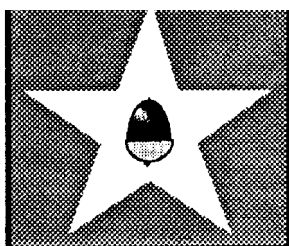


Conflict Studies Research Centre

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**The Putin Presidency:
Establishing Superpresidentialism**

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Vladimir Putin has now been president of the Russian Federation for just over two years, becoming acting president on 31 December 1999, and then winning the presidential election in March 2000. The next elections are due to be held in 2004. There has been some discussion in the last two years about extending the length of the presidential term from four to five years. The new chairman of the Federation Council, Sergey Mironov, advocated this in December 2001, but stated that he was speaking of possible future change in the presidency, and did not advocate such a change during the current Putin presidency. Putin himself said in December 2001 that the current presidential term would not be changed to suit himself. It currently seems highly likely that he will win the 2004 presidential election, and will therefore remain in power until 2008. He will then be constitutionally obliged to step down. It is open to question whether Russian political culture and the nation will have developed sufficiently by then to state with confidence that Putin will step down in 2008, if he does indeed serve a second term. It is possible that there may be a constitutional fudge, enabling him to stay in power beyond 2008. For example, Russo-Belarusian integration may result in the formation of a new state with a new constitution, and enabling Putin to contest the presidential elections of this new state, so permitting him to remain in power without violating the 1993 constitution of the Russian Federation.

There are arguably three main power bases within the Russian political system. These are: the presidential administration; the Security Council; the cabinet of ministers, or government. Changes within these organs (particularly the first two) have been discussed in a previous paper¹, and there have been few if any significant changes since then, despite much discussion in 2001. In October 2001, Putin issued a decree restructuring the government. The prime minister of the Russian Federation is to have five deputies. Of these, one deputy prime minister is to carry out the functions of minister for industry, science and technology, one to act as agriculture minister and one as finance minister. The Ministry for Federation Affairs, Ethnic and Migration Policy is to be abolished. The ministry's functions are to be carried out by the Interior Ministry, Foreign Ministry and Ministry for Economic Development and Trade. In 2000, Putin abolished the Ministry for CIS affairs. Overall, however, there has been little change in government in terms of either personnel or structure since January 2000. Between January 2000 and May 2000 nine ministers left the government, and between May 2000 and January 2002, eight ministerial changes occurred. It remains to be seen whether there will be any further changes to the structure of the government.

The political system in the Yel'tsin era was characterised by a hyperpluralism, which undermined the capacity of the state to act as a state. The attack on oligarchs since 2000 has aimed at curbing the financial power which enabled them to replace the state as public patron. The tightening up of control over the regions through the creation in 2000 of seven federal districts headed by presidential

representatives is another part of the process of strengthening the power of the Russian state over society. Other key reforms of the Putin period, such as the law on political parties, the proposed judicial reform and reform of the civil service all form part of this process. However, the political system will remain superpresidential in character. In the Yel'tsin period, this superpresidentialism was undermined by hyperpluralism. Putin's aim is to establish an efficient state system to remove the hindrances to superpresidentialism.²

The Russian Party System

As part of its attempt to do this, the Putin leadership has attempted to encourage the emergence of a docile legislature. This contrasts with the Yel'tsin period, when the Duma often challenged the then president. Putin is fortunate in that he faced a largely cooperative Duma after the December 1999 elections that was less inclined to challenge him than previous Duma convocations had been prepared to challenge Yel'tsin. The emergence of the pro-Kremlin Yedinstvo faction in autumn 1999 made for a large pro-Putin group in the Duma.

The leadership has since then attempted to encourage the emergence of a party system that would be stable and not challenge its predominance. In 2001 a new law on political parties came into force, with a view to developing such a party system. The law aims at reducing the number of political parties, so that the results of Duma elections will be much more predictable. The law also ensures that parties can only exist on a federal level, so contributing to the centralisation of the political system. It also pushes parties towards close cooperation with the executive branch.³

The constellation of party forces has developed in a way favourable to Putin in 2001. Yedinstvo had already established close cooperation with Otechestvo-Vsya Rossiya, Narodnyy Deputat and Regiony Rossii in the Duma in 2001, and in December 2001 Yedinstvo and Otechestvo-Vsya Rossiya merged to form one party. These developments give the Putin leadership a strong bulwark within the Duma.

Duma Representation⁴

Faction	Number of deputies
Yedinstvo	81
CPRF	84
LDPR	12
Otechestvo-Vsya Rossiya	49
URF	31
Yabloko	17
Agropromyshlennaya deputatskaya gruppa	43
Narodnyy Deputat	57
Regiony Rossii	47
Independents	21

Yedinstvo has 81 deputies, Otechestvo 49. The merged parties therefore have 130 deputies. As this party cooperates closely with Narodnyy Deputat and Regiony Rossii, the pro-Putin parties therefore have 234 seats in the Duma, that is more

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than half (there are 450 seats in total). Furthermore, the URF and Yabloko often support the Kremlin on economic legislation.

