THE PUTIN LEGACY: 
RUSSIAN-STYLE DEMOCRATIZATION 
CONFRONTS A "FAILING STATE"

Stark contrasts differentiate the state of the Russian polity, economy, and society at the end of the Putin presidency from that when the Putin regime had arisen eight years earlier. The Russia of 2008 boasted a dynamic economy, a more self-confident elite and citizenry, and a political system much more capable of yielding coherent policies and programs. Moreover, the assertive Vladimir Putin who prepared to depart the federal presidency behaved in marked contrast to the reluctant chief executive who had come unexpectedly to the presidency at the end of 1999. Russians were overwhelmingly satisfied: Putin's constantly over 80 percent approval ratings throughout 2007 were higher than any level achieved during his first seven years in power, remaining at stratospheric levels as the final year of his presidency wound down.

Predictably, as the Putin tenure came to an end, mainstream Russian and mainstream Western views of the Putin record and future legacy could not have been more divergent. Russians offered overwhelmingly positive assessments, exhibiting a reluctance to see his presidency end, and expressing uncertainty over his likely successor and policies to come. Indeed, a considerable majority expressed a preference that the constitution be altered to permit Putin a third term, while others — wary of any constitutional change — were already wondering about the possibility of a Putin return to power in 2012, when he could again legally challenge for the country's top executive position. Moreover, some observers opined over a reform of the Russian semi-presidential system that would bolster the post of prime minister,

1. I thank Mikhail Beznosov, William Graves, Patrick McGovern and Michael Slobodchikoff for their incisive critiques of arguments set out here.

2. Presidential approval ratings tracked by Russia Votes, the Levada Center, Moscow, and the Centre for the Study of Public Policy, University of Aberdeen, http://www.russiavotes.org/.

weaken the position of the president into a more honorific position and therefore permit Putin a seemingly unlimited ability to govern as head of government rather than as head of state. This is not to say that Russians weren’t sophisticated enough to understand that the country faced continuing serious socioeconomic problems; indeed, half of all respondents in scientific surveys conducted during Putin’s last year as president expressed their displeasure with the country’s domestic situation. But citizens clearly appreciated Russia had made tremendous progress – along many fronts – during the 2000-08 period. In contrast, Western assessments of Putin and his legacy were decidedly negative, emphasizing a neo-authoritarianism that reflected both the rolling back of Yeltsin period democratic gains and the triumph of the siloviki, the security forces. American ethnocentric interpretations applied American democratic values and institutional logic, with Putin’s Russia predictably falling short. Consolidation of state power at home, combined with a more assertive foreign policy, left many Western observers wary, with Russian economic growth and related domestic advances viewed as a function of heightened world energy prices rather than as a result of Putin government actions. Overall, a strengthened Russian presidency and state were seen as promoting neo-authoritarian and neo-imperialist attitudes and policies fully consonant with the country’s Soviet past.

As the following discussion indicates, differences in Russian and Western perspectives stem in part from divergent Russian and Western – especially American – frames of reference in assessing the functioning of a democracy. Russian emphasis on efficient decision making and coherent policy outcomes must be contrasted with a Western and American preoccupation with a desired deconcentration of decision-making powers as nested within a growing civil society. There has been an understandable, yet important, differentiation between Russians’ emphases on democratic system outputs and Westerners’ emphases on the democratic structure of system inputs. Of even greater importance, however, are the divergent Russian and Western reactions to a fundamental Russian reality of the 1990’s and 2000’s: the challenges of Russia’s “failing state,” and the necessary and appropriate institutional and policy re-

4. Suggestive was Finland’s experience, another country with a semi-presidential system, where constitutional reforms in 2000 upgraded the position of the prime minister vis-à-vis that of the president.

5. E.g., a July 13-16 Levada Center survey of 1600 respondents, as reported in Kira Latukhina, “Going the wrong way,” Vedomosti, July 23, 2007.