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When the Wave Hits a Shoal: The Internal and External Dimensions of Russia's Turn Away from Democracy

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CDDRL was founded by a generous grant from the Bill and Flora Hewlett Foundation in October in 2002 as part of the Stanford Institute for International Studies at Stanford University. The Center supports analytic studies, policy relevant research, training and outreach activities to assist developing countries in the design and implementation of policies to foster growth, democracy, and the rule of law.

About the Author

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In addition to many articles and book chapters on contemporary Russia, she is the author of two single authored books: *Local Heroes: The Political Economy of Russian Regional Governance* (Princeton, 1997) and *Resisting the State: Reform and Retrenchment in Post-Soviet Russia* (Cambridge, forthcoming, 2006). She is also co-editor (along with Michael McFaul) of *After the Collapse of Communism: Comparative Lessons of Transition* (Cambridge, 2004).

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*“What we thought would be easy, turned out to be very difficult” – Boris Yeltsin,
December 31, 1999 upon resigning as President of Russia*

When Vladimir Putin was elected President of Russia in March 2000, the country bequeathed to him by his predecessor, Boris Yeltsin, was an unconsolidated, often disorderly and raucous electoral democracy. Gradually though, the Russian political system under Putin came to be described as first “managed democracy” then “illiberal democracy” or “delegated democracy” and finally, by 2005, a non-democracy. What happened? Why did the fourth wave crash on Russia's shores, and what prospects are there for external factors to play a role in bringing about a rejuvenation of democracy in Russia in the next decade? Is Russia immune to the diffusion effect of democratization that purportedly swept the East in the late 1980's and that is again moving eastward in the last 4 years? What are the implications for this apparent resistance to the fourth wave for Russia's fragile newly democratic neighbors in Ukraine, Georgia and Serbia?

In this essay, I will explore these and other questions as I try to assess the internal and external factors that might help us to understand why Russia has undergone a “reverse wave” in democratization even as its smaller neighbors have apparently resisted the authoritarian tide that struck parts of the post-communist world in the late 1990s.

I have organized this paper into four sections: Section one discusses Russia's resistance to the fourth wave of democratization. I will assess to what degree Russia was actually a "democracy" in the 1990's and the ways in which the transition appears to have first stalled and then moved backwards over the last six years. In section II, I will look at the internal political, social and economic factors (including oil) that have contributed to the growing momentum of the reverse wave. In section three, I will try to establish whether or not the examples of Serbia, Ukraine, Georgia and elsewhere have helped or hindered the momentum away from democracy in Russia. Finally, in section four, I will propose prospective EU and US policy toward Russia that might help it back onto the democratic path even as I acknowledge that the leverage of international actors over Russia and President Putin is increasingly limited.

Section I: Russia and the Reverse Wave of Democratic Transition

In 2005, Freedom House revised its assessment of Russia from partly free to not free.

Comparative Freedom House rankings of countries commonly included in Fourth Wave analyses are shown below in Table 1.

Note that Russia's revised status as Not Free puts it in the same company as the five Central Asian states, Azerbaijan, and Belarus – hardly where most of us thought Russia would be fifteen years ago when the Soviet Union collapsed.

Table 1: Freedom House Rankings 2005 Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union (1.0-2.5=FREE, 3.0-5.0 = PARTLY FREE; 5.5-7.0 = NOT FREE)

FREE	SCORE	PARTLY FREE	SCORE	NOT FREE	SCORE
Czech Republic	1.0	Albania	3.0	Azerbaijan	5.5
Hungary	1.0	Macedonia	3.0	Kazakhstan	5.5
Poland	1.0	Bosnia-Herzegovina	3.5	Kyrgyzstan	5.5
Estonia	1.0	Georgia	3.5	Russia	5.5
Slovakia	1.0	Moldova	3.5	Tajikistan	5.5
Slovenia	1.0	Ukraine	3.5	Belarus	6.5
Bulgaria	1.5	Armenia	4.5	Uzbekistan	6.5
Latvia	1.5			Turkmenistan	7.5
Croatia	2.0				
Lithuania	2.0				
Romania	2.5				
Serbia and Montenegro	2.5				
TOTAL= 12		TOTAL = 7		TOTAL = 8	

