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## **Progress and Retreat in Africa**

*Richard Joseph* ■ *H. Kwasi Prempeh*

*Joel D. Barkan* ■ *Larry Diamond*

## **Russia's Transition to Autocracy**

*Pierre Hassner*

## **The Freedom House Survey for 2007**

*Arch Puddington*

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*Yang Jianli* on China

*Yun-han Chu et al.* on Global Public Opinion

*Richard Youngs* on European Democracy Assistance

*Mitchell A. Seligson et al.* on U.S. Democracy Assistance

*Sumit Ganguly* on India

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## **Argentina, Brazil, Ecuador**

*Steven Levitsky & María Victoria Murillo*

*Lourdes Sola* ■ *Catherine Conaghan*

# RUSSIA'S TRANSITION TO AUTOCRACY

*Pierre Hassner*

*Pierre Hassner, research director emeritus at the Centre d'Etudes et de Recherches Internationales (CERI) in Paris, delivered the 2007 Seymour Martin Lipset Lecture on Democracy in the World (see box on p. 6). For many years he was a professor of international relations at the Institut d'Etudes Politiques in Paris and a senior visiting lecturer at the European Center of Johns Hopkins University in Bologna. He is the author of *La terreur et l'empire* (2003) and *La violence et la paix: De la bombe atomique au nettoyage ethnique* (1995, with an English translation in 1997).*

It was with great trepidation that I accepted the invitation to deliver this distinguished lecture, together with the suggestion that my remarks should focus on Russia. Although my lifelong preoccupation with international politics—and in particular with the struggle between freedom and tyranny—has led me to follow closely developments in Russia (and, of course, the Soviet Union), I must confess at the outset that I am not an “old Russia hand.” I do not speak Russian, and I have never spent more than two consecutive weeks in Russia.

Why, then, did I agree to speak on this subject? In the first place, as an analyst of international relations I have a strong interest in the political role of human passions, and I think that understanding wounded pride, repressed guilt, resentment, and the manipulation of fear is central for interpreting Russia today. But I was also attracted by the idea of paying tribute to the memory of Seymour Martin Lipset. I met him and his wife Sydnee only once, toward the end of his life, at a celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the Congress for Cultural Freedom. To my knowledge, Lipset did not write much on Russia or on communism, but he did write extensively on the connection between economic development, the rise of a middle class, and democracy, as well as on the impact of political culture and traditions. As I expected, in preparing this lecture, I found a good deal of inspiration in Lipset's intellectual approach.

## THE SEYMOUR MARTIN LIPSET LECTURE ON DEMOCRACY IN THE WORLD

Pierre Hassner delivered the fourth annual Seymour Martin Lipset Lecture on Democracy in the World on 15 November 2007 at the Canadian Embassy in Washington, D.C., and on November 22 at the Munk Centre for International Studies at the University of Toronto. The Lipset Lecture is cosponsored by the National Endowment for Democracy and the Munk Centre, with financial support this year from the Canadian Donner Foundation, the Canadian Embassy in Washington, the American Federation of Teachers, the Albert Shanker Institute, William Schneider, and other donors.

Seymour Martin Lipset, who passed away at the end of 2006, was one of the most influential social scientists and scholars of democracy of the past half-century. A frequent contributor to the *Journal of Democracy* and a founding member of its Editorial Board, Lipset taught at Columbia, the University of California at Berkeley, Harvard, Stanford, and George Mason University. He was the author of numerous important books including *Political Man*, *The First New Nation*, *The Politics of Unreason*, and *American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword*. He was the only person ever to have served as president of both the American Political Science Association (1979–80) and the American Sociological Association (1992–93).

Lipset's work covered a wide range of topics: the social conditions of democracy, including economic development and political culture; the origins of socialism, fascism, revolution, protest, prejudice, and extremism; class conflict, structure, and mobility; social cleavages, party systems, and voter alignments; and public opinion and public confidence in institutions. Lipset was a pioneer in the study of comparative politics, and no comparison featured as prominently in his work as that between the two great democracies of North America. Thanks to his insightful analysis of Canada in comparison with the United States, most fully elaborated in *Continental Divide*, he has been dubbed the "Tocqueville of Canada."

