

## **Vladimir Putin President or Authoritarian Ruler?**

On December 31, 1999, Boris Yeltsin handed the Russian presidency over to Vladimir Putin. Along with the presidency, Putin received Yeltsin's vision for a democratic country. However, instead of following the road to democracy that Yeltsin had paved, Putin began to diverge from Yeltsin's course and take Russia in a new direction towards authoritarianism. Putin has accomplished the consolidation of power through state ownership of the media, state involvement in the oil industry, and an extension of executive power. Putin has distinguished himself as an authoritarian ruler of Russia not the president.

Upon first glance of Russia's government, it is clear why Putin has been labeled a president. The western definition of a president is a popularly elected head of state who is confined to a term limit and whose power is limited through a system of checks and balances.<sup>1</sup> Putin exemplifies this definition because he was popularly elected in each of his three elections, and the existence of a multiparty system in Russia still exists today. For example, in the 2012 presidential election, five parties were represented: United Russia, Just Russia, Communist Party of Russia, Liberal Democratic Party of Russia, and an Independent Party. A multiparty system provides political competition and helps

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<sup>1</sup> Merriam Webster, November 30, 2013, accessed November 30, 2013, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/president>.

deter the domination of a single party. In addition to political open mindedness, freedom of the press is widely promoted throughout Russia. Putin even allows criticism of himself to be published on his own website. Freedom of the press is one of the fundamental liberties for a free democratic society. Another key aspect for a free society is a free market economy. While Russia is not a completely free market economy, it is largely privatized. For instance, the prevailing industry in the Russian economy is oil and 57% of the oil industry is privately owned.<sup>2</sup> If an economy is restricted, it establishes a situation where civic freedom is substantially constrained. While these instances lead one to believe Russia is a free democratically governed country, it is merely how it appears on the surface. Upon closer examination, one can see the crippling effects of Putin's authoritarian regime on opposing political parties, other branches of the Russian government, the freedom of the press, and the Russian economy.

In order to understand why Putin can be classified as an authoritarian one must define an authoritarian. An authoritarian can be defined as a leader who has absolute control over a country or state through consolidation of power by limiting civic freedom.<sup>3</sup> Putin has accomplished this through diluting the power

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<sup>2</sup> Daniel Treisman, *The Return: Russia's Journey from Gorbachev to Medvedev* (New York: Free Press, 2012), 340-385.

<sup>3</sup> Merriam Webster, november 30, 2013, accessed november 30, 2013, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/authoritarian?show=0&t=1394825480>

of the Duma and Federal Council, while extending the influence of the executive branch. In 2001, Vladimir Putin founded the political party United Russia. This is significant because United Russia has become the most dominant political party in the Duma. The Duma election results illustrated the supremacy of United Russia; in the 2003 Duma election United Russia captured 38% of the seats, 2007 64% of the seats, and in 2011 49% of the seats. United Russia's control of the Duma, allows a pro Putin agenda to be promoted and this nullify the Duma's ability to preserve a democratic government.<sup>4</sup> In addition to the Duma, the Federal Council is the second governing body that makes up the legislative branch in Russia. Originally, the Federal Council was composed of democratically elected governors who ruled over the different regions of Russia. Putin reformed the Federal Council by dividing Russia into seven federal districts, governed by seven officials chosen by Putin.<sup>5</sup> Putin's ability to pick and chose elected officials in the Federal Council is not a characteristic of a free society and renders this legislative body ineffective. Furthermore, Putin is able to control the judicial branch because under the stipulations of the Russian Constitution the president is able to choose Supreme Court judges as well as the federal prosecutor.<sup>6</sup> In the 1993 Russian Constitution, Boris Yeltsin gave the executive branch more power

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<sup>4</sup> "Russian Federation Gossoudarstvennaya Duma (State Duma)." INTER-PARLIAMENTARY UNION. March 27, 2014. Accessed March 27, 2014.

[http://www.ipu.org/parline/reports/2263\\_E.htm](http://www.ipu.org/parline/reports/2263_E.htm).

<sup>5</sup> "Putin's Reforms." Seminar Russia. March 26, 2014. Accessed March 15, 2014.

