

**MILLIONS OF OWNERS, NOT HUNDREDS OF MILLIONAIRES: AN
ANALYSIS OF THE MIDDLE CLASS AS A REQUISITE CONDITION FOR
DEMOCRACY IN CONTEMPORARY RUSSIA**

By Isaac Lichlyter

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Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College
The University of Mississippi

University, Mississippi

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Approved:

Adviser: Dr. Joshua First

2nd Reader: Dr. William Schenck

3rd Reader: Dr. Holly Reynolds

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ABSTRACT

ISAAC LICHLYTER: The Middle Class and Democracy in Contemporary Russia
(Under the Supervision of Joshua First)

Building on Lipset's modernization theory, this thesis makes the argument that a robust, independent middle class is vital for the long term sustenance of liberal democracy in Russia. Following a discussion of scholarly literature on what constitutes democracy and the middle class, a historical analysis compares and contrasts the trajectories of the middle class and democracy in Russia from the late-Soviet Era to the present. This thesis draws on public opinion polling, media reports (both Russian and foreign), and scholarly works to perform a mixed qualitative and quantitative analysis to show that middle class Russians provide the most reliable base of support for democracy and that it has been the weakness of the middle class which has left Russia vulnerable to an illiberal relapse. Moving forward, this suggests that promoting economic growth in the middle class is the best method to encourage democracy in Russia and that any brief forays in to democracy are unlikely to prove sustainable unless they are preceded or accompanied by a corresponding growth of the middle class.

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Introduction

Following the fall of communism in Russia in 1991, there was a general sense in the West that a genuine opportunity existed to transform Russia into a western-style country both economically and politically. The Russian Federation's constitution – ratified in 1993 – was designed to usher in a new era marked by a respect for the rule of law as a means of creating and preserving a liberal democratic form of government. Since then, many academics in both Russia and the West have worried about a gap between promises of civil freedoms and practical realities. Upon initial inspection, Russia possesses the institutions – popularly elected executive and legislative branches as well as an independent judiciary – to consolidate democracy. In just the last year however, troubling events have taken place including the perceived manipulation of both parliamentary and presidential elections, legislative crackdowns on protest movements, and increased restrictions on non-governmental organizations. This thesis proposes that one of the fundamental reasons the illiberalization of Russian politics has been and is still occurring is that no independent middle class exists which can effectively muster broad popular support in favor of liberal democracy.

Research Description

This thesis begins by synthesizing previous scholarship regarding democratization theory, characteristics of liberal democracy, and the middle class as a socio-economic and

political identity. Building upon this foundation, it draws on public opinion polling, media reports (both Russian and foreign), and scholarly works, to chart the history of liberal democracy as it has actually been realized in Russia since 1987. Although the thesis adheres to a somewhat narrative form at times, there is also an academic analysis of the data underlying my work.

My analysis is divided into four sections each representing a distinct time period. The interval from Gorbachev to the fall of the Soviet Union establishes a foundation for the succeeding chapters by describing the lack of both a middle class and liberal democracy during the waning days of the USSR. Incorporating Remington's notion of a property-less bourgeoisie, it explains how the controlled nature of the economy inhibited the development of a truly independent middle class resulting instead in a proto-middle class lacking the motivation and means to effectively push for political rights. The second stage charts the period from the ratification of the Russian Constitution in 1993 through mid-2001. I have labeled that period the age of the oligarch because of the emergence of a new economic elite during this period which used their wealth to exert considerable influence on the political process while simultaneously using the political process to protect their wealth and influence. The result was a stunted middle class stuck between the power hungry elites and economically marginalized lower stratum of society. Putin's campaign against the oligarchs as a class – exemplified in the prosecution of Yukos billionaire Mikhail Khodorkovsky in 2003 – constitutes the third time period. If the Yeltsin years represent illiberal governance due to the interference of economic elites in

politics, the Putin years swing towards the other extreme – a re-centralization of government control over economic elites and society as a whole. Dmitri Medvedev's four year stint as president and Putin's return to power earlier this year in an apparently managed transfer of power represents the final era. This time period is characterized by a more assertive middle class, manifested by the unprecedented protests of 2011 and 2012, which could potentially change the Russian political landscape if it continues to grow.

Background

The idea of a connection between the middle class and democracy in Russia is an outgrowth of an apparent contradiction in public opinion polling data. According to polls, most Russians simultaneously have a low opinion of the current state of Russian democracy and a favorable opinion of President Vladimir Putin.¹ Attempting to reconcile this apparent dichotomy leads to the potential explanation that Russians place a higher priority on some goal other than democracy. One probable candidate is economic well being, and in fact polling data shows that 75% of Russians believe a strong economy is more important than good democracy.² For comparison, in the U.S. that number is just 44% and drops to 37% in Great Britain and 27% in France.³ Such an attitude seems indicative of economic insecurity among non-middle class Russians which makes them

¹ Pew Research Center, "Views of Democracy", *Global Attitudes Project*, December 2011, <http://www.pewglobal.org/2011/12/05/chapter-1-views-of-democracy/> (accessed April 11, 2013); Levada Center, *Индексы одобрения деятельности Владимира Путина и Дмитрия Медведева*, [Approval Rating Index of Vladimir Putin and Dmitrii Medvedev], August 2012, <http://www.levada.ru/indeksy> (accessed April 13, 2013)

² Pew Research Center, "Public Opinion in Russia: What is more important, a good democracy or a strong economy?", *Global Attitudes Project*, 2012, <http://www.pewglobal.org/database/?indicator=48&survey=14&response=A%20strong%20economy&mode=table> (accessed April 11, 2013)

³ Pew Research Center, "Public Opinion in Russia," 2012

willing to tolerate a diminution of civic freedoms in exchange for economic stability. This leads to the premise that transforming such low-income citizens into an independent middle class is a key requisite for the establishment of a stable, liberal democracy.

My research seeks to follow the development of both democracy and a middle class in Russia from *perestroika* until the present and explore the gap between institutional promises and true, liberal democracy as both a political and socio-economic phenomenon. In particular, it looks for evidence of a link between a robust middle class and sustained democratic liberalism using the Russian Federation as a single case study. This approach is an application of Lipset's modernization theory – which will be discussed momentarily – which can be used to supplement M. Steven Fish's school of thought which posits that political institutions are central to a country's political situation – in this case the formation and consolidation of democracy.⁴ My research does not contest the well documented influence of institutions on national political outcomes. Instead, it seeks to expand the focus of democratization theory to account for the impact of the socio-economic makeup of a country on its institutions and resulting politics.

The significance of my thesis lies in its ability to potentially forecast the political trajectory of the Russian Federation as well as identify a factor which could alter that trajectory. Once the factors most pivotal to the health of liberal democracy have been identified, they can be observed and measured. These observations can then be used to more confidently predict emerging trends of Russian democracy. From an academic

⁴ M. Steven Fish, "Stronger Legislatures, Stronger Democracies," *Journal of Democracy* 17, no. 1 [2006]: 5

standpoint, this is useful in furthering a detailed understanding of democratic development in non-Western countries. From a political standpoint, an understanding of the root factors preventing the consolidation of democracy in Russia is critical for formulating effective policy proposals. The link between the middle class and democracy is also relevant to intelligence interests as it is intimately connected to forecasting the future of one of the largest geo-political powers. An inquiry into the true foundation of democracy in Russia is thus not only an academic exercise but also a relevant practical concern.

Concepts and Theories Explained

To set the stage for my research it is first necessary to explain several important concepts and theories from which my research will draw heavily. Perhaps the most fundamental term to be expounded upon is democracy. In his work *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, Joseph Schumpeter argues that democracy is a means of making political decisions in which the people themselves decide issues by choosing individuals – through free and fair electoral processes – to carry out their will.⁵ Significantly, this includes the ability to evict politicians who do not conform to the popular will.⁶ Political scientist John May has provided a related though slightly more expansive definition notable for its clarity and coherence. According to May, democracy is defined by responsive rule; or in other words a correspondence between the government's actions and the desires of the governed.⁷ There are auxiliary mechanisms

⁵ Joseph Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, 5th ed., [London: George, Allen & Unwin, 1976]

⁶ Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, 1976

⁷ John D. May, "Defining Democracy: A Bid for Coherence and Consensus," *Political Studies* 26, no. 1

which contribute to the administration and maintenance of democracy such as the extent of suffrage, but at its root democracy merely refers to governance in accordance with the will of the populace.⁸

Liberal democracy is related to democracy, but has several additional characteristics. Foweraker and Krznaric lay out a minimalist definition of liberal democracy as a system where there is competition among a plurality of parties for power through free and fair elections.⁹ But liberal democracy involves not only the responsiveness of a government to its citizenry, but also a certain expectation of civic freedom. Bollen defines the measure of liberal democracy as “the extent to which a political system allows political liberties and democratic rule.”¹⁰ Political liberties are subsequently defined as the extent to which “people of a country have the freedom to express a variety of political opinions in any media and the freedom to form or participate in any political group.”¹¹ In summary, liberal democracy consists of a society possessing a free media, unconstrained by undue government influence and multiple political parties that genuinely compete for control of the government in free elections untainted by tampering.

Defining the middle class is a somewhat more complex task. Approaches vary from economic to socio-political and everywhere in between. One popular conception of

[1978]: 1-14

⁸ John D. May, “Defining Democracy,” 1978

⁹ Joe Foweraker and Roman Krznaric, “Measuring Liberal Democratic Performance: an Empirical and Conceptual Critique,” *Political Studies* 48 [2000]

¹⁰ Kenneth Bollen, “Liberal Democracy: Validity and Method Factors in Cross-National Measures,” *American Journal of Political Science* 37, no. 4 [1993]: 1208

¹¹ *Ibid.*,

a middle-class individual in Russia is related to consumption – owning a car, a flat, and a dacha or country home.¹² A 2011 study by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences took an economic approach and defined the middle class as individuals who spend between 30 and 37.3% of their income on food.¹³ In a more in depth study of the American middle class, Blumin proposes 5 factors which distinguish the middle class: work, consumption, residential location, voluntary associations, and family organization.¹⁴ Ian Scott's analysis of the middle class in Zambia highlights the influential role of the middle class as members of “learned professions” also referred to as the managerial bourgeoisie.¹⁵ Applying these ideas to Russia, the middle class is currently distinguished economically by its spending a relatively lower percentage of its income on essentials such as food compared to lower income strata. This spending pattern leaves the middle class with a disposable income that allows it to purchase some consumer durables – a laptop, car, etc.¹⁶

The middle class though is not merely an economic concept. The middle quintile of income in a country does not naturally possess some mystical power over the formation and direction of governance in a society. Rather it is the personal independence a mid-level income allows individuals to achieve that is relevant to this investigation of Russian society. A relatively high level of income allows for individuals of the middle

¹² Suvi Salmenniemi, *Rethinking Class in Russia*, [Farnham: Ashgate, 2012]

¹³ Wang Hairong, “Defining the Middle Class,” *Beijing Review*, September 5, 2011, http://www.bjreview.com/quotes/txt/2011-09/05/content_387890.htm (accessed April 14, 2013)

¹⁴ Stuart Mack Blumin, *The Emergence of the Middle Class: Social Experience in the American City 1760-1900*, Cambridge University Press, 1989, 11

¹⁵ Ian Scott, “Middle Class Politics in Zambia,” *African Affairs* 77, no. 308 [1978]: 321

¹⁶ Hiroaki Hayashi. “Uniqueness of Russian Middle Class and Its Future.” *Journal of Comparative Economic Studies* 3, [2007]: 37-38

stratum to consider political issues on a more ideological basis rather than purely as a series of pragmatic economic questions.¹⁷ The confluence of the economic and socio-political nature of the middle class is best laid out by Alina Shakina in her analysis of the Russian middle class. She writes that “first, there is their economic independence. Second is their professionalism and the high self-esteem to which professionalism gives rise, their sense that they are important to their society. From this comes the third feature: their clear sense of civic duty. All this makes it possible for the middle class to perform stabilizing social functions, similar to those that in the human body are performed by the spine.”¹⁸

The position of the middle class is also unique in that it avoids the illiberal tendencies of both the elite and lower income strata of society. Its position in the middle means that it opposes systems of government predicated on the concentration of wealth among the few as well as the populist distribution of wealth to lower economic strata of society.¹⁹ The middle class also values democracy as a means of ensuring a fair application of the rule of law.²⁰ Instead of focusing on personal connections, the middle class seeks to focus on creating a legal framework to create a level playing field for society.²¹ As a result, an independent middle class has both the means and the unique

¹⁷ Abraham Maslow, “A Theory of Human Motivation,” *Psychological Review* 50, no. 4 [1943]: 370-96; Abraham Maslow, *Motivation and Personality*, [New York: Harper, 1954]

¹⁸ Alina Shankina, “The Middle Class in Russia,” *Russia Social Science Review* 45, no. 1 [2004]: 28

¹⁹ Brian Anderson, “Russia on the Verge of Democratic Reform,” In *Russian State and Society in Political Crisis*, translated by Dmitry Belanovsky, edited by Brian Anderson, Rebecca Baldrige, and Mikhail Dmitriev [Center for Strategic Research, 2012]

<http://www.hhs.se/SITE/Publications/Documents/Russian%20State%20and%20Society%20in%20Political%20D0%A1risis.pdf> (accessed April 14, 2013), 156

²⁰ Nezavisimaya Gazeta, “Mobilizing the Unmobilized,” *Current Digest of the Russian Press* 63, no. 20 [May 16, 2011]

²¹ *Ibid.*,

inclination to act as a check on the government – a concept which is central to my analysis.

An understanding of existing theories of democratization is a necessary prerequisite to an investigation of the practical inner-workings of Russian democracy. Perhaps the most basic divide in democratization theory is between the elite oriented approach of O'Donnell and Schmitter and the modernization approach of Lipset. O'Donnell and Schmitter – along with others such as Kaufman and Przeworski – argue that a schism among the ruling elites is the most likely cause of a transition from authoritarianism to democracy.²² Lipset on the other hand argues that there is a correlation between how economically developed a country was and how likely it is to support democracy.²³ In Lipset's view, economic development does not guarantee democracy, but strongly encourages an environment in which it could develop.²⁴ My analysis of democracy in Russia seeks to combine these two approaches. Elite agency may prove decisive as a catalyst for a transition to democracy, but economic development which supports the formation of a middle class can be considered a requisite for the consolidation of a stable, liberal democracy.

My thesis also addresses the more institutional theory of democratization embodied by M. Steven Fish's assertion that a country's particular political institutions –

²² Guillermo O'Donnell and Philippe Schmitter. “Tentative Conclusions about Uncertain Democracies,” in *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Prospects for Democracy*. [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986]

²³ Seymour Lipset. “Some Social Requisites of Democracy: Economic Development and Political Legitimacy.” *American Political Science Review* 53 [1959]

²⁴ Franziska Deutsch and Julian Wucherpfennig. “Modernization and Democracy: Theories and Evidence Revisited.” *Living Reviews in Democracy* 1 [2009]: 1-8

specifically an empowered legislature – are critical factors in the success or failure of democratization.²⁵ The statistical support for Fish's theory is convincing but at the end of the day fails to explain why specific countries choose to create a legislature with minimal power or one with substantial control of the government. It is this gap that my thesis seeks to fill. By examining the impact of socio-economic structures on politics it provides a supplementary explanation to Fish's purely institutional approach. In essence, while a weak legislature left Russia vulnerable to an authoritarian relapse, it was the weakness of the middle class that allowed for the consolidation of power in the executive rather than the legislature.

An analysis of the middle class's importance for democratization and democratic consolidation must also take into account the relationship between the middle class and civil society. Civil society, according to Gill and Markwick is composed of groups autonomous to the state who are able to project and defend the interests of their constituents against the state.²⁶ The critical components of this civil society are a public sphere in which it is acceptable to discuss and debate political issues, state recognition of autonomous groups and a reciprocal recognition by societal groups of the state's prerogative in certain areas.²⁷ Not all civil society is inherently political. Gill and Markwick differentiate between first order groups – groups organized around personal friendship or a shared hobby – second order groups – groups which actually represent interests which may or may not be political – and third order groups – specifically

²⁵ Fish, "Stronger Legislatures," 10-12

²⁶ Graeme Gill and Roger Markwick, *Russia's Stillborn Democracy? From Gorbachev to Yeltsin*, [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000], 6

²⁷ *Ibid.*,

politically oriented groups including political parties.²⁸ In the Soviet period, civil society was confined to first and second order groups which meant that the initial impetus for reform had to come from within the regime itself.²⁹ While the reforms eventually took on a life of their own, it is important to understand that the lack of a middle class impacted the course of *perestroika* by denying reformers a solid social base which supported democratization.