Today, analysts of Russia are threatened by three temptations: economic determinism, cultural determinism, and political determinism. For instance, the excellent Russian author Dmitri Trenin is optimistic about Russia's future because, although not democratic, it is capitalist; hence he argues that it will give birth to a middle class that will want the rule of law.<sup>1</sup> Other authors believe that Russia will never become democratic, because its culture is basically authoritarian. A third group, composed largely of Americans, believes in politics as a *deus ex machina*: Because all people want democracy and the market, no matter what their

culture or their state of economic development is, these can be installed virtually overnight. For avoiding these simplifications and for grasping the complicated interrelationship between politics, economics, and culture, I think there is no better guide than the work of Seymour Martin Lipset.

For my part, I shall concentrate on the role of politics and especially of a single person—Vladimir Putin. Although he is neither the beginning nor the end of the story of democracy and capitalism in Russia, he does play a crucial role.

I came here, however, neither to praise Putin nor to bury him. I did not come to praise him because I agree with Sergei Kovalev that “Putin is the most sinister figure in contemporary Russia history.”<sup>22</sup> He has led Russia into a harsh brand of authoritarianism with some fascist features, and he remains under strong suspicion of having inspired a number of criminal acts, including the fires that served as a pretext for launching the second war in Chechnya, and the assassination of political opponents such as Anna Politovskaya.

On the other hand, I did not come to bury him. His rule is full of contradictions and, while it has some extremely ominous aspects, he cannot be said to have burned all his bridges or to have made it impossible for Russia to evolve in a more positive direction once circumstances change. Whatever our final judgment, we must not close our minds to the case made by his defenders, who stress his popular support among the Russian people, the improvements that he has achieved in certain areas (as compared to the catastrophic situation he found when coming to power), and the fact that his undoubtedly authoritarian rule has stopped well short of totalitarian terror.

Many Russians and some Westerners assert that, no matter how dubious public opinion polls or how rigged elections are in Russia, a majority of the people still support Putin. In their eyes, that is sufficient to make the regime a democracy of sorts, and one more in line with Russian traditions than is the pluralistic Western model. According to Putin’s defenders, he is not hostile to pluralism as such but merely claims the right to choose a different model, equally imperfect but more suitable to Russia’s present circumstances. For precedents, they cite not only Peter the Great and Alexander Nevsky but also Franklin Roosevelt, who also fought the oligarchs of his time and, in addition, ran for a third (and fourth) term.

Another comparison, implicit in some sympathetic French commentaries, invokes the precedent of Charles de Gaulle. One of the most shocking features of Putin’s policies is his attempt to claim continuity with both the Czarist and the Soviet pasts. In a way, de Gaulle followed a similar approach in a France that traditionally had been divided between the heirs of the French Revolution and those of the *ancien régime*. De Gaulle belonged to the Bonapartist tradition, which wanted to

unify French history and to promote a nationalism that embraced *all* of France's past. Moreover, although France was no longer a great power, de Gaulle's great game was to pretend that she still was and to get her to punch above her military or economic weight in the Great Powers League. As we shall see, Putin has been trying to do something similar with Russia.

Unfortunately, however, there is also much else in Putin's dossier, and the overall verdict has to be much harsher. True, the case made by defenders of Putin's foreign policy, largely backed even by many liberal Russians who are critical of Putin's authoritarianism, should not be dismissed out of hand: After all the shocks that Russia has suffered—the loss of Eastern Europe, the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the great economic crisis of 1998, the huge increase in economic inequality through the enrichment of some and the impoverishment of most, the enlargement of NATO, the presence of U.S. troops in Central Asia, and the talk of Ukraine and Georgia joining NATO—it is only normal that there should be a reaction of resentment and a wish for reassertion now that conditions permit. But, his liberal defenders add, with time a more balanced attitude will emerge. The problem with this argument is that the evolution of Putin's policies is heading in the wrong direction. Rather than being a preparation for democracy or for a more realistic and constructive role in world affairs, it looks much more like a tendency toward greater authoritarianism at home and troublemaking abroad.