More specifically, on a scale of 0 to 7, with 0 being the lowest score and 7 being the highest in terms of performance, Russia received the following on four dimensions of the Freedom House Scale in 2005:

Accountability and Public Voice: 2.88

Civil Liberties: 3.72

Rule of Law: 3.41

Anticorruption and Transparency: 2.79

The Freedom House scale, for all of its drawbacks, still reflects an undeniable and now widely accepted view that Russia has become less democratic since the election of Vladimir Putin six years ago. Although elections have continued more or less unabated since 1993 in Russia, and both President Yeltsin and President Putin have thus far avoided egregious transgressions of the Russian Constitution, the institutions that constitute the main democratic bulwarks of the Russian political system have become seriously jeopardized.

Since I don't think this is a much-debated point, I will merely review the ways in which democratic institutions, civil liberties and the rule of law have been compromised in Russia over the last few years. I will also briefly discuss Russia's worsening corruption problem, noting that all of this has occurred at a time when Russia's economy has begun to grow thus apparently confounding the predictions of Lipset and other advocates of modernization theory.

Elections have continued in Russia at the federal and regional levels since 1991. The quality of these elections, however, has consistently eroded, and since the implementation of regional reforms in 2005, elections for regional governments in Russia have been eliminated, in many ways undermining the quality of Russian democracy.

In part, in response for a demand to increase order and stability in the wake of the unruly 1990s in Russia, and declaring the introduction of a “dictatorship of law” one of Putin’s first acts in office in 2000 was to introduce tighter control over the Russian media. This was done by restricting access to broadcast licensing, raiding offices of media outlets and helping to run independent newspapers out of business. At the same time, an effective political opposition melted away in Russia as Putin’s favored Unified Russia party won strong electoral majorities (aided by renewed control over the media) in the Duma.

Reform to the upper house of parliament, the Federation Council, such that permanent members are appointed rather than elected, further damaged the quality of Russian democracy. Finally, pluralism at the regional level was further circumscribed under Putin. His first line of attack included the establishment of seven federal districts within his presidential administration, each encompassing approximately twelve subunits of the Russian Federation. This did not involve a redrawing of formal borders between provinces, but was an administrative change in that each of the seven districts would be headed by an appointed representative charged with coordinating the tasks of the federal bureaucracy in particular, as well as attempting to check the overt flouting of central authority on the part of elected regional governors and republican presidents. This was a controversial move in that the reform attempted to place appointed presidential