My analysis also incorporates the psychological theory developed by Abraham Maslow regarding humans' hierarchy of needs. To briefly summarize, Maslow divided all human needs into five basic categories: physiological, safety, love/belonging, esteem, and self-actualization.³⁰ The most basic of these categories is physiological and all the categories build on each other so that as a general rule a person must first feel safe as regards to their body, employment, and resources, before they prioritize development of their esteem and self-actualization.³¹ My thesis applies this theory to the socio-economic and political sphere by proposing that individuals are not inclined to concern themselves with issues of self actualization – civil freedoms and pluralistic political participation – until they feel secure in a personal and economic sense. The middle class as I have defined it meets this criterion of economic security which is why they have the potential to be such a force for liberal democracy.³²

²⁸ Ibid.,

²⁹ Ibid., 10-11

³⁰ Maslow, “A Theory of Human Motivation,” 1943

³¹ Maslow, *Motivation and Personality*, 1954

³² While elites also meet the criteria of enjoying economic security, I argue that their economic security is linked to a maintaining of the status quo in illiberal states which discourages them from acting as a force for liberal democracy. There are certainly exceptions to this rule, but as a general principle elites lack the middle class's affinity for democratization.

My approach to the question of the Russian experience with democracy is significantly influenced by the work of Stephen Kotkin, author of *Armageddon Averted*, Richard Sakwa, who wrote *Putin: Russia's Choice*, and Gordon Hahn, who has extensively studied the fall of the Soviet Union. To briefly summarize Kotkin, the political transition after the fall of the Soviet Union was not one to democracy, but rather a transfer of power between Russian elites.³³ There were efforts such as those by Chubais to break the power of the old system by expanding the pool of individuals with a stake in the political system,³⁴ and their ultimate failure left democracy without deep roots in society and made it vulnerable to exploitation by illiberal forces.³⁵ Instead of focusing on the socio-economic reasons for this lack of connection, Kotkin takes a more institutional approach and faults Russia's political institutions – specifically the Executive branch – for failing in this task.³⁶ Nevertheless, Kotkin recognizes the critical nature of rooting the state in organized social constituencies.

Hahn also finds that the transfer of power surrounding the fall of the Soviet Union was orchestrated from above by elites rather than from below by the masses.³⁷ According to Hahn, this type of transition differed from the situation in other post-Soviet including Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary where actors independent of the state negotiated the transfer of power.³⁸ Hahn blames a lack of organization and resources

³³ Stephen Kotkin, *Armageddon Averted* [Oxford University Press, 2001], 107

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 103-136

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 148

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 152, 170

³⁷ Gordon Hahn, *Russia's Revolution from Above, 1985-2000: Reform, Transition, and Revolution in the Fall of the Soviet Communist Regime*, [New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 2002], 2

³⁸ *Ibid.*,

among the popular movement to change for sidelining the forces of revolution from below leaving them to exploited by the bureaucrats and *nomenklatura* during the transition period.³⁹ Going further, Hahn argues that the top-down nature of Russia's transition is responsible for the currently stunted nature of Russia's democracy.⁴⁰

Sakwa is more focused on the specific details of Russia's political development since Putin's first appointment as president in 2000. While arguing that Russia in fact represents a country transitioning to democracy, Sakwa acknowledges the historic instability and vulnerability of those democratic ideals. Sakwa is most concerned with the measures which have reduced political pluralism in Russia to almost nothing. This includes heavy restrictions on political parties and non-governmental organizations.⁴¹ Perhaps most significantly, Sakwa mentions the emergence of a “state bourgeoisie” dependent on regime politics.⁴² This is not an independent middle class – a managerial bourgeoisie – but rather a social group which may exhibit some economic characteristics of middle class life while actually providing social support for an illiberal regime.⁴³

There has also been some previous investigation of the link between the middle class and democratic liberalization. To highlight just a few academic works informing this thesis: Ronald Glassman's pair of volumes – *The Middle Class and Democracy in Socio-Historical Perspectives* and *The New Middle Class and Democracy in Global*

³⁹ Ibid., 2-3

⁴⁰ Ibid., 4

⁴¹ Richard Sakwa, *Putin: Russia's Choice*, 2nd ed., [London: Routledge, 2008], 105

⁴² Ibid., 136

⁴³ As I explain in Chapter 2, employment by the state is a serious barrier to real economic independence as employees are in an inherently vulnerable position and face serious disincentives to openly opposing government policies including employment termination

Perspectives – use a historical analysis to further develop Lipset's argument that the middle class is important for democracy. Huber, Rueschemeyer, and Stephens's *The Impact of Economic Development on Democracy*, deals with the impact of economic development on democratization more broadly although their principles can be applied to the middle class. Finally, Leventoglu's “Social Mobility, the Middle Class, and Political Transitions” deals with outside factors affecting the middle class – specifically economic stability – to explain the conditions under which the middle class is most supportive of democratic transitions. The first two authors provide further theoretical support to the idea that economic development spurring the growth of a middle class is fortuitous for democratization while Leventoglu's idea spurred my examination of the factors which can mitigate or even eliminate support for democracy among ostensible members of the middle class. Instead of economic stability however, my analysis focuses on the significance of government employment in reducing middle-income Russians' support for liberal democracy.

My research addresses Kotkin's work by developing a supplementary explanation for the failure of liberal democracy to take root in post-Soviet Russia. While the particular institutions of the fledgling government – in particular the strong executive – did leave Russia vulnerable to illiberal governance, the impact of Russia's socio-economic structure should not be neglected. In this respect, my thesis is more aligned with Hahn's argument that the lack of social mobilization during the fall of the Soviet Union is responsible for the atrophied nature of Russian democracy today. This thesis

goes further however by suggesting that the lack of an independent middle class in particular bears special responsibility for the failure of democracy to mature in Russia. Regarding Sakwa's position, while Russia holds allegedly democratic elections I contend that the overall system of governance is illiberal at best and authoritarian at worst. I also heavily incorporate Sakwa's argument for a segment of the middle class dependent on the state to provide an explanation of why many Russians who self-identify as middle class nevertheless fail to support liberal democratic government.

Contribution of Research

Building off of public polling data that shows most Russians prefer economic security to good democracy,⁴⁴ I hypothesize that a key reason for the lack of democracy is the presence of an economically insecure, lower income population that significantly outnumbers the independent middle class. Much has been made among academics and politicians of Russians' desire for stability. Some have even gone as far as to suggest that the Russian mentality is predisposed to authoritarian rule.⁴⁵ However, this kind of analysis overlooks the impact of socio-economic class on the extent to which Russians are willing to exchange civil freedoms for guarantees of economic security. My research seeks to fill that gap.

My research is further differentiated from previous scholarship by its analysis of a

⁴⁴ Pew Research Center, "Public Opinion in Russia," 2012

⁴⁵ Peter Baker and Susan Glasser. *Kremlin Rising: Vladimir Putin's Russia and the End of Revolution*. New York: Scribner, 2005; Cheng Chen and Rudra Sil. "State Legitimacy and the (In)significance of Democracy in Post-Communist Russia." *Europe Asia Studies* 56, no. 3, [2004] 347-368; Aleksandr Lukin, "Electoral Democracy or Electoral Clanism? Russian Democratization and Theories of Transition," *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization* 7, no. 1 [Winter 1999]: 94-95

combination of socio-economic and political factors to explain the political development of Russia since *perestroika*. While other scholars have looked at the existence of a middle class in Russia – and many more have commented on the political evolution of Russia through the administrations of Gorbachev, Yeltsin, Putin, Medvedev, and now Putin again – there is a dearth of academic research examining the relationship between these two epiphenomena. That is not to say that my research seeks to prove that the middle class is the sole cause of liberal democracy. Rather, by showing how the lack of growth in the middle class has historically corresponded with a failure to develop liberal political practices, combined with polling data showing higher levels of support for liberal democracy among middle class Russians, my research adds another piece to the puzzle of understanding the many diverse factors which encourage or inhibit democratization.

Out of the Shadows: Russia's Proto-Middle Class under Gorbachev

“Democracy is the wholesome and pure air without which a socialist public organization cannot live a full-blooded life ~ Mikhail Gorbachev¹

This chapter examines the emergence of a proto-middle class after the initiation of *perestroika* by Gorbachev and the progression of this proto-middle class until the subsequent Yeltsin government. The absence of polling data broken down by economic class during this time period means there is no method of determining the level of support for democracy among the middle class relative to other social strata. This leaves a comparison of the state of the middle class and democracy during this time period as the best available method for supporting a link between the two. While the emerging proto-middle class composed primarily of technocrats represented a potential force for social and political change, that potential was never recognized. Instead, the lack of regulation surrounding *perestroika* and privatization was exploited by existing elites and opportunistic bureaucrats to legitimize their power. The resulting concentration of wealth among a small stratum of Russian society left the nascent middle class without the necessary economic base of support and as a consequence left the country vulnerable to an illiberal relapse.

Introduction

For most of the 20th Century, Russia as we know it was a member of the USSR.

¹ Mikhail Gorbachev, “Address to the 27th Party Congress,” given at the 27th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, February 25, 1986, <http://www.historyorb.com/russia/democratisation.php> (accessed April 18, 2013)

During this period, the Soviet system was conducive to neither democracy nor a middle class. As a result, until the *perestroika* reforms of Gorbachev authorized individual labor activities in 1986 and the formation of private economic cooperatives in 1987,² there was no real middle class bridging the divide between the *nomenklatura* elites and society at large. Throughout the Soviet period, there was heavy emphasis on the idea that the Communist Party represented the unified interests of the people.³ Such an ideology required the labeling of dissent as un-patriotic and resulted invariably with harsh repression.⁴ This principle of conformity extended also to civic organizations such as trade unions and even youth groups like the Pioneers – Russian boy scouts. Such a perspective naturally stifled public displays of political or societal pluralism.

In response to Gorbachev's reform of Soviet society, an entrepreneurial class began to emerge. This class – based primarily around technocrats as well as small businesses or cooperatives because the State still controlled the major industrial interest – can be thought of in terms of a proto-middle class.⁵ *Perestroika* also transformed non-middle class Russians. Soviet political elites⁶ became increasingly concerned as they observed the collapse of European communist governments in 1989.⁷ The progress of

² David Hoffman. *The Oligarchs: Wealth and Power in the New Russia*. [US: Public Affairs, 2011], 38-39

³ Glenn Curtis, "Social Structure and Social Stratification," *Russia: A Country Study* Washington: Government Printing Office, 1996. To be clear, people here refers to the working class proletariat. The government did not claim or seek to represent to interests of the bourgeoisie or intellectuals

⁴ Robert Sharlet, "Prague 1968: The Aftermath," *International Journal* 33, no. 4 [1978]: 763

⁵ Paul Gregory, *The Political Economy of Stalinism: Evidence from the Soviet Secret Archives*, [Cambridge University Press, 2004], 218-20; Philip Hanson, *The Rise and Fall of the Soviet Economy: An Economic History of the USSR from 1945*, [London: Longman, 2003]

⁶ Because of the fusion of the state and the economy, it could be argued that the distinction of "political" elites (versus economic elites) lacks real meaning since the *nomenklatura* typically had significant economic influence as well. However, I feel drawing this distinction now will prove useful when moving forward to discuss the relationship between economic and political elites during the 1990s

⁷ Fredo Arias-King, "Soviet Domestic Politics and Collapse of the Outer Empire, 1989,"

perestroika provoked two very different reactions within these social groups. While the proto-middle class was among the social groups supportive of continuing reform in an open, democratic manner⁸, political elites were divided between those who categorically opposed radical reform and those who sought to use the reform movement to their own advantage.⁹

When the dust settled on the collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of the Russian Federation, what remained was a still--weak middle class facing elites who had re-written the rules of the game and were prepared to take full advantage of the new system. The so called “triumph” of democracy was actually a power play by elites who stood to gain economically and politically.¹⁰ Also in the mix were Russians who simply wanted stability – both economic and political – and were willing to support whatever leader was willing to promise them that stability.¹¹

While the new Russian constitution formally established civil rights, elections, and democratic institutions, a large divide would soon emerge between these promises and the realities of the situation. There was no longer an official political party, but that did not mean political power had been equitably diffused throughout society. Without a middle class to defend them, these democratic institutions remained vulnerable to the

Demokratizatsiya: Post-Soviet Journal of Democratization 7, no. 2 [1999]: 289

⁸ Tatiana Zaslavskaja, "O strategii sotsial'nogo upravlenia perestroikoi". In *Inogo nye dano* edited by Yuri Afanasyev, [Moscow: Progress, 1988]

⁹ Perhaps the two clearest examples from opposite sides of the divide are Yegor Ligachev, representing the conservative wing of the CPSU, and Boris Yeltsin, representing the opportunistic reformer

¹⁰ Kotkin, *Armageddon Averted*, 107

¹¹ James Gallagher, “Battered Russians Long for Stability,” *Chicago Tribune*, March 14, 1993, http://articles.chicagotribune.com/1993-03-14/news/9303192110_1_boris-yeltsin-congress-speaker-ruslan-khasbulatov-central-government (accessed April 14, 2013); Natasha Tolstikova, “Mmm as a Phenomenon of the Russian Consumer Culture,” *European Advances in Consumer Research* 4 [1999]

power politics of demagogues like Yeltsin and the oligarchs. The end result was a political system more evocative of the country's Soviet or Tsarist legacy than a true liberal democracy.¹²

The Soviet Union and a Proto-Middle Class

When Gorbachev was elected General Secretary of the Central Committee, Soviet society could be broken down into three categories: elites, blue collar workers and peasants, and the more liberal middle stratum.¹³ Elites in this context refers to not just the political elites of the Communist party – commonly known as the *nomenklatura* – but also managers of state factories and other enterprises. While such elites would almost certainly have been party members, they were more administrators of policy than central policy makers. In addition to prototypical members of the creative intelligentsia, the middle stratum contained technocrats also known as the technical intelligentsia – economists, engineers, and sociologists for example – who operated within the state sphere but possessed independently valuable education and skills.¹⁴ Regarding the general priorities of the various social classes, Zaslavskaja argues that the elites as might be expected were concerned with consolidating their power while workers and peasants were predominantly interested in matters of basic economic survival and living

¹² Kotkin, *Armageddon Averted*, 151

¹³ Tatiana Zaslavskaja, “Contemporary Russian Society: Problems and Prospects,” *Sociological Research* 45, no. 4 [2006]: 27; Such a reality aligns at the lower end of the spectrum with Maslow's hierarchy of needs and at the upper end with the assumption that those in power generally want to maintain that power (for reasons of status, ego, standard of living, etc.)

¹⁴ Thomas Remington, “The Russian Middle Class as Policy Objective,” *National Council for Eurasian and East European Research*, December 14, 2010, http://www.ucis.pitt.edu/nceer/2010_825-06_Remington.pdf (accessed April 13, 2013), 14

conditions.¹⁵ Although the intelligentsia and technocrats represented a sort of societal median, based on the previous definition they cannot be considered a true middle class for two reasons: their lack of participation in civil society, and their continued connection to state institutions of power.

The influence of the technocrats is especially relevant to understanding the emergence of a so-called middle class during the late Soviet Union.¹⁶ As noted before, the initial impetus for reform in the late Soviet period did not originate in the working classes.¹⁷ Instead, this openness to reform came from technocrats who can be distinguished from bureaucrats based on their personal background and professional purpose. While both technocrats and bureaucrats were subservient to the state, bureaucrats for the purposes of this paper are rank and file government workers who may be educated but who are not being utilized for their technical expertise.¹⁸ Technocrats on the other hand hold university degrees in economics, engineering or some other applied science and typically have work experience outside of the state organs.¹⁹ These differing backgrounds can lead to differing roles as bureaucrats may be tasked with simply

¹⁵ Zaslavskaja, "Contemporary Russian Society," 2006

¹⁶ By referring to the middle class here as a "so-called" middle class, I am attempting to underline the existing debate over whether it did in fact represent a true middle class or a proto-middle class, or even no distinct class at all

¹⁷ Jiri Pehe, "The New, and Democratizing, Soviet Middle Class," *New York Times*, May 25, 1987, <http://www.nytimes.com/1987/05/25/opinion/the-new-and-democratizing-soviet-middle-class.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm> (accessed April 13, 2013); While this may seem an unnecessary point, since I refer to middle-class based democracy as democracy from below I felt it necessary to clarify that this grassroots democracy is not generated by just any of the lower social strata

¹⁸ Xiaowei Zang, "The Fourteenth Central Committee of the CCP: Technocracy or Political Technocracy?" *Asian Survey* 33, no. 8 [1993]: 788

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 788; While this definition is not specific to the Soviet Union (in fact Soviet universities did not offer degrees in finance), I think it provides a useful frame of reference for grasping the distinction between technocrats and bureaucrats

implementing the official government policy²⁰ while technocrats are more involved in coming up with policy solutions which can create a positive outcome for society.²¹

A relatively high level of income allowed individuals of the middle stratum to consider political issues on a more ideological basis rather than purely as a series of pragmatic economic questions.²² Not only were technocrats empowered by their relatively high income level, their access to computers, other communication technology, and travel opportunities made them inherently more difficult to control than blue collar workers.²³ Their openness to new ideas led members of the middle stratum to make demands on the regime to improve their quality of life – access to information, travel, and consumer goods for example – based on their observations and experiences of other countries,²⁴ While these demands were not explicitly political to begin with, their very existence represented a significant step in the development of civil society.

