

Executive Summary Backgrounder

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Advancing Freedom in Russia

Steven Groves

The current Moscow power establishment is leading Russia back in time. Instead of moving forward toward a nation that cherishes and protects freedom and democracy, the establishment is creating a state and body politic dominated by a new breed of oligarchic groups composed of security officers and their business allies.

The Russian media are no longer free and unrestricted. With the exception of a few minor showcase outlets and the Internet, the media are dominated by the Kremlin and its allies. The majority of political parties are under state control, and the activities of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) with foreign ties are under severe scrutiny. Russia is no longer a free nation.

A return to authoritarianism is not in the interests of the Russian people, their European neighbors, or the world in general. Regrettably, most efforts to protest the Kremlin's political hegemony are suppressed, sometimes violently. Political opponents and media critics of the Kremlin have been censored, intimidated, and at times beaten and even killed.

The Kremlin has created and fostered the growth of scores of nationalist groups to establish "street muscle" and protect itself against an Orange Revolution scenario. These include Nashi (ours), the main pro-Putin youth movement, which works to create the public perception of massive support for the current regime and at times takes to the streets to stifle opposition to Kremlin policy.

The Moscow leadership seems impervious to America's and Europe's pleas to foster democracy. While the U.S. and its allies wait for a more opportune time to reengage, they should consider refocusing their efforts on Russia's neighbors that are willing to democratize. Ultimately, the Russians themselves need to realize that they can benefit more by integrating into the West and developing democratic institutions that will preserve and protect their freedoms.

On the other hand, Washington cannot ignore Moscow. Too many pressing issues—from Iran and nuclear proliferation to arms control treaties and the future of conventional forces in Europe—are on the table. Even during the Soviet era, Washington and Moscow at times had a robust diplomatic engagement, despite viewing the world very differently. Today, many of those differences have diminished as Russia increasingly integrates itself into the global economy.

The U.S. and its allies should make clear to the Kremlin and the Russian people that the lack of freedom in the Soviet Union was a major cause of its

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collapse and that nostalgia for those bygone days is severely misguided.

What the U.S. Should Do. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, U.S. policy toward Russia has assumed a transition to democracy that has not happened and is unlikely to happen in the foreseeable future. While the U.S. government and pro-democracy NGOs should continue to work with the Russian government when possible to strengthen Russia's beleaguered civil society, U.S. policymakers should recognize that Russia has chosen a path that leads it away from true democracy.

Russia is unlikely to make significant democratic reforms in the short term, but the United States should continue to prepare for a time when the Russian people realize that a one-party state in which all power is consolidated in the executive branch is not in their best interests. To that end, the United States should:

- **Promote a diverse freedom agenda**, refocusing its efforts on strengthening the Russian NGO community in areas where the Kremlin has less of a pretext to interfere: enhancing economic freedom, supporting human rights, protecting press and academic freedoms, and promoting religious and ethnic tolerance.
- **Reorganize public diplomacy** to reach the Russian people, especially Russia's young people, more effectively through the Internet—the only means of mass communication not yet controlled by the Russian government.
- **Establish an international Victims of Communism Museum in Washington, D.C., and in Central Europe.** These museums would help to remind the world of the follies of Communism.
- **Expand student exchange programs.** Congress and the State Department should double the number of grants awarded through the Freedom Support Act to the Future Leaders Exchange (FLEX) Program.

- **Prioritize the strengthening of democratic institutions in the former Soviet republics.** The United States should make a long-term commitment to fund the development of democratic institutions in countries that are amenable to strengthening their young democracies, such as Ukraine, Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan.
- **Apply pressure to Russia through international organizations.** The United States should coordinate with U.S. allies in international bodies—e.g., the G-8, the Council of Europe, and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe—to examine Russia's performance in freedom, human rights, democracy, and the rule of law.

Conclusion. At present, proponents of freedom and democracy can only hope that the Kremlin's current restrictions on the media, NGOs, free speech, and freedom of expression will eventually lose legitimacy and stature in the eyes of the Russian people.

Hopefully, the Russian people will come to understand that their country will stagnate and decline without true freedom even while it remains a principal exporter of energy resources and other raw materials. Russia and its citizens deserve better than becoming a Saudi Arabia with a cold climate and nuclear weapons.

The United States should continue to engage Russia on issues of national importance such as energy and national security, but policymakers should openly acknowledge that Russia has chosen not to become a true democracy and is instead apparently satisfied with "sovereign democracy."

Although the United States should not turn its back on Russia, it should refocus its efforts to promote freedom and democracy on more fertile ground elsewhere in the world.

—Steven Groves is Bernard and Barbara Lomas Fellow in the Margaret Thatcher Center for Freedom, a division of the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for International Studies, at The Heritage Foundation.

Background

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A return to authoritarianism is not in the interests of the Russian people, their European neighbors, or the world in general. Regrettably, most efforts to protest the Kremlin's political hegemony are suppressed, sometimes violently. Political opponents and media critics of the Kremlin have been censored, intimidated, and at times beaten and even killed.

The Kremlin has created and fostered the growth of scores of nationalist groups to establish "street muscle" and protect itself against an Orange Revolution scenario. These include Nashi (ours), the main pro-Putin youth movement, which works to create the public perception of massive support for the current regime and at times takes to the streets to stifle opposition to Kremlin policy.

The Moscow leadership seems impervious to America's and Europe's pleas to foster democracy.

Talking Points

- Individual freedom and human rights in Russia have declined sharply over the past decade and at an accelerated pace under President Vladimir Putin.
- Russia's once-robust multiparty system has been transformed into a political monopoly under Putin's United Russia party, which controls the Duma.
- The Kremlin has silenced opposition voices by systematically taking over almost all Russian media. Journalists widely practice self-censorship due to widespread harassment and intimidation.
- The Kremlin has suppressed democratic opposition by cracking down on civil society organizations and by using nationalist groups such as the pro-Kremlin Nashi youth group. Several political opponents have been killed under mysterious circumstances.
- The United States should attempt to stem the decline of freedom in Russia by promoting a diverse freedom agenda, strengthening public diplomacy, expanding U.S.–Russia student exchanges, and bolstering democracy-promotion efforts in Ukraine, Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan.