[http://sitemaker.umich.edu/seminar.497.2010.russia/putin\\_s\\_reforms](http://sitemaker.umich.edu/seminar.497.2010.russia/putin_s_reforms).

<sup>6</sup> "Chapter 4. the President of the Russian Federation." The Constitution of the Russian Federation. March 15, 2014. Accessed March 15, 2014.

<http://www.constitution.ru/en/10003000-05.htm>.

than both the legislative and judicial branch, however a system of checks and balances akin to the US Constitution was included as well. The legislative branch was supposed to represent checks on executive power. However, Putin has abolished the system of checks and balances through his significant influence over the legislative and judicial branches. By weakening the power and influence of the legislative branch Putin has been able to extend the power of the executive branch.

Putin also exhibited authoritarian qualities when he discovered a loophole in the Russian Constitution. The Russian constitution stipulates that a president may only serve two consecutive terms. Putin had to give up the presidency in 2008, upon completion of his second consecutive terms. In order to maintain a firm grasp on the Russian government, he reached a deal with Dmitry Medvedev. Putin had agreed to support Medvedev in exchange for being named prime minister of Russia. It is very common for an authoritarian to refuse surrendering his power. Many people saw Medvedev as nothing more than a "puppet" for Putin. This has been substantiated because under Medvedev from 2008-2012, more legislation was passed to extend the power of the executive branch in Russia. For example, in 2008, the presidential term was extended from four to six years. More evidence to support Medvedev's puppet status was his voluntary withdrawal from the presidency in 2012 after only one term. The only logical reason for Medvedev's short stint as president was to act as a "stand in" for Putin, so after four years he could run for reelection and not violate the terms

of the constitution by serving three consecutive terms as president. Putin's appointment of Medvedev as the prime minister of Russia after his reelection in 2012, also confirms Medvedev's role in Putin's scheme to take advantage of a loophole in the Russian constitution. With the extension of the presidential term limit in 2008, Putin stands to be in office until 2024.<sup>7</sup> Thus Putin has the ability to have significant influence and power in Russia for a span of 24 years. In a democratic society, leaders do not find loopholes in the system to hold onto power, but they relinquish power after their term limit has expired in order to preserve the existence of a democracy. Putin's lengthy clutch of power proves that he is not interested in preserving democracy; his primary concern is retaining command of Russia.<sup>8</sup>

Putin has sought to expand his influence over other institutions as well. Freedom of the press allegedly exists in Russia today. However, one may ask how freedom of the press can exist when the three major television channels in Russia are owned by the state? The three major television channels in Russia are Rossiya, Channel 1, and NTV. The state owns Channel 1, and Gazprom, and a state run oil company, owns both Rossiya and NTV. This is significant, because the majority of Russians rely on the television for their news. If the state owns the news networks, then they can manipulate and control all information that is

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<sup>7</sup> Mike Sefanov, "Russian Presidential Term Extended to 6 Years," CNN Europe, December 22, 2008, accessed November 30, 2013,

<http://www.cnn.com/2008/WORLD/europe/12/30/russia.presidential.term.extension/>.

<sup>8</sup> Christian Neef and Mathias Schepp, "The Puppet President: Medvedev's Betrayal of Russian Democracy," INTERNATIONAL, October 4, 2011, accessed November 30, 2013, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/the-puppet-president-medvedev-s-betrayal-of-russian-democracy-a-789767.html>.

presented to the people of Russia—Not only can the government control what news is disseminated to the people, it can censor opposing political parties as well. In order to receive votes and support, political parties must advertise through television, the primary news medium for the Russian people. If certain political parties do not receive airtime, they will be prevented from running a successful campaign. The state regulation of television is a method used to eliminate opposing political parties without having to ban them from participation in government. Control of the media, specifically television in Russia, is an effective means for Putin to silence his opponents and promote his pro Putin agenda.<sup>9</sup>

Putin has been able to successfully regulate Russia's quasi-free market economy by cornering the oil market. In his book The Return, Daniel Treisman accurately describes Russia as a "petrocracy". Treisman argues that only around 37-43% of the oil industry is state owned, and that oil is fundamentally privatized. Treisman is correct in his assertion; however, the companies that the state owns determine the market power of the oil industry.<sup>10</sup> The major state-run oil companies are Gazprom, Transneft, and Rosneft. The state owns Gazprom, the largest extractor of natural gas in Russia, and the state has a monopoly on Rosneft, an oil and natural gas refinery, and Transneft, an oil and natural gas pipeline in Russia. Despite the oil industry being largely privatized,

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<sup>9</sup> Luke Harding, "Russian Tv Channels Come under State Control," Rense, October 17, 2009, accessed November 30, 2013, <http://renew.com/general88/russz.htm>.