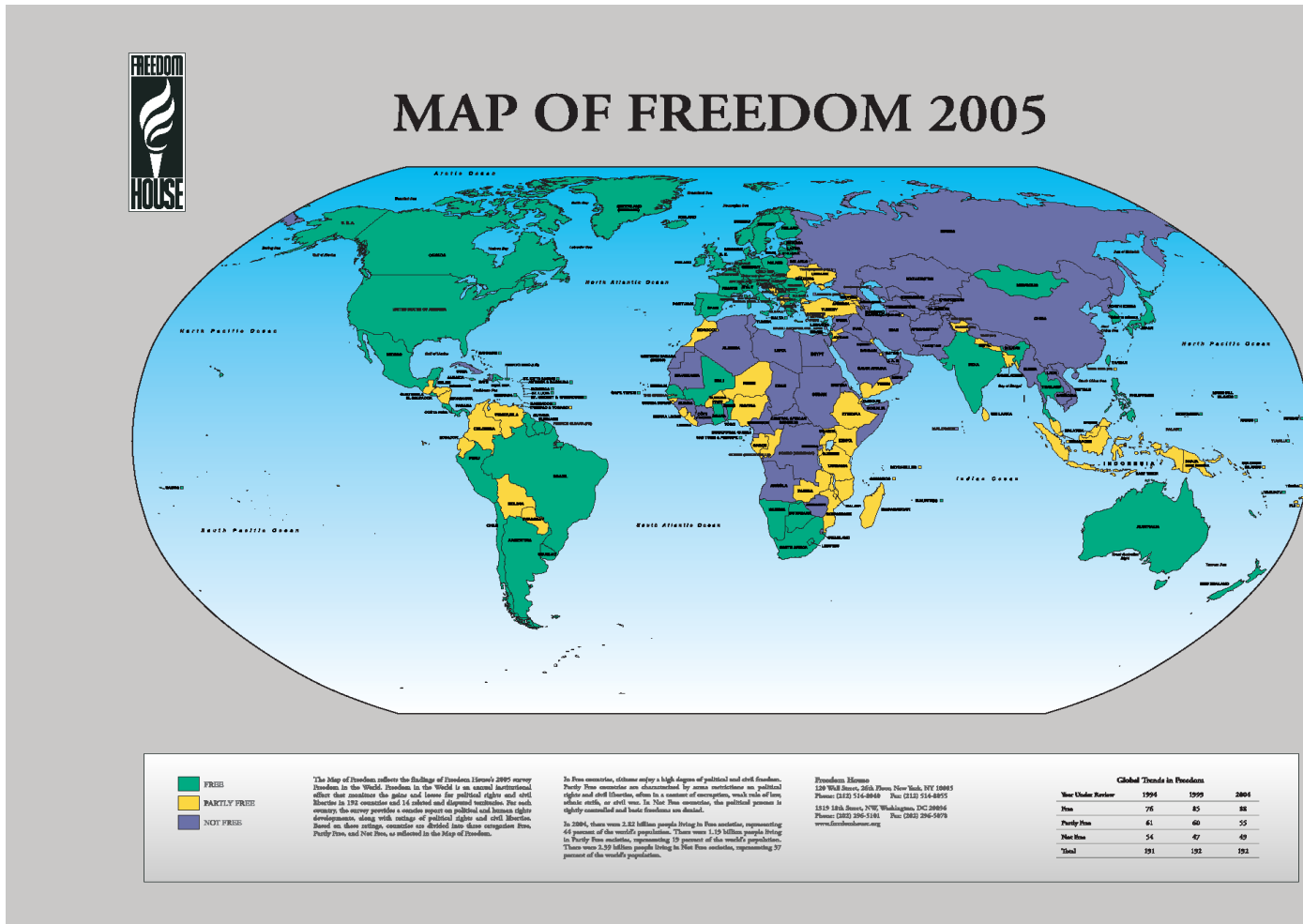
representatives higher in the political-administrative hierarchy than elected governors and presidents of regions.

Second, in an effort to remove overly active governors from excessive regional involvement in national politics, Putin proposed, and the Duma accepted, a plan to reorganize the Federation Council, Russia's upper house of parliament, such that regional political leaders (governors, presidents and heads of regional legislatures) would no longer automatically gain seats. Instead, each region would be represented in the upper house by two appointed representatives – one put forward by the governor or president of the region and the other by a vote of regional parliament.

At the same time, drawing on his extensive contacts with his former employer, Putin dramatically increased the role of the Federal Security Service (or FSB which is the successor to the KGB) in governing Russia, has resorted to arbitrary use of the courts to punish political opponents (the Khodrokovsky case is a prime example of this), as well as using federal tax authorities and the police for political purposes. All of these changes, combined with a more recent assault on Russian civic and non-governmental organizations, represent significant reversals in the democratization of Russia. As Michael McFaul and Sanja Tatic note in their report for Freedom House's Countries at the Crossroads 2005 report on Russia: "Today, decision-making authority is more concentrated in the office of the president than at any time in Russia's post-Soviet history. The Russian polity has considerably less pluralism in 2004 than it did in 2000, and the human rights of individual Russian citizens are less secure."ⁱ