At the same time, prior to the legalization of individual economic activity the state maintained a total monopoly over legitimate economic production. Private co-operatives – economic endeavors organized by groups of private citizens – were legalized in May 1987 opening a window for private ownership as Russians opened their own cooperatives in industries as diverse as electronics repair and agriculture.²⁵ However, by 1991 the total output of private cooperatives represented only 0.8% percent of total production in the

²⁰ Grace Franklin and Randall Ripley. *Bureaucracy and Policy Implementation* [Dorsey Press, 1982], 45

²¹ Thomas Harrington, “Technocrats,” *CommonDreams.org*, December 5, 2011, <https://www.commondreams.org/view/2011/12/05-6> (accessed April 14, 2013)

²² Maslow, “A Theory of Human Motivation,” 1943; Maslow, *Motivation and Personality*, 1954

²³ Pehe, “The New, and Democratizing, Soviet Middle Class,” 1987

²⁴ *Ibid.*,

²⁵ Stephen Kotkin. *Steeltown, USSR* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991], 25

USSR.²⁶ The natural consequence was that all members of society – even middle income citizens – were dependent on the state for their continuing economic well being.²⁷ To a significant extent, dependence on the state reduced motivation for public opposition to the continuing existence of the state itself. As Thomas Remington states in his book, *The Politics of Inequality in Russia*, “[a] property-less bourgeoisie may be more likely to seek the state's protection than demanding political rights as guarantees of property rights.”²⁸ The existence of a true, independent middle class was thus highly unlikely under the Soviet system. At best, we can say that a proto-middle class existed, which set the stage for the emergence of a new middle class after the fall of the USSR.

Repression of Democracy and Civil Society

The relationship between the state and society in Soviet Russia prior to Gorbachev repressed the emergence of democracy or civil society to a substantial degree. The primary reason for this was the one-party system of authoritarian rule. As Huntington has observed, single-party authoritarian regimes often fuse the ideology of the party to the ideology of the state.²⁹ The result is that attacks on the party – whether on ideological or merely practical grounds – are viewed and treated as treason against the state.³⁰ In the case of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, the party presented itself as the very

²⁶ T. Kuznetsova, “Cooperatives: The Tactic Determines the Practice,” *Problems of Economics* 32, no. 8 [1989]: 41

²⁷ To be fair, all citizens of a state are to some extent dependent on it for their economic well being. A sound fiscal policy and fair property law are two examples of this phenomenon. However, such dependence is different than a direct dependence on the state for continued employment which was the case in the centrally planned and controlled economy of the Soviet Union.

²⁸ Thomas Remington. *The Politics of Inequality in Russia*, [Atlanta: Emory University, 2011], 190

²⁹ Samuel Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late 20th Century*, [University of Oklahoma Press, 1991]

³⁰ Huntington, *The Third Wave*, 1991

embodiment of the state.³¹ As such, any action that created fissures in the facade of this united front was severely dealt with.³²

It is important to note, however, that such a state of affairs did not completely eliminate dissent against the governing regime. In fact, at various times during the Soviet period a robust industry of *samizdat* – illegal, self published materials – flourished, often devoting its attention to criticisms of state and society.³³ However, the illegal nature of such activities inhibited the development of a public dialogue regarding politics, economics, and society. Only after Gorbachev initiated his policy of *glasnost* and Russians began to accept that it was not merely a ploy to identify enemies of the regime did this type of discussion move out into the open. Understanding this point is critical because this type of pluralistic, public political dialogue is a key symptom of a healthy middle class that is actively engaged in the political and social development of the country. Its absence then supports the contention that Russia at the beginning of Gorbachev's term lacked a true middle class.

³¹ Soviet Constitution of 1977, art. 6, http://www.servat.unibe.ch/icl/r100000_.html (accessed April 11, 2013),

³² For example, not only were independent political candidates unheard of, independent trade unions were also disallowed; (Sarah Ashwin and Simon Clarke. *Russian Trade Unions and Industrial Relations in Transition*, New York: Palgrave, 2002, 3; Martin Hill, “The War on Labor Unions is a War on All of Us,” Opensalon.com blog, entry posted February 24, 2011, http://open.salon.com/blog/martinhill/2011/02/24/the_war_on_labor_unions_is_a_war_on_all_of_us (accessed April 14, 2013)). Even publicizing local food shortages was punished as seditious activity because it undermined the image of the Communist Party as the party of the people (Herman Ermolaev, *Censorship in Soviet Literature (1917-1991)*, [Boston: Rowman & Littlefield, 1997], 78; National Intelligence Council Memorandum, “Dimensions of Civil Unrest in the Soviet Union,” April 1983, http://www.foia.cia.gov/docs/DOC_0000273394/DOC_0000273394.pdf (accessed April 13, 2013), 22

³³ Vladimir Shlapentokh, *Public and Private Life of the Soviet People*, [New York: Oxford University, 1989], 197-98

Soviet Civil Society

As noted above, true civil society was not possible during most of the Soviet period due to the pervasiveness of state influence over all aspects of society.³⁴ The few non-official associations and activities – for example the Helsinki Watch Group, the Committee for Human Rights, the Russian Social Fund for Aid to Political Prisoners and Their Families, and the Working Group for the Defense of Labor and of Social and Economic Rights – which did manage to exist during the Soviet period were largely forced underground by the state due to the arrests of their membership.³⁵ Professional groups tended to be co-opted by the state³⁶ leaving independent social organizations few and far between until Gorbachev's economic reforms were enacted.³⁷ Nevertheless, an analysis of the late Soviet period shows the existence of something resembling civil society – previously defined as a network of voluntary associations recognized within a legal framework.³⁸ The prominent scholar of the Soviet Union Moshe Lewin postulates that these independent social networks even influenced the behavior of government bureaucrats.³⁹

In some respects, Lewin seems to be arguing for the existence of a middle class in Soviet Russia which was pushing for systemic reform; but while social pressure certainly

³⁴ *Russian Civil Society: A Critical Assessment*, edited by Alfred Evans, Laura Henry and Lisa McIntosh Sundstrom. [M E Sharpe Inc., 2005], 28

³⁵ Jim Butterfield and Marcia Weigle. "Civil Society in Reforming Communist Regimes: The Logic of Emergence." *Comparative Politics* 25, no. 1 [1992]: 7-8

³⁶ Sarah Ashwin and Simon Clarke, *Russian Trade Unions*, 15

³⁷ Valerie Sperling, *Organizing Women in Contemporary Russia*, [Edinburgh: Cambridge University Press, 1999], 17-18

³⁸ Butterfield and Weigle, "Civil Society", 3

³⁹ Moshe Lewin, *Gorbachev Phenomenon: A Historical Interpretation*, [University of California Press, 1991], 80

had some effect on Gorbachev's *perestroika* the development and influence of a true middle class should not be overstated. At the most basic level, these professionals were still dependent almost exclusively on the government for their economic well-being.⁴⁰ Such a state of affairs was practically inescapable in a country with an economy so closely controlled by the party-state apparatus. Additionally, while a nascent civil society may have responded to Gorbachev's calls for *glasnost* by supporting reform of economic and political structures, there is little doubt that the actual impetus for these reforms originated from within Gorbachev's circle.⁴¹ The middle class had not sufficiently developed its economic independence and collective identity to effect a liberalizing change. So while Soviet *intelligentsia* and technocrats may have represented a proto-middle class in their level of income and education and even their support for reforms of the Soviet system from within, their failure to form a civil society including Gill and Markwick's relevant third order groups prior to 1991 means that they cannot be considered a true middle class.⁴²

Economic Reforms and Emerging Entrepreneurs

The economic landscape of the Soviet system was significantly altered in late 1986-1987 with the legalization of individual labor activity and private cooperatives.⁴³

⁴⁰ Dimitriy Gershenson and Herschel Grossman. "Cooption and Repression in the Soviet Union." Working Paper 163, Russell Sage Foundation, 2000, 5, http://www.russellsage.org/sites/all/files/u4/Gershenson%20%26%20Grossman_Cooption%20and%20Repression%20in%20the%20Society%20Union.pdf (accessed April 14, 2013)

⁴¹ Tatiana Zaslavskaja, "The Correlation Between Healthy and Ill Forces in not in our Favor." Interview with Fredo Arias-King, *Demokratizatsiya: Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization* 13 [2005]: 297; Robert Scheer, "From Moscow, First Report of an Unprecedented Call for Change: The Gorbachev Manifesto," *LA Times*, November 15, 1987, http://articles.latimes.com/1987-11-15/books/bk-21139_1_mikhail-gorbachev (accessed April 13, 2013)

⁴² See footnote 27 for an explanation of third order groups

⁴³ Kotkin, *Steeltown*, 12

The economic and social impact of these changes were the subject of Steven Kotkin's research in Magnitogorsk – a mid-sized industrial center in the Urals built around a pig iron and rolled steel factory.⁴⁴ The impact of reforms in Magnitogorsk cannot simply be extrapolated to other urban or rural areas of Russia, but Kotkin's work is an in depth look at how a particular community of Russians felt and reacted to Gorbachev's initial economic reforms providing a real world case study of the broader theoretical arguments surrounding privatization. While there were still many limits on the extent of these activities – producers were still largely dependent on the state for the necessary raw materials⁴⁵ – these policies were still a rather significant departure from the previous strategy which relied entirely on central planning. The cooperative law allowed private citizens to form businesses as diverse as clothing manufacturing and electronics repair.⁴⁶

The impacts of these economic developments on Russian civil society were somewhat ambiguous. On the one hand, workers engaging in the cooperatives spoke of the freedom and dignity they felt by controlling their own economic vocation.⁴⁷ In the aftermath of these reforms, Russians in Magnitogorsk were inspired to create a Society for the Defense of Consumers' Rights although whether this society resulted in any real positive change was unclear.⁴⁸ On the other hand, the new producers were still very much dependent on the state – a fact of which they themselves were constantly aware.⁴⁹ This dependence was the result of the absence of independent suppliers of raw material as well

⁴⁴ Ibid., xii

⁴⁵ Ibid., 31

⁴⁶ Ibid., 18-19

⁴⁷ Ibid., 38

⁴⁸ Ibid., 22

⁴⁹ Ibid., 18-19

as a substantial but unpredictable regime of regulation and taxation.⁵⁰ Additionally, only a small portion of Russians engaged in such economic activities. The vast majority continued to rely entirely on state administrated industries for their livelihood.⁵¹ In the view of some Russians, this dependence created a vulnerability to manipulation of citizens by authorities. As one resident of Magnitogorsk put it, “[e]verything is allocated by them according to their lists, with which they rule over our lives”.⁵² This lack of independence inhibited the ability of the average worker to behave as a truly autonomous political actor – a key component of a middle class identity.

While the relationship is far from clear or linear, based on the experience of Magnitogorsk there does appear to be some kind of link between the emergence of small, relatively independent businesses and some semblance of civil society. While the actual participants in the cooperatives seemed to most acutely feel this new freedom, it also extended to wider grassroots efforts for consumer protection. Nonetheless, this independent economic activity had significant restrictions which limited its ability to create truly autonomous actors, and large segments of the population remained dependent on the state. It would be premature to label the result of these reforms a true middle class, but the development still represents a significant departure from the Soviet era to that point.

Economic Chaos

The proto-middle class – composed of both the creative and technical

⁵⁰ Ibid., 26, 31

⁵¹ Iurik Arutiunian, “On the Social Structure of Post-Soviet Russia,” *Sociological Research* 42, no. 6 [2003]: 49; Less than 1/8th of Russians worked in the Private Sector as of 1990

⁵² Kotkin, *Steeltown*, 28

intelligentsia as well as some members of private cooperatives – was not the only social strata which grew during this time period. During the later Gorbachev years, many elites were able to amass substantial fortunes which could then be used to obtain political power and influence.⁵³ The lack of strictly enforced rules during the economic reform process meant that some reforms failed to achieve their goal of building up legitimate private businesses. There was a good deal of plundering especially by the old elites of the Soviet system who saw in *perestroika* a chance to expropriate state property to themselves.⁵⁴ These 'entrepreneurs' – who later became known as the oligarchs – began to emerge during the late Gorbachev era, but the trend continued throughout the 1990s. One of the prime examples of these new oligarchs was Boris Berezovskii. Between 1989 and 1992, he made \$250 million USD in profits by purchasing Lada cars from the state's manufacturing plant at reduced prices and then selling them on the open market.⁵⁵

Such manipulation of the reform process is significant for two reasons. First, it created a negative association in the minds of many Russians between democracy and lawlessness.⁵⁶ This negative association was personally observed by the author repeatedly when reading news articles while living in Russia in the spring of 2012. Even then, the specter of the chaos of the 1990s was still powerful enough to be used as an effective political tool to justify a maintenance of the illiberal status quo. Second, the consolidation

⁵³ David Hoffman, *The Oligarchs*, 180, 234

⁵⁴ Rob Jones, "From Perestroika to Capitalist Restoration." *Socialism Today* 133 [2009]: <http://www.socialismtoday.org/133/ussr.html> (accessed April 14, 2013)

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*,

⁵⁶ Alex LeRoy, "Is Democracy Good for Economic Growth?," *International Policy Digest*, November 28, 2012, <http://www.internationalpolicydigest.org/2012/11/28/is-democracy-good-for-economic-growth-part-2/> (accessed April 14, 2013)

of wealth among the elites arguably stunted the development of a broad middle class by denying it the proper economic base.⁵⁷ Instead of giving all Russians the opportunity to better themselves through the emergence of private industry, *perestroika* increased the stratification of society between elites and non-elites. Both the desire and ability of Russians to demand liberal democracy decreased as a result of this economic plundering during the early years of the 1990s.

Fragile Hope

While far from perfect, Russia by 1993 was showing signs of democratization having established a government with an executive elected by the people in free and fair elections as well as a constitution which codified the rights of citizens to certain liberal freedoms.⁵⁸ On paper at least, democracy had triumphed over authoritarianism. Freed from the confines of the Soviet state and empowered by the economic reforms, the middle class had begun to create something close to a real civil society. 45% of the environmental non-governmental organizations (NGOs) which were still active in Russia in 2006 came into being between 1987 and 1991.⁵⁹ However, the influence of such grassroots movements could not compete with the power wielded by the oligarchic elite.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Iurik Arutunian, "On the Social Structure of Post-Soviet Russia," 48-52

⁵⁸ Glenn Curtis, "Political Parties and Legislative Elections," *Russia: A Country Study* Washington: Government Printing Office, 1996; Constitution of the Russian Federation of 1993, art. 13 & art. 81, http://www.st-gaterus.eu/media/Constitution_Russia_eng.pdf (accessed April 11, 2013); Here I mention the constitution's guarantees of freedom to further the sense that Russia had – on paper – the makings of a solid democracy rather than to draw any contrast with previous Soviet Constitutions. In fact, both the 1936 Constitution of Stalin and the 1977 Constitution of Brezhnev made expansive guarantees of freedom. The issue in both cases was that these promises proved to be empty. In fact, the 1993 Constitution actually removed guarantees of economic rights enshrined under the Soviet Union.

⁵⁹ Tamara Semenova, "Russian Civil Society and Governmental Policy," UNISCI Discussion Paper No. 10 [2006]: 314

⁶⁰ For a more in depth look at the power of the oligarchs over government policy throughout the 1990s I would recommend David Hoffman's book *The Oligarchs*

This meant that the new Russian democracy remained vulnerable to relapses which unfortunately were soon to come.

