

Russia through the looking-glass

By Nicolai N Petro,
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A troubling rift has developed between western and Russian perceptions of Russian reality. In the west, an increasingly common view is that President Vladimir Putin is intent on destroying democracy in Russia. It is my contention that:

- this view is inaccurate
- its inaccuracy is leading to misjudgments about political trends inside Russia
- a more accurate view could help the west (in particular the United States) to forge common ground on the issue of democratic governance.

When next you read a lambasting of Russia's record on democratic governance, consider these three reality-checks.

First, in a country where politicians get extremely low ratings, Vladimir Putin enjoys phenomenal popularity – two recent [opinion polls](#) [1] find that more than 70% of Russian are happy with his performance. Why? Because under his rule since 2000, real wages have risen 75% after inflation, poverty has been halved, and federal-budget surpluses are running at 12%. In these conditions, it would be suspicious if Putin had anything *less* than a 70% approval rating.

Second, a March 2005 survey of attitudes toward democracy shows that three times as many Russians feel that the country is *more* democratic today than it was under either Mikhail Gorbachev or Boris Yeltsin. The same proportion of the population rates human-rights conditions better under Putin than under Yeltsin.

Third, constant media depiction of four negative stories of Russia – the corrosion of independent media, a corrupt legal system, assaults on civil society, and a worsening situation in Chechnya (in addition to Kremlin authoritarianism) reinforces a selective view of trends across the country as a whole. A more considered view of these four issues should aid understanding of why most Russians credit Putin with improving human rights and democracy in their country.

Nicolai N Petro is professor of politics at the University of Rhode Island and author of *The Rebirth of Russian Democracy: An Interpretation of Political Culture* ([Harvard University Press, 1998](#) [2]) and *Crafting Democracy: How Novgorod Has Coped with Rapid Social Change* ([Cornell University Press, 2004](#) [3]). He has served as civic-affairs advisor to the mayor of the Russian city of Novgorod, and as policy advisor in the United States state department. His website is [here](#) [4]

This article is adapted from his testimony before the [US Helsinki Commission](#) [5], a US government agency that monitors compliance with the provisions of the [Helsinki Accords](#) [5] of 1975

The media: diversity report

The trend toward economic independence of the media has accelerated dramatically under Putin. Before he came to office, just 10% of local television stations were financially self-sufficient; that has risen to more than a third. This has occurred alongside annual growth rates in newspaper, journal and book production that exceed 10%. There is more privately-financed media in Russia under Putin than there has ever been in Russian history, both in absolute numbers and as a percentage of the whole.

Over the past two years, media profits have grown by more than \$2 billion, and these have accomplished what no foreign-assistance programmes ever could – create a wide variety of commercial programming and diversify the ownership of the Russian media. Today, among the thirty-five largest media holding companies in Russia, the state directly or indirectly manages no more than a handful. In sum, this genie is long out of the bottle and the notion that the Kremlin could ever put it back is too far-fetched to be taken seriously.

The legal system: signs of change

Historically Russians have had little faith in their legal system [6], but this too is changing under Putin. Thanks to a new criminal code and code of criminal procedures passed in 2002, a judge must approve arrest warrants, and the accused charged with a crime within two weeks, or released. Nationwide jury trials, another Putin innovation, today acquit 20% of cases; in 2005 Russia had its highest acquittal rate ever.

The constitutional court under chief justice Valery Zorkin has set a more independent course, criticising the December 2003 electoral law, striking down restrictions [7] on media coverage of elections, and strengthening the rights of defendants and the role of juries.

There are also clear signs that this liberalisation is continuing. In January 2006, the annual conference of chairs of regional courts proposed sweeping reforms that would virtually eliminate closed judicial proceedings. The state Duma (lower house of parliament) also passed, in a first reading, an important initiative in defence of privacy rights. This established a federal agency where a citizen can find out what information the government is gathering about him or her, and where this information is being kept.

No doubt the speed of these transformations is at least partly attributable to the fact that the European Court of Human Rights [8] in Strasbourg has become the *de facto* final court of appeals for Russian civil cases. It is worth noting, however, that fully 86% of the cases filed in Strasbourg seek to obtain financial compensation in suits that have already been won by plaintiffs in Russian courts.

It should therefore come as no surprise to learn that the number of citizens turning to courts for redress of their grievances has shot up from one million under Yeltsin to six million under Putin, and that 71% of plaintiffs win the cases they bring against government authorities. In a word, the Russian legal system is fast becoming an important instrument in the defence of civil liberties.