As the quality of Russian democratic checks and balances against executive power have weakened, corruption has perhaps not surprisingly increased. Transparency International, an independent research NGO that tracks corruption perceptions, noted in 2005 that despite Putin's attempts to exercise increased despotic power, Russia has become more, not less corrupt. Transparency International includes in its rankings 159 countries, arranged from 1-159 in order from least to most corrupt (for those particularly interested, Iceland is ranked as least corrupt at no. 1, Canada is no. 14, the United States is 17). In 2005 Russia ranked 126th -- among the top 20% of most corrupt countries in the world. On the Transparency International scale, a score of less than 3.0 out of a possible 10.0 indicates severe corruption; Russia scores 2.4, indicating severe corruption. Regionally, the only former Soviet and East European countries doing worse than Russia are Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan – virtually all of the same countries that join Russia in Freedom House's "not free" category in 2005. (Bulgaria does the best in terms of least perceived corruption in the formerly communist region according to Transparency International).

Figure 1: Map of Freedom, 2005 (Source: <http://www.freedomhouse.org>)



Section II: Internal Factors in Explaining the Reverse Wave in Russia

As always, Russia represents a paradox. Flying in the face of modernization theory, as its gross domestic product per capita has increased under Putin, the quality of Russia’s democracy has eroded. What are the internal factors that explain this reverse wave? What distinguishes these from the internal dynamics in Serbia, Georgia and Ukraine in particular?

A combination of poor institutional choices and structural economic factors at the time of transition in the early 1990's help to explain why Russia has turned off the democratic path since about 2000.

Institutional Choices

As the work of Don Horowitz warned in the early to mid 1990s, and Steven Fish cautions more recently, there are inherent dangers for new democracies in presidential systems of government. Undoubtedly, the power of the Russian presidency versus the parliament granted by the constitution of 1993 is a prime example of an institutional choice that has proven particularly damaging to Russian democracy. To be sure, Putin has not violated the main precepts of the constitution in adapting more authoritarian policies, but the power of his office enshrined by the constitution of 1993 has meant that he truly has not had to bother doing so even as he has eased Russia from democracy to emerging dictatorship.

As in France, the Russian constitution provides for a dual executive in which the government requires the confidence of parliament, but the president does not.

Significantly, because the 1993 constitution was written at a particular point in Russia's troubled democratic history (when Boris Yeltsin faced a particularly uncooperative parliament) the Russian president was given the power to issue decrees with the force of law although his decrees may not violate existing law. There is also a process by which they may be overridden by parliament, and they were under Boris Yeltsin, but have never been under Vladimir Putin. (In future revisions to this paper I will update which decrees were overturned under Yeltsin and perhaps compare the decree issuing patterns of Yeltsin and Putin given the fact that Putin faces a much more compliant parliament than did

Yeltsin.) The President of Russia appoints the prime minister, subject to the approval of parliament, but should the Duma (lower house) refuse to confirm presidents' choice three times, the president can dissolve the Duma and call for new elections. Further illustration of the power of the Russian presidency enshrined in the 1993 Constitution is the fact that although the Duma may hold a no confidence vote in the government, the President may ignore it the first time that it passes, and at the second passage, the President is not required to appoint a new government, but can either dissolve parliament or dismiss the government. If he dismisses the Duma, new elections for Duma would ensue. Because Putin has faced virtually no opposition in the Duma nor in the Federation Council (Russia's upper house) over the last six years, he has not needed to rely on these heavy handed constitutional guarantees of his authority.

A further institutional feature of Russia's political landscape however that has certainly helped to establish Putin as the undisputed ruler of Russia is the weak political party system at both the national and local levels. This has perpetuated a governance problem. It is a well accepted idea that political parties are key institutions for building democracies, but they can also be crucial in maintaining a cohesive, effective state. Parties serve as conduits between civil society and the state, and also between political actors in the capital and in the provinces. They can promote coherence in policy platforms across nation states. In short, parties can solve collective action problems by integrating the polity as well as aggregating interests. Parties create webs of reciprocity between national and local officials as well as extend accountability for policy creation and implementation beyond one man or the narrow interests of his cronies. Indeed, it is