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While the U.S. and its allies wait for a more opportune time to reengage, they should consider refocusing their efforts on Russia's neighbors that are willing to democratize. Ultimately, the Russians themselves need to realize that they can benefit more by integrating into the West and developing democratic institutions that will preserve and protect their freedoms.

On the other hand, Washington cannot ignore Moscow. Too many pressing issues—from Iran and nuclear proliferation to arms control treaties and the future of conventional forces in Europe—are on the table. Even during the Soviet era, Washington and Moscow at times had a robust diplomatic engagement, despite viewing the world very differently. Today, many of those differences have diminished as Russia increasingly integrates itself into the global economy.

The U.S. and its allies should make clear to the Kremlin and the Russian people that the lack of freedom in the Soviet Union was a major cause of its collapse and that nostalgia for those bygone days is severely misguided.

The Rise and Fall of Russian Democracy

In contrast to the Soviet Union, Russia took important steps during the 1990s to decentralize power and establish independent institutions that could balance the executive branch. The Russian constitution adopted in 1993 vested extraordinary authority in the president but balanced that authority somewhat by decentralizing power and placing institutional checks on the president. For example, while the president can dissolve the parliament (Duma) and call for new elections, the Duma can impeach the president and recall the government by a vote of no-confidence.¹

Under the 1993 constitution, Russia attained a certain level of political equilibrium during the 1990s. In 1994, Communist and nationalist members in the Duma held roughly the same number of seats as reform members, leaving approximately 100

centrist members as the swing voters.² Parliamentary elections in 1993 and 1995 were deemed generally free and fair and resulted in Dumas in which various political viewpoints were represented. Regrettably, the political equilibrium also resulted in a total deadlock at a time when an impoverished Russia desperately needed rapid reform.

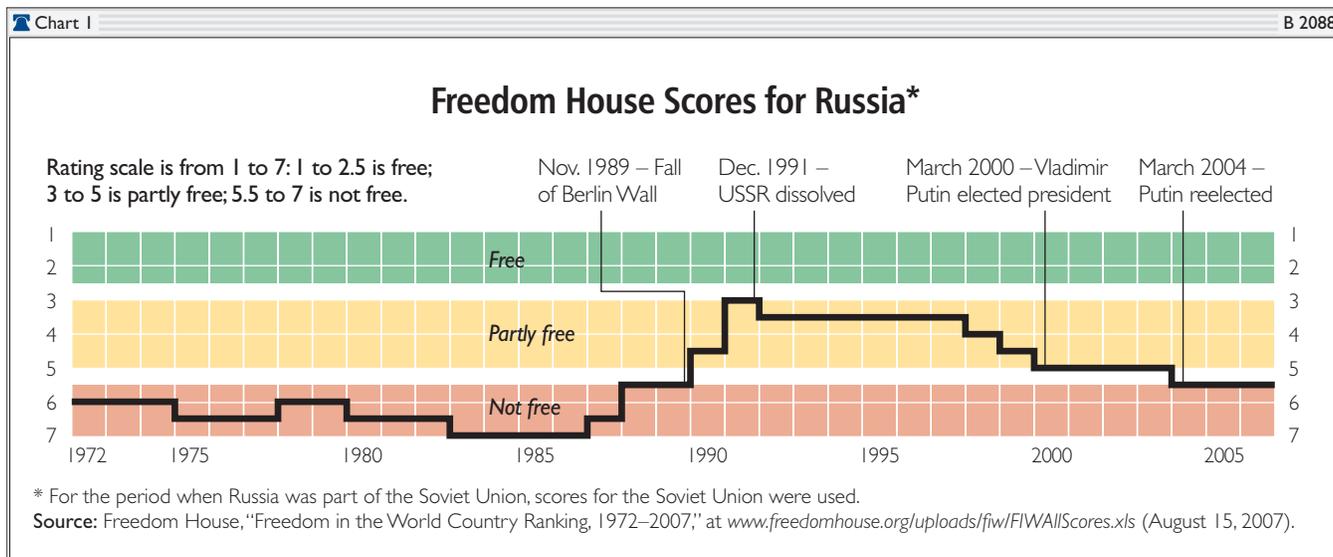
Since his election in 2000, President Vladimir Putin has systematically eroded the political balance once enjoyed by Russia's young democracy. Under Putin's watch, the Kremlin transformed a robust and often cacophonous multiparty system into an unchallenged monopoly, consolidating power under the United Russia party, which completely controls the Duma. Through a series of political maneuvers and new election laws, Putin and the Kremlin have established a new form of government that Putin's political architect Vladislav Surkov calls "sovereign democracy."

Despite the name, sovereign democracy appears to be a return to a neo-Soviet or quasi-Czarist form of government, reminiscent of the 1905–1917 era. Its characteristics include the presence of a single, dominant political party designed to hold power in perpetuity; consolidation of political power in the Kremlin at the expense of the federal legislature, federal judiciary, and regional and local governments; the lack of a clear constitutional order; and repeated violations of the constitution by the state.

Return of the One-Party State. In 1990, the Soviet Congress of People's Deputies repealed Article 6 of the Soviet Constitution, ending the Communist Party's monopoly on power³ and one-party rule in the Soviet Union. This opened the door for other political organizations to participate in elections. However, 17 years later, a dominant "party of power" has again emerged in Russia, the largest of the 15 former Soviet republics.

After Putin was elected president in March 2000 and the pro-Kremlin Unity party made major gains in the Duma, Putin and his allies set out to ensure

1. Constitution of the Russian Federation, 1993, at www.constitution.ru/en/10003000-01.htm (November 20, 2007), and Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 1994–1995* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1995), p. 481.
2. Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 1994–1995*, p. 480.
3. Graeme Gill and Roger D. Markwick, *Russia's Stillborn Democracy? From Gorbachev to Yeltsin* (Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 2000).



that future elections would be more predictable than prior contests. The ultimate goal was to secure power indefinitely for a new elite group of former KGB officers and others from Putin's inner circle.