Conclusion

The eight years between Gorbachev's elevation to General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1985 and the ratification of the Russian Constitution in 1993 tell the story of a tentatively rising middle class. Beginning with the proto-middle class technocrats and intelligentsia, by the end of this period, a small but genuine middle class can be said to exist based on the increase in economic well-being among the middle stratum of society and the emergence of nascent organs of civil society. However, the middle class was not the only rising force at this time. Economic elites – many members of the old Communist *nomenklatura* – had used the disorder surrounding *perestroika* to entrench their own economic and political power. A significant majority of the population also remained concerned primarily with survival rather than political abstractions.⁶¹ As a result, without a more substantial middle class the democracy which had been only recently won remained unconsolidated.

⁶¹ Sergei Belanovsky et al., “Socio-Economic Change and Political Transformation in Russia,” *Center for Strategic Research*, translated by Dmitry Belanovsky, November 7, 2011, 25 http://csis.org/files/attachments/111107_CSR_Report_November_2011.pdf (accessed April 13, 2013); Mariia Ordzhonikidze. “Western Values as Perceived by Russians.” *Sociological Research* 47, no. 5 [2008]: 7

Unrealized Hope: The Regression of Democracy under Boris Yeltsin

“We need millions of owners, not hundreds of millionaires”~ Boris Yeltsin¹

This chapter examines the connection between the Russian middle class and democracy during the tenure of Boris Yeltsin as president. Polling data during this period supports the contention that middle class Russians are more likely to support liberal democracy while an analysis of the historical narrative during this time frame provides evidence consistent with the claim that a weak middle class left the political system open to manipulation by an oligarchic elite. Although the holding of legislative and presidential elections under Yeltsin might suggest a truly democratic system of government, a closer examination reveals that what appeared to be the democratic process was merely infighting among elites over who would control the power of the illiberal government rather than a broader disagreement over the existence of the illiberal regime itself.

Introduction

The fall of the Soviet Union shook of the economic landscape in Russia. Instead of a mostly state run economy, there was a push for rapid privatization according to the model of Western capitalism.² One method of accomplishing this was the issuance of stock options for previously state owned companies to Russian citizens.³ This was

¹ Boris Yeltsin, “Speech to the Congress of People's Deputies,” April 7, 1992 Quoted in David Hoffman, *The Oligarchs*, 189

² David Hoffman, *The Oligarchs*, 184

³ Kotkin, *Armageddon Averted*, 130

designed to ensure an equitable spread of the economic resources. In practice however most of these stocks became concentrated in the hands of a relatively small circle of well off elites.⁴ In many cases these were the same individuals who held power under the communist government.⁵ Instead of creating a vibrant middle class with an investment in the country's economic development, privatization created a class of oligarchs concerned primarily with the growth of their own interests.

Further setting back the middle class was the economic chaos which ensued for much of the decade. Many Russians were sold worthless stock options by opportunistic businessmen resulting in substantial losses.⁶ At the same time, there was massive inflation verging on hyper-inflation⁷ which served to wipe out any accumulated life savings. Both of these factors severely hampered the development of any real sort of middle class. Many Russians were pushed to the financial brink even to the point of food insecurity.⁸ This development was important for two reasons. First, it linked the idea of Western style government with the experience of impoverishment in the minds of some Russians.⁹ Second, instead of a balanced society, wealth was highly concentrated in the

⁴ David Hoffman, *The Oligarchs*, 203

⁵ Valery Lazarev, "Evolution and transformation of the Soviet elite," [Paper presented at the University of Houston – Oxford University Joint Conference regarding the Initial Conditions and the Transition Economy in Russia: The Weight of the Past in Comparative Perspective, April 20, 2001], 3-4, <http://www.uh.edu/~pgregory/conf/SovElite.PDF> (accessed April 13, 2013); Glenn Curtis, "Political Parties and Legislative Elections," 1996; David Hoffman, *The Oligarchs*, 186-87

⁶ David Hoffman, *The Oligarchs*, 223

⁷ *Ibid.*, 212

⁸ David Sedik, Sergey Sotnikov, and Doris Wiesmann, "Food Security in the Russian Federation," Economic and Social Development Paper 153, Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN, 2003, <http://www.fao.org/docrep/007/y5069e/y5069e00.htm> (accessed April 13, 2013)

⁹ Yuri Federov, "Democratization and Globalization: The Case of Russia," *Democracy and Rule of Law Project*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace 13, [May 2000]: 6

upper echelons.¹⁰ As we will see, this uprooted the country's best hope for a stable, liberal democracy.

During this same time period, the Russian government was composed primarily of democratic institutions but failed to promote a liberal democracy. To begin with, there were serious questions regarding the legitimacy of elections. After the 1995 parliamentary and 1996 presidential elections for example, there was a widespread belief among observers that election results had been manipulated to reduce the share of the vote won by candidates from the Communist Party.¹¹ Even those close to Yeltsin have claimed that for the good of the country the Communists could not be allowed to receive a significant portion of the votes no matter what it took to ensure that.¹² The weakness of the government meant that other liberal ideals – freedom of the press and speech for example – faced less of an attack but nonetheless failed to take root in Russian society as ideas considered by most Russians as important.¹³

Through most of the 90s and into the beginning of Putin's first term, the oligarchs saw the government as a means of settling disputes between conflicting factions. Overall, the government as an independent actor remained very weak relying on the support of these networks of elites.¹⁴ While public disagreements over government policy during this time period could mistakenly be considered proof of a robust pluralistic society, in reality

¹⁰ Glenn Curtis, "Political Parties and Legislative Elections," 1996

¹¹ Susan Sachs, "Russia's Communists Retain Political Clout," *South Florida Sun-Sentinel*, July 5, 1996, http://articles.sun-sentinel.com/1996-07-05/news/9607040529_1_gennady-zyuganov-russian-communist-party-yeltsin-camp (accessed April 13, 2013)

¹² David Hoffman, *The Oligarchs*, 345-347

¹³ Yuri Federov, "Democratization and Globalization", 4-5

¹⁴ Sakwa, *Putin: Russia's Choice*, 72

these spats were merely conflicts among elites over the exact distribution of power.¹⁵ Even when the government was criticized as heavy handed, the real complaint was not the president's extensive authority but rather his use of that authority in an undesired manner.¹⁶ The government was thus transformed into a tool of warring elites rather than a democratic institution run by and for the general population.

Linking the Middle Class and Democracy

A link between the middle class and democracy during this time period can be both measured directly and inferred indirectly from the results of public opinion polls. From an indirect standpoint, polling data shows that middle class Russians were significantly more likely to hold modernist rather than traditionalist values.¹⁷ In this case, traditionalist views refers to support for a stronger government presence in society.¹⁸ Modernist values then align with a more liberal, democratic perspective. Admittedly, this dataset does not specifically define modern values in terms of democracy. Also, it relies on a purely economic understanding of the middle class rather than understanding it as a social institution.¹⁹ However, the point nonetheless remains that there is a divide in values between middle income and lower income Russians.

The divide between middle income and lower income Russians is driven home even more in polling data collected by the Russian Independent Institute of Social and Nationalities Problems during the 1990s. Table 3.1 shows the results of a poll conducted

¹⁵ Lukin, "Electoral Democracy," 100-101, 105-106

¹⁶ For example, see the Bankers' War of 1997 discussed in David Hoffman's book *The Oligarchs*

¹⁷ Belanovsky et al., "Socio-Economic Change," 28

¹⁸ Ibid., 20

¹⁹ An economic understanding in this case is a definition of the middle class based almost entirely on per-capita income levels, an approach favored by the IMF and other economic institutions

by the Russian Independent Institute of Social and Nationalities Problems (RIISNP) – created in 1991 – in which respondents were asked to evaluate various elements of democracy listed in the first column as either important or unimportant. The table then breaks down respondents by column based on their income level with each column subdivided into the percentage of respondents giving each respective answer.

Table 3.1: *Russian Political Opinion under Yeltsin Divided by Income*

Element of Democracy	Middle Income		Low -income strata		Below the poverty line	
	Important	Unimportant	Important	Unimportant	Important	Unimportant
Multiparty System	31.8	42.9	25.9	51	20.9	56.1
Presence of representative organs of power	43.6	28.8	39	33.3	33.1	35.5
Freedom of enterprise	71.7	12.8	55.3	23.6	40.9	31.1
Freedom of speech and of the mass media	85.7	5	76.9	10.7	66.2	15.5
Freedom to travel abroad	66.7	18.5	50.4	31.8	37.8	40.9
Electivity of all government bodies	68.2	11	63.7	16.5	61.8	-

Source: Russian Independent Institute of Social and Nationalities Problems (RIISNP), *1995-2000 survey data*, referenced in Vladimir Petukhov and Andrei Ryabov, “Public Attitudes About Democracy.” In *Between Dictatorship and Democracy: Russian Post-Communist Political Reform*, edited by Michael McFaul, Vladimir Petukhov, and Andrei Ryabov, 268-91, Washington D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2004.

As Table 3.1 shows, support for liberal democratic values like multiparty elections, freedom of enterprise and freedom of speech is noticeably higher among

middle income Russians.²⁰ This correlation is not sufficient to prove sole causality – i.e. it does not prove that being in the middle class is the only factor behind some Russians support for democracy – but it nonetheless provides support for the idea that expanding the segment of the population identified as middle class is favorable for the development of liberal democracy in Russia. When combined with other public opinion data and historical evidence, the result is a convincing if circumstantial argument.

Emerging Middle Class

The economic situation as it related to the development of the middle class during this time period fluctuated between tolerable and inhospitable. Privatization was initially formulated by Yeltsin's economic advisers as a means of giving all Russians a stake in the future of their country.²¹ However the reality fell far short of this noble goal. The process of privatization was manipulated by the oligarchs with the end result that most of the country's wealth had been concentrated among a small group of elites.²² Instead of creating millions of owners, the reforms created a handful of millionaires and billionaires. This disparity is reflected in official economic data. As Gill and Markwick note, “[a] 1995 comparison of household money income in the USA and Russia...showed not only that the top and bottom 20 per cent of Russian households had a larger share of income

²⁰ Russian Independent Institute of Social and Nationalities Problems (RIISNP), *1995-2000 survey data*, referenced in Vladimir Petukhov and Andrei Ryabov, “Public Attitudes About Democracy.” In *Between Dictatorship and Democracy: Russian Post-Communist Political Reform*, edited by Michael McFaul, Vladimir Petukhov, and Andrei Ryabov, 268-91, Washington D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2004. The data presented here are the results of nationwide sociological monitoring of a representative sample of approximately 1,800-2,200 respondents in all economic-geographic regions of Russia conducted by the Russian Independent Institute of Social and Nationalities Problems (RIISNP) in 1995-2000.

²¹ David Hoffman, *The Oligarchs*, 192-95

²² *Ibid.*, 189

than in the USA, but that the three middle quintiles in Russia had a smaller share of income than their US counterparts.”²³

The middle class during this time frame can be imagined in terms of small business owners, low level entrepreneurs, the most qualified specialists, and technically skilled employees²⁴. The image of the middle class can be most starkly contrasted with that of the oligarchs during this period. Middle class Russians – while relatively well off – were in no position to live the extravagant lifestyles associated with the “New Russians” of the period.

The oligarchs managed to accumulate a large percentage of the country's wealth by using personal connections and business savvy to take advantages of the relatively unregulated transfer of massive state holdings to the private sector. There were those among Yeltsin's circle who were concerned about possible manipulation of the public auctions of state firms, but in the end the belief that privatization – regardless of who became the owner – was necessary won out.²⁵ Through various, occasionally underhanded means, a few individuals managed to acquire massive amounts of auction vouchers which could be used to purchase shares in state companies.²⁶ In many cases, these acquisitions were made at the expense of Russians poised to become members of the middle class.²⁷ In the end, the middle class that emerged was far smaller than the

²³ Gill and Markwick, *Russia's Stillborn Democracy*, 240. At the same time, the middle class only accounted for 25% of total economic output. A much lower number than their western counterparts (Gill and Markwick, 240)

²⁴ Gill and Markwick, *Russia's Stillborn Democracy*, 240

²⁵ David Hoffman, *The Oligarchs*, 193

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 197, 203-207

²⁷ The lack of regulation surrounding vouchers and the many voucher trading funds which quickly sprung up and often quickly disappeared are reasons why many Russians' lost of their vouchers. For a more

reformers within the Gorbachev and Yeltsin administrations had initially hoped.

The result of this disparity was a social structure which resembled a pyramid. At the apex were a small group of individuals controlling vast amounts of wealth while the majority of the population was left at the bottom. Such a distribution of wealth dried up the financial base necessary to support a robust, independent middle class.²⁸ In the ideal scenario for the middle class, income distribution would be similar to a flat diamond: relatively few individuals at the top and bottom with a large, robust middle section creating and possessing the majority of the country's wealth.²⁹ The dysfunctional pyramid social structure instead created an environment where elites manipulated the political as well as economic process. Instead of a robust liberal democracy, power devolved to a more authoritarian system of government influence by the few rather than the many.

In spite of these difficulties, the middle class managed to grow somewhat during the early 1990s. As a result of economic liberalization, small and medium size businesses began to appear, accounting for 12% of GDP and employing 20% of the workforce in early 1998 according to official figures.³⁰ According to noted Russian sociologist Tatiana Zaslavskaiia, the middle stratum – defined as small and medium scale entrepreneurs, managers in both manufacturing and non-manufacturing spheres, specialists, and elite workers – made up 24% of Russian society between 1993 and 1995.³¹ There is no precise

complete discussion, I recommend Chapters 8 and 9 of David Hoffman's book *The Oligarchs*

²⁸ Marcia Weigle, "On the Road to the Civic Forum: State and Civil Society from Yeltsin to Putin," *Demokratizatsiya: Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization* 10, no. 2 [2002]: 127

²⁹ I owe this analogy to a pamphlet published by the Trade Unions Congress
<http://www.tuc.org.uk/touchstone/lifeinthemiddle.pdf>

³⁰ "Yeltsin Praises Russia's Emerging Middle Class," *Eurasian Monitor* 4, no. 40 [1998]

³¹ Tatiana Zaslavskaiia, "Социальная структура современного российского общества," [Social structure of contemporary Russian society], *Общественные науки и современность* no. 2 [1997]: 12-

measurement of how much of this middle stratum was truly middle class in terms of income level, education, and self-identification. However, Zaslavskaja's research indicates that a middle class existed at least to some degree even if it remained less than a third of the size of the lower strata of Russian society.³²

The weakness of the middle class following privatization was compounded by the financial crisis of August 1998, which saw massive inflation wiping out the savings of most middle class Russians.³³ Whether they had kept their money in banks or out of banks, the hyperinflation of the late 90s meant that many Russians struggled to afford even basic necessities.³⁴ This situation represented a cruel reversal of the Soviet period in which citizens had plenty of money, but nothing on which to spend it.³⁵ In sum, while the situation was not hopeless, the outlook remained bleak for the development of a strong middle class.

Based on the state of the middle class, one would expect to observe correspondingly weak democracy. In fact, the flaws of Russian democracy during this period are too numerous to cover exhaustively. Colton and McFaul list a few worth noting included government decision making that was often closed to the public and wrapped in layers of confidentiality and secrecy, massive pressure on the media by the

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³² Ibid., 13

³³ Gill and Markwick, *Russia's Stillborn Democracy*, 241; David Hoffman, *The Oligarchs*, 212

³⁴ According to Matthew Wyman, only 27% of Russian voters in 1999 could afford consumer durables (washing machines, refrigerators, etc.) *Elections and Voters in Post-Communist Russia*, edited by Matthew Wyman, Stephen White, and Sarah Oates, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing, 1998

³⁵ Glenn Curtis, "Chapter 12: Industry," *A Country Study: Soviet Union*, Library of Congress, edited by Raymond Zickel, 1989, [http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?frd/cstdy:@field\(DOCID+su0316\)](http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?frd/cstdy:@field(DOCID+su0316)) (accessed April 11, 2013); Becky Gates, "Chapter 11: Economic Structures and Policy," In *A Country Study: Soviet Union*, Edited by Raymond Zickel, 449-482, Library of Congress, 1989

Russian government and quasi-private interests to conform to officially approved viewpoints, and the disproportionate use of force to suppress opposition—for example, during the 1993 constitutional crisis and in the two grisly wars in Chechnya.³⁶ The shortcomings of Russian democracy were also exacerbated by the country's unbalanced socio-economic structure. From the beginning of the privatization process, the extreme concentration of wealth among the oligarchs gave them tremendous political power.³⁷ Of course, this power had to be maintained – a goal threatened by the potentially unpredictable nature of a democratic system of government. As a result, the oligarchs often resorted to manipulation of the political process to protect their economic interests.