(mis)rule by mini-oligarchies that apparently so bothers Putin about politics at the provincial level in Russia. Yet Putin himself is attempting to rule all of Russia in exactly the same way. He, and Boris Yeltsin, both assiduously avoided joining any national political party officially, preferring instead to rule in a non transparent fashion through a group of family and long time friends. Under Yeltsin's low quality democracy, national parties largely devoid of support from the President of the country had little practical relevance for provincial governors when they stood for election. They provided little or no campaign funding, policy platform or practical organizational assistance. To whom would any sensible politician turn as an alternative means of support? Local notables. As a result, Russian politics at the national and political levels has become dominated by webs of bilateral, highly personalistic relationships that do not lend themselves to the effective provision of public goods and services. Perhaps not surprisingly, Russian citizens have begun to associate cronyism with elections, and often democracy. This has led to doubts about performance legitimacy of Russia's democracy in the 1990s and nostalgia for the stability that the Soviet system brought. Putin's promises to establish a "dictatorship of law" thus resonate well with a population exhausted with the halting and uneven reform efforts of the 1990s, and this in turn accounts for a certain amount of his popularity – that and the fact that there is no realistic opposition or alternative to him currently.

A third institutional cause of Russia's turn away from democracy involves the persistent lack of organization of an independent civil society. Certainly, Putin's recent adoption of draconian laws requiring the re-registration of NGO 's as domestic Russian organizations has damaged the independence of Russian civil society, but even before this, Russian

society was not one of “joiners.” The mass demonstrations of the late 1990s demanding the end of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union long ago gave way to popular apathy and at times, powerful nostalgia for the communist era (Mendelson paper on youth here). Presumably, though, this has more to do with a desire for stability and predictability (noted above) as opposed to necessarily negative attitudes toward the concept of democracy and liberal rights and freedoms, since, in most public opinion polls, Russians appear to still value the latter. ⁱⁱ

Putin’s persistent popularity among Russian voters helps to distinguish internal dynamics in Russia from those in Serbia, Georgia, and Ukraine over the last four years. In those cases, as Mike McFaul noted in the *Journal of Democracy* in the fall of 2005, although they were semi-autocratic (not dissimilarly from Putin’s Russia), they all shared in common the fact that the incumbent president was unpopular. Putin, however, has managed to maintain popularity ratings pretty consistently over 60%.

The fact that the media has been kept on a tight leash under Putin, also distinguishes internal dynamics in Russia from those in Georgia, Serbia, and Ukraine. Where B-52 in Serbia helped spread the message of change, for example, few independent media programs persist in Russia... Further, the liberally minded opposition in Russia (as represented by Yavlinsky, etc.) has long been deeply divided and represented poor and unrealistic electoral choices for Russian voters. Finally, distinct from Ukraine in particular, the regime under Putin is not clearly fragmented – the President retains a tight grip in constitutional theory and in actual practice over the “power ministries” of the military and internal security services.

Aside from the questionable institutional choices made by Russian politicians in the early 1990s, and Putin's careful manipulations of the Russian press and civil society over the last five years that have contributed to Russia's easy step away from democratic consolidation, certain economic factors have also helped nudge Russia toward autocracy. Indeed, as I noted earlier, a troubling aspect to the turn from democracy under Putin is that this has occurred as the economy has begun to grow, thus apparently defying modernization theory, although perhaps confirming resource curse theory.

Despite the fact that as Putin himself noted when he took office in 2000, Russians are "poor people living in a rich country", the economy began to grow for the first time since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1999. It is important to note, however, that while the economy has grown on average between 4 and 6% per year over the last few years, this has been done largely on the back of unusually high world oil prices, as opposed to systematic economic restructuring of the Russian economic system. Further, even if Russia continued to grow at this rate over the next 20 years, it would, only then, reach the gross domestic product per capita level of Portugal – hardly an economic standout of the European Union. To be sure, there have been important changes to the Russian financial and economic system in recent years – including the introduction of a 13% flat personal income tax rate, and a general tightening up of tax revenue collection – but a systematic restructuring of Russian industry that might make Russian manufactured goods competitive on world markets has yet to take place.