Anti-Putin or anti-Kremlin parties are unlikely to pose any significant threat to the status quo. The CPRF is the largest opposition party, and remains opposed to Putin's economic policy. However it seems content to play a purely political role.

The URF (Union of Rightist Forces – *Soyuz Pravykh Sil*) was formed originally as an electoral bloc of politically liberal and pro-market reform parties to contest the 1999 Duma elections. In 2001 these parties merged into a single party, and Boris Nemtsov was elected as leader. The URF supports much of the economic legislation proposed by the Kremlin, although it is critical of what it sees as politically illiberal measures, such as the war in Chechnya and the Kremlin's attitude towards independent television media. However, former URF deputy Sergey Yushenkov has criticised the URF for being too close to the Kremlin. He set up the Liberal Russia movement with Boris Berezovskiy in December 2001 as an anti-Putin liberal movement.

Yabloko has supported certain economic reform legislation proposed by the Kremlin, but is critical of what it sees as Putin's political illiberalism. In 2001 it warned of the danger of a bureaucratic police state emerging in Russia. There was some discussion in 2000 of a possible merger of Yabloko and the URF, and some agreements were signed, but no merger has so far materialised.

The Russian party system appears to be fairly stable, and was probably so before the introduction of the 2001 law on political parties. This law is likely to have the effect of consolidating the party system, hence making it even more stable and predictable and thereby ensuring that the Kremlin will probably continue to have a manageable Duma. As this law makes it difficult for new parties to emerge to challenge the existing ones, the current party leaders have every reason to cooperate with the Kremlin. This thus works to the executive's advantage.

The Federation Council has become a less independent organ since the reform of centre-regional relations in 2000. Regional governors and chairman of regional legislatures can no longer sit in the Federation Council, thus removing their representation at the apex of the federal political system. The regions are now represented in the Federation Council by one person from the region's executive structures and one from its legislative structures. Many of the executive representatives do not come from the region they represent, but are Moscow based, and so their links to their region are relatively weak. Their links to the Kremlin administration are often far stronger. The Federation Council is dominated by the pro-Putin Federatsiya group which comprises approximately 100 senators (out of a total of 189).

Centre-Regional Relations

The establishment of the seven federal districts headed by presidential representatives in 2000 has now become an established feature of the Russian political system, and appears to have gone a long way towards reversing the haemorrhaging of power from the federal centre that took place during the Yel'tsin presidency. It is possible that the federal district administrations may come to assume a quasi-governmental role, that may partially usurp the powers of regional

governments and so further enhance the power of the centre, and hence of the presidency over the federation.⁵

The Media

The independence of the electronic media has become somewhat precarious since Putin came to power. Although Putin has stated that he has no intention of interfering with press freedom, television stations that follow a policy line independent of the Kremlin, such as NTV in 2001 and TV-6 in 2001 and 2002 have been subject to strong legal pressures that have made it impossible for them to operate as independent stations. There has been no blatant suppression of these stations. Instead, legal disputes over finances forced a change of ownership in the case of NTV. The owners of TV-6 have been subject to criminal investigation and one of its part owners, Lukoil-Garant, sought TV-6's liquidation on the grounds that its debts exceeded its assets. The moves against NTV and TV-6 are on the surface motivated by purely commercial concerns, but are probably politically motivated by a Kremlin leadership that finds it difficult to tolerate an independent electronic media.

Alternatives to Putin

Putin currently faces no credible rivals for the presidency. Furthermore, there are none on the horizon. This contrasts strongly with the Yel'tsin period, when the then president faced several potential rivals throughout his presidency (eg Aleksandr Rutskoy, Aleksandr Lebed', Viktor Chernomyrdin, Yury Luzhkov, Yevgeniy Primakov).

Putin's support levels are extremely high (he has usually enjoyed an approval rating of over 70 per cent since January 2000), and show no signs of abating. The way thus seems clear for him to dominate the political scene in Russia for the foreseeable future, and the changes in centre-regional relations, in the Federation Council, in the nature of the party system, in the limiting of the power of the business oligarchs indicate that in practice the presidency under Putin is a more powerful institution than it was under Yel'tsin. He relies much more than Yel'tsin on the security services and state bureaucracy, a logical step in view of his desire to create a more efficient state machine and overcome the inconsistencies in centre-regional relations and the hijacking of the state by business oligarchs.