The first step was to restrict participation in future elections by making it difficult to form political parties. Prior to Putin's presidency, a political party could register to compete in elections if it had over 100 registered members.⁴ In July 2001, Putin signed a new law that raised that number to 10,000 and required that the party have at least 100 members in each of Russia's 89 regions.⁵ Since 2006, the total membership requirement has increased to 50,000.

This law drastically limits the number of parties eligible to compete in Duma elections, effectively barring small single-issue parties and regional political organizations. Opposition parties, such as the Republican Party of Russia led by Vladimir Ryzhkov and Vladimir Lysenko, were completely banned, while other tiny parties loyal to the Kremlin

received a break from the authorities to overcome the barrier and split the opposition.⁶

Not satisfied with stifling new political parties, the Kremlin moved to consolidate two existing parties supported mostly by loyalist politicians to create a single, dominant party. By the end of Putin's first year in office, the pro-Kremlin Unity party had successfully absorbed the Fatherland–All Russia party, its bitter opponent during the 1999 parliamentary election.⁷ This merger created United Russia, a new party of power, which quickly ended the long-standing parliamentary power-sharing agreement with the Communist Party. In April 2002, the Communists were stripped of nearly all of their leadership posts in the Duma.⁸

By the 2003 parliamentary elections, Putin and his allies had prepared the ground for an election landslide. With Putin's popularity at record levels and high oil prices fueling a new prosperity, United Russia won over 300 seats in the 450-seat Duma.

4. Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 1996–1997* (Edison, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 1998), p. 423.

5. Law on Political Parties, Russian Federal Law No. 95-FZ, July 11, 2001, Art. 3, at www.democracy.ru/english/library/laws/parties_fz95_eng/index.html (November 20, 2007).

6. Luke Harding, "Supreme Court Ban on Liberal Party Wipes Out Opposition to Putin," *The Guardian*, March 24, 2007, at www.guardian.co.uk/russia/article/0,,2041825,00.html (November 20, 2007).

7. Henry E. Hale, "The Origins of United Russia and the Putin Presidency: The Role of Contingency in Party-System Development," *Demokratizatsiya*, Vol. 12, No. 2 (Spring 2004), at http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa3996/is_200404/ai_n9376577 (November 20, 2007).

8. Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2003* (Washington, D.C.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003), s.v. "Russia," at www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=22&year=2003&country=471 (November 20, 2007).

Many of the remaining seats were won by parties sympathetic to the Kremlin and Putin. The Kremlin also did everything in its power to keep the democrats divided. Liberal opposition parties, such as the center-left Yabloko party and center-right Union of Right Forces, failed to win 5 percent of the vote—the minimum threshold required to win proportional representation in the Duma. Indeed, evidence suggests that votes were undercounted to achieve that very result.⁹ Recent Russian elections have been criticized by election monitors from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), and the OSCE monitor group slated to observe the December 2007 Duma elections was forced to cancel its mission due to Russian noncooperation.

With two-thirds of the seats in the Duma, United Russia passed additional legislation to restrict political participation in the parliamentary elections scheduled for December 2007. The new legislation raised the minimum threshold from 5 percent to 7 percent.¹⁰ Other provisions prohibited the common practice among smaller parties of forming electoral blocs to reach the minimum threshold and prohibited Duma members from changing their party affiliations after an election.

Another law ended the practice of allowing voters to vote “against all” as a protest vote and ended the minimum voter participation requirement, preventing an election from being declared invalid because a majority voted “against all” or because voter turnout was too low.¹¹

Yet another law changed the entire Duma to proportional representation using party lists for the December election. Previously, 225 Duma members were elected from single-seat districts, and 225 were elected proportionally. Combined with the 7 per-

cent threshold, this effectively ends the smaller opposition parties’ chances of winning any seats.¹²

Furthermore, because of Russia’s size—an estimated 141 million people spread across 11 time zones, 89 regions, and more than 120 ethnic groups—eliminating all single-seat districts and electing the Duma solely by party list severely weakens the connection between voters and their representatives. Instead of Duma members being directly responsible to their voters, they will be primarily responsible to a handful of party leaders, most of whom reside inside Moscow’s Garden Ring or in the prestigious gated enclaves along the Rublevka highway.

Collectively, the new election laws cement the United Russia party as the “party of power” in the Duma for the foreseeable future. Indeed, Putin has already signaled that he may run at the head of the United Russia list in the next Duma elections and thus would almost certainly become Russia’s next prime minister.¹³ This would pave the way for Putin to serve a third, nonconsecutive term as president, which is permitted under the constitution.

Recentralization of Power in the Kremlin. Beginning in 1996, the Russian people directly elected their regional governors, who until then had been appointed by the Kremlin. In 1996, voters elected 48 of Russia’s 89 governors for the first time in Russian history. Russian voters accepted some of the Kremlin’s previous appointees, electing 20 of the 44 incumbents.¹⁴ The elected regional governors, no longer dependent on the Kremlin for their positions, naturally became more independent and less deferential to the president and Moscow.¹⁵ Formerly, federal bureaucracies from the tax authorities to secret services were partially accountable to regional elected governors.

9. Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2004* (Washington, D.C.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2004), s.v. “Russia,” at www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=363&year=2004&country=3013 (November 20, 2007).

10. Law on Elections of Deputies to the State Duma, Russian Federal Law No. 51-F3, May 18, 2005, and Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2006* (Washington, D.C.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006), s.v. “Russia,” at www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=363&year=2006&country=7044 (November 20, 2007).

11. Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2007* (Washington, D.C.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2007), s.v. “Russia,” at www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=22&year=2007&country=7258 (November 20, 2007).