<sup>10</sup> Treisman, 362-367,

the state controls the vital sources of production, refinement, and distribution of all of the oil and natural gas in Russia. This is significant, because Russia's primary industry is its production and exportation of oil and natural gas.<sup>11</sup> If the state controls the oil, then the state controls the economy at large. Russia's total GDP is \$2.555 trillion dollars and \$5.92 billion dollars make up its total revenue from exports. The oil and natural gas industry account for 75% of all Russian exports.<sup>12</sup> As a result the state ownership of these resources allows domination of the market, because it has the ability to determine all of the production and distribution of oil and natural gas. Putin's control over the oil industry signifies that he is in charge of the Russian economy. Putin's firm hold on the Russian economy drastically reduces the ability of the Russian people to pursue their own economic goals, significantly reducing civil liberties in Russia and extending executive power.

Putin also shows his authoritarian tendencies by quashing any serious political opposition. For example, in 2000, when Putin came to power, he gave the oligarchs an ultimatum. The oligarchs would be allowed to keep their money provided that they did not involve themselves in politics. The oligarchs had amassed vast fortunes under Boris Yeltsin and came to hold many influential positions in many prominent industries in Russia, but Putin refused to allow

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<sup>11</sup> Leon Aron, "The Political Economy of Russian Oil and Gas," American Enterprise Institute, May 29, 2013, accessed November 30, 2013, <http://www.aei.org/outlook/foreign-and-defense-policy/regional/europe/the-political-economy-of-russian-oil-and-gas/>.

<sup>12</sup> "The World Factbook," Central Intelligence Agency, November 13, 2013, accessed November 30, 2013, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/rs.html>.

them influence in his government. For instance, Mikhail Khordorkovsky made his wealth through the oil company Yukos. Yukos was one of the premiere petroleum companies in Russia until the company went bankrupt, and all of its assets were sold. Mikhail Khordorkovsky's critical comments of Putin led to the company's downfall. He did not heed Putin's warning and openly argued with him about corruption in the Putin government in 2003. In the same year, he was charged with tax evasion, and as a result, Yukos filed for bankruptcy.<sup>13</sup> In order to recover from its tax liability, Yukos was sold at auction to Rosneft, a state run refining company. Not only was Putin able to silence a political opponent in Khordorkovsky, he was able to sell one of the largest privately owned oil companies in Russia to the state-run company Rosneft.<sup>14</sup> As a result, Putin was able to accumulate more state ownership of the oil industry and increase his control over the Russian economy. In addition to Khordorkovsky, Boris Berezhevsky also felt the wrath of Putin. Berezhevsky made billions through his ownership of Channel 1 in Russia. However, like Khordokovsky, Berezhevsky was critical of Putin and his policies. In 2000, Berezhevsky was exiled to Britain and all of his Russian assets were seized. Even the mighty industrial heavyweights like the oligarchs, with their tremendous wealth and economic influence, could not undermine Putin and his extended executive power. Putin's

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<sup>13</sup> "Mikhail Khordorkovsky," *The Moscow Times*, November 30, 2013, accessed November 30, 2013,

[http://www.themoscowtimes.com/mt\\_profile/mikhail\\_khodorkovsky/433772.html](http://www.themoscowtimes.com/mt_profile/mikhail_khodorkovsky/433772.html).

<sup>14</sup> Peter Finn, "Putin: Sale of Yukos Unit Legal," *The Washington Post*, December 22, 2004, accessed November 30, 2013, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A16512-2004Dec21.html>.



authority has become unwavering, and anyone who attempts to undermine it will be crushed.<sup>15</sup> Putin has remarkable power, so much so that the oligarchs in Russia have become subservient to him.

