Putin: Consummate Illiberal or Embryonic Anti-Liberal?

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“Putinology” has become a popular theme in Demokratizatsiya. Virginie Coulloudon concludes that Putin’s “vertical state” was a reflection of a wide segment of the elite who believed economic reforms could be implemented better through top-down governance. Eugene Huskey argues that this verticality may create more discipline in the short-term, but its long-term effects are still vague and potentially negative. John Squier argues that Putin’s goal is gosudarstvennost’, or strengthening of the state, which is neutral and eventually, in theory, could help the horizontal, civil-society forces. Theodore Karasik recalls the Andropovite and siloviki banners raised by Putin early in his administration to create a new national ideal based on great-power ideology. Thomas Granville adds that Putin was pursuing derzhavnost’ and the recentralization of the state as an end in itself (eschewing perhaps more practical and ultimately more beneficial federal models). Nikolas Gvosdev’s assessment is one of “managed democracy,” where he compares Putin’s rule to Mexico under the Industrial Revolutionary Party (PRI)—a façade of democracy clouding elite manipulations, corruption, and unrepresentative government. Following this corporatist vein, Donald Jensen uses a form of Graham Allison’s “bureaucratic politics paradigm” to argue that Putin is forced to balance several competing interests he inherited to carve his policy. Robert Orttung evaluates Putin’s federal reforms as a use of the law for political purposes rather than the implementation of the rule of law (although, as Robert Sharlet argues, not without meeting stiff legal resistance at all levels). Gordon Hahn agrees, adding that the Putin federal reforms “are creating again an unstable tectonic inside the Russian state,” with potentially perilous implications, including the rise of Muslim radicalism in Russia. Emil Pain notes that Russia’s electorate expects democratic regression from Putin after having sensed that “democracy” was responsible for Russia’s malaise.

Many of these authors are losing faith in the idea that Putin’s vertical state, derzhavnost’ or gosudarstvennost’, will have a positive overriding aim over time. Also, many years before Putin came to power, several Demokratizatsiya authors—most notably J. Michael Waller—repeatedly, prophetically, and unfashionably at the time, raised the specter of a KGB state, warning of its danger to early Russian democratic development.
In this and upcoming issues, contributors discuss a more anti-liberal (as opposed to simply illiberal) side of Putin.

In an interview, Grigory Yavlinsky, founder and leader of Yabloko (the main liberal Russian party) discusses Putin’s anti-liberal imperial ideology.

Mikhail Beliaev studies Russia’s regions, in a broader context of literature from other post-Communist transitions to question the effectiveness of Putin’s “strong hand” tactics to bring economic prosperity.

John Dunlop’s analysis of the influential Eurasianist, or Evraziistvo (a phenomenon first described in Demokratizatsiya in 1992 by Victor Yasmann), proponent Aleksandr Dugin and his influence on key players in Russia follows.

Despite his current popularity, the odds are against Putin ushering in lasting prosperity or legality, as Beliaev concludes here. With rare exception, all the post-Communist leaders who hailed from the Communist structures and who did not follow in office a non-Communist leader were associated with state failure, corruption, illegality, and economic stagnation. Putin hails from similar structures as did his predecessor and others, including Ion Iliescu, Vladmir Mečiar, Leonid Kravchuk, Leonid Kuchma, Alyaksandr Lukashenka, Nursultan Nazarbaev, Mircea Snegur, Islam Karimov, Slobodan Milošević, and Franjo Tudjman.

In elections, media, civil society, and relations with the United States, Putin’s Russia has regressed in comparison to the late Gorbachev period. Nikolai Zlobin argued for the best interests of Putin’s Russia as a dignified junior partner of the United States, but this possibility appears to be receding amid Putin’s miscalculations and his growing unpopularity in Washington. Bruce Jackson, a prominent adviser to the Bush administration, reflected this tendency with his article “The Failure of Putin’s Russia” in the Washington Post. However, there will always be those in Washington who admire foreign autocrats, which may explain the State Department’s continuing endorsement of Putin’s imperial designs on tiny Moldova.

Yavlinsky and other critics may have a point in asserting that Putin, more than “managed democracy,” represents both the substance and the façade of an anti-liberal force. This is a force that seeks to consume vestiges of political liberalism in Russia in a compulsive, arbitrary, and ultimately aimless way, while altogether infringing on other countries’ sovereignty.

A more optimistic scenario presents itself in Georgia and Belarus. In this issue, a leading analyst walks us through the complex party development factors that led to Shevardnadze’s fall there, and the original democratic leader shares with us some interesting, yet not well-known, facts about Belarus’s past and present. Georgia is entering a brave new world of post-post-Soviet democratization, and Belarus may become the next surprise.

In keeping with the Demokratizatsiya tradition, this issue also includes historical articles: a reassessment of Chernobyl as a catalyst for Soviet reform and a comparison of the founding presidents of the post-Soviet states. An interview with one of those founding presidents, Stanislau Shushkevich, also includes relevant historical material, including details of his summit at the Belovezhsky Forest, which dissolved the USSR.
We are pleased once again to offer an essay of book reviews from Johanna Granville, this time discussing the horrors of human trafficking.

Finally, this issue contains a tribute to Yabloko deputy Yuri Shchekochikhin, a longtime board member of Demokratizatsiya, who died under mysterious circumstances during his investigation of a KGB-connected business. We commemorate his life and work.

NOTES
7. Donald N. Jensen, “Working with the Russians,” Demokratizatsiya 11, no. 2 (2003): 223–28. Although Jensen concentrates mostly on foreign policy decision making, his analysis also overlaps with domestic policymaking, such as the war in Chechnya.


16. This is discussed in Nikolai Zlobin, “Все по другому,” Izvestiya, 30 December 2003.