12. *Ibid.*

13. Steven Gutterman, “Putin Signals Plan to Hold Onto Power,” Associated Press, October 1, 2007, at www.breitbart.com/article.php?id=D8S0GVNG0 (November 20, 2007).

14. Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 1996–1997*, p. 422.

This experiment with elected regional governors did not last. After his election in 2000, Putin moved quickly to restrict the relative independence that the governors had enjoyed for four years. In March 2000, the Kremlin suspended gubernatorial elections, claiming a need to improve the quality of the government and to fight graft and organized crime. Putin also pushed through legislation to remove the regional governors from their *ex officio* positions in the Federation Council (the upper house of the federal legislature) and to change tax policies, reducing the governors' economic power by redistributing the tax pie in favor of the central authorities in Moscow.

In addition, Putin created a new, extra-constitutional layer of bureaucracy over the regional governors by appointing seven envoys to preside over seven newly created "super-regions."¹⁶ This would be the equivalent of a U.S. President creating pro-consuls for the Northeast, the South, the Midwest, the West, and the West Coast regions of the United States without amending the U.S. Constitution.

Not surprisingly, many of the super-region envoys were KGB veterans or former generals, including Victor Cherkesov, a close Putin ally and then deputy director of the Federal Security Service (the domestic successor to the KGB); Georgy Poltavchenko, a former KGB officer and Putin ally from St. Petersburg; Konstantin Pulikovskiy, an army military general who fought in Chechnya; Viktor Kazantsev, a former military commander in the North Caucasus; and Oleg Safonov, an appointed envoy to the Far East.¹⁷

In September 2004, the Putin Administration used the Beslan school hostage tragedy as a pretext to implement the rest of its plan to reclaim the power to appoint regional governors.¹⁸ Sergei Mitrokhin, a Yabloko party leader, characterized Putin's plan as "the beginning of a constitutional coup d'etat" and "a step toward dictatorship."¹⁹ Although privately wary, the regional governors had little choice but to endorse Putin's reform publicly, even though it would drastically diminish their own autonomy and authority. The Duma readily gave its full support to the Kremlin's recentralization of power.²⁰

The Increasingly State-Controlled Russian Media

Television, newspapers, and radio stations in the Soviet Union were state-owned and heavily censored. During the *glasnost* (openness) reforms under Mikhail Gorbachev in the late 1980s and the Yeltsin administration's reforms in the 1990s, Russian mass media became freer and more independent, although not quite to the level of the press in the West. The law on the press and the 1993 constitution guarantee freedom for mass communication and, theoretically, banned censorship.²¹

In December 1994, President Yeltsin ordered the government to divest from the Ostankino Russian State Television (ORT) channel and signaled that Russia should abandon government control of the media. By 1995, over 150 independent radio and television companies (including national independent television stations NTV and TV6) were broadcasting in Russia, over 10,000 newspapers were in

15. See Mark Zlotnik, "Russia's Elected Governors: A Force to Be Reckoned With," *Demokratizatsiya*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (Spring 1997), at www.demokratizatsiya.org/Dem%20Archives/DEM%2005-02%20zlotnik.pdf (November 20, 2007).

16. Fiona Hill, "Governing Russia: Putin's Federal Dilemmas," Brookings Institution *New Europe Review*, January 2005, at www.brookings.edu/articles/2005/01russia_hill.aspx (November 20, 2007).

17. "The Making of a Neo-KGB State," *The Economist*, August 23, 2007, at www.economist.com/world/displaystory.cfm?story_id=9682621 (November 20, 2007); "Putin's Power Play," *Business Week*, international ed., June 5, 2000, at www.businessweek.com/2000/00_23/b3684202.htm (November 20, 2007); and BBC News, "Putin Seeks Power over Regions," June 15, 2000, at http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/world/monitoring/media_reports/771909.stm (November 20, 2007).

18. Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2005*, s.v. "Russia," at www.freedomhouse.org.

19. Peter Baker, "Putin Moves to Centralize Authority," *The Washington Post*, September 14, 2004, p. A1, at www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A17838-2004Sep13.html (November 20, 2007).

20. Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2006*, s.v. "Russia."

21. Constitution of the Russian Federation, Art. 29.

publication, and foreign cable and satellite channels were widely available.²²

While the Russian government was divesting from mass media, powerful financial groups and individuals—some friendly with the Kremlin, some not—were investing in and buying up major media outlets. These groups, especially those led by businessmen Boris Berezovsky and Vladimir Gusinsky, competed for political power and influence over Russian public opinion. Russian media became corrupt and overpoliticized. Television channels and print media competed in airing sensationalism, gore, and *kompromat* (compromising materials) about politicians and businessmen.

Matters came to a head during the 1999 Duma elections when the pro-Putin Berezovsky and the ORT engaged in a fierce media war against Gusinsky, whose NTV television supported former Prime Minister Evgeny Primakov and former Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov's Fatherland-All Russia party.²³ Gusinsky lost the media war, and his Media-MOST media group suffered for its opposition to the Second Chechen War, which began in summer 1999. The Kremlin targeted Gusinsky and Media-MOST with tax raids, embezzlement charges, and arrests.²⁴ Gazprom, the government-controlled gas monopoly and a Media-MOST shareholder, called in a \$700 million loan. As a result, Gazprom took control of NTV television in April 2001; fired the staff of *Itogi*, a weekly magazine owned by Media-MOST; and closed the *Sevodnya* newspaper. Gusinsky, who had fled the country in 2000 after being charged with fraud, was in no position to oppose the Kremlin's onslaught.