Yeltsin's Clans

Understanding the flaws of Russian “democracy” during this period is virtually impossible without a discussion of the oligarchs surrounding Yeltsin's administration. In many sources, they are referred to simply as “the family”³⁸ - Gill and Markwick refer to some of them as the Sverdlovsk Mafia after the region of Russia in which Yeltsin had many powerful connections.³⁹ These oligarchs – also called “New Russians” drawing a link between Gorbachev's privatization and Lenin's New Economic Policy of the 1920s – accumulated vast personal fortunes as a result of personal connections and lax

³⁶ Timothy Colton and Michael McFaul. “Are Russians Undemocratic?” *Russian and Eurasian Program*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace 20, [June 2001]: 3-4

³⁷ Hoffman's *The Oligarchs* is again an invaluable resource especially his chapter entitled “The Embrace of Wealth and Power” which explores the co-option of the government by savvy businessmen

³⁸ For Example - Sakwa, *Putin: Russia's Choice* 20. The caricature of Yeltsin and the oligarchs as a family is so popular it is even incorporated by Russian comedians such as Maksim Galkin

³⁹ Gil & Markwick, 129-30

government regulations during the privatization period.⁴⁰ Some were former factory managers who had colluded with local bureaucrats to maintain a majority ownership through the voucher sell-offs, other were mid-level bureaucrats who saw the winds of change coming in Gorbachev and decided to make the best of the situation.

Commentators have described the sell-off of state property as the legitimization of the previous power structure through the appearance of law and order.⁴¹ In other words, the top down structure of power in Russia did not change hands, it merely changed appearances.

Regardless of the exact means by which their wealth was obtained, New Russians prioritized the maintenance of their newly acquired fortunes. Despite the outward show of law and order in the 1991 and 1993 elections, it soon became clear that the most secure means of maintaining their wealth was through personal connections – known as *blat*.⁴² Among the most effective personal connections were those tied to the nascent Russian state. While the criminal world arguably exerted a great deal of influence during this time period as well,⁴³ the state had the ability to grant an air of legitimacy as well as a strong

⁴⁰ See Helena Goscilo. “Popular Image of the New Russians: Seen Through Class, Darkly.” National Council for Eurasian and East European Research, November 16, 1998, 22, <http://www.ucis.pitt.edu/nceeer/1998-813-07g-Goscilo.pdf> (accessed April 14, 2013) regarding the link between “New Russians” and “NEP-men”. See David Hoffman, *The Oligarchs*, 186 for an explanation of how this transfer of property was not even illegal because there really was no legal framework to govern privatization

⁴¹ Lazarev, “Evolution and transformation of the Soviet elite,” 22; Iurik Arutiunian, “On the Social Structure of Post-Soviet Russia,” 49; Dmitri Glinski and Peter Reddaway, “The Ravages of 'Market Bolshevism',” *Journal of Democracy* 10, no. 2 [1999]: 21

⁴² See Alena Ledeneva's works *Russia's Economy of Favors* and *How Russia Really Works* for more on the impact of *blat* in both Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia

⁴³ Bruce Michael Bagley, “Globalization and Transnational Organized Crime: The Russian Mafia in Latin America and the Caribbean,” November 15, 2001, 5-6, <http://www.as.miami.edu/international-studies/pdf/Bagley%20GLOBALIZATION%202.pdf> (accessed April 11, 2013)

coercive force. This became especially clear during the 1996 presidential election. Facing a reasonably strong challenge from the Communist candidate, Gennady Zyuganov, Yeltsin appeared quite vulnerable. Realizing that a return to Communist government represented a threat to their new wealth – most Russians resented the newly wealthy, regarding their gains as ill-gotten⁴⁴ – a group of oligarchs decided to coordinate their resources to ensure Yeltsin's re-election.

Free and Fair Elections?

Perhaps the most central component of democracy is the holding of elections which are not only competitive but free and fair.⁴⁵ As Elklit and Svenson note, there are no elections which can be considered completely fair.⁴⁶ However, it would be difficult to find any means of calling the results of the 1996 elections anything but heavily manipulated. This judgment is based not so much on actual election-day irregularities – ballot stuffing or voter coercion – as to pre-election actions which significantly skewed the playing field in favor to the incumbent President Boris Yeltsin.

A certain advantage is generally expected for an incumbent candidate even in democratic elections.⁴⁷ Whether through name recognition, experience, or some other factor, a current officeholder enjoys a significant edge over the challenger. This

⁴⁴ Sergei Guriev and Andrei Rachinsky. "The Role of Oligarchs in Russian Capitalism." *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 19, no. 1 [2005]: 140

⁴⁵ Robert. Dahl, *Democracy and Its Critics*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989, 221. Dahl actually refers not to "democracies" but to "polyarchies." I use the term "democracy" here in order to conform to ordinary usage.

⁴⁶ Jorgen Elklit and Palle Svensson. "What Makes Elections Free and Fair?." *Journal of Democracy* 8, no. 3 [1997]: 43

⁴⁷ Jessica Trounstine, "Information, Turnout, and Incumbency in Local Elections," *Urban Affairs Review*, November 6, 2012, 2

advantage only extends so far, however, before it begins to threaten the fairness of the election process itself. For example, in the course of their term, an elected official will undoubtedly make various official trips which are often structured to highlight leadership capabilities or other desirable traits. While that may confer an advantage to the incumbent, it is still an accepted part of the democratic process. However, if the officeholder were to utilize state resources for his own election campaign – forcing government employees to work for the campaign for example – that would cross the line into unfairness.

In the case of Russia, the 1996 election was marked with an abuse of access to state resources by Boris Yeltsin as well as a manipulation of pre-election coverage in the national media to increase public support for Yeltsin. Over the course of the election campaign, Yeltsin drew around \$11 billion out of state funds for his own personal use.⁴⁸ Such funds were not available to any of the other candidates in the race, so their use represents a clear breach of common standards of fairness. During the election, Yeltsin also made bargain with a group of billionaires headed by Boris Berezovskii.⁴⁹ The oligarchs, a group that included owners of the country's leading media conglomerates, used their vast resources to skew pre-election coverage dramatically in Yeltsin's favor.⁵⁰ Tactics used included paying for favorable newspaper articles, unsigned advertising, and falsified documents.⁵¹ As many international election observers have noted, such a pre-election advantage, which goes far beyond the usual incumbents' advantage, is just as

⁴⁸ Gill and Markwick, *Russia's Stillborn Democracy*, 191

⁴⁹ All of David Hoffman's chapter "Saving Boris Yeltsin", but especially 326 - 330

⁵⁰ David Hoffman, *The Oligarchs*, 328

⁵¹ David Hoffman, *The Oligarchs*, 345

damaging to the fairness of an election as actual vote rigging on the day of the polls.⁵²

Yeltsin for his part used his presidential powers which, under the 1993 constitution were quite extensive and personal influence to promote a business environment favorable to the oligarchs' interests.⁵³

Despite the show of elections and democratic process, it would be difficult to consider this level of collusion between government and business an example of liberal democracy. The simple existence of such schemes does not preclude the operation of democracy in Russia. Even a mature democracy such as the United States can struggle with the influence of corruption on its electoral system.⁵⁴ However, when such a scheme is blatantly carried out with the legal system either unwilling or unable to sanction its perpetrators, significant doubt is cast on the health or even existence of liberal democracy in the country.

⁵² Thomas Carothers, "The Observers Observed," *Journal of Democracy* 8, no. 3 [1997]: 22-23

⁵³ Thomas Graham, "From Oligarchy to Oligarchy: The Structure of Russia's Ruling Elite," *Demokratizatsiya: Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization* 7, no. 3 [1999]: 328-330. It is important to note that while the oligarchs united to support Yeltsin's candidacy, they are not a monolithic entity with a single common interest. There was a great deal of in-fighting among them, which Yeltsin occasionally intervened in. Nonetheless, his continued tolerance of the oligarchs and their political influence stands in marked contrast to the more firm stance adopted by his successor Vladimir Putin.

⁵⁴ CBS News, "Blagojevich Gets 14 Years in Prison," December 7, 2011, http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-250_162-57338646/blagojevich-gets-14-years-in-prison/ (accessed April 11, 2013)

The root cause of this arrangement can be blamed on many things including the concentration of power in the executive branch, the overall weakness of the state apparatus. However, at least part of the root cause can be traced to the weakness of the middle class in Russia during the mid to late 1990s. Without a substantial middle class, most of the country's wealth became concentrated among a few economic elites.⁵⁵ That is not to say that income inequality does not exist in countries with a middle class – it does. There is no way of knowing for certain whether a robust middle class could have prevented such un-democratic actions or held Yeltsin and others accountable after the fact. However, as power is diffused across a wider population base – represented by the middle class – rather than concentrated among a few elites, the ability of average citizens to hold government officials accountable would logically seem to increase. Without such a middle class though, there is virtually no check on the power of elites except for other elites. Elections and the political process in such a scenario become part of a chess game among the powerful few rather than tools of democratic accountability. The political involvement of the oligarchs in Russian politics seems to bear out this point.

Perceptions of Democracy

The absence of meaningful democracy during this time period did not go unnoticed by Russians. Table 3.2 presents the results of a multi-year study by the Russian Independent Institute of Social and Nationalities Problems. The first column lists the statement respondents were given with the responses broken up by column into the percentage of respondents who agreed with the statement and the percentage who

⁵⁵ Glenn Curtis, "Social Structure and Social Stratification," 1996

disagreed with it. Each column is further subdivided by year to show a long term comparison of attitudes between 1995 and 2000.

Table 3.2: *Russian Political Attitudes 1995-2000.*

Opinion	Agree			Disagree		
	1995	1997	2000	1995	1997	2000
Democratic procedures are a facade	73.1	74.4	74.5	13.3	12.9	11.8
Democratic procedures are indispensable	56	51	47.8	13.6	17.9	18.3
Public Participation is Important	23.4	18.8	23.8	52.5	59.9	60.7
Ordinary Citizens have no role to play, only politicians do	66.1	70.3	66.4	20	17.7	21.8

Source: Russian Independent Institute of Social and Nationalities Problems (RIISNP), *1995-2000 survey data*, referenced in Vladimir Petukhov and Andrei Ryabov, "Public Attitudes About Democracy." In *Between Dictatorship and Democracy: Russian Post-Communist Political Reform*, edited by Michael McFaul, Vladimir Petukhov, and Andrei Ryabov, 268-91, Washington D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2004.

As Table 3.2 shows, during the latter half of the 1990s over 70% of Russians consistently saw the democratic process as a sham.⁵⁶ Such results can hardly be considered surprising given the previously discussed manipulation that surrounded the 1996 election.⁵⁷ More significant perhaps is the 7% drop in respondents agreeing that democratic procedures are indispensable bringing that number below a simple plurality of

⁵⁶ Vladimir Petukhov and Andrei Ryabov. "Public Attitudes about Democracy." In *Between Dictatorship and Democracy: Russian Post-Communist Political Reform*, edited by Michael McFaul, Vladimir Petukhov, and Andrei Ryabov, 268-91, [Washington D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2004]

⁵⁷ Gill and Markwick, *Russia's Stillborn Democracy*, 191

the Russian populace.⁵⁸ Two explanations can be offered for this decline. First, as Russians became resigned to facade democracy they simply became apathetic towards genuine democracy. Alternatively, the decline could indicate that initial support for democracy was superficial or instrumental rather than genuine – based on some expectation of the economic benefits of democracy for example rather than a belief in democracy for democracy's sake.⁵⁹ The first explanation holds some weight considering the data showing low support for public participation in politics, but the second is more relevant to discussions of the middle class and democracy. Because the percentage of Russians belonging to the middle class was so low during this time frame – and dropped even further after the financial crisis of 1998 – this data could support the conclusion that any support for democracy outside of the middle class was primarily instrumental in nature further emphasizing the importance of the middle class in building a stable, liberal democracy.

Civil Society: An Inch Deep and a Mile Wide

If civil society is understood as any autonomous association of private citizens⁶⁰ - that is associations which are distinct from the state – then numerically speaking civil society during this period was extremely robust. Neighborhood associations, interest groups, and political parties popped up rapidly in the now unregulated post-Soviet space. By some counts, there were over 1,200 registered political parties in 1992.⁶¹ Most of

⁵⁸ Petukhov & Ryabov, “Public Attitudes about Democracy,” 2004

⁵⁹ Ronald Inglehart and Christian Welzel. “Political Culture, Mass Beliefs, and Value Change”, In *Democratization*, edited by Patrick Bernhagen, Christian Haerpfer, Ronald Inglehart, and Christian Welzel, [US: Oxford University Press, 2009], 129

⁶⁰ Gill and Markwick, *Russia's Stillborn Democracy*, 5-6

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 243

these civil associations including the political group Dem Rossiia – an amalgamation of eighteen social movements and nine political parties that came together in October 1990 and disintegrated in early 1992– lasted a few years at most before dissolving.⁶² As a result, not a single party contesting the 1993 elections on its own list represented the interests of the bourgeoisie.⁶³ The main issue for these parties was a lack of roots in society. Instead of arising naturally out of grassroots, citizen movements, these parties were often created by a single individual or group of individuals seeking to use them as a vehicle to further their own interests.⁶⁴ Arguably, this is one reason Yeltsin refused to associate himself with any one party, portraying himself instead as the representative of all Russians.⁶⁵ A vibrant civil society is a supportive – if not a necessary – feature of liberal democracy⁶⁶ As such, it is relevant to examine the reasons civil society has failed to take a deep root in post-Soviet Russia.

The atrophied nature of civil society during 1990s cannot be blamed on a lack of effort by the U.S. and other established democracies to encourage civic participation. Between 1992 and 1998, the US Agency for International Development (USAID) alone donated more than \$92 million USD on civic initiatives and support for NGOs.⁶⁷ In their book, *Russia's Stillborn Democracy: From Gorbachev to Yeltsin*, Graeme Gill and Roger

⁶² Ibid.,

⁶³ Ibid., 244

⁶⁴ Ibid., 245

⁶⁵ Aleksander Kynev, "State Duma Elections 2011 and the Marginal Role of Russian Parties Part 1," *European Unions Institute for Security Studies*, November 2, 2011, <http://www.iss.europa.eu/publications/detail/article/state-duma-elections-2011-and-the-marginal-role-of-russian-parties-part-1/> (accessed April 13, 2013)

⁶⁶ Natalia Letki, "Social Capital and Civil Society," In *Democratization*, edited by Patrick Bernhagen, Christian Haerpfer, Ronald Inglehart, and Christian Welzel, [US: Oxford University Press, 2009], 167

⁶⁷ Sarah Henderson, *Building Democracy in Contemporary Russia: Western Support for Grassroots Organizations*, [Cornell University Press, 2003], 69

Markwick point the finger at the economic climate in Russia during much of the 1990s.⁶⁸ The economic turmoil following shock therapy as well as the economic crisis of 1998 relegated the working class to little more than disempowered bystanders by denying them any sort of economic base of support.⁶⁹ Meanwhile, the middle class – which Gill and Markwick agree provides a solid center for sustainable, liberal democracy – remained substantially undersized in relation to their Western counterparts.⁷⁰ It is intriguing that the period marked by a weak civil society coincides with perhaps the low-point of the middle class in modern Russia. Such proof is purely circumstantial, but nonetheless provides a measure of support for the hypothesis that there is a link between the middle class and the viability of liberal democracy as embodied in a healthy civil society in Russia.

Conclusion

While the 1990s could be considered one of the most free periods in Russian history based on a superficial glance at the freedoms guaranteed in the 1993 Constitution and electoral institutions, a closer look reveals a more complex picture. The concentration of wealth among a few elites combined with several severe economic downturns combined to weaken the country's emerging middle class and undermine support for true liberal democracy. Instead of transforming into a liberal democracy – governed from the bottom up – the widespread economic instability caused Russia to revert to a more top-down approach to government. While the outward appearance of the power structure may have changed, its overall character remained essentially illiberal and un-democratic.

⁶⁸ Gill and Markwick, *Russia's Stillborn Democracy*, 230

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 237

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 240

Managed Democracy: Russia's Putin Experience

“Democracy is expendable, development is not” ~ Vladimir Lenin¹

This chapter looks at the increased centralization of power by Vladimir Putin as president against the backdrop of the development of the middle class during Putin's first two terms in power. The chapter draws upon polling data as well as economic data to support the hypothesized link between the middle class and democracy. Polling data continues to show societal support for democracy primarily comes from the middle class with lower income Russians preoccupied with economic concerns rather than political ones. Examining the development of the middle class during this period shows that while economic growth spurred an expansion of the middle class, the overall proportion of Russians truly belonging to the middle class remained low especially by Western standards, never exceeding 15% of the total population. The continued absence of a middle class is reflected in the continuing trend of quasi-authoritarian governance by Putin.

