

# JOURNAL OF DEMOCRACY

April 2007, Volume 18, Number 2 \$11.00



## **India's Unlikely Democracy**

*Sumit Ganguly* ■ *Rob Jenkins*

*Pratap Bhanu Mehta* ■ *Aseema Sinha*

## **Venezuela: Crowding Out the Opposition**

*Javier Corrales & Michael Penfold*

## **The 2006 Freedom House Survey**

*Arch Puddington*

---

*Saad Eddin Ibrahim* on Muslim Democracies

*Laurence Whitehead* on Closely Fought Elections

*Pamela Constable* on Afghanistan

*Herbert F. Weiss* on Elections in the DRC

*Srdjan Darmanović* on Montenegro's Independence

*Michael McFaul* on *Electing to Fight*

---

## **Another Russia?**

*Garry Kasparov* ■ *Leon Aron* ■ *Stephen Sestanovich*

## Another Russia?

# BATTLING KGB, INC.

Garry Kasparov

*Garry Kasparov, the world's highest-ranked chess player from 1986 until his retirement in 2005, is chairman of the United Civil Front, an interregional social movement in Russia. He played the leading role in organizing "The Other Russia," a coalition of political and social opposition groups that organized a major conference in Moscow preceding the July 2006 G-8 Summit in St. Petersburg. This essay is based on a talk that he gave at the National Endowment for Democracy on 12 January 2007. Comments were presented at that event by Leon Aron and Stephen Sestanovich. Their remarks appear in the pages that follow.*

For more than six years, the administration of President Vladimir Putin has deepened and darkened a political, economic, and moral crisis in my home nation of Russia. I would like to talk about the origins of this crisis, its nature, and its consequences—and how we are fighting to reverse it.

Back in 1999, mysterious explosions in Moscow and an illegal war in Chechnya turned a former KGB colonel into a presidential candidate. In each year of his presidency, Vladimir Putin has moved my country back towards the dark days of the police state that is still fresh in my memory.

After I appeared on a panel discussion on BBC television last year, on a show recorded in Moscow, a British viewer wrote in amazed at how freely we said things that, he said, would have led to our execution not long ago. This perception—that Russians are better off now and shouldn't complain—has been very harmful to the democratic cause. Between the end of the communist dictatorship and the crackdown under President Putin, there was a period of real democracy. It was brief and it was flawed, but it could have served as a foundation upon which to build.

Some will tell you that Putin's assault on democracy is a big shift from the Boris Yeltsin days, but actually it is a very logical progression. While Yeltsin established democratic institutions, he never uprooted the *nomenklatura*, the appointed bureaucrats who run the state. This

corrupt patronage proved immune to democratic reform. For a limited time this old system lived alongside the new one of elections and basic democratic rights. But this unnatural situation could not last for long. Yeltsin's successor had to choose one or the other, the veiled power of the bureaucracy or the transparency of democracy. It was obvious which would be chosen by a man of Putin's KGB background.

Russia's oligarchs today are themselves top state officials. Aristotle himself could not find a better definition of "oligarchy" than what we have in the Kremlin. Top Putin administration members chair some of the largest corporations in the country, such as Gazprom, Rosneft, and Transneft. You might wonder if Russian even has a term for "conflict of interest." First, Putin's bunch took justice into their own hands, and then they put the state coffers into their own pockets.

### A Kleptocratic Regime

This Kremlin's aims—and here is the point many miss—have nothing to do with the left or the right, or with any political ideology at all. Such considerations have been swept away under Putin. This regime is, and has always been, a kleptocracy. The only belief system that guides its leaders is the firm belief that they should all be very, very rich. To achieve these ends, the dictatorship of Alyaksandr Lukashenka in Belarus is victimized along with Mikhail Saakashvili's reformers in Georgia. This is not geopolitical paranoia, it is about making money. Today the Kremlin is a mafia-style operation. Force is the first option, and you negotiate only with those who are stronger.

In fact, there is a joke making the rounds today in Russia. German chancellor Angela Merkel calls Putin to ask him to negotiate with Lukashenka. "Maybe you can find common ground," she says. Putin's reply: "What's that?!"

Nor is the Putin regime a business in the way that the Soviet system made every company into a state company. Under Putin's system, the money flows only upwards through the *vertikal* of power. The skyrocketing price of oil and gas has poured billions of dollars into Russia, but little of it escapes the gravitational pull of the Kremlin's inner circle. The Russian GDP has multiplied many times over, but only a small percentage of the population is benefiting. The vast majority of the people who live outside the centers of Moscow and St. Petersburg are actually seeing their living standards decline. The political structure is so corrupt and corroded that there is no way to distribute money to the provinces, even if the Kremlin wished to do so.