Berezovsky and his media empire fared no better than Gusinsky after Putin took office. Despite his aggressive support of Putin in the 1999 Duma elec-

tions, Berezovsky fell out of favor with the Kremlin for demanding too much political control. Berezovsky fled Russia in the face of alleged plots to murder him, and his media assets came under assault. For example, in September 2001, a Moscow court ordered the liquidation of TV6, in which Berezovsky was the majority shareholder. TV6 was ultimately closed down in connection with a suit filed by Lukoil, a massive oil company that was a minority shareholder in TV6.²⁵ The TV6 frequency was later awarded to a group of Kremlin insiders and renamed TVS, which was closed down in June 2003 and replaced with an all-sports channel.²⁶

Since June 2003, no independent, nationwide television network has operated in Russia. Russia's networks are controlled either directly by the government or by groups who support the Kremlin. Journalists are widely practicing self-censorship. Some prominent opposition voices have been silenced, fired, or murdered. Lists of people are prohibited from appearing on national television, including prominent politicians and critics.

Government control of the radio waves is the next likely step in the Kremlin's campaign to control all Russian media. Only Echo Moskv, a liberal station with an elite audience primarily in Moscow, is still uncensored, as are some Western radio stations such as Voice of America and the BBC, which are rebroadcast in a few locations.

However, the Kremlin has ordered most Western stations off the air. In the past year, Kremlin regulators have successfully forced over 60 local radio stations to stop broadcasting programs produced by Voice of America, Radio Liberty, and the BBC.²⁷

The state-owned Channel One network recently imposed a new, pro-Kremlin management team on the Russian News Service, Russia's largest indepen-

22. Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 1994–1995*, p. 482.

23. Floriana Fossato and Anna Kachkaeva, "Russian Media Empires V," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty *Special Report*, 1999, at www.rferl.org/specials/russia/media5 (November 20, 2007).

24. Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2000–2001* (Washington, D.C.: Transaction Publishers, 2001), p. 448.

25. BBC News, "Russian Media Fights Court Closure," November 28, 2001, at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/1681226.stm> (November 20, 2007).

26. Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2003*, s.v. "Russia."

27. Peter Finn, "Russia's Signal to Stations Is Clear: Cut U.S. Radio," *The Washington Post*, July 7, 2006, p. A1, at www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/07/06/AR2006070601760_pf.html (November 20, 2007).

dent radio network.²⁸ The management team issued a series of new directives that are eerily reminiscent of Soviet-era media practices:

- The United States is portrayed as “the enemy” on the network’s radio broadcasts,
- Political figures opposed to the Kremlin are not to be mentioned on the air, and
- All stations are required to adhere to a “50 percent positive rule” in which at least half of any reporting done on Russia must be “positive.”²⁹

A very few conventional media outlets and the Internet are the only remaining sources of uncensored information.

Suppression of Political Dissent

The Kremlin is clearly taking no chances in the “election” of Putin’s presidential successor. Consolidating United Russia’s power, ending direct elections for regional governors, and reestablishing control over Russia’s major media are apparently insufficient to guarantee the Kremlin’s continued dominance.

In what could be the ultimate act of suppressing political dissent, several political rivals of Russia’s current power structure have been mysteriously gunned down over the past several years.

- In April 2003, Sergei Yushenkov—a member of the Duma, a founder and co-chairman of the Liberal Russia Party supported by Berezovsky, and an advocate for democracy, free-market economic reform, and human rights—was shot and killed with a silenced weapon outside his Moscow home after registering his party for the December 2003 Duma elections.³⁰
- Vladimir Golovlev, a co-founder of Liberal Russia, was assassinated less than a year earlier.³¹
- Yuri Shchekochikhin, a crusading journalist who investigated high-level government corruption

for the independent *Novaya Gazeta*, died under suspicious circumstances in 2003 and is widely rumored to have been poisoned.

Nor are assassination attempts on Kremlin opponents apparently limited to Russian soil. Alexander Litvinenko, a former-KGB agent and vehement Putin critic, was murdered by polonium poisoning in London in 2006.

While these acts have never been definitively linked to the Kremlin, the pattern of dead Kremlin critics is a powerful tool in suppressing political dissent. The question is whether or not Putin’s Russia has returned full circle to its authoritarian, violent past. Assassination of political rivals has a long tradition in Russian history. Stalin’s agents famously murdered Leon Trotsky in Mexico City in 1940. Stepan Bandera, a Ukrainian separatist leader from World War II, was murdered in 1959 in Germany by a KGB assassin.

The Kremlin is also using intimidation to suppress political dissent. For example, the Yabloko Party came under attack in October 2003 when the office of one of its consultants was raided by Russian authorities. Yabloko was one of several liberal organizations and political parties supported by Mikhail Khodorkovsky, a Kremlin critic and former owner of Yukos oil company, who was arrested two days after the raid.³² Khodorkovsky, who advocated political reform and supported the creation of a parliamentary republic, has since been sentenced to eight years in a Siberian prison for tax evasion in what many Russian legal experts and human rights activists believe is a case of selective prosecution of a regime foe. Khodorkovsky’s case is on appeal to the European Court of Human Rights.

In addition to the wholesale intimidation and assassination of political opponents, the Kremlin has systematically suppressed mass dissent, cracking

28. Christopher Walker, “Muzzling the Media: The Return of Censorship in the Commonwealth of Independent States,” Freedom House, June 15, 2007, at www.freedomhouse.org/uploads/press_release/muzzlingthemedial_15june07.pdf (November 20, 2007).

29. Andrew E. Kramer, “50% Good News Is the Bad News in Russian Radio,” *The New York Times*, April 22, 2007, at www.nytimes.com/2007/04/22/world/europe/22russia.html (November 20, 2007).

30. BBC News, “Russian MP’s Death Sparks Storm,” April 18, 2003, at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/2958997.stm> (November 20, 2007).

31. BBC News, “Russian Deputy Shot Dead,” August 21, 2002, at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/2207022.stm> (November 20, 2007).

32. Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2004*, s.v. “Russia.”

down on pro-democracy civil society organizations and creating nationalist groups and movements such as Nashi, the pro-Kremlin “youth group” designed to provide public support for the current government and counter pro-democracy street demonstrations.