Introduction

The transition of political leadership from Yeltsin to Putin did not immediately change the overall landscape of power. In the months after his inauguration as president, Putin seemed to act tentatively as if afraid of offending the “family” of powerful

¹ Vladimir Lenin, Quoted by Richard Sakwa, “The 2003–2004 Russian Elections and Prospects for Democracy,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 57, no. 3 [2005]: 391

individuals which had coalesced around Yeltsin.² That attitude changed drastically in a very public manner when Putin began his prosecution of the individuals known as the oligarchs. Among the first such instances were the investigation and subsequent criminal indictments of the media holdings of Vladimir Gusinsky; the financial interests of Vladimir Potanin; and Lukoil which was led by Vagit Alekperov.³ In each case, there has been disagreement over whether the alleged crimes actually occurred or whether Putin used prosecutions to consolidate his political control. Regardless, the message had been sent that there was a new sheriff in town, and that the old way of doing business was no longer welcome.

Following this initial show of strength, Putin continued working to increase the effectiveness of the state. Among the reforms, Putin ended the practice of the popular election of regional governors and instead gave the president the power to directly appoint them.⁴ Under Putin's watch, the system of election to the State Duma – Russia's parliamentary body – was reformed to give increased advantages to established national parties such as the pro-Kremlin United Russia.⁵ While Putin heralded these moves as necessary to establish the “dictatorship of law,”⁶ in practice these changes had the effect of centralizing power in the federal government – specifically in the office of the

² Sakwa, *Putin: Russia's Choice*, 72

³ Ibid., 144; John Helmer, “Another Oligarch to Meet His Kremlin maker?,” *Asia Times Online*, May 5, 2004, http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Central_Asia/FE05Ag01.html (accessed April 13, 2013); United Press International, “Raids on Russian Businesses Intensify,” July 13, 2000, <http://archive.newsmax.com/articles/?a=2000/7/12/203152> (accessed October 12, 2012)

⁴ Jeremy Bransten, “Russia: Putin Signs Bill Eliminating Direct Elections Of Governors,” *Radio Free Europe*, December 13, 2004, <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1056377.html> (accessed April 11, 2013)

⁵ Sakwa, *Putin: Russia's Choice*, 124

⁶ Ibid., 138

president.⁷ Other assaults on democracy can be seen in the conduct of election and government attacks on media and societal figures who insisted on criticizing the administration.⁸ After the 2003 parliamentary elections for example, observers from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) stated that the results exhibited a “regression of democratization.”⁹

On the economic front, Russia experienced tremendous economic growth during this time period – averaging 7% growth from 1999-2007.¹⁰ This growth did not translate to a growth in democratic values or political liberalism. One of the factors that can be blamed for this lack of support for liberal democracy is the continuing struggle of the independent middle class. In large part, the economic growth was driven by skyrocketing oil prices rather than an increase in small and medium sized businesses.¹¹ Additionally, Putin used the expansion of the state bureaucracy to co-opt many individuals who might otherwise be considered members of the middle class. From 2004-2005 the number of Russians employed as bureaucrats rose 11.8 percent to 1.46 million.¹² At that level, the ratio of bureaucrats to Russian citizens was 1 to every 100 – the same level as during the Soviet period.¹³ Because bureaucrats only served at the pleasure of other government

⁷ F. Joseph Dresen, “Vladimir Putin and the Rule of Law in Russia,” *Wilson Center*, 2008, <http://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/vladimir-putin-and-the-rule-law-russia> (accessed April 11, 2013)

⁸ Sakwa, *Putin: Russia's Choice*, 144

⁹ *Ibid.*, 114

¹⁰ David Hoffman, *The Oligarchs*, xvi

¹¹ Philip Hanson. “The Economic Development of Russia: Between State Control and Liberalization.” Issue 32, Istituto Per Gli Studi Di Politica Internazionale, 2008, http://www.ispionline.it/it/documents/WP_32_2008.pdf (accessed April 13, 2013), 2-3. This is not to say that Russian cities are dependent on oil for growth to the extent of a Riyadh or Baku, but oil revenues still make up a dominant source of economic growth.

¹² Marshall Goldman, “Russia's Middle Class Muddle,” *Current History* 105, no. 693 [2006]: 324

¹³ *Ibid.*,

officials, they were hardly more inclined to challenge the government by supporting democratic reforms than Soviet bureaucrats four decades earlier.¹⁴

Outside of this median income stratum, opinion polls continued to show Russians as indifferent towards democracy and strongly prioritizing economic stability.¹⁵ A likely cause for such opinions was widespread economic insecurity and a deep seated fear that any sort of political transformation would take the country back into the dark years of the 1990s.¹⁶ This mindset meant that there was little public opposition to Putin's centralization of power as long as economic worries remained eased.¹⁷ While the financial crisis of 2008 would raise tensions, even then the lack of a middle class meant most complaints were economic in nature rather than concerned with civil rights and freedoms.

Changing of the Guard

If the 1990s represented a period of nondemocratic governance caused by the weakness of the state, the period from 2000 – 2007 represents a complete reversal of the situation. Having observed the failings of the Russian state under Yeltsin, Vladimir Putin came to power and quickly set about consolidating the power of the central government – especially the executive.¹⁸ Putin's term began with many questions surrounding how he would relate to the oligarchs referred to as Yeltsin's “family.”¹⁹ At first, Putin appeared to

¹⁴ Ibid., 325

¹⁵ Pew Research Center, "The Global Middle Class", *Global Attitudes Project*, 2009, <http://www.pewglobal.org/2009/02/12/the-global-middle-class/> (accessed April 13, 2013)

¹⁶ This fear is discussed in the previous chapter during the discussion of Russians' negative views of democracy

¹⁷ Sakwa, *Putin: Russia's Choice*, 86

¹⁸ Ibid., 139-140

¹⁹ Ibid., 84

represent a continuation of the Yeltsin years, but it soon became apparent that he would be far more assertive in regards to the influence of wealthy Russians in politics. Putin began his political reorganization by opening legal investigations against Vladimir Gusinsky, Vladimir Potanin, Vagit Alekperov, and Boris Berezovskii among others.²⁰

As the previous chapter showed, much of the oligarchs' wealth was obtained through questionably legal means at best – a situation that was made possible by the weakness of the state in the aftermath of the Soviet Union's collapse and the eagerness of Yeltsin to privatize Russia at all costs.²¹ While Berezovskii, Gusinsky, Khodorkovsky and other “New Russians” had legitimate skeletons in their closet, a closer examination of the situation reveals that the campaign to single them out as the face of corruption in Russia was almost certainly based on political rather than legal grounds. Putin held a special meeting with the leading oligarchs in February of 2000 – shortly after assuming to presidency – where he informed them that the rules of the game were changing. No longer would oligarchs be able to control state policy for their own gain.²² This meeting was followed by a statement from Putin in July that the oligarchs would be allowed to maintain their economic situation so long as they refrained from criticizing the government or becoming involved in politics.²³

Such statements linking criminal prosecutions to criticism of the government reveal that the true motivation for Putin's “anti-corruption” campaign was a desire to

²⁰ Ibid., 144 See footnote 150

²¹ Khodorkovsky for example acquired Oil giant Yukos for \$310 million despite its actual worth being around \$5 billion. Berezovsky acquired a controlling stake in Sibneft for less than 3% of its estimated value; Marshall Goldman, “Putin and the Oligarchs,” *Foreign Affairs* 83, no. 6 [2004]

²² Marshall Goldman, “Putin and the Oligarchs,” 2004

²³ Ibid.,

consolidate power rather than promote the democratic principle of the rule of law. This is not to say that the oligarchs represented the liberal democratic idea. Far from it. Putin and the oligarchs instead represent two sides of the same undemocratic coin: the oligarchs the product of a quasi-anarchic society without meaningful government power; Putin the architect of a resurgent state exerting its control over the economic and political life of the country. Just as the fall of the Soviet Union should not be confused with the beginning of a liberal democratic state, so Putin's campaign of law and order should be understood as the power grab that it was.

Regression of Democracy

Table 4.1 details the annual Freedom House rating given to Russia from 2002 to 2007. The overall freedom rating is given on a scale from 1 – 7 with 1 being the highest degree of freedom and 7 being the lowest. Countries with scores from 1.0 to 2.5 are considered free, countries scoring between 2.51 and 5.5 are labeled partly free, and countries with scores below 5.5 are considered not free. The freedom rating is further broken down into the subcategories of political rights – the ability to participate freely in the political process – and civil liberties – which allow for the freedoms of expression and belief, associational and organizational rights, rule of law, and personal autonomy without interference from the state – that are scored on the same 1-7 scale.

Table 4.1: *Freedom House Ratings: Russia 2002-2007*

Year	Freedom Rating	Political Rights	Civil Liberties
2002	5	5	5
2003	5	5	5
2004	5	5	5
2005	5.5	6	5
2006	5.5	6	5
2007	5.5	6	5

Source, Freedom House, *Freedom in the World Report, 2002 – 2012*, <http://www.freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2007/russia> (accessed April 13, 2013)²⁴

As the Freedom House data shows, this time period was not kind to the development of liberal democracy in Russia. These ratings represent a decline from the 3.5 rating – which equates to partially free – given in 1997.²⁵ This drop in international perceptions of Russian democracy was caused by several factors. First, international observers of democracy are not and cannot be unbiased. Their observations and analysis of those observations is influenced by their own personal agenda – in many cases the

²⁴ Political rights enable people to participate freely in the political process, including the right to vote freely for distinct alternatives in legitimate elections, compete for public office, join political parties and organizations, and elect representatives who have a decisive impact on public policies and are accountable to the electorate. Civil liberties allow for the freedoms of expression and belief, associational and organizational rights, rule of law, and personal autonomy without interference from the state... Freedom House does not maintain a culture-bound view of freedom. The research and ratings process involved 59 analysts and 20 senior-level academic advisors—the largest number to date. The analysts used a broad range of sources of information—including foreign and domestic news reports, academic analyses, nongovernmental organizations, think tanks, individual professional contacts, and visits to the region—in preparing the country and territory reports and ratings. While Freedom House considers the presence of legal rights, it places a greater emphasis on whether these rights are implemented in practice. Furthermore, freedoms can be affected by government officials, as well as by nonstate actors, including insurgents and other armed groups. For a complete explanation of the Freedom House methodology please see <http://www.freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world-2012/methodology>

²⁵ Heiko Pleines. "Russia in Political Country Ratings: International Comparisons of Democracy, Rule of Law, and Civil Rights." *Russian Analytical Digest*, no. 21 [2007]: 3

promotion of democracy.²⁶ Such biases can lead observers to gloss over imperfections so as not to dishearten a nascent pro-democracy movement. As a result, the rating of Russia as partly free in 1997 must be taken with a grain of salt. As the previous chapter discussed, there were already electoral irregularities with regards to pre-election media coverage under Yeltsin so the drop in Freedom House ratings under Putin can be attributed in part to a recognition of the true deficiencies of democracy in Russia all along.

Biased analysis should not be an excuse however for ignoring the very real measures by the Putin administration to rollback democratic freedoms and consolidate government power in a so-called 'sovereign democracy'.²⁷ One of the most significant of these steps was transition from popular elections of regional governors to their direct appointment by the president.²⁸ In and of itself, this move was not a violation of democracy as the law was changed according to proper legislative procedure. However, it represented a troubling step away from the democratic principle of popular accountability for public officials and the separation of powers.²⁹ By making governors answerable to the president rather than local residents, this move simultaneously reduced the governors' incentive to account of the concerns of their constituency and increased their dependence on the good favor of the President. The move substantially blurred the lines of federalism

²⁶ Judith Kelley, "Election Observers and Their Biases," *Journal of Democracy* 21, no. 3 [2010]: 164-166

²⁷ Sakwa, *Putin: Russia's Choice*, 135. The idea of sovereign or managed democracy refers to Putin's preference for a strong state dedicated to enforcing the rule of law even at the expense of some liberal democratic freedoms.

²⁸ Jeremy Bransten, "Russia: Putin Signs Bill Eliminating Direct Elections Of Governors," 2004

²⁹ *Ibid.*,

designed to mitigate the concentration of absolute power in the national executive.³⁰

Beyond the consolidation of power in the national executive, Putin also took steps to reduce party diversity in the legislature with the stated goal of strengthening the party system. While Russia had already established criteria for party registration and minimum vote thresholds to weed out single issue parties, Putin substantially increased those requirements with the alleged aim of promoting the dominance of a single party.³¹ Prior to 2003, Russian electoral law had established a minimum vote threshold of 5% to receive seats in the Duma.³² In 2002, the United Russia party – widely seen as the party of Putin – began to push for a drastic increase of that threshold to 12.5%.³³ The leaders of smaller parties resisted this change as they felt it would consolidate too much power in the hands of United Russia and its allies.³⁴ The final result was somewhat of a compromise – the threshold was raised to 7% with exceptions for extreme circumstance.³⁵ To put that in

³⁰ Robert Coalson, "Russia: Putin Takes Control Of The Status Quo Through Gubernatorial Appointments," *Radio Free Europe*, June 8, 2005, <http://www.russialist.com/9173-10.php> (accessed April 11, 2013); Putin's stated goal of fighting the corruption inherent in local and regional politics notwithstanding, this move still represents a startling centralization of executive power.

³¹ Peter Baker, "Putin Moves to Centralize Authority; Plan would Restrict Elections in Russia," *Washington Post*, September 14, 2004; Mark MacKinnon, "Gorbachev, Yeltsin Blast Putin's Changes; Ex-Presidents Critical of Movement toward Kremlin-Centred Authority," *The Globe and Mail*, September 17 2004

³² Russia Votes, "Duma Election Law Details," *Center for the Study of Public Policy at the University of Strathclyde*, Last updated March 1, 2012, http://www.russiavotes.org/duma/duma_election_law.php (accessed April 13, 2013)

³³ Pravda.ru, "State Duma Speaker Favors 5 Percent Threshold for Parties in 2003 Parliamentary Elections," October 14, 2002, <http://archive.fairvote.org/pr/global/russiaspeakerfavors.htm> (accessed April 13, 2013)

³⁴ Rosbalt, "The proposal of "United Russia" to raise the threshold for access to the State Duma to 12.5% is targeted against Yabloko and the Union of Right-Wing Forces," October 7, 2002, <http://www.eng.yabloko.ru/Publ/2002/agency/rosbalt-071002.html> (accessed April 13, 2013); smaller parties with more liberal tendencies include the Liberal Democratic Party, Yabloko, and the now defunct Constitutional Democratic party. For a complete list of the political parties during this period, see the Levada Center's fact sheet: http://www.russiavotes.org/duma/list_parties_2003_2007.php

³⁵ Russia Votes, "Duma Election Law Details," 2012.

context, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe – a well respected intergovernmental organization (IGO) – recommends that well-established democracies maintain a threshold of no more than 3% for parliamentary elections to ensure adequate representation.³⁶

At the same time, the Putin-led government also enacted changes to the electoral system as a whole with the end result – if not the original intent – of limiting independent opposition. From 1993-2003, the Russian political system was a mixed member system under which some seats were allocated to parties on a proportional basis while others were single mandate seats – awarded to individual candidates who were not required to belong to a party.³⁷ By implementing this policy while simultaneously making it more difficult to register as a political party,³⁸ the Putin administration put a serious damper on officially recognized political diversity.³⁹ While even democratic countries have requirements for party registration and the allocation of legislative seats, the severity of the Russian requirements combined with the overall hostile tone of the Putin administration towards unregulated democracy combine to create serious doubts about the motivation for these reforms.

³⁶ Council of Europe, Parliamentary Assembly, “Resolution 1547,” April 18, 2007, <http://assembly.coe.int/Mainf.asp?link=/Documents/AdoptedText/ta07/ERES1547.htm> (accessed April 16, 2013)

³⁷ Gordon Bowen, “Russian Legislative and Electoral Systems,” <http://www.mbc.edu/faculty/gbowen/duma.htm> (accessed April 11, 2013)

³⁸ Vladimir Gel'man, “The Transformation of Russia's Party System,” *Russian Analytical Digest*, no. 19 [2007]: 13. Additional hurdles included increasing national membership requirements from 10,000 to 50,000 members, with regional branches required in two thirds rather than half of the country's regions.