Many observers in the West wishfully think that this is only an internal Russian problem. They say, first, that Putin is popular and that the Russian people have the leadership they deserve; and second, that a strong hand in the Kremlin is better for the rest of the world because it

means stability, even if it comes at the cost of human rights and democracy inside Russia. These are fallacies, and very dangerous fallacies.

Regarding Putin's popularity, you first have to stop making comparisons between Russia and other countries based on opinion polls and similar data. We only recently escaped the oppression of the all-seeing Soviet dictatorship, and our president was a KGB spy. When someone calls you at home and asks you what you think of the top man, what answer are you going to give? I am sure Saddam Hussein's approval rating was still polling at over 99 percent until the first U.S. tanks rolled into Baghdad! No, you cannot learn anything by asking about the president like that; you have to ask about his policies, about the direction of the country, and about how people view their situation. When you ask Russians about Chechnya—a word practically banished from Russian television—or how they feel about the future of the country, you get a very different picture. The pretty picture painted by the macroeconomic numbers is deceiving. Before comparing 2007 to 1998, remember that back then at the time of the financial default the price of a barrel of oil was US\$10. Today it is over \$50, recently down from \$70.

Away from the wealth of the big cities, times are hard. Even if we are generous and say that the energy boom has helped 15 percent of Russians, that still leaves more than a hundred million people out in the cold. These people do not deserve the Putin administration. They do not deserve to live without free media. They do not deserve to have their voting rights chopped away to nothing. They do not deserve to have their pensions looted while this Kremlin regime becomes the wealthiest ruling elite in history. Russia is a country of great literary and scientific accomplishments. It should not be our destiny to become another Saudi Arabia or Venezuela, to quite literally fuel the achievements of other nations while we lose ground. The Putin administration is selling off the future of Russia by the barrel.

Not only Russians lose, of course. The Kremlin recently played its shell game with Shell Oil in the Sakhalin deal. Under the cover of environmental regulations, the Kremlin forced Shell to sell its stake to Gazprom. But the money made there will not go to the nation. In this shell game it is impossible to tell which shell is Rosneft, Gazprom, or the Russian state. When the game is over, all three shells are empty, and the Russian people (along with the foreign investors, in this case) lose every time.

Even if a hundred million increasingly impoverished and unruly citizens in a nuclear Russia do not worry you, consider the international impact of Putin's policies. The myth of Russian stability has led many in the West to ignore what the Kremlin has been doing to maintain the only things it really cares about—the flow of cash and the oil prices needed to sustain that flow. The energy revenue that supports graft, propaganda, and repression is the only thing keeping Mr. Putin and his

friends in control, something of which they are all very much aware. This should lead us to wonder if they really have the West's best interests at heart when it comes to global stability.

Mr. Putin has had six years to make good on his assurances that he would help the West to bargain with the various hostile regimes he is so close to. He promised to help with the North Koreans, and now they have missiles capable of reaching the continental United States. As a result of endless negotiations with Russia, Iran is more belligerent than ever and is hurriedly enriching uranium. Meanwhile, Russia is selling advanced anti-aircraft-missile technology to Tehran. A few days after hostilities broke out between Israel and Lebanon, the Putin administration released its list of recognized national and international terrorist groups—the first time the list has been made public.

---

***The myth of Russian stability has led many in the West to ignore what the Kremlin has been doing to maintain the only things it really cares about—the flow of cash and the oil prices needed to sustain that flow.***

---

Strikingly, both Hamas and Hezbollah are missing. Every outbreak of violence pushes up the price of oil and puts more money into the bank accounts of Putin and his cronies. This is the friend of the West that recently chaired the G-8 (or G-7 by my count)?

The international instability encouraged by the Putin government is increasingly matched inside the Kremlin's walls. A mafia structure cannot easily bear uncertainty, and the turmoil is beginning to spill over. A dilemma is approaching for Putin and his associates. The president's term of office ends in 2008, and his efficient political machine is threatening to explode. Should Putin stay or should he go? The chaos that will surely occur if Putin leaves office is relatively easy to understand. Any mafia-like structure is based on the authority of the top man. If he leaves or appears weak, there is a bloody scramble for his position. Whoever wins that battle must then eliminate his rivals to consolidate his grip. Perhaps only 10 percent of the combatants will pay in blood or incarceration, but nobody knows who will be in that 10 percent.