The “Putin Youth.” Arguably one of the most disturbing aspects of the Kremlin’s determination to suppress political dissent is its creation in 2005 of a veritable army of nationalist organizations, including Nashi. Nashi boasts over 100,000 members and operates in a manner that some have compared to the violent, paramilitary, heavily ideological youth movements formed in 1920s Germany prior to the Nazi takeover in 1933.

Nashi’s manifesto is based on the writings of Vladislav Surkov, Putin’s chief political adviser, and is defined by unwavering devotion to Putin, anti-Americanism, and anti-Western sentiment. New recruits watch propaganda films and receive basic military-style training, including learning how to field-strip AK-47s and Makarov pistols. In its formative stage, Nashi even conducted a book burning of “unpatriotic” publications.³³ Russian politicians or activists who disagree with Putin or his policies are immediately branded as “traitors” or “fascists” by Nashi. At Nashi functions, Putin’s political opponents (e.g., world chess champion grandmaster Garry Kasparov) have been depicted as lingerie-wearing prostitutes.³⁴

Nashi’s modus operandi is quick-reaction demonstrations in force, sometimes violent, to prevent political threats to the Kremlin, especially when the supposed threat comes from abroad. When the Estonian government relocated a Soviet war memorial

from the center of Tallinn to a nearby war cemetery over Russia’s objections, hundreds of Nashi members laid siege to the Estonian embassy in Moscow, spray painting its walls with graffiti, pelting the building with rocks, and blocking traffic without any interference from the Moscow police.³⁵ When Estonian Ambassador Marina Kaljurand called a press conference to demand more security at the embassy, Nashi members violently stormed the meeting.

Similarly, for six months after daring to appear at a conference organized by the opposition movement Other Russia, British Ambassador to Russia Anthony Brenton was hounded by Nashi members who blocked his car, harassed him while he was shopping, and posted his daily schedule on the Internet.³⁶

The Kremlin’s intent in creating Nashi is clear: preventing formation of a democratic movement in Russia like those that led to the Orange Revolution in Ukraine and the Rose Revolution in Georgia—revolutions that many in the Russian government and media believe were inspired and supported by the United States. With parliamentary elections in December 2007 and the presidential election in March 2008, the Kremlin is taking no chances that a grassroots democratic (or ultranationalist) movement will take hold and gain momentum.

To that end, Nashi was established in towns close to Moscow so that its members could quickly assemble in Red Square (or elsewhere) to support Putin and the Kremlin. Indeed, Nashi recently distributed 10,000 specially made SIM cards³⁷ to its members so that they could promptly report any democratic rally to the Kremlin and swiftly organize to put it down.³⁸

33. Edward Lucas, “Sex for the Motherland: Russian Youths Encouraged to Procreate at Camp,” *Daily Mail* (London), July 7, 2007, at www.dailymail.co.uk/pages/live/articles/news/news.html?in_article_id=471324&in_page_id=1770 (November 20, 2007).

34. Steven Lee Myers, “Youth Groups Created by Kremlin Serve Putin’s Cause,” *The New York Times*, July 8, 2007, at www.nytimes.com/2007/07/08/world/europe/08moscow.html (November 20, 2007), and Owen Matthews and Anna Nemtsova, “Putin’s Powerful Youth Guard,” *Newsweek International*, May 28, 2007.

35. Myers, “Youth Groups Created by Kremlin Serve Putin’s Cause.”

36. Mark Franchetti, “Putin’s Fanatical Youth Brigade Targets Britain,” *The Sunday Times*, September 2, 2007, at www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/europe/article2368176.ece (November 20, 2007).

37. A subscriber identity module (SIM) is an identity card that stores a person’s identity and phone number for use with any compatible cell phone. It also can store a large number of contacts. Kent German, “SIM Card Explained,” CNET, April 12, 2005, at http://reviews.cnet.com/4520-10166_7-6160666-1.html (November 24, 2007).

38. Matthews and Nemtsova, “Putin’s Powerful Youth Guard.”

Nashi's sometimes violent activities are neither hindered by the Russian police nor renounced by Putin or the Kremlin. To the contrary, Putin has embraced Nashi as "part of his team" and meets with its leadership at his summer residence in Zavidovo.³⁹ If the Russian people take to the streets in connection with the upcoming Duma and presidential elections, Nashi will surely be there.

Restrictions on Nongovernmental Organizations. The Kremlin has recently imposed a series of restrictions on Russia's community of civil society nongovernmental organizations. These organizations strengthen democratic institutions and promote political awareness with the purpose of creating better informed citizens, who in turn participate in politics and hold the Russian government accountable for its actions. Such groups are facing increasing difficulties in Russia.

Since Putin's election in 2000, the government has passed a series of laws that restrict NGO activities.⁴⁰ For example, in June 2002, the Duma, ostensibly concerned with radical Islamist propaganda, empowered the government to suspend the activities of NGOs with members who have been accused of "extremism," but it did not define "extremism."⁴¹ Putin himself made his personal views clear in a May 2004 state of the union speech, when he accused Russian NGOs of "receiving funding from influential foreign foundations and serving dubious groups and commercial interests."⁴² The Kremlin dealt another blow to the NGO community by arresting Khodorkovsky, one of Russia's major donors to NGOs and pro-democracy political parties, in October 2003.⁴³

The NGO crackdown began in earnest after the Orange Revolution propelled pro-democracy politicians to power in Ukraine in January 2005. Several months later, Putin announced a prohibition on foreign contributions to Russian political NGOs to block external interference in Russian affairs.⁴⁴

In January 2006, Putin signed into law new restrictions on NGO activities and membership.⁴⁵ For instance, an NGO will not be permitted to register if, in the opinion of the government, its "goals and objectives... create a threat to the sovereignty, political independence, territorial integrity, national unity, unique character, cultural heritage and national interests of the Russian Federation." The new law also allows government representatives to attend any NGO event, including private strategy sessions and board meetings, and prohibits individuals identified by the government as "undesirable" from founding, joining, or participating in NGO activities.⁴⁶

Such broad prohibitions arguably could be used to restrict any activity conducted by NGOs that advocates for press freedom, women's rights, ethnic minorities, or political participation. The government's power to attend the private meetings of an NGO and declare its members "undesirable" sends a clear message to Russian civil society not to run afoul of Kremlin policy.

