in the mass media.
- Xenophobia – distrust of foreigners, other races and religions.
- Economic dirigisme, ie desire for a strong state role in the economy, nationalisation of strategic industries, protectionism, paternalist welfare policy.

- Demographic pessimism. Concern about Russian population growth rates.

Some of these aspects can already be regarded as part of the ideology of the Putin presidency, and others may well become part of the value system of the Russian leadership over the next decade, particularly if it has to contend with the danger of being outflanked by an extreme nationalist movement.

ENDNOTES

[1] See Maria Lipmann, 'Putin's harder edge', Washington Post, 18 January 2005, http://www.carnegie.ru/en/pubs/media/71942.htm. See also

[2] For more detailed discussions of administrative reform, see the following: http://cns.miis.edu/pubs/week/040713.htm; http://www.strana-oz.ru/?numid=17&article=855; http://www.nisse.ru/experts.html?mode=opinions&id=migin&op=1068491316. Natal'ya Alyarkinskaya 'Born in a Rush', Moskovskiye Novosti, No 1-2, 14-20 January 2005.

[3] See interview with Yevgeniy Primakov, Nezavisimaya Gazeta, 17 January 2005.

[4] See interview with Dmitry Medvedev in Ekspert, No 13, 4 April 2005, http://www.expert.ru/expert/current/data/13-medved.shtml.

[5] See interview with Stanislav Belkovskiy in Moskovskiy Komsomolets, 10 February 2005; Aleksandr Samarina, Anastasia Kornya, 'Operation Monarch Starts', Nezavisimaya Gazeta, 9 March 2005.

[6] See interview with Sergey Mironov in Izvestiya, 2 March 2005. See also Maria Lipmann, 'Russian Politics, Playing with Fuhrer', Washington Post , 28 March 2005, http://www.carnegie.ru/en/pubs/media/72358.htm. See also Nabi Abdullaev, 'Putin has support for staying in power, after 2008', St Petersburg Times, 22 March 2005, http://www.sptimesrussia.com/archive/times/1054/news/n_15190.htm.

[7] It has been speculated that Rodina may have been created by the Kremlin as scarecrow party (i.e. to scare the electorate into seeing Putin as the moderate alternative. However, even if this is true, there is a danger is that Rodina may emerge as a real threat to Putin.

[8] Timur Polyanikov, 'The Logic of Authoritarianism', Svobodnaya Mysl', 1, January 2005.

[9] Nashi means "ours". It is a nationalist term in Russian, emphasising that the movement is one devoted to the Russian nation.

[10] Ibid.

Want to Know More ...?

See: Jim Nichol, "*Democracy in Russia: Trends and Implications for US National Interests*", Congressional Research Service Report for Congress Order RL32662, http://www.**ndu**.edu/library/docs/crs/crs_rl32662_28jan05.pdf

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