The first question I would like to consider concerns the link between the evolution of the Russian regime and changes in its attitude toward the outside world. Recent years have witnessed a spectacular hardening against the domestic opposition, the freedom of the press, and any democratic life inside Russia, as well as against Russia's former satellites and the West. There has also been an encouragement of nationalism, which initially took on a primarily ethnic character (directed particularly against people from the Caucasus), but has increasingly targeted the West. The most dangerous aspect of all this is the growing hostility toward Russia's neighbors—Estonia, Georgia, and other former members of the Soviet Union and even of the Warsaw Pact (such as Poland). This is especially worrying because, paradoxically, it is in dealing with its neighbors that Moscow's policy has been the least successful and has met the greatest resistance—much more than from either the Russian population or the West.

### **From Anarchy to Autocracy?**

Russia's progress toward democracy began going off the rails even before Putin came to power. Lilia Shevtsova dates the trouble from 1993, when Yeltsin ordered troops to fire on a rebellious parliament.<sup>3</sup> The crisis of democracy under Yeltsin culminated with his reelection

in 1996, which was manipulated by the oligarchs to give him a victory in spite of his disastrous standing in the opinion polls. This was an essential first step for Putin's subsequent ascension to power. Under Yeltsin, of course, some important elements of democracy existed that have vanished under Putin—above all, freedom of the media and wide-ranging public debate. But there was no equality and no real rule of law; privatization amounted to a seizure of public wealth by the oligarchs; the power and corruption of the Yeltsin family turned the pretense of democracy into a farce; and Moscow (though it had the power to start a war in Chechnya) was unable to collect taxes from many regions.

Early in Putin's presidency, there emerged some open signs of a further slide toward autocracy in the name of restoring the authority of the state (indicated by such slogans as "the dictatorship of the law"). But the predominant strategy sought to maintain the appearance of democracy while progressively emptying democratic institutions of their content. This kind of deception is an old art in Russia, whose most famous example is the Potemkin villages of the eighteenth century; various contemporary authors have coined new terms for the phenomenon more appropriate to the Putin era, speaking of "virtual" or "imitation" democracy. While under Gorbachev and Yeltsin a real attempt had been made to emulate Western democracy and to follow Western models and advice, under Putin the attempt at deception became ever more apparent.

A residual desire for respectability in the eyes of the West and the world is evident, however, in Putin's decision not to modify the constitution in order to run for a third term. Instead he has chosen to designate a virtual president for a virtual democracy, while keeping real power himself. Throughout his second term, one could observe an increasingly self-assured and provocative claim that Russia had come up with its own brand of "sovereign democracy," which was probably superior to Western-style liberal democracy and certainly more appropriate for Russian conditions. One can debate whether this term merely implies a rejection of Western interference and lecturing, or whether "sovereign" also means that this kind of democracy is based on the authority of the leader and the unity of the nation, to the exclusion of any real pluralism.

What is certain, however, is that key aspects of the new dispensation are strongly reminiscent of fascism. These include not only the elimination of any rival centers of power (whether economic, political, legal, or cultural), but also phenomena such as the "personality cult" of Putin, the appeals to proclaim him "leader of the nation," and the creation of youth organizations devoted to bullying the opposition and ethnic minorities and to helping the police. These trends seem increasingly to be influencing the Russian population at large. Two indications of this are the rise in xenophobia to a level comparable to that found among Germans in the years preceding Nazism,<sup>4</sup> and the growing public admiration for

Stalin, whose ranking as a leader is second only to that of Putin himself and contrasts sharply with the popular contempt toward Gorbachev and Yeltsin. Yet, according to the polls, while an increasing proportion of Russians (26 percent) believe that Russia should follow its own path in terms of government, a plurality (42 percent) are still in favor of liberal democracy.