The strengthening of the state has been described as part of a process of de-democratising society and also of the FSB-ization of society (the Federal Security Service, the FSB, is a successor to the KGB). The procuracy has been used for political purposes, and the Audit Chamber is effectively being used as a form of secret service. At the Civil Forum held in late 2001, the human rights ombudsman Oleg Mironov stated that "a society cannot be called civil if more than half the state servants wear a military uniform". Mironov pointed out that not just the army, but the tax police, procuracy, and many other organisations wear military uniform. A feature of Putin's presidency has been the strengthening of police control over society, that aims at restoring vertical structures of power at the expense of civil society, and so establishing an effective superpresidential system. The holding of the Civil Forum itself was somewhat ironic and artificial, as it seemed to be an

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attempt by the Putin leadership (ie the Russian state) to encourage the development of a civil society that would be largely beholden to the state, rather than an independent spontaneous emergence of groups and associations from which the state itself would emerge as a product of society, rather than society being a product of the state.

Putin has put much emphasis upon the need to use law. However, this does not appear to be an attempt to create a *rechtstaat*, but more to use laws in order to establish the unchallenged supremacy of the presidency. Putin has expressed his support for the idea of monarchy. In 2000 he stated:

On the whole ... in certain periods of time ... in a certain place ... in certain conditions the monarchy has played and pays to this day a positive role ... The monarch does not have to think about whether he will be elected or not, make petty conjectures, somehow influence the electorate. He can think about the fate of his people, and not be distracted by trifles.

Journalists said to Putin that this was impossible in Russia. He replied:

Much appears to us as impossible and unrealizable, and then – bang! As it was with the Soviet Union. Who could have imagined that it would take upon itself and collapse.⁶

The notion of a leader not subject to electoral pressures is clearly a notion to which Putin is strongly attracted. The Russian constitution makes the presidency an electoral autocracy, and Putin's presidency has aimed at turning this notion into reality. Given the sentiments expressed above, it is not impossible that Putin may eventually seek the restoration of monarchy in Russia. This may seem a bizarre scenario, but it is not necessarily less bizarre than any of the developments that have actually taken place in the former Soviet Union since 1985.⁷

Whilst attempting to strengthen the power of the presidency, Putin has also sought to bargain with key interest groups in society. He has had to bargain with those he has tried to weaken, such as regional governors and oligarchs. He initially bargained with the CPRF in early 2000 in allotting key posts in the Duma. He has pursued a liberal economic policy, so gaining the support of liberal reformist forces and has pursued a tough policy towards Chechnya in order to maintain the support of nationalist forces. Therefore although the presidency has been strengthened, Putin is not in a position where he can rule without having to reach compromises with key interest groups in society. Indeed, he appears so far to have adopted this approach in preference to a more confrontational one.

Putin's popularity level remains high, and this is probably connected with the fact that economic change has not so far inflicted significant additional hardship on the population. The high price of oil has benefited the economy and thereby the population. If this situation changes, and liberal economic reform does cause hardship, then Putin may face a serious challenge to his rule. He may then be strongly tempted to use coercion, for example, if a surprise challenge does emerge in future elections, which might raise the possibility of Putin losing control over the electoral process as Slobodan Milosevic did in Yugoslavia in 2000. However, he would be reluctant to use coercion other than as an absolutely last resort. It is important in the conditions of Russia's semi-democracy and need to cultivate a respectable international image for the leadership to be seen as being "reasonably"

democratic. It is more likely that he would use legal measures to try to frustrate the attempts of rival candidates to register. If he felt there was a serious danger of losing a presidential election, then he might create a pretext for postponing elections, as Yel'tsin considered doing in 1996. It is safe to assume that Putin will continue to endeavour to strengthen both the power of the state and the presidency over society for the remainder of his period in office, in order to attempt to prevent such challenges from threatening his rule.

ENDNOTES

¹ See Dr Mark A Smith Putin's Power Bases, E109, CSRC, RMA Sandhurst, June 2001. Available from <http://www.csrc.ac.uk>

² See Eugene Huskey, 'Overcoming the Yel'tsin legacy: Vladimir Putin and Russian Political Reform,' in Archie Brown, ed, Contemporary Russian Politics: A Reader, Oxford, OUP, 2001, pp 82-98.

³ For an analysis of the law on political parties see Andrei Ryabov, The Outlook for the Russian Multi-Party System in the New Political Context, Mosow Carnegie Centre Briefing Papers, No 8, August 2001, available from <http://www.carnegie.ru> The text of the law on political parties can be found at <http://www.democracy.ru>

⁴ <http://www.duma.gov.ru> accessed on 23 January 2002.

⁵ For a detailed discussion of centre-regional relations, see Graeme Herd & Anne Aldis, eds, 'Russian Regions and Regionalism: Strength Through Weakness?', Curzon Press, 2002, forthcoming.

⁶ Vladimir Putin First Person: An Astonishingly Frank Self Portrait by Russia's President, London, Hutchinson, 2000, pp 186-187.

⁷ See Liliya Shevtsova, 'From Yel'tsin to Putin: The Evolution of Political Power', in Archie Brown & Liliya Shevtsova, eds, Gorbachev, Yel'tsin and Putin: Political Leadership in Russia's Transition, Washington DC, Brookings Institution Press, 2001, p 96.

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