

'Russian Democracy Has Disappeared'

On the 20th anniversary of the Soviet Union's collapse, Vladimir Putin is taking Russia down an autocratic path

BY CLIFFORD J. LEVY IN MOSCOW



'Batman and Robin': Prime Minister Vladimir Putin (left) and President Dmitri Medvedev

Mikhail Beketov, a newspaper editor in a Moscow suburb, had been warned, but he would not stop writing—about dubious land deals, crooked loans, under-the-table hush money. It was all evidence, he argued, of rampant government corruption.

Not long after, Beketov was savagely beaten outside his home and left to bleed in the snow. Now he's in a wheelchair, his brain so damaged that he cannot utter a simple sentence.

The attack against Beketov in 2008 was the first of a wave of attacks against and harassment of Russian journalists, human rights activists, and opposition politicians. These attacks, along with the abolition of some local elections and other moves to concentrate power in the hands of the Kremlin,* are all evidence that Russia is becoming an increasingly authoritarian country.

When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, it looked like Russia might emerge as a true democracy. But democracy is not a natural fit for Russia. For 350 years, the country was ruled by powerful czars, and the Soviet

Union—America's adversary during the Cold War—was a brutal Communist dictatorship dating back to the 1917 Russian Revolution.

Gorbachev Speaks Out

In the last decade, the Russian economy has thrived and foreign investment has soared. Consumer goods are widely available, and millions of Russians, part of a growing middle class, are able to afford them. But at the same time, the country has become less free.

Mikhail Gorbachev, who introduced a wide range of political and economic reforms as the last leader of the Soviet Union, has now become a prominent critic of the Kremlin. Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, he says, is undermining Russia's fledgling democracy by crippling opposition forces.

"He thinks that democracy stands in his way," says Gorbachev, who won the 1990 Nobel Peace Prize for his reform policies.

The U.S. shares his concerns. The release



Soldiers in Moscow's Red Square for a 2008 parade; Mikhail Gorbachev says 'Russia has a long way to go.'



last month by Wikileaks of classified U.S. diplomatic communications included the statement by Secretary of Defense Robert Gates that "Russian democracy has disappeared."

In 2008, Putin found a way around the law that prevented him from running for President again when his second term expired: He hand-picked Dmitry Medvedev as his successor, and after he won in a landslide, Medvedev appointed Putin as his Prime Minister. Although President Medvedev is technically the country's leader, Putin continues to wield considerable power. One of the leaked diplomatic cables describes Medvedev as "playing Robin to Putin's Batman."

U.S.-Russia Relations

When President Obama took office in 2009, he said he wanted to reset relations with Russia, hoping better ties would encourage Russia to get back on the road to democracy and work with the U.S. on issues of common interest, like blocking Iran's nuclear program.

But if anything, Russia has slipped backward. Putin's 2004 decision to eliminate elections for key regional governors and

city mayors has angered critics, including Gorbachev. Those positions are now filled by Kremlin appointees.

"Democracy begins with elections," Gorbachev says. "Elections, accountability, and turnover."

Another key component is respect for the rule of law, which in Russia is frequently manipulated to serve the government's needs. Critics of the Kremlin are routinely denied permission for rallies, and the police detain anyone attending unauthorized demonstrations.

"We still live in a police state," says Eduard Limonov, leader of a banned opposition group.

Take the case of Mikhail Khodorkovsky, who until 2003 was the billionaire head of Yukos Oil, the country's biggest oil company. After offering support to opposition political parties, he has spent the last seven years in jail on trumped-up charges. (His fate—and the fact that his company was sold off to Putin supporters after he went to jail—has made foreign investors wary.)

Khodorkovsky's case is just the most high-profile example of how corrupt Russia's justice system has become.

Jury trials—a foundation of U.S. law—were supposed to change Russia's judicial system. Judges, who are appointed by the government, almost always convict, but a jury of ordinary people was expected to be more fair.

But jurors are frequently intimidated by the authorities, and when they acquit a defendant, their verdicts are routinely overturned. In addition, lawmakers have been cutting back on the types of crimes that qualify for a jury trial.

The overall effect is a justice system that in some ways has changed little since Soviet days. That seems to be exactly what concerns Gorbachev.

"Russia has a long way to go to usher in a new system of values, to create and provide for the proper functioning of the institutions and mechanisms of democracy—the institutions of civil society," Gorbachev says.

"All this is done through a major transformation in people's brains. And this, clearly, is changing very slowly." •

With reporting by Ellen Barry and C.J. Chivers of The New York Times.