### **From Joining the West to Blasting It**

Since Putin came to power, Russia has continually been moving away from democracy, and of late at an accelerating pace. By contrast, Moscow's foreign policies and Russian attitudes toward the outside world, in particular toward the West, have made a number of spectacular U-turns. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, attraction to the West, the urge to imitate it, and the hope of being welcomed and helped by it were predominant, as reflected in the stance of Yeltsin's foreign minister, Andrei Kozyrev. Toward the end of the Yeltsin period, however, Russian dissatisfaction with the West started to show, and Kozyrev was replaced by Yevgeny Primakov, who favored a policy oriented toward "multipolarity" and a greater emphasis on Asia. Another sign of the shift was Yeltsin's unhappiness with the NATO intervention in Kosovo. This led him into an intemperate outburst mentioning Russia's nuclear might, but ultimately did not prevent him from contributing to peace by pressuring Serbian dictator Slobodan Milošević to give in.

During the early years of Putin's presidency, Russian policies toward the United States were remarkably conciliatory. Putin's passive reaction to U.S. abandonment of the Anti-Ballistic-Missile Treaty, his immediate offer of support for the United States after 9/11, his cooperation against terrorism, and his acceptance (apparently against the objections of the Russian elite) of a U.S. military presence in Central Asia all contributed to what seemed to be a very positive relationship. This was the period when President George W. Bush looked into Putin's soul and famously declared that he could trust him.

After 2003, however, the relationship changed radically. Putin started to hurl the wildest accusations and insults against the West, charging that the Beslan atrocity had been engineered by those who always wanted to isolate Russia and to put it down, calling Western powers neocolonialists, and comparing the United States to Nazi Germany. Putin began to take the most intransigent diplomatic positions against U.S. initiatives on almost every subject (ranging from Kosovo to anti-missile systems in Eastern Europe), threatening escalation and retaliation.

What caused this shift? First of all, there was a change in what the Soviets used to call "the correlation of forces." This is best summed up by a formulation often used nowadays by Russian interlocutors: "Russia up, America down, and Europe out." Russia is up because of the price

of oil, America down due to the consequences of its Iraq adventure, and Europe out because of the defeat of the EU Constitution, the failure to get its act together on energy matters, and the influence of new member states (like Poland and the Baltic republics) that Russia considers both hostile and contemptible.

Second, by warning against external dangers and enemies, Putin helps to inspire a “fortress” mentality in Russia, and gives himself a pretext for branding any domestic opposition as treason and for calling upon everyone to rally behind the leader. But while the first reason explains what made the change possible and the second what makes it useful for the transition to autocracy, Russia’s foreign policy cannot be fully understood without taking into account the postimperial humiliation and resentment of the Russian people and the neoimperial ambition of its leaders.

### **Imperialism, Nationalism, and Autocracy**

Two quotations seem to me to sum up the role of these sentiments. The first was stated by Andrei Kozyrev, Russia’s most pro-Western foreign minister, in 1995: “Two things will kill the democratic experiment here—a major economic catastrophe and NATO enlargement.”<sup>5</sup> Both, of course, came to pass. So it was very easy to convince the Russian public that *both* were engineered by the West, that the advice of Western economic experts, like the admission of former Soviet allies into NATO, was part of a great conspiracy against Russia.

The second statement was made by Vladimir Putin himself a number of times, most conspicuously, if in condensed form, in May 2005 in Germany. The complete text, as quoted by the British historian Geoffrey Hosking, is as follows: “He who does not regret the break-up of the Soviet Union has no heart; he who wants to revive it in its previous form has no head.”<sup>6</sup>

Together these two statements point to the twin problems of resentment and revanchism on the part of postimperial powers, and to the effects of these passions upon the prospects for democracy. Zbigniew Brzezinski has suggested that it was in Russia’s interest to lose Ukraine, because Russia can either be an empire or a democracy, but it cannot be both.<sup>7</sup> With Ukraine, Russia is an empire; without Ukraine it is not an empire and thus can become a democracy. This may well be true in the long run, but in the short term losing an empire is not the most promising prelude to the task of building democracy. The Weimar syndrome inevitably comes to mind.