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NGOs: the wrong campaign

The [amendments](#) [11] on non-governmental/non-commercial organisations (NGO/NCO) passed by the Duma in December 2005 have been widely described as extending government control. They were, in fact, designed to do just the opposite, by clarifying the state's obligation toward them.

For example, registration can no longer be denied on the whim of local officials; and without one of four specific reasons, registration has to be granted within thirty days. The proposal also limits review of NCO [activities](#) [12] to once a year, and stipulates that any administrative actions have to be done under court supervision. The much-touted issue of the closing of foreign organisations is a red herring, since the proposed legislation specifically deprives bureaucrats of the ability to act on their own in this regard.

A reading of the Duma debates on this [law](#) [13] reveals that its authors – noted liberals Andrei Makarov and Sergei Popov – put these safeguards in place precisely to limit state intervention. They convinced their colleagues but not, alas, many in the western media. In the ensuing [outcry](#) [14], new amendments were introduced, including one that allows new foreign NCOs to be denied registration if they "threaten the sovereignty, political independence, territorial inviolability, national unity and sovereignty, cultural heritage or national interests of the Russian Federation."

The initial version of the bill contained no such provision. It was added at the last minute, in response to western criticisms of the law – a textbook example of how well-intentioned but ill-informed human-rights pressure can backfire.

Chechnya: the real story

In 2005, dramatic changes have taken place in [Chechnya](#) [14] that renew hope for peace and stability there.

More than 7,000 rebels have laid down their arms, many joining the pro-Moscow government. As a result, terrorist attacks within Chechnya have fallen fourfold, and casualties among the Russian military have dwindled from 1,397 in 2000 to just twenty-eight in 2005. Kidnappings have fallen at a similar rate, although tragically more than 1,800 cases remain unresolved. These are Chechen government statistics. The human-rights group "[Memorial](#)" [15] gives somewhat higher numbers, but the trend they portray is exactly the same.

Chechnya has become a much safer environment, and this has encouraged more than 250,000 refugees to return and open more than 30,000 new businesses.

The region's dramatic turnaround has been noted by European observers once sharply critical of Russia. Both [Alvaro Gil-Robles](#) [15], human-rights commissioner for the Council of Europe, and [Marc Franco](#) [16], the head of the European Commission's delegation to Russia, went out of their way this fall to praise Chechnya's progress.

It is unfortunate that these efforts have received so little [attention](#) [17] in the western media.

A common ground

I conclude from this review that, while clearly many problems of implementation still exist for Russian democracy, Russian politicians are struggling in good faith to address them. The political process works, and because it works outsiders should not approach it as if it were broken.

Western critics seem honestly not to know the degree to which Russians are using the right of appeal to their government and court system, and debating issues in a variety of public arenas (including the more than two dozen political debate programmes that air every week on national television). These critics attribute Putin's popularity to state manipulation, and therefore see any strengthening of the Russian state as a bad thing.

But every survey shows that this is not what Russians think. They saw the state under Yeltsin abandon the poor, the sick, and the elderly, and now demand that it assume more responsibility for public welfare.

Putin's critics lack faith in Russia's democratic institutions, they misjudge the driving force in Russian politics today: Putin isn't forcing Russians into the arms of the state; rather, it is the people who are demanding that the state do more for them and be more accountable to them.

In this light, three things would help us to understand Russia better (see [Untimely Thoughts](#) [18]).

First, the destruction of state institutions should not be equated with greater freedom. Much of the criticism of the west inside Russia could be defused by supporting the same model of civil society for Russia that is present throughout Europe – one that calls for partnership rather than confrontation with the state. This, however, would require acknowledging the good faith of the Russian government in this regard.

Second, Russian NGOs should be encouraged to wean themselves off foreign subsidies and orient themselves toward clearly defined domestic constituencies. A nationwide survey in November 2005 found that only 13% of Russians know what an NGO is, and just 3% have ever encountered examples of NGO activity. It is hard to develop much public support that way. Shifting from foreign to domestic financial support is clearly the way to go, and the recently passed NGO legislation is a positive step because it pushes civic organisations in this direction.

Finally, the tone of public discourse in the west about Russia must improve. Nothing but rancour is aroused when (for example) highly placed current or former United States government officials cavalierly refer to Russia as "a fascist state", and to Russian officials as "bad guys". It is the Russian people's own wisdom and judgment that should first be listened to on such matters.

I am convinced that Russian institutions have now developed far enough to make the gradual expansion of democracy a foregone conclusion. The question that remains is whether western political leaders will be wise enough to let it emerge on its own, or delay it by trying to shape its course.

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