RIA NOVOSTI/REUTERS (PUTIN & MEDVEDEV); YURI KOCHETKOV/EPA/CORBIS (SOLDIER IN RED SQUARE)

The once and future president

Vladimir Putin has just been elected to his third term as Russia's president. Do Russians really respect him?

Was Putin fairly elected?

Not remotely, but that's not to say anyone could have beaten him. Since he first took the helm in Russia, in 1999, Vladimir Putin has ruled with a modified form of Soviet-style authoritarianism that he calls "managed democracy." The idea is that weakened state institutions, including the electoral system, yield to the designs of a strong leader. That entails some outright fraud; monitors found evidence of "carousel voting," in which busloads of voters travel around casting ballots under different names, and in Chechnya, more pro-Putin votes were counted than there were registered voters. But managed democracy relies even more on subtler manipulations. Technical reasons are found to prevent opposition parties from registering. Massive state resources, including almost all TV and radio news, are brought to bear in favor of the Kremlin. Phony "opposition candidates" are put forward. Those tactics delivered Putin an official victory of almost 64 percent. That number was surely inflated, but Putin does inspire heartfelt devotion among many Russians.



A 'real man' for Russia

Why do they admire him?

Putin represents stability, a welcome contrast to the chaos of the first decade after the Soviet Union dissolved, in 1991. Under Boris Yeltsin, a few tycoons, known as oligarchs, were allowed to plunder state resources in a period of wild privatization that plunged millions into poverty. Putin reversed that process, reasserting firm central control over Russian resources. During his reign, the Russian economy has grown by an average of 7 percent a year, poverty has been halved, and the average monthly salary of Russians has more than tripled. High global prices for Russia's vast oil and natural gas resources played a big role in that success. But many Russians give Putin credit for the fact that they are much better off than ever before.

How did he tame the oligarchs?

He opened fraud proceedings that left some, like Mikhail Khodorkovsky, in jail, and drove others, like Boris Berezovsky, out of the country. But some oligarchs, notably Roman Abramovich, remain close to Putin. Hedge fund manager William Browder, a former Putin admirer who was banned from Russia in 2005, says Putin moved against the oligarchs mainly to secure their wealth for himself and his cronies. "They've now consolidated their position to such an extent that Putin is likely to be one of the richest men in the world," he said last month; by one estimate Putin is worth \$40 billion. Still, Putin's battle against the oligarchs helped establish him as a *nastoyashi muzhik*, or "real man." In a country where the Stalin era is often wistfully recalled as a time of Russian glory, that is an important image.

"Russia needs a strong leader," a Moscow vendor told the *Toronto Globe and Mail*. "It's such a big country, with so many different ethnic groups, that it's very difficult to unite. It requires toughness."

How does Putin project strength?

Through relentless propaganda aimed at promoting a cult of personality. Putin, 59, is physically fit—he doesn't drink and was a judo champion in his youth—and he makes sure the Russian public knows it. State television routinely shows him engaged in manly pursuits like racing cars, hunting big game, piloting fighter jets, rid-

ing bare-chested on horseback, and zooming around unhelmeted on a Harley-Davidson. During the terrible forest fires of 2010, Putin personally dumped tons of water on the flames from a water bomber. In one of his more ridiculous photo ops, just last year, he was shown scuba diving in the Black Sea, where he conveniently "discovered" two ancient but curiously pristine Greek urns in just seven feet of water.

Do people believe these stunts?

They seemed to, until recently, but the urn find was a tipping point. The international press quickly mocked Putin, and even Russian commentators expressed skepticism, forcing the Kremlin to finally admit that the episode had been staged. Since then, more cracks have appeared in Putin's popularity. Last September, when he announced his intention to take back the presidency, Russians began grumbling openly about the dearth of democracy in "managed democracy." They were further offended by what looked like the outright stealing of the December parliamentary elections, which Putin's United Russia party won despite trailing badly in exit polls. Tens of thousands of people protested the results, and Putin's approval rating dropped to below 50 percent, down from 73 percent as recently as February 2011.

Will his rule now be challenged?

Yes, but the opposition has yet to prove it has staying power. The series of massive protests since December, particularly of middle-class Muscovites, clearly took the Kremlin by surprise. Anti-corruption blogger Alexey Navalny, who dubbed United Russia the "party of crooks and thieves," has emerged as a grassroots leader, and may be able to better galvanize the anti-Putin movement than more traditional opposition figures. But the protests are already petering out. "We have to think of something more concrete, something other than protests," says Nikolai Belyaev, a businessman who quit his job to join the protest movement. "I very much want to hope that society is not going to fall asleep again."