The shockwaves of these battles have already become visible with the murders of Anna Politkovskaya in Moscow and Alexander Litvinenko in London. There is little to be gained from speculating about who exactly ordered these murders. But the system that encouraged the crimes, and the logic that made them politically expedient for some of those in power, reveal the true face of Putin's Russia.

The alternative is for Putin to stay, but the problem with this plan is that he is constitutionally prevented from staying in office beyond the end of his term in 2008. The real obstacle, of course, is not the constitution, which can easily be bent to the Kremlin's will. But after he has

made so many statements about his intent to step down in 2008, Mr. Putin would lose all his legitimacy in the West if he exercised this option. It is true that his regime has never shown much concern for the voices of America and Europe, but the money his associates have become so adept at squeezing from Russian assets resides almost entirely in Western banks. If the Russian government loses its veneer of legitimacy, these accounts and transactions could begin to receive unpleasant scrutiny.

## The Other Russia

This sounds like a depressing, even hopeless situation. Indeed, when I first entered the Russian political arena full time nearly two years ago, I had the feeling that I was sitting down to a chess game already in progress with my side facing checkmate in every variation. I realized that our first task as an opposition force was simply to survive, to get out the message that we existed, that we did not agree with those in power, and that we were fighting. With every television station and major newspaper under state control, this has been a very difficult task, as you might imagine.

The opposition—small political and nongovernmental groups each having its own quarrels with the government—was in disarray. Despite the numerous causes and ideologies represented, I became convinced that we needed to unite, to find common cause against the repression. The one thing we all had in common was the knowledge that democracy was our only salvation. Liberals, human rights activists, even the Communists—all now rely on the fact that the Russian people, given a choice in a fair election, will reject Putin's attempt to turn our country back into a totalitarian state.

To have a real impact, it was necessary for us to unite on the core issue: You are either working with the Kremlin or dedicated to dismantling the regime that Putin has created. We also needed to find a way to reach out beyond the Garden Ring, the wealthy center of Moscow. We needed an organization that would unify the opposition groups across the ideological divide, as well as develop our own nationwide network of activists. Under the banner of the United Civil Front (UCF), I traveled Russia from Vladivostok to Kaliningrad to spread our message, to talk about why the countryside was so poor and the elites so rich. And most importantly, I explained that it was not too late to come together to fight for our civil liberties and democracy, because only those things will improve the deteriorating standard of living.

In a way, the key step was taking a page out of the Kremlin's book: forming a nonideological movement. Forces from across the political spectrum came together. In the summer of 2006 we had enough momentum to go on the offensive, hosting "The Other Russia" conference in

Moscow in advance of the G-8 meeting in St. Petersburg. We knew we had achieved significant progress when the Putin administration made efforts to harass us at every turn. If this is truly a measure of success, I should be proud that my humble UCF offices were raided by security forces a few days prior to our December 16 march in Moscow. Despite being outnumbered four to one by police, thousands came out to express their peaceful support under our banners declaring that “We Do Not Agree.”

Clearly the regime is worried. As unfavorable as our own position may still be, my evaluation of our opponents’ forces indicates that they are not without their own weaknesses. Unlike the old Soviet regime, this ruling elite has a great deal at stake outside of Russia. Their fortunes are in banks, stock markets, real estate, and sports teams, mostly abroad. This means they are vulnerable to external pressure. They literally cannot afford the cutting of ties that would come with open hostility between an increasingly dictatorial Russia and the West. So far, however, it has been difficult to convince the so-called leaders of the free world (or the free press) to bring such pressure to bear. Thus the third element of my strategy has been to expose this hypocrisy in as many editorial pages as I can reach.

To further this mission, *The Other Russia*, in addition to its continued efforts at home, is working to establish a communications structure beyond the long reach of the Kremlin. We need to expose the daily crimes that are occurring and to get the story into the hands of the right people, like the people right here in this room. Our hundreds of activists on the ground in Russia are also in need of support. We are building a legal-defense fund to force the regime at least to follow its own laws, however draconian they may be.

We do not ask a great deal from the West: Only to end the fiction that Putin’s Russia is an equal member of the club of democratic nations. To stop providing Putin with democratic credentials, credentials that he uses against his critics in Russia. To stop pretending that a dialogue with Russia is taking place, when in reality there is no common language with this Kremlin regime. You cannot treat Putin’s police state according to the same rules as Germany or Canada. Otherwise, the Russian people could expect to enjoy the same rights and the same voice as Germans or Canadians, but we have neither. Together we can work to restore those rights and that voice.