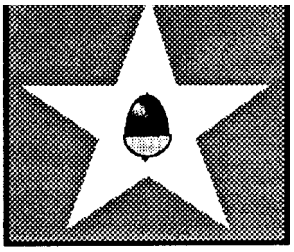
Conflict Studies Research Centre

Dr Mark A Smith

The Putinite System

March 2003



E111

The Putinite System

Dr Mark A Smith

This paper outlines the characteristics of the current Russian political scene, and the main figures and groups within it.

Since Boris Yel'tsin stepped down as president in December 1999, the domestic political scene has become, for the most part, settled and predictable. After the turmoil of the 1990s, President Vladimir Putin has introduced a new period of stability that seems likely to last at least until the end of this decade. It could be argued that this is the first period of lasting stability that Russia has experienced since the Brezhnev era (1964-1982) in the USSR. When Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev died in November 1982 he was followed by three leaders in as many years. The third of these leaders, Mikhail Gorbachev, then introduced far-reaching reforms that within six years had brought about the collapse of both the Soviet Union and his own rule. However, whilst the Brezhnev era was marked by stagnation, the quiescence of the Putin era is marked by an attempt to complete the transition to a market economy and integration into global economic structures, along with various political reforms that aim to achieve the complex objectives of combining democracy with the Kremlin's desire not to surrender its power monopoly. The only likely potential threat to this tranquillity would be if Putin were to die unexpectedly, as one still cannot be certain that constitutional procedures would necessarily be followed in that emergency.

Vladimir Putin's domination of the Russian political system just over twelve months before the next presidential elections take place (scheduled for 14 March 2004) appears unchallengeable. Opinion polls reveal that over 50% of the electorate would vote for him in an election. This would enable him to win in the first round, as he did in 2000. His nearest rival, Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF) leader Gennady Zyuganov, enjoys around 16% support. It is unlikely that this situation will change between now and spring 2004. It therefore seems inevitable that Putin will be re-elected for a second term. It is also possible that there will be moves after the next presidential election to extend the presidential term from its current four year period to one of five years.

If elected for a second term, Putin will be obliged to step down at the end of that term in 2008, as the constitution currently states that a president can serve no more than two terms. This could create an interesting situation, as there are few cases of a Russian leader willingly surrendering power. In 2008, Putin will still be young for a national leader (he will then be 56). He will presumably still be in good health. If he does step down willingly in 2008, then this would create a new precedent in Russian politics. If he does not do so, then it would require a considerable constitutional fudge to enable him to run for a third term. The development of such a fudge may be one of his main tasks during his second term.

The Putinite System
Conflict Studies Research Centre
ISBN 1-904423-27-2
March 2003

Dr Mark A Smith

The Putinite Regime – Monocentrism

The post-communist Russian political system under both Yel'tsin and Putin has been characterised by Russian political scientists as "administered democracy", which is a curious hybrid of democracy and authoritarianism, somewhat akin to the pre-2000 Mexican political system.[1] Aleksey Zudin describes the Russian political system under Vladimir Putin as "monocentric", by which he means that all power is located in the presidency.[2] Whilst this was theoretically true of Yel'tsin's presidency, the Yeltsinite system was in reality "polycentric", where other key players in the political system enjoyed a considerable degree of autonomy from the president. The most significant key players were the Duma and Federation Council, regional leaders, political parties, business oligarchs and parts of the media. Under Putin, a process of "deautonomisation" has reduced the power and influence of these actors, and forced them to become more subordinate to the presidency. Some of the main features of Putin's regime are:

- Development of a corporatist system. The Kremlin is interested in close ties with business organisations such as the Russian Union of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs, *Delovaya Rossiya*, and the trade union federation (FNPR). The creation of the Civic Forum in November 2001 was an attempt by the Kremlin to develop close ties with a broad range of social organisations.

- Social stability. Putin wishes to avoid the conflicts of the Yel'tsin era, and build on his high approval ratings to develop a stable social order, where conflict is marginalised. The restoration of Soviet symbols such as the old national anthem and Soviet insignia in the armed forces represents an attempt to win over those with loyalties to the old Soviet order.

- Co-optation of opposition parties. Putin is more willing than Yel'tsin to develop a dialogue with opposition parties such as the CPRF and Yabloko, consulting with them on legislation.