³⁹ According to a Levada Center fact sheet, 11 parties which received votes in the 2003 election but failed to meet the minimum vote requirements lost their status as political parties by 2007 including the Development of Enterprise and Constitutional Democratic parties, http://www.russiavotes.org/duma/list_parties_2003_2007.php

Extent of the Middle Class

As the continued weakness of Russian democracy suggests, the middle class as an independent group remained a relatively limited phenomenon during this time period. Even as Russia managed to rebound from the financial crisis of 1997, the number of middle class Russians at the beginning of the decade remained low. Estimates in 2002 ranged from as low as 7% by the Carnegie Foundation to an optimistic 19% according to the research firm Premier–TGI – an annual survey of consumer behavior and attitudes.⁴⁰ This objective evaluation differed sharply from Russians self-evaluation as a study by the Russian Academy of Sciences' Institute of Philosophy revealed that more than half of Russians at that time considered themselves to be middle class – a discrepancy possibly caused by the popular notion of the middle class as consisting of ownership of a car, flat, and dacha.⁴¹ Russians who owned all three would likely self-classify as middle class even if they lacked other non-economic elements of a middle class identity. By 2006, the number of middle class Russians had grown due to Putin's revival of the Russian economy. Zaslavskaja estimates the extent of the middle class at 11% of the general population – 64% growth in less than five years.⁴²

On its face, this growth paints a cautiously optimistic picture of a potential base for liberal democracy in Russia. A 64% increase over 4 years in any demographic group is significant especially if such growth can be sustained in the longer term. At the same

⁴⁰ Sam Vaknin, "Russia's Middle Class," *United Press International*, December 18, 2002, <http://samvak.tripod.com/brief-middleclass01.html> (accessed April 13, 2013)

⁴¹ Ibid.; Salmenniemi, *Rethinking Class in Russia*, 2012

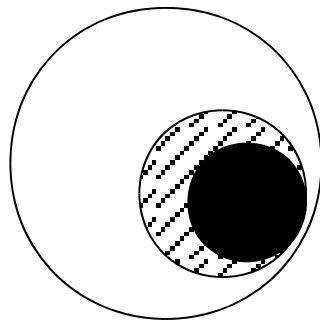
⁴² Zaslavskaja, "Contemporary Russian Society," 2006, 28

time, expectations should be tempered by the realization that even after this growth the middle class accounted for just 11% of society. It seems unrealistic to expect such a small fraction of society to affect significant changes on the social and political landscape even if they so desired. The bottom line is that while such growth is encouraging, the political reality shows that it still fails to provide a sufficiently broad base for the emergence of liberal democracy in Russia.

Identity of the Middle Class

Zaslavskaja identifies the middle stratum of Russian society during the early 2000s as mid-level state employees, small to mid size entrepreneurs, managers at private companies and highly qualified professionals with in demand skills such as technology or finance.⁴³ This middle stratum includes the middle class, but is not analogous to the middle class as it includes state sector employees. The relationship of the middle class to the middle stratum and the middle stratum in turn to Russian society as a whole can be imagined in terms of a series of shrinking circles as shown in figure 4.1

Figure 4.1: *The Relationship of the Middle Class to the General Population*



⁴³ Zaslavskaja, "Contemporary Russian Society," 2006, 27 - 28

In this figure, the transparent circle represents the entirety of the Russian population, the hatched represents the segment of the population which falls in the middle income stratum, and the black circle is the portion of the middle stratum which represents a true middle class.

Mitigating Factors

While the Russian economy grew substantially during this period especially compared to the 1990s there was not a significant corresponding growth of liberal democratic ideals. Despite growth of small and medium sized businesses, there was no significant corresponding push for democratization.⁴⁴ In part, this can be explained by the fact that much of the growing middle class was not independent in any meaningful sense of the word. Many of the Russians who were able to climb into the middle class were neutralized as a base for political opposition by virtue of their employment in the government sector. Much the same as soviet bureaucrats two decades early, it would be naïve to expect these “middle class” Russians to behave as in independent socioeconomic group. As a report by the Levada Center in 2004 noted, based on their income levels many mid to upper-level government bureaucrats fall into the boundaries of the middle class, but are regarded by middle class workers in the private sector as a hostile force at worst and unfriendly partners at best.⁴⁵ This means that data showing a growing number

⁴⁴ Kommersant, "Small Business Share in GDP 13-15%," February 19, 2008, http://www.kommersant.com/p-12072/r_500/economic_growth/ (accessed April 14, 2013); Interfax, "Putin Dissatisfied with Share of SMEs in Russian GDP," November 15, 2012, <http://www.interfax.com/newsinf.asp?id=375625> (accessed April 13, 2013) - The share of GDP accounted for by small businesses grew from 4% in 2004 to 13% in 2007

⁴⁵ Aleksei Levinson, Olga Stychevskaya and Yakov Shukin. "О тех, кто называет себя 'средний класс';" *Вестник Общественного Мнения* 5 [2004]: 52

of Russians whose income could be labeled middle class should be taken with a grain of salt and the understanding that as much as 54% of the middle class in 2007 was composed of government bureaucrats with only 35% of the middle class employed by private businesses.⁴⁶ Even further, 15% of the middle class held positions in the security and law enforcement apparatus.⁴⁷

Middle Class Attitudes towards Democracy

While comprehensive surveys of middle class attitudes towards democracy are somewhat lacking during this time period, data from the Pew Research Center's Global Attitudes Project supports the assertion that middle class Russians have more favorable attitudes towards democracy. Table 4.2 is based on data collected by the Pew Research Center's Global Attitudes Project. The first column lists several statements presented to respondents while subsequent columns break down the percentage of respondents who agreed with each statement by their income level.

⁴⁶ Mikhail Sergeyev, "Stagnation of the Middle Class," *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, January 24, 2007

⁴⁷ Georgy Ilyichov, "Sensation: 20% of Russia's Population Now Belongs to the Middle Class," *Izvestia*, January 13, 2006; By law enforcement, I am referring to employees in the prosecutors' offices, the offices of internal affairs, etc., not necessarily police officers

Table 4.2: *Pew Global Attitudes Survey*

	Middle Class ⁴⁸	Lower Income
Honest Elections with at least 2 Parties are Very Important	51%	37%
Free speech is the most important value ⁴⁹	24%	17%
Freedom from hunger is the most important value	38%	44%

Source: Pew Research Center, "The Global Middle Class", *Global Attitudes Project*, 2009, <http://www.pewglobal.org/2009/02/12/the-global-middle-class/> (accessed April 13, 2013)

As the table shows, there is a 14 percentage point gap in support for free and fair elections between middle class and lower income Russians. Emphasis on freedom of speech over freedom from hunger or crime and violence is lower among both categories, but support is still higher among the middle class. Higher emphasis on freedom of hunger is to be expected among lower income Russians for whom putting food on the table is an immediate concern while voicing controversial opinions is more of a luxury. These results are consistent with the theoretical literature which suggests that the higher level of material security allows the middle class to focus on more abstract pursuits such as liberal democracy. They are also consistent with my central thesis that the development of a robust middle class is central to the sustenance of liberal democracy in Russia. There is no way to further subdivide respondents into government and non-government employees, but the results show that support for democracy is noticeable higher among the middle class despite the inclusion of groups with a stake in the existing power

⁴⁸ Based on studies by the World Bank, the Pew Research Center defined the global middle class as people earning more than \$4,286 per year in standardized international dollars.

⁴⁹ Respondents were asked to choose which of the following most important to them personally: free speech, freedom of religion, freedom from hunger and poverty, or freedom from crime and violence

structure. This could mean that even state employees display something resembling a middle class identity or that support among privately employed members of the middle class is high enough to hide lower levels of support among government workers.

Considering how central free speech is to the ideal of a liberal democracy, the lower level of support for freedom of speech among the middle class compared to honest, multiparty elections may be even more interesting.⁵⁰ One explanation is that middle class Russians believe that government leaders – as long as they are legitimately elected - deserve some measure of respect or immunity from criticism. It is also possible that the low threshold for inclusion in the middle class for the purposes of this survey – \$4,286 – meant that some individuals were included which now or in the past have struggled with food insecurity. The question was phrased in terms of choosing the most important value which could lead to lower levels of support for free speech if some respondents valued free speech but found hunger to be a more immediate concern.

Table 4.3 shows further polling data that provides a demographic breakdown of support for democratization among Russians. Table 4.3 contains polling data from the All Russian Center for the Study of Public Opinion – a leading Russian sociological research firm – from a survey conducted in August 2005. Two of the statements given to respondents were: 1) Russia needs democratization of the political system, widening of political rights, and the limiting of government bureaucracy's impact on politics and society; and 2) For Russia it is now more important to strengthen the government,

⁵⁰ Toni Massaro and Robin Stryker. "Freedom of Speech, Liberal Democracy, and Emerging Evidence on Civility and Effective Democratic Engagement." *Arizona Law Review* 54, no. 2 [2012]: 403-404

guiding order in all spheres of social and political life. The percentage of respondents who agreed with those statements is broken up into columns by education level and monthly income.

Table 4.3: *Demographic Breakdown of Support for Democratization*

	Demographic Group of Respondents							
	Education				Monthly Income			
	Beginning education or lower	School/Poly-Technic school	Technical Education	At least 3 years of college	Less than 1500 rubles	1501-3000 rubles	3000-5000 rubles	Greater than 5001 rubles
Russia needs democratization	14.09	24.09	23.45	23.28	21.62	20.53	26.83	21.99
More important to strengthen the government,	68.64	60.8	62.93	64.37	63.18	66.6	61.38	67.38

Source: VTsIOM [All Russia Center for the Study of Public Opinion]. “Poll of Russian Public Opinion.” August 14, 200. http://wciom.ru/zh/print_q.php?s_id=185&q_id=15106&date=14.08.2005 (accessed April 11, 2013).⁵¹

The data shows increased levels of support for democracy and civil rights among Russians making between 3000 and 5000 rubles/month – a lower middle class income. It is interesting to note that support for democracy is lower and support for a stronger state is higher among both lower income and upper echelon strata of Russian society. While this thesis is focused primarily on differences between middle class and lower income individuals, the declining support for democracy above a certain income level is

⁵¹ The exact question asked: “Recently, many people are talking about the necessity of transition in the life of society. Choose the statement about transition which you agree with the most”

intriguing and perhaps a starting point for future research. Also included in the table is the breakdown of responses by education level because some definitions of the middle include some minimum education. While there is no direct correlation between increasing levels of income and support for democratization, it is intriguing to note that the least educated individuals – likely to find themselves in a lower income stratum – are also the least supportive of democracy and most supportive of an empowered state apparatus. Such data certainly appears compatible with the claim that the primary source of support for democracy in Russia is the middle class.

Conclusion

Although this time period was troubling from the standpoint of liberal democratic freedoms, the growth of the middle class provides some reason for optimism. Putin's re-centralization of power reversed the lawlessness of the Yeltsin years, but his selective application of the rule of law and manipulation of the electoral process reinforced the illiberal nature of the Russian regime. The concentration of power was widely accepted and even welcomed by Russians because of the continued weakness of the middle class relative to their Western counterparts and the predominance of lower income strata more concerned with economic sustenance than political freedoms. This link between a weak middle class and weak democracy is backed up by polling results showing low levels of support for liberal values outside of the middle class. For Russia, the Putin years proved to be a case where the more things changed, the more they stayed the same.

Reform Versus Relapse: The Tandem Years

“The demise of the Soviet Union was the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century” ~ Vladimir Putin¹

This chapter looks at the Medvedev presidency as well as the managed return of power to Putin in 2012. Polling data regarding middle class attitudes is lacking during this time period, so the chapter draws primarily on a historical analysis of the Russian political and economic situation to establish the compatibility of the hypothesized link between the middle class and democracy with reality. Specifically, this chapter examines the dynamics of the protest movement since December 2011 to contrast the political concerns of middle class Russians with the economic and social concerns of most Russians. Ultimately, it argues that the protest movement is unlikely to result in liberal democratic reforms so long as the movement lacks a substantial, independent middle class social base.

Introduction

The last five years represent a series of contrasts primarily revolving around the figures of Medvedev and Putin. Despite the nondemocratic anointing of Dmitri Medvedev by Putin as his successor, when Medvedev first took office in 2008 there was a sense of hope among many Russians and even Western observers as Medvedev was

¹ Vladimir Putin, Quoted in “Putin Calls Collapse of Soviet Union 'catastrophe',” *Washington Post*, April 26, 2005, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2005/apr/26/20050426-120658-5687r/?page=all> (accessed April 18, 2013)

considered to be relatively liberal in his political philosophy.² Further stoking these positive feelings, Medvedev promised a modernization program which promoted societal development rather than simply growth which produced relatively few benefits for most Russians.³ Medvedev advocated for economic diversification and increased innovation.⁴ Such policies along with a rhetorical emphasis on governmental reform provided a favorable environment for the spread of a middle class identity.

However, this spirit of optimism and reform came under assault from both economic and political angles. The global economic crisis of 2008 sent energy prices tumbling which resulted in the serious contraction of the Russian economy and dried up a major source of revenues used to finance social spending by the government.⁵ As in most financial downturns, the Russian middle class was negatively impacted to a significant degree.⁶ Beyond economic difficulties, the single event which most transformed the Russian political landscape was the announcement by then Prime Minister Vladimir Putin in November 2011 that he would run in the upcoming presidential elections in accordance with the agreement made between Medvedev and himself in 2007.⁷ This announcement

² Neil Buckley, "Medvedev Palatable to Russian Liberals and Western States," *Financial Times*, December 11, 2007.

³ Richard Rousseau, "Lights and Shadows of Medvedev's Modernization Plan," *Europe's World*, September 20, 2010, http://www.europesworld.org/NewEnglish/Home_old/PartnerPosts/tabid/671/PostID/1812/language/en-US/Default.aspx (accessed April 13, 2013)

⁴ Andrew Kramer, "Economic Reforms Likely to Continue Under Putin," *New York Times*, September 25, 2011

⁵ Luke Harding, "Russia Close to Economic Collapse and Oil Price Falls, Experts Predict," *The Guardian*, November 20, 2008, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2008/nov/20/oil-russia-economy-putin-medvedev> (accessed April 14, 2013)

⁶ Ben Aris, "Russia's Middle Class Walloped by Crisis," *Moscow Times*, October 28, 2011. <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/blogs/434424/post/russias-middle-class-walloped-by-crisis/446648.html> (accessed April 13, 2013)

⁷ Ellen Barry, "Putin Once More Moves to Assume Top Job in Russia," *New York Times*, September 25, 2011.

increased the widespread feeling among the general population of their inability to influence the country's political process and acted as a catalyst for a very public opposition movement.⁸

Like the alleged voting irregularities in both the December 2011 parliamentary election and March 2012 presidential vote, the arranged transfer of power did not represent a new phenomenon for Russian politics.⁹ My explanation for the unexpected outcry in this case is the continued growth of a middle class during Medvedev's tenure which had begun to hope for a more liberal, western style of democracy. This contention is supported by polls showing the majority of protesters pushing for democratic reforms could be categorized as middle class.¹⁰ That is not to say that all of the mobilized activists are liberal reformers. There is certainly a marriage of convenience between such protesters and other factions united only in their opposition to Putin's continued hold on power.¹¹ The radical nationalists and leftist parties generally fall into this category.

Despite all this, independent polling agencies continue to show a majority of Russians support Putin as the country's leader.¹² Not coincidentally, the surveys also show

⁸ Levada Analytical Center, *Russian Public Opinion 2010-2011* [Moscow: Levada Center, 2012], 51, <http://en.d7154.agava.net/sites/en.d7154.agava.net/files/Levada2011Eng.pdf> (accessed April 13, 2013); At the end of 2011 Russians were asked whether elections made the government do what the general public needs – essentially asking whether elections make politicians accountable to their constituents. Only 8% of respondents said “Yes, to a considerable degree”. 52% said either “Not so much” or “Absolutely not”

⁹ For a more in depth look at previous managed transfers of power see the discussion of the 1996 election, Yeltsin's appointment of Putin in 2000, and Putin's choice of Medvedev in 2007

¹⁰ Leon Aron, “Russia's Protesters: The People, Ideals and Prospects,” *American Enterprise Institute*, August 9, 2012, <http://www.aei.org/outlook/foreign-and-defense-policy/regional/europe/russias-protesters-the-people-ideals-and-prospects/> (accessed April 13, 2013)

¹¹ RIA Novosti, “Tens of Thousands Mass in Fresh Russia Vote Protest”, December 24, 2011, <http://en.rian.ru/russia/20111224/170465766.html> (accessed April 11, 2013). The protest coalition included Communist, Nationalist, and Liberal factions

¹² Interfax, “Russians Support Putin, not Happy with State Duma – Poll,” February 21, 2013, <http://russialist.org/russians-support-putin-not-happy-with-state-duma-poll/> (accessed April 14, 2013)

an overwhelming majority of Russians consider economic stability to be more important than liberal democracy.¹³ While the protest movement highlights the recent growth of the middle class, such data reinforces the continuing lack of a broad, independent middle class. Putin has proved himself to be a master of exploiting the economic fears of population which considers even its meager financial situation to be continually vulnerable to a return to the chaotic 1990s.¹⁴ Additionally, the growth of jobs in the government bureaucracy along with subsidies for energy prices and social spending have helped maintain a dependence on the government which significantly diminishes the potential base of supporters for true reforms.¹⁵ Unless this situation is altered by the rise of an independent middle class which is sufficiently organized and substantial enough to both formulate and advocate for its own economic and civic interests, the prospects for sustained liberal democracy in Russia are likely to remain bleak at best.