In addition to the oligarchs, there has been a similar response to journalists who are critical of Putin. For example, journalists Yuri Shckekochikhun and Anna Politkovskaya, were highly critical of Putin up until their mysterious deaths. Yuri Shckekochikhun was an advocate against the FSB, Russia's security agency, claiming that they were responsible for the Moscow apartment bombings in 1999 and the mismanagement of the Moscow Theater crisis in 2002. Putin felt the impact of Yuri Shckekochikhun's journalism, because Putin was in command of the FSB. In 2003, Shckekochikhun died from a "mysterious illness"; however many speculated that he was poisoned in order to stop his anti-Putin journalism.<sup>16</sup> Similarly to Shckekochikhun, Anna Politkovskaya was a published author and journalist who strongly opposed Vladimir Putin. She discussed how Putin had created an authoritarian regime and had limited political freedoms in Russia. In 2006, Politkovskaya was found shot to death in her apartment building. Even though there was no direct evidence attributing both of these deaths to Vladimir Putin, it raised several

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<sup>15</sup> Ben Judah, "Confessions of an Oligarch," Mail Online, April 6, 2013, accessed November 30, 2013, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2304973/Confessions-oligarch-Shortly-mysterious-death-Boris-Berezovsky-revealed-amassed-2bn-fortune-ruthless-pillage-post-Soviet-Russia.html>.

<sup>16</sup> "Prosecutors Say Novaya Gazeta Journalist's Mysterious Death Was Not Murder," Reporters Without Borders, April 10, 2009, accessed November 30, 2013, <http://en.rsf.org/prosecutors-say-novaya-gazeta-10-04-2009,30806.html>.

questions and concerns.<sup>17</sup> The fact that two journalists, who were critical of the head of state, were killed leads one to believe that they were quieted in order to prevent any further anti Putin literature. Journalists were not the only people subject to “suspicious” deaths. In 2006, an ex KGB officer, Andre Litvenenko succumbed to poisoning in a London hospital.<sup>18</sup> Litvenenko was an outspoken critic of both Putin and the FSB. Polonium was used to poison Litvenenko and silence his opposition of Putin. It is significant because Litvenenko was living in London at the time of his death. This shows anti-Putin voices can be silenced even if they do not live within the confines of Russia.<sup>19</sup> The deaths of forthright anti Putin Russians indicate that while “freedom of the press” is believed to exist in Russia, there maybe serious consequences for speaking out against Putin and the Russian government.

Putin is an illusionist, because on the surface, Russia appears to be a democratically governed country with protected civil liberties. However, Russia’s multi party system, largely privatized economy, and freedom of the press are nothing more than a façade. Putin has successfully extended executive power by stripping the Duma of a portion of its power through changing its electoral processes. He has also discovered loopholes in the Russian constitution that have permitted him to evade the constitutional term limits for the

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<sup>17</sup> “Anna Politkovskaya, 1958-2006,” *The New York Times*, June 26, 2009, accessed November 30, 2013,

[http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/p/anna\\_politkovskaya/](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/p/anna_politkovskaya/).

<sup>18</sup> Yemane, Yonas. “Alexander Litvinenko's Poisoning.” March 15, 2011. Accessed November 30, 2013. <http://large.stanford.edu/courses/2011/ph241/yemane2/>.

<sup>19</sup> Treisman, 102-113.

presidency. In a country where the president is able to circumvent the constitution and restrict the power of other legislative bodies, one has to ponder if freedom truly exists? Putin has accumulated enough power to control almost every facet of the lives of the Russian people. Putin is in control of the government, the media, and the economy the three primary socio economic institutions in Russia. Furthermore, any anti-Putin discourse will not be tolerated and one has seen how outspoken Russian people have been jailed, exiled, or killed. When a person has to question their safety when criticizing the president or wonder whether or not the news they receive is reputable, the assumption is that there is a dearth of freedom in that country. Vladimir Putin has become the most powerful person in Russia and has successfully restricted the civil liberties of the Russian people, which confirms his status as an authoritarian.

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