That Russia needs to shake its oil dependence and develop other aspects of its economy to maintain growth long term is clear from its ranking on the World Bank's Human Development Index (HDI). The HDI is comprised of a group of measures compiled by

the United Nations that includes life expectancy at birth, adult literacy, primary and secondary school enrollment, GDP per capita, adult literacy rates, among other measures all combined into a single index. The index produces a ranking of countries. In 2002, Estonia, Poland and Hungary are ranked 36th, 37th, and 38th on the HDI, but Russia is ranked 56, just below Cuba, Trinidad and Tobago, but just ahead of Libya. ⁱⁱⁱ

Oil, however, gives Russia much more economic clout internationally than its HDI ranking would indicate. Its membership (indeed, chairmanship currently) in the G-8, and its aspiring membership in the WTO mask the fact that increasingly, Russia looks like a classically resource cursed developing country. Its politics are becoming increasingly oligarchical and authoritarian; it is investing less in human capital and infrastructure outside of the oil industry; and in the wake of its threats to cut oil and gas supplies to Ukraine and the Baltics recently, has begun to act internationally like a resource rich bully.

This brings me to section III of this essay, regarding external influences on Russia's transition from democracy to authoritarianism.

Section III: External Factors in Explaining the Reverse Wave in Russia

While the winds of democratic change may indeed be blowing eastward from Europe toward Georgia and Ukraine, they have apparently shifted away from Russia. Indeed, the Orange Revolution has evidently had the opposite effect on Russia – it appears to have hardened Putin's resolve to defend Russia from any sort of popular revolution against his authority. The law on non-governmental organizations might be seen in some ways as a direct reaction to events in Ukraine in 2004, as perhaps might be true of Russia's threats against Ukraine's gas supply in the winter of 2005-2006. The Russian government has also

actively discouraged any additional media freedom in the wake of the Orange Revolution, and has thwarted the activities of new and old non governmental organizations, both domestic and foreign – even the Union of Soldier’s Mothers was recently targeted in the spring of 2006.

It would be difficult, however, to conceive of how Russia as the regional political and economic hegemon would be easily influenced by events in smaller states along its borders, so it is not surprising that Ukraine’s recent political changes have apparently had little positive effect on politics in Russia. The negative backlash, however, is more surprising.

If Russia is immune to the diffusion effect, then what international factors might affect internal politics within Russia? Evidently, the events of September 11, 2001 had an important effect on Russian internal politics as well as helping President Putin’s standing with President Bush as a reliable and caring partner. That Putin was among the first foreign leaders to call Bush and express his condolences is well known. But the events of September 11 allowed Putin to argue to Bush and the international community that Russia also had a domestic terrorism problem in the form of Chechen rebels within its own borders. This gave him a pretext to crack down further on Chechnya, although the rebels themselves certainly encouraged this by their own actions in Moscow and Beslan as well.

Allowing the US access to key airbases in Central Asia was by far the biggest service that Putin has performed for the US and Europe to date, however. In other areas (most notably the invasion of Iraq), Putin has been less cooperative with the US in particular. The Russian government has also been a thorn in the side of the international

community (not just the US) in dealing with Iran's nuclear ambitions. Moreover, as Russia has become less democratic, as noted above, and more of a natural resource based economy, it has reasserted itself as an independent force in international politics. The dependence of Europe and China on Russian oil and gas supplies makes them more vulnerable to Russian international ambitions and has given Russia increased clout in the international community relative to the US in particular. Moreover, as Russia edges away from democracy, and becomes increasingly a natural resource based economy, the US and Europe have also lost a great deal of leverage over the Russian government. Increasingly it looks like Russia does not need us – not even to buy its oil (China will do that).

Section IV: Can the Tide Be Turned?