To inject the government into the activities of Russian civil society, Putin established the Public Chamber in 2004 with the purported purpose of reviewing draft legislation and serving as a watchdog over the government, the media, and law enforcement. This organ has no precedent in inter-

39. Cathy Young, "Putin's Young 'Brownshirts,'" *The Boston Globe*, August 10, 2007, at www.boston.com/news/globe/editorial_opinion/oped/articles/2007/08/10/putins_young_brownshirts (November 20, 2007).

40. See National Endowment for Democracy, "The Backlash Against Democracy Assistance," June 8, 2006, at www.ned.org/publications/reports/backlash06.pdf (November 20, 2007).

41. See U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, *Challenge to Civil Society: Russia's Amended Law on Noncommercial Organizations*, March 2007, at www.uscirf.gov/reports/Russia_NGO_report_FINAL_March5.pdf (November 20, 2007).

42. Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2004*, s.v. "Russia."

43. Associated Press, "Oil Tycoon to Stay in Siberia Jail," CNN, September 28, 2007, at <http://edition.cnn.com/2007/WORLD/europe/09/28/russia.khodorkovsky.ap/index.html> (November 20, 2007).

44. Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2006*, s.v. "Russia."

45. Law on Political Parties.

46. International Center for Not-for-Profit Law, "On Introducing Amendments to Certain Legislative Acts of the Russian Federation," February 17, 2006, at www.icnl.org/knowledge/news/2006/01-19_Russia_NGO_Law_Analysis.pdf (November 20, 2007).

national practice. Under the procedures for setting up the Public Chamber, the Kremlin selected its first 42 members, who in turn selected a second set of 42 members from national Russian public associations. The combined 84 members then selected the final 42 members from regional and interregional public associations.⁴⁷

The creation of the Public Chamber misses the point entirely: Civil society and the individual NGOs that make up that society are supposed to be independent of the government, serving as a liaison between the government and the governed. A Kremlin-built organization created to supplant the NGO community is an oxymoron. Rather, the likely purpose of the Public Chamber is to supplant Russian civil society with a more government-friendly organization.

Rewriting the History of Stalin's Crimes and the Soviet Union

Most nations gloss over some of the embarrassing episodes in their histories. Historical revisionism is also common. In Russia, attitudes toward Stalin and his repressions have always been the litmus test—the watershed between freedom's supporters and its opponents. Today, some Russian officials and large percentages of the Russian people are not merely glossing over the same monstrous policies and practices of the Stalin era, but are instead embracing them.⁴⁸

The Kremlin uses history opportunistically. In the run-up to past parliamentary elections, when the Communist Party was still an electoral annoyance, if not a real threat, government-controlled television showed a flurry of films depicting Communist atrocities. Now the government is using its heavy hand to rewrite Soviet history and indoctrinate Russian schoolchildren.

Earlier this year, the Kremlin published two new manuals to serve as the basis for history and social

studies texts for the upcoming school year. The social studies manual depicts the United States as an imperialist country determined to create a global empire and describes the collapse of the Soviet Union as “the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century.” The history manual lauds Joseph Stalin, whose regime was responsible for the deaths of approximately 20 million Soviet citizens,⁴⁹ as “the most successful Soviet leader ever.” The history text also defends the Kremlin's interference in Ukraine's rigged 2004 presidential election, in which Putin publicly backed pro-Russia Viktor Yanukovich against the pro-Western democratic reformer Viktor Yushchenko, who was later mysteriously poisoned. The final chapter of the manual, entitled “Sovereign Democracy,” introduces Russian schoolchildren to the current elite's vision for their future.⁵⁰

Putin has defended the new texts, downplaying Stalin's purges and the incarceration and death of millions in the Gulag labor camps as “problematic pages” in Russian history. In an attempt to minimize the Great Purge of 1937 in which a million people were systematically murdered by Stalin's secret police, Putin compared it to the U.S. dropping an atomic bomb on Hiroshima, conveniently ignoring the fact that the United States was at war with Japan at the time and that bombing Hiroshima and Nagasaki actually saved lives on both sides by forcing Japan to surrender.

Historical revisionism apparently bore fruit even before release of the new school texts. A recent poll found that 54 percent of Russian youth ages 16–19 believed that Stalin was a “wise leader” who did “more good than bad.” Only 17 percent believed that Stalin was responsible for the execution and imprisonment of millions of people. A majority viewed the United States as a rival and an enemy and believed that the collapse of the Soviet Union was a tragedy.⁵¹ This historical blindness does not bode well for either Russia or U.S.–Russia relations.

47. Nikolai Petrov, “The Blessing and Curse of the Public Chamber,” *The Moscow Times*, July 25, 2005, p. 8, at www.themoscowtimes.com/stories/2005/07/25/007.html (November 20, 2007).

48. See Lionel Beehner, “Russia's Soviet Past Still Haunts Relations with West,” Council on Foreign Relations *Backgrounder*, June 29, 2007, at www.cfr.org/publication/13697 (November 20, 2007).

49. Simon Sebag Montefiore, *Stalin: The Court of the Red Tsar* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2003), p. 649.

50. Tony Halpin, “Textbooks Rewrite History to Fit Putin's Vision,” *The Times* (London), July 30, 2007, at www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/europe/article2163481.ece (November 20, 2007).

What the U.S. Should Do

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, U.S. policy toward Russia has been premised on a transition to democracy that has not happened and is unlikely to happen in the foreseeable future. While the U.S. government and pro-democracy NGOs should continue to work with the Russian government when possible to strengthen Russia's beleaguered civil society, U.S. policymakers should recognize that Russia has chosen a path that leads it away from true democracy.