Middle Class Development

At the beginning of this period, the Russian middle class had just begun to seriously feel the effects of the global economic recession.¹⁶ Nevertheless, measuring the middle class continued to be a complicated proposition. Russian sociologist Tatiana Maleva created measurements of the middle class in 2008 using professional status –

¹³ Pew Research Center, “Public Opinion in Russia,” 2012

¹⁴ Leon Aron, “Russia’s Protesters,” 2012

¹⁵ Alissa Carbonnel, “Seeking Kremlin Return, Putin Pledges Spending Increases,” *Reuters News*, February 13, 2012, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/02/13/us-russia-putin-idUSTRE81C10L20120213> (accessed April 11, 2013); Muhammad Iqbal, “Increase in social spending to prevent unrest Russia: Putin,” *Business Recorder*, October 17, 2011, <http://www.brecorder.com/world/europe/32079-increase-in-social-spending-to-prevent-unrest-russia-putin.html> (accessed April 14, 2013); Belanovsky et al., “Socio-Economic Change,” 39

¹⁶ Brian Whitmore, “Requiem for Russia’s Middle Class?,” *Radio Free Europe*, October 5, 2008, http://www.rferl.org/content/Requiem_For_Russias_Middle_Class/1294084.html (accessed April 13, 2013)

defined by a combination of higher education experience, regular employment, non-physical labor, and management position – possession of durable goods such as cars, washing machines and televisions, and self identification.¹⁷ Her study showed that 21% of the population met the basic income requirements for inclusion in the middle class, 22% met occupational and educational standards, and 40% self-identified as middle class, but only 7% exhibited all three properties.¹⁸ While the 2008 crisis did not decimate the middle class to the same extent as the disorder of the 1990s, its effect was hardly beneficial. In fact, the middle class arguably bore the brunt of this crisis as many workers were forced to change occupations due to layoffs and typically took a pay cut in the process.¹⁹

We continue to see difficulties in distinguishing an independent middle class during the Medvedev and Putin administrations. Many Russians who self-identify as middle class – usually because of their income level – are in fact closely linked to and reliant on the state for their economic well-being.²⁰ At the same time, Putin and Medvedev’s economic policies did foster some real growth among the middle class.²¹

¹⁷ Tatiana Maleva, “Srednii klass vchera, segodnia, zavtra,” *Institut Sovremennogo Razvitiia* 8 [2008]: 10-11

¹⁸ Ibid.,

¹⁹ Lilia Ovcharova, “Russia's Middle Class: At the Centre or on the Periphery of Russian Politics,” *European Union Institute for Security Studies*, February 16, 2012, http://www.iss.europa.eu/fr/publications/detail-page/article/russias-middle-class-at-the-centre-or-on-the-periphery-of-russian-politics/#_ftn5 (accessed April 13, 2013)

²⁰ Valeria Khamrayeva, “President's Autumn: Sociologists and Political Scientists Warn that President Putin Might Start Losing Popularity before Very Long,” *RBC Daily*, September 19, 2012, <http://www.rbcdaily.ru/politics/562949984744943> (accessed April 14, 2013); Lilia Ovcharova, “Russia's Middle Class,” 2012

²¹ Adrian Monck, “Medvedev Calls for Greater Competition in Russian Politics, Business and Social Services,” *World Economic Forum*, January 23, 2013, <http://www.weforum.org/news/medvedev-calls-greater-competition-russian-politics-business-and-social-services> (accessed April 13, 2013)

Medvedev in particular focused on private sector growth during his five years in office – embarking on an ambitious strategy of privatizing \$10 billion in state assets annually and opening more industries to foreign investment.²² A particular area of growth during this time period was small business. The output of this sector – traditionally associated with middle class entrepreneurs, managers, and workers – grew from 13% of GDP in 2007 to 21% in 2012.²³ While these figures are still underwhelming compared to 70% of GDP associated with small businesses in Western economies, they represent a dramatic improvement over the 4% of GDP associated with such enterprises at the end of Putin's first term in 2004.²⁴

Moving forward, the Russian government has set the goal of increasing the percentage of the population employed by small businesses to 70% by 2020.²⁵ If successful, this effort could have significant implications for the political development of Russia. Based on the thesis that a strong, independent middle class is a force for liberal democracy, Putin may unwittingly be creating the social force which brings an end to his era of sovereign democracy. As more Russians reduce their economic dependence on the government and join the ranks of the middle class, Putin's base of support among working class Russians is likely to shrink. With the next presidential elections scheduled

²² Andrew Kramer, "Economic Reforms Likely to Continue Under Putin," *New York Times*, September 25, 2011

²³ Interfax, "Putin Dissatisfied with Share of SMEs in Russian GDP," 2012; Kommersant, "Small Business Share in GDP 13-15%," 2008

²⁴ Russian Ministry of Economic Development, "Economics, Business, Society Stats Data from Russia", *In Way to Russia*, 2009, <http://www.waytorussia.net/Features/Stats> (accessed April 12, 2013); Kommersant, "Small Business Share in GDP 13-15%," 2008

²⁵ Voice of Russia, "Collecting Statistics about Russian Small Businesses," April 2, 2011, <http://english.ruvr.ru/2011/04/02/48357108.html> (accessed April 13, 2013)

for 2018, it is not out of the realm of possibility that Putin will face an actual, credible challenge should he choose to run for re-election. That being said, it is also quite conceivable that efforts to enlarge the middle class will fail to fulfill their promise – much like the majority of Medvedev's reform efforts – and Putin's authority will remain unchecked at least through his second term.

Illiberal Democracy

As discussed in the introduction, one of the hallmarks of democracy – liberal or illiberal – is the regular occurrence of genuinely competitive elections.²⁶ A certain incumbent advantage does exist – which can extend to a retiring officials appointed successor, but in a democracy the end result is not a predetermined fait accompli. In 2007, much as in 2000 with the transition from Yeltsin to Putin, no such competition for succession took place.²⁷ That is not to say that Medvedev's ascension to power was without hope for supporters of democracy. Prior to his election as president, Medvedev was known as a relatively liberal member of Putin's inner circle.²⁸ He was chosen over the objections of members of the *siloviki* – Russia's security forces community – who preferred a more hard-line candidate such as Sergei Ivanov or former intelligence officer Vladislav Surkov.²⁹ As a result, there was hope in some quarters that Medvedev could represent a departure from the para-constitutional “sovereign democracy” of the Putin

²⁶ Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, 1976

²⁷ The Economist, “The Pseudoelection,” January 31, 2008, <http://www.economist.com/node/10609262> (accessed April 11, 2013)

²⁸ Chris Baldwin, “Medvedev Admits He (sic) Nervous Taking Top Kremlin Job”, *Reuters News*, December 20, 2007, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2007/12/20/us-russia-medvedev-idUSL2040762720071220> (accessed April 11, 2013).

²⁹ *Ibid.*,

years.³⁰ Even domestic opponents of Putin's regime seemed to think the Medvedev represented a break from the previous mode of governance.³¹ While Medvedev's administration did break from the Putin legacy on several points, most of the hope for democratization went unrealized.

Putin's return to the presidency in 2012 raises another set of issues regarding the quality of Russian democracy. As late as September 2011, some analysts genuinely believed that Medvedev stood a chance of retaining his position outright or at least presenting a credible challenge to Putin's re-coronation.³² This illusion was shattered by Medvedev's theatrical nomination of Putin for the presidency at the national convention of the United Russia Party.³³ Shortly thereafter, Putin remarked in an interview that the entire arrangement had been agreed upon over five years prior as a means of skirting the constitutional limit of two consecutive terms.³⁴ While there is no way to conclusively determine if such an arrangement in fact existed, the fact remains that this type of controlled transfer of power is not uncharacteristic of the Russian experience since the fall of the Soviet Union. Yeltsin anointed Putin who anointed Medvedev. After 1996, it is

³⁰ Luke Harding, "Putin Anoints Deputy Prime Minister as Heir to Presidency," *The Guardian*, December 10, 2007, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2007/dec/11/russia.lukeharding> (accessed April 14, 2013)

³¹ Andrew Osborn, "Russian Reformer Voices Optimism About Medvedev," *Wall Street Journal*, June 25, 2008, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB121434109795000879.html> (accessed April 13, 2013)

³² Ellen Barry, "In Russian Leadership Battle, Medvedev Hints He Lacks Fire," *New York Times*, September 12, 2011; Timothy Heritage and Kiryl Sukhotski, "Putin's authority wanes in Russia - Medvedev adviser," *Reuters News*, September 5, 2011, <http://in.reuters.com/article/2011/09/05/idINIndia-59155920110905> (accessed April 13, 2013)

³³ Voice of Russia, "Putin Nominated for President," September 24, 2011, <http://english.ruvr.ru/2011/09/24/56672671.html> (accessed April 13, 2013)

³⁴ Ilya Arkhipov and Henry Meyer, "Putin Will Run for Russian Presidency, Seeking Longest Tenure Since Stalin," *Bloomberg News*, September 25, 2011, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2011-09-24/putin-to-run-again-for-russian-presidency-in-2012-medvedev-may-be-premier.html> (accessed April 11, 2013)

hard to argue that any presidential election has been democratic if legitimate competition is a prerequisite for democracy. Moreover, such an arrangement explicitly designed to circumvent constitutional limits seems more appropriate for a personalistic illiberal regime in South America not an alleged European democracy.³⁵

Another hallmark of illiberal and facade democracies has been the manipulation of the country's constitution essentially at will.³⁶ This manipulation can appropriate additional powers to the ruling coalition, remove checks on current executive authority, or curtail some form of opposition. In any case, the process of constitutional modification is used to cloak some illiberal policy in the guise of legitimacy. In the case of Russia during this time period, pressure arose from Putin and his supporters to extend the presidential term from four years to six.³⁷ The amendment was formally offered by the United Russia Party and approved by Medvedev in 2008, but most analysts agree that the entire sequence of events was orchestrated by Putin himself.³⁸ Amendments to the constitution are not in and of themselves a violation of democratic principles. But when an amendment intended to increase the authority of a specific individual is pushed

³⁵ Almudena Calatrava and Pertossi Mayra, "Former Argentine President Nestor Kirchner Dies," *Associated Press*, October 27, 2010, http://www.boston.com/news/world/latinamerica/articles/2010/10/27/argentine_state_tv_nestor_kirchner_has_died/?page=2 (accessed April 11, 2013). One example is the transfer of power between Nestor and Christina Kirchner in which appeared planned to skirt consecutive term limits. While the Kirchners did not head a classic authoritarian regime they attempted to stifle dissent at the expense of liberal democracy

³⁶ Associated Press, "In Latin America, Incumbents Winning and Dominating as Term Limits are Increasingly Loosened," October 24, 2012, *Fox News*, <http://www.foxnews.com/world/2012/10/24/in-latin-america-incumbents-winning-and-dominating-as-term-limits-are/> (accessed April 11, 2013); Recent examples include Hugo Chavez in Venezuela, and Alberto Fujimori in Peru

³⁷ Philip Pan, "Russia Lengthens Presidential Tenures," *Washington Post*, December 31, 2008, http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2008-12-31/world/36865902_1_sergeri-mitrokhin-presidential-term-early-presidential-vote (accessed April 13, 2013)

³⁸ The Economist, "On Putin's Terms," November 14, 2008, <http://www.economist.com/node/12622987> (accessed April 11, 2013)

through by a party which dominates both national and state legislatures a healthy amount of skepticism is warranted.³⁹

Table 5.1 shows Freedom House's independent evaluation of the quality of Russian democracy. As discussed in the previous chapter, the annual freedom rating is given on a scale of 1-7 with 1 being the most free. The rating is also broken down into the subcategories of political rights and civil liberties which are rated on the same 1-7 scale.

Table 5.1: *Freedom House Ratings: Russia 2008-2013*

Year	Freedom Rating	Political Rights	Civil Liberties
2008	5.5	6	5
2009	5.5	6	5
2010	5.5	6	5
2011	5.5	6	5
2012	5.5	6	5
2013	5.5	6	5

Source: Freedom House, *Freedom in the World Report, 2002 – 2012*, <http://www.freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2008/russia> (accessed April 13, 2013)

The Freedom House rating of Russia is best described as continuity. The situation neither improved nor deteriorated during Medvedev's government or Putin's subsequent return to power. Whether this evaluation is accurate can certainly be debated. As previously discussed, a managed transfer of power – or two in this case – is nothing new. However, the government's response to opposition demands for free and fair elections in late 2011 and 2012 seems to be noticeably more repressive than its past actions. During

³⁹ Philip Pan, "Russia Lengthens Presidential Tenures," 2008; Luke Harding, "Russian Vote Paves Way for Early Putin Comeback," *The Guardian*, November 14, 2008, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2008/nov/14/russia-putin> (accessed April 13, 2014)

Putin's first term, he targeted influential figures – hostile oligarchs in particular – who he considered a threat but rarely if ever used outright repression against ordinary Russians. In the aftermath of the December 2011 parliamentary elections however, government security forces attempted to limit public protest by denying or modifying applications for large public gatherings, arresting both leaders and run of the mill protesters, and exponentially increasing the financial penalties for unauthorized protests.⁴⁰

Freedom of the press – a hallmark of liberal democracy – has also suffered in recent years. Table 5.3 shows both the raw press freedom score and the international ranking of Russia for press freedom. Both numbers are calculated and published by Reporters Without Borders – a non-profit NGO based in France dedicated to protecting freedom of information around the world. The press freedom score is calculated on a scale of 0 – 100 with 0 representing total respect for media freedom.

Table 5.2: *Press Freedom Rating: Russia 2008-2013*

Year	Press Freedom Score	Country Ranking
2008	47.5	141
2009	60.88	153
2010	49.9	140
2011/2012	66	142
2013	43.42	148

Source: Reporters Without Borders, *2013 World Press Freedom Index*, [Paris: Reporters Without Borders, 2013] http://en.rsf.org/spip.php?page=classement&id_rubrique=1054 (accessed April 11, 2013)

⁴⁰ BBC News, “Russia Protests: Putin Opponents March in Moscow”, June 12, 2012, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-18405306> (accessed April 11, 2013); RT.Com, “Protests No More: Opposition Activist’s Rally Request Rejected, June 26, 2012,” <http://rt.com/news/prime-time/rally-udaltsov-rejected-law-814/> (accessed April 13, 2013)

As Table 5.2 shows, the 2013 Press Freedom Index of Reporters Without Borders ranked Russia 148th out of 179 countries for its media crackdown.⁴¹ Specific measures of repression included the re-criminalization of defamation, banning foreign funding of human rights organizations, and stricter control of the internet.⁴² While there are variations in press freedom ratings even among western democracies and the rating does not take into account regime type, the Secretary-General of the organization has noted that democracies typically ensure stronger protections for freedom of the press.⁴³ The implication is that the lack of media freedom reflects Russia's illiberal governance.

Dynamics of Protest

Following the 2011 parliamentary elections and 2012 presidential elections, a dynamic protest movement emerged the likes of which had not been seen in Russia since the fall of the Soviet Union. A number of diverse groups spanning the entire political spectrum were united by their shared disdain for what they perceived as the illiberal nature of the Russian electoral system.⁴⁴ Left wing politician Sergei Udaltsov spoke at the same rallies as liberal blogger Alexei Navalny and former treasury secretary Alexei Kudrin.⁴⁵ The unity of such disparate actors in support of free and fair elections has been

⁴¹ Reporters Without Borders, *2013 World Press