As I conclude this rather pessimistic overview of Russia's response to the second crest of the fourth wave (maybe too complicated a metaphor...), I want to be cautious about what might reasonably be expected in what is still as short period of time. The task of transition was especially difficult in Russia. It was, afterall, the seat of Sovietism, it is the largest country on earth geographically (spanning 11 time zones), and is replete with inherited economic difficulties. Further, it is (of course) a sovereign state and former superpower. Although the US won the Cold War, we are not occupiers and we were never capable of transforming Russia in a Western image. I should also note that it is still too early to right Russia off -- we may see it digressing now only to make a giant leap forward economically and perhaps then politically in a few years.

Indeed, the seeds of weakness in Russian authoritarianism are already visible. Putin cited his desire to impose order and enhance the governing capacity of the Russian state in the wake of the wild 90's as one of the main reasons that he has circumscribed critical components of Russian democracy. As I have written elsewhere, however, there is little reason to believe that his new authoritarianism has actually resolved lingering governance problems.^{iv} The proliferation of institutions attempting control rather than public service and goods provisions under President Putin has merely made the Russian state bigger, but not more effective at the tasks of actually governing. Is there any reason to believe that a bloated authoritarian state, rather than a leaner, democratic one can accomplish the concrete tasks of governing Russia?

The Soviet experience indicated that institutionalization does indeed work, but it also demonstrated that inflexible, non-democratic institutions do not necessarily provide for stable and effective governance for very long. If anything, the Soviet system of authoritarianism was over-institutionalized. The party, and command economy kept regional actors in line, but the system ultimately failed because it proved slow and unresponsive to change. It did not produce sustainable economic growth, took a terrible toll on political and civil freedoms, and quality of life of the average Russian citizen. Eventually, the Soviet system became brittle, inadaptable, and vulnerable to collapse from within.

A truly competitive, federal democracy in Russia is likely to do better than the Soviet system or the low quality democracy that existed through the 1990's under Yeltsin if supported by effective political institutions. At the heart of such a system is an institutionalized competitive political party system within the context of truly free and

fair elections. Such a system would better accomplish Putin's goals of creating a more governable and secure Russian state than would a further retreat toward authoritarianism. Rather than canceling elections in the provinces, Putin should be advocating more elected offices throughout Russia under the rubric of a truly competitive party system. Just as he and his predecessor, Boris Yeltsin have tried to maintain democracy without accountability, however, Vladimir Putin is now merely building authoritarianism without authority. This lack of governing authority may actually be the downfall of the current regime. Should oil prices drop (and one day they will), Russia's economy will be exposed for all of its inherent weaknesses. Weak authoritarianism will be shown to have provided less to the Russian people than did weak democracy and this might be the moment at which Russia tilts back toward a democratic path.

Aside from waiting for a drop in oil and gas prices, the US and Europe have some leverage over Russia that may help turn the tide back toward democracy sooner rather than later. First, and foremost, US and European allies must encourage President Putin to turn over power in 2008 when his term officially expires. Not doing so would consolidate Russian authoritarianism and make the battle back to democracy that much harder.

Second, Russia should be told in no uncertain terms that it is not really a full member of the G-8 and that its participation in that body is a privilege and not a right. Its economic and corruption performance in no way make it eligible as one of the most important 8 economies in the world. Improvement in its democratic and civic rights records should be a precondition for continued participation in the G-8. An alternative G-7 could be held concurrently or prior to the G-8 this summer in St. Petersburg to deny Russia's current administration the democratic and economic legitimacy it apparently craves. At the same

time, we must not withdraw from engagement with Russia. One of the key mistakes made in dealing with Russia in the last five years in particular is the continued treatment of it as a fully developed democracy and economy – it is most certainly not that. It's transition is not over. External levers are surely weaker than they were in Georgia, Ukraine or Serbia, but they are not completely absent.

ⁱ Michael McFaul, with Sanja Tatic, "Russia" in Countries at the Crossroads 2005, p.4. Freedom House available at www.freedomhouse.org

ⁱⁱ *ibid.*

ⁱⁱⁱ United Nations, Human Development Index. 2002.

^{iv} Kathryn Stoner-Weiss, "Russian Federalism and Democracy" *Journal of Democracy*, January, 2006.