Russia is unlikely to make significant democratic reforms in the short term, but the United States should continue to prepare for a time when the Russian people realize that a one-party state in which all power is consolidated in the executive branch is not in their best interests. To that end, the United States should:

- **Promote a diverse freedom agenda.** Russian political elites and (more disturbingly) the Russian people do not appear inclined to prioritize political pluralism, engage in robust policy debate, or dissent against Kremlin policies. Moreover, the Kremlin has successfully curtailed the activities of pro-democracy NGOs to prevent them from sparking an Orange Revolution in Russia.

While the United States should continue to fund democracy promoters such as the International Republican Institute and the National Democratic Institute, it should refocus in the near term on strengthening the Russian NGO community in areas where the Kremlin has less of a pretext to interfere: enhancing economic freedom, supporting human rights, protecting press and academic freedoms, and promoting religious and ethnic tolerance. Tens of thousands of NGOs are still active in Russia and constitute a wide community of activists who want to see their country freer and under less stringent political control.

- **Reorganize public diplomacy.** U.S. public diplomacy strategy toward Russia should candidly acknowledge that Russia has regrettably

chosen "sovereign democracy" over true democracy, distancing itself from the community of democratic nations. Mere statements of "disappointment" by the U.S. government have never been effective and are no longer sufficient. Reaching ordinary Russians has become more difficult in recent years because of a systematic crackdown on U.S. public diplomacy radio broadcasts.

The United States should therefore increase its efforts to reach the Russian people, especially Russia's young people, through the Internet—the only means of mass communication not yet controlled by the Russian government. Internet programming (e.g., video, social networking sites similar to MySpace or Facebook, and RSS news feeds) should target the average Russian. These Web products should include objective and unbiased information, analysis, commentary on events, and possibly even satirical portrayals of "sovereign democracy" produced and directed by Russians for Russians. They should also distribute video and audio clips of events and speeches that have been barred from Russian television and radio to remind ordinary Russians that their media outlets are reporting selectively. Interviews of former Soviet dissidents and documentaries detailing Communism's failures and Stalin's crimes should also be presented to counter the Kremlin's historical revisionism and reeducation efforts.

- **Establish an international Victims of Communism Museum in Washington, D.C., and in Central Europe.** Over 15 years passed between the fall of the Berlin Wall and the dedication of the Victims of Communism Memorial in Washington, D.C. Before another 15 years pass, the United States should establish an international Victims of Communism Museum located in Washington, D.C., with a sister institution in Eastern or Central Europe (e.g., in Prague, Warsaw, or Budapest)⁵² to remind the world of the follies of Communism.

51. Reuters, "Russian Youth: Stalin Good, Migrants Must Go: Poll," July 25, 2007, at www.reuters.com/article/worldNews/idUSL2559010520070725 (November 20, 2007).

52. Some prominent Russians have suggested building such a museum in Moscow, but this is probably politically impossible at present.

These museums would help to confront the contemporary elite's revisionist treatment of the Soviet Union and Stalin, honor the 100 million victims of Communism, and highlight the ongoing struggles of people currently living under despotic Communist regimes in China, North Korea, Cuba, and Vietnam. They should also include a robust on-line component in multiple languages, should support academic research on the crimes of Communism, and develop school curricula to keep the memory of victims and historic lessons alive.

- **Expand student exchange programs.** Foreign students who visit the United States for educational or cultural exchanges invariably return to their home countries with positive impressions of American citizens, freedom, and democracy. The United States should expose more young Russians to the experience of living in a free and open society by expanding exchanges of high school and university students.

To that end, Congress and the State Department should double the number of grants awarded through the Freedom Support Act to the Future Leaders Exchange (FLEX) Program, which coordinates youth exchanges between the United States and the former Soviet republics. The FLEX Program should emphasize recruitment of Russian students while continuing to support exchanges from other former Soviet republics.

- **Prioritize the strengthening of democratic institutions in the former Soviet republics.** The United States should prioritize expanding political, economic, and military ties with and support for freedom and democracy in those of Russia's neighbors that are receptive to the freedom agenda. The United States should make a long-term commitment to fund the development of democratic institutions in countries that are amenable to strengthening their young democracies, such as Ukraine, Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan. According to former U.S. National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski, Ukraine is a crucial model for Russia. Demo-

cratic development in Ukraine could be a harbinger of Russia's future.⁵³

- **Apply pressure to Russia through international organizations.** The United States should coordinate with U.S. allies in international bodies—e.g., the G-8, the Council of Europe, and the OSCE—to examine Russia's performance in freedom, human rights, democracy, and the rule of law. If feasible, these international bodies should enlist the cooperation of Russia's government and NGOs. Each body should establish a blue ribbon panel or commission to examine a particular aspect or problem, develop detailed recommendations, and work to the extent possible with the Russian government to improve Russia's performance.

Conclusion

At present, proponents of freedom and democracy can only hope that the Kremlin's current restrictions on the media, NGOs, free speech, and freedom of expression will eventually lose legitimacy and stature in the eyes of Russian people.

Hopefully, the Russian people will come to understand that their country will stagnate and decline without true freedom even while it remains a principal exporter of energy resources and other raw materials. Russia and its citizens deserve better than becoming a Saudi Arabia with a cold climate and nuclear weapons. The United States should continue to engage Russia on issues of national importance such as energy and national security, but policymakers should openly acknowledge that Russia has chosen not to become a true democracy and is apparently satisfied with "sovereign democracy."

Although the United States should not turn its back on Russia, it should refocus its efforts to promote freedom and democracy on more fertile ground elsewhere in the world.

—Steven Groves is Bernard and Barbara Lomas Fellow in the Margaret Thatcher Center for Freedom, a division of the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for International Studies, at The Heritage Foundation.

53. Ariel Cohen, "Elections in Ukraine: A Second Chance for the Orange Revolution?" Heritage Foundation *WebMemo* No. 1654, October 2, 2007, at www.heritage.org/Research/Europe/wm1654.cfm.