If you have lost an empire and not found a role, as Dean Acheson once said about Britain, what can you do? One solution, adopted in various ways by Germany, France, Britain, Austria, and Turkey, is to try to adapt to the new situation. You may do this by abandoning imperial

ambitions, or by trying to transfer them to a larger whole like Europe, or by becoming the junior partner of a bigger power, as Britain has done with the United States. On the other hand, one can try to recover one's past imperial position, a process that members of the permanent Russian

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elite such as Sergei Karaganov think is well under way. Dmitri Rogozin, a well-known nationalist leader and Russia's new ambassador to NATO, calls upon his fellow radical nationalists to join the government in helping Russia to "recover its status as a great power."<sup>8</sup>

A third possibility is simply to *pretend* that you still are (or again have become) a superpower. Here, virtual democracy and virtual empire go together. Just as Russia's leaders pretend that they are ruling over a

democracy, they also pretend that they are ruling over an empire.

Gorbachev, Yeltsin, and the whole Russian elite had been entertaining a somewhat analogous hope ever since the collapse of the Soviet Union. They thought that Russia's conversion to democracy would automatically earn it a kind of duopoly—the co-leadership of the West with the United States, and the co-leadership of Europe with the European Union (with a special sphere of influence over the former Soviet satellites). As Dmitri Trenin puts it, "What Russia craves is respect. It does not want to be a junior partner—it wants to be an equal."<sup>9</sup>

To some extent, Western leaders understood this craving and tried to satisfy it by such steps as inviting Russia to join the G-7 and creating the NATO-Russia Council. But Russians soon concluded that the West, instead of giving them the "instant accession to co-leadership" to which they felt entitled, was "trading symbolism for substance."<sup>10</sup> This gave rise to feelings of disappointment, suspicion, and resentment, which were exacerbated by the Russians' view that the United States and Europe, adding insult to injury, were adopting former Russian satellites and penetrating former Russian territory.

Today, thanks to his country's improved economic and strategic bargaining position, Putin has found a rather skillful way to make Russia's virtual empire seem more credible. It is to demonstrate that Russia (to borrow Madeleine Albright's expression about the United States) is "the indispensable nation," that it is a great power at least in a negative sense, inasmuch as it can block any Western strategy or diplomatic initiative with which it does not agree or on which it was not consulted. Sometimes opposing the West—or at least not following its lead—may be based on strategic considerations, such as competition for clients. But obstructionism seems to be a priority even when Moscow shares Western goals, such as avoiding an Iranian nuclear capacity. Indeed, in some

cases thwarting the West appears to become a goal in itself, as recent Russian policy toward Kosovo illustrates.

The same mindset is applied even more strongly to the weaker states surrounding Russia. Putin may not be able to reintegrate them into the Russian empire, but, as a second-best alternative, he can punish them for wanting to be independent. Above all, he seeks to prevent them from becoming models of democracy and prosperity that might be compared favorably to Russia. Ivan Krastev may exaggerate in stating that the 2004 Orange Revolution in Ukraine had the same effect on Russia as 9/11 had on the United States,<sup>11</sup> but it does seem that it really was a shock. Putin's highest priority is to oppose "color revolutions"—to keep them from succeeding where they have occurred, and to prevent one from coming to Russia.

### The Russians and the World

Two questions crucial to our subject remain to be answered: What has been the reaction of Russian society to Putin's policies, and what has been their global or international impact?