This means that Putin's regime strengthens its monocentric nature by consulting with all key groups on policy making. A strong pro-presidential consensus is thus formed. Putin's regime can be seen as semi-authoritarian, in that the likelihood of him being removed in a free election is low, but it is an inclusive form of authoritarianism, seeking to involve broad sectors of society in the making and implementation of policy. This means that it will be more difficult for a viable opposition to emerge. The lack of a viable opposition obviously hinders the development of democracy. It also creates the danger of stagnation, as inability of any electorate to remove a government deprives that government of an incentive to perform effectively. Russia still lacks an effective party system, where opposition parties can mount a realistic challenge to the incumbent president. The refusal of Putin (and Yel'tsin before him) to form or join any political party has probably hindered the development of a more competitive party system, as their refusal diminishes the value of political parties in the eyes of the electorate.

It would therefore seem then that Putin will win the 2004 presidential election, and that his monocentric regime will remain largely unchanged. His leadership consists of three main groupings.

1. *Siloviki*, ie those who work in the various internal security organs.

2. Economic liberals.

Elements from both of these groupings are part of the St Petersburg group that has been promoted since Putin became president.

The main figures of the "Petersburg" political group include Igor Sechin, head of the president's secretariat; Viktor Ivanov, deputy chief of the presidential staff; Federal Security Service Director Nikolay Patrushev; and Internal Affairs Minister Boris Gryzlov. Other key figures are Aleksey Kudrin, Minister of Finance and German Gref, Minister of Trade and Economic Development.

Members of the business elite associated with the "Petersburg" group include Gazprom head Aleksey Miller; former president of Mezhprombank (now head of its supervisory board and senator from Tyva) Sergey Pugachev; and Rosneft President Sergey Bogdanchikov, who has joined the Petersburgers.

3. Supporters of “the Family”, ie those who were close to Yel’tsin. Head of the presidential administration Aleksandr Voloshin is the main representative of this group. Prime Minister Mikhail Kasyanov also reportedly has close ties with the Family, and has been attempting to move against some of the St Petersburgers in the cabinet of ministers, such as Kudrin, German and also Ilya Klebanov, Minister of science and technology.

Constitutionally, the prime minister is the second most important figure in the political system. If the president were to die, or become incapacitated, then the prime minister would become acting president. A prime minister’s relatively high profile could be used by him to help launch a bid for the presidency. However, this obviously runs the risk of antagonising the president. Yel’tsin probably dismissed two of his prime ministers (Viktor Chernomyrdin and Yevgeny Primakov) for this reason. The current prime minister, Mikhail Kasyanov, was appointed by Yel’tsin to the government, but Putin has been content to have him as his prime minister since 2000. Putin has probably not dismissed Kasyanov because Putin has been anxious to avoid the personnel instability of the Yel’tsin era. Kasyanov, who is a competent financial specialist and who speaks good English, is also probably seen as useful means of reassuring the West that Russia intends to be a reliable economic partner.

It is rumoured that there are differences between the two men, but if Kasyanov has presidential ambitions, then he is unlikely to manifest them at this time, as this could well bring about his dismissal. Kasyanov may perhaps be a contender for the presidency in 2008, assuming Putin does step down at that time. If serious differences do emerge between them, Putin may be tempted to dismiss Kasyanov perhaps in the run up to either the Duma or presidential elections (Duma elections are due in December 2003) in order to deflect any criticisms of government policy and to create the impression of a “new start” in 2004. Possible replacements for Kasyanov could be Aleksey Kudrin or German Gref.

Sergey Shoygu, the minister of emergencies, is also seen as being close to Putin, and a possible future contender for the presidency. Opinion polls reveal him to be one of the three most trusted politicians in the country. However, as in the case of Kasyanov, it would be unwise for Shoygu to reveal any presidential ambitions at this point. The issue of Putin’s successor is only likely to emerge towards the end of his second term, assuming that he does decide to step down at that time, and to refrain from any constitutional fudge to remain in power. Shoygu’s other key post

was as one of the leaders of the *Yedinstvo* party, which was one of the main pro-Putin parties in the Duma.

Party Groupings

Russia lacks an effective party system. Due to the desire of both Yel'tsin and Putin to stand above party, the political parties that have developed in the post-communist decade do not play quite the same roles that they do in western systems in linking society to the state and providing political leaders and programmes. However parties are not totally irrelevant. They do play an important role in the Duma.

The Pro-Putin Parties

In February 2002 *Yedinstvo*, *Otechestvo* and *Vsya Rossiya* merged to form *Yedinaya Rossiya*. In October 2002 Aleksandr Bespalov claimed that *Yedinaya Rossiya* had become the largest party in Russia with a membership of 200,000. In November 2002, Interior Minister Boris Gryzlov was elected as its chairman. This has led to fears of too close a relationship between the Interior Ministry and *Yedinaya Rossiya*. Although Putin is not a member of *Yedinaya Rossiya*, he is a strong supporter of it, and it can therefore be seen as a presidential party. The alliance it has with *Regiony Rossiya* and the Popular Party (*Narodnaya Partiya*) ensures a pro-Putin majority in the Duma. In early 2003, these four parties had 234 deputies in the Duma (out of a total of 450). Opinion polls reveal that *Yedinaya Rossiya* is the second best supported party in Russia (after the CPRF), with support levels of roughly 18%. However, in early 2003 it was clear that there serious splits in the leadership of *Yedinaya Rossiya*, and its support in the polls was falling. One poll in late January gave it a support rating of 14%, down from 27% at the end of December 2002.