As regards the first question, the evidence seems to show that, while most Russians are aware of and condemn the regime's human rights violations, and in principle favor liberal democracy, they are also grateful to Putin for restoring Russia's international power and authority. As a researcher at the Levada Analytical Center, Russia's leading institute for the study of public opinion, writes: "Today, all categories of the population care about Russia recovering its power. As soon as a young man becomes conscious of his citizenship, the following idea emerges: The country is in bad shape, its authority in the world needs to be enhanced."<sup>12</sup> Indeed, in 2006, among those who regret the collapse of the USSR, 55 percent (as opposed to only 29 percent in 1990) cite as their main reason: "People no longer feel they belong to a great power." And those who regret the passing of the Soviet Union are not a small minority. In answer to the question, "Would you like the Soviet Union and the socialist system to be reestablished," 12 percent answer, "Yes, and I think it quite realistic"; 48 percent say, "Yes, but I think now it is unrealistic"; and only 31 percent say, "No, I would not."<sup>13</sup>

Russian sociologist Emil Pain speaks of a "revival of the imperialist syndrome." While, in principle, imperial sentiment should be an antidote to ethnic nationalism directed against non-Russian peoples from the former Soviet Union, Pain points out that the two are currently blended in a generalized xenophobia.<sup>14</sup> Gorbachev, in trying to save the Soviet system, opened the way to forces that overwhelmed it; is it possible that Putin, by encouraging radical nationalists, may similarly unleash forces that will go well beyond his intention and his capacity to control them? There are signs, albeit disputed ones, that he may already be more and

more isolated, that he has to arbitrate a severe fight between competing “clans,” and that he may experience “the impotence of omnipotence”<sup>15</sup> and be sidelined by his own appointees. While we cannot exclude the hypothesis that Russia (or China) will become a stable authoritarian or illiberal capitalist regime, it does seem more likely that in the long run both these countries will have to evolve either toward new forms of nationalistic fascism or toward some form of democracy.

Internationally, Putin is playing a skillful and (for the time being) successful game. He has effected a turn toward Asia in Russian foreign policy (not out of any Eurasian ideology, although he does play upon this strand of Russian public opinion). His motive is, first, to play the China card as a way of balancing the United States (as Nixon and Kissinger did to balance the Soviet Union). Putin knows full well that in the long run China constitutes a bigger danger to Russia than does the United States, but this approach offers him a way to invoke the virtual multipolar world to which China also pays lip service and to buttress Russia’s credentials as a virtual Asian power. More important, Russia and China jointly are able to use their indifference to human rights to block Western attempts to sanction rogue states, from Uzbekistan and Burma to Sudan and Zimbabwe, and instead to deal with these countries in purely economic and strategic terms.

In this, Russia and China are at one with almost all the countries of the global South, including India, for whom national sovereignty and noninterference in internal affairs trump democracy promotion and the defense of human rights. Russia and China thus put themselves in the position of balancers, mediators, or arbiters in a potential conflict between the North and the South, or between the United States and countries like Iran or North Korea.

One should not see this new situation as a universal confrontation between the democratic West and a coalition of totalitarians that includes everyone from Putin to Ahmadinejad and Bin Laden. It comes closer to the triangular configuration that prevailed between the two World Wars, though it is even more complicated. But one result is clear and obvious: The international struggle for democracy and human rights is made much more difficult by the existence of countries that are, at the same time, indispensable partners for the West (as Russia is for nuclear and energy matters), but also competitors and adversaries. If one adds to this the non-Western world’s quasi-universal distrust of the West, it is hard not to be pessimistic about the international prospects for democracy, at least in the near term.

But lack of optimism for the short run should not mean lack of commitment and faith. The French philosopher Henri Bergson put forward a thesis that seems to me as true as it is shocking: Liberal democracy is the least natural regime on earth.<sup>16</sup> What is natural is the rule of the strongest. Democracy can come into being only through an uphill struggle that requires courage and perseverance and that aims at a profound

change in attitudes and institutions. That is why I would like to dedicate this lecture to those who, in the most difficult situations, fight against the tide—in the first place, to the late Anna Politovskaya, but also to all those who, in Russia and countries with similar regimes, continue to write freely and truthfully about democracy and about autocracy.

## NOTES

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