The Communist Opposition

The CPRF remains the best supported party in the country and along with the pro-Putin *Yedinstvo* faction is the largest faction within the Duma (both have 82 seats). It is likely to retain this position in the December 2003 elections. The CPRF is fiercely critical of both the government and of Putin (initially it only used to criticise the government). It launched a strong attack on the Putin leadership in May 2002. Relations with non-communist groups in the People's Patriotic Union of Russia (PPUR) became strained in 2002, but Zyuganov has improved relations with these forces in early 2003. He is likely to be the CPRF's presidential candidate in 2004. Although its verbal criticisms of the Putin leadership are fierce, the CPRF entertains no serious hope of winning power, and appears content to play an opposition role. In the Duma it is allied to the Agro-Industrial group of deputies.

The Democratic Opposition

The most important liberal opposition forces are the Union of Rightist Forces (URF), led by Boris Nemtsov, and *Yabloko*, led by Grigory Yavlinskiy. There has been some discussion between the main "democratic" parties (ie the URF and *Yabloko*) about putting forward a single candidate for the 2004 election. This would presumably be either Boris Nemtsov or Grigory Yavlinskiy. However the parties have failed to form an effective alliance, despite many months of discussion. It is reported that Yegor Gaydar (URF) has been commissioned to write Putin's economic programme for his second presidential term. If this is the case, then it clearly undermines the URF's potential as an opposition force. Failure of the URF and *Yabloko* to unite could split

the democratic vote in both Duma elections due in December 2003 and the 2004 presidential election.

As noted above, the pro-Putin parties comprise the largest grouping in the Duma. They also often have the support of URF and *Yabloko* on economic issues, and the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR) rarely opposes the government. Putin therefore enjoys a largely compliant Duma.

The Parties In The Duma

Yedinstvo	82
CPRF	82
LDPR	13
Otechestvo-Vsya Rossiya	52
URF	32
Yabloko	17
Agro-industrial Group	43
Narodnyy Deputat	53
Regiony Rossiya	47
Independents	21

Source: http://duma.gov.ru accessed 18 March 2003.

The Oligarchs

The most significant development over the past two years is the emergence of two powerful election groups from the business sphere - the Potanin group and the Abramovich-Deripaska group and their strained relationship with each other. While oligarchs no longer possess the power they did in the Yel'tsin era, they are not irrelevant, due to the role they play in financing electoral campaigns. In October 2002, the newspaper *Vek* argued that there were now five main oligarch groupings:[3]

1. The Vladimir Potanin group and the two national newspapers - *Izvestiya* and *Komsomolskaya Pravda* - he controls. This group is close to the Kremlin.

2. Roman Abramovich and Oleg Deripaska. This group is hostile to Potanin. It has close connections with the old Yelt'sin circle, whilst at the same time having excellent channels to government. The Kremlin does cooperate with it. Its weakness is its ties to the past. It would probably give "targeted support" to Putinite candidates in the Duma elections.

3. The oil magnate Mikhail Khodorkovskiy. It is not clear whether he would emulate the Abramovich-Deripaska team in targeted financing of Putinite candidates or turn rightward to support the URF and/or *Yabloko*.

4. Anatoly Chubays. He could lose influence if UES (the electricity monopoly) is reformed, which may weaken the position of the URF.

5. The phantom group "Berezovskiy and the Communists" is not really a group. Berezovskiy has proposed an alliance with the Communists. However, the CPRF has no interest in an anti-Putin alliance with Berezovskiy. No one wants Berezovskiy's financial support, for fear of antagonising Putin.

Centre-Regional Relations

The reforms of centre-regional relations undertaken by Putin in 2000 appear to have significantly reversed the centrifugal trends that were a strong feature of Yel'tsin's presidency. Putin has had more success than Yel'tsin in establishing a "common legal space" throughout the Russian Federation, although the task of creating such a space is far from complete. In 2002, Tatarstan amended its constitution to bring it into line with the federal constitution, dropping the word "sovereignty" from Article One. However, complaints have been made that the process of bringing the Tatarstan constitution and other laws into line with federal laws remains far from complete. On the other hand, Tatarstan President Mintimir Shaymiyev made several outspoken criticisms in 2002 about the denial of the rights of the regions. In July 2002, he criticised Putin directly:

> *I would like to say that we are subordinate to you, the president. The regions have been denied virtually all powers. The regional leaders feel unprotected. I have never raised this issue before, but I would like to raise it now. Lawlessness gradually overtakes the prosecutor's bodies, courts, etc. We used to regulate their work depending on the needs of the population. We used to be able to report back on them. Not any more. Everyone just keeps quiet now.*[4]

On 12 December 2002 Vladimir Putin signed into law the draft federal law "On introducing addenda to Article 3 of the Russian Federation law 'On languages of the peoples of the Russian Federation'", which was adopted by the Duma on 15 November 2002 and then approved by the Federation Council on 27 November 2002. Article 3 of the Russian Federation's law "On languages of the peoples of the Russian Federation" now contains a new norm stipulating that the alphabets of the state language of the Russian Federation and the state languages of its republics must be based on the Cyrillic script. Other scripts for the alphabets of the state language of the Russian Federation and the state languages of its republics can only be adopted under federal laws. This is a very clear attempt by the federal centre to exercise its power over the regions, and can also be regarded as a form of Russification. It has predictably been received negatively in Tatarstan, which had adopted the Latin script.

The trend towards centripetalism in centre-regional relations that was launched by Putin in 2000 is likely to remain a key feature of his presidency. It is unlikely to face significant opposition, despite the protests of the Tatarstan leadership. 2002 saw the introduction of the teaching of Russian Orthodox culture in state schools, and this can be seen as an attempt to develop a sense of national identity in the population. These Russifiying trends contain the clear potential for aggravating the relationship between the federal centre and the non-Russian republics.

Conclusions

Three years into his presidency, Putin has achieved a high degree of stability that contrasts sharply with the unpredictability of the Yel'tsin period. There has been little turnover of personnel in the government since 2000. Executive-legislative relations are largely conflict free, and the centre's control over the regions has been much enhanced. The independence of the electronic media vis-à-vis the Kremlin has been significantly reduced since 2000, which, while a blow to freedom of speech, is presumably considered a plus by the national leadership.

The Russian political scene is likely to be dominated by continuity in 2003, as the country prepares for the Duma elections in December. The main features of Russia's hybrid political system will remain intact with Putin facing no real challenge. Issues such as press freedom and the observance of human rights in Chechnya will cause tension between the leadership and elements on the liberal wing of the political spectrum. The Putin leadership is likely to continue to try to strike an uneasy balance between its desire for *poryadok* (order) and its obligations to adhere to the liberal and democratic principles of both the Russian constitution and various international agreements of which the Russian Federation is a signatory. Any major terrorist outrage like the Nord-Ost theatre incident in Moscow in October 2002 will clearly pose the Putin leadership the dilemma of ensuring security without undermining liberty. This would be a major challenge for a country with a strong authoritarian tradition, and conversely a weak democratic one. The law against extremism which came into force in July 2002, which appears to be aimed mainly at the threat posed by Nazi and fascist organisations, has been criticised as a potential threat to freedom by some analysts.[5] In March 2003, the FSB and Interior Ministry proposed changes to the Criminal Procedure Code, asking that they be allowed to detain terrorist suspects for up to 30 days without charge (currently, suspects can be held without charge for 48 hours). Moves of this kind are always likely to be accompanied by the suspicion that the current leadership may well use such measures to hinder the development of democracy in the Russian Federation.

ENDNOTES

[1] See Mark Smith, 'Putin's Regime: Administered Democracy', Conflict Studies Research Centre, E108, June 2000, http://www.csrc.ac.uk

[2] Aleksey Zudin, Rezhim Vladimira Putina: kontury novoy politicheskoy systemy, Carnegie Centre Moscow, April 2002, http://www.carnegie.ru

[3] Aleksey Bogaturov, 'Oligarch Archangels begin to fight amongst themselves', Vek, No 35, 10 October 2002.

[4] NTV Mir 8 July 2002, cited in BBC Monitoring http://news.monitor.bbc.co.uk

[5] See the discussion of this law in Daniil Shchipkov, 'Extremism will not pass?', in Nezavisimaya Gazeta Religiya, 19 June 2002.

Disclaimer

The views expressed are those of the Author and not necessarily those of the UK Ministry of Defence

ISBN 1-904423-27-2

Published By:

Defence Academy of the United Kingdom

Conflict Studies Research Centre
Haig Road
Camberley
Surrey
GU15 4PQ
England

Telephone: (44) 1276 412995
Fax: (44) 1276 686880
E-mail: csrc@defenceacademy.mod.uk
http://www.csrc.ac.uk

ISBN 1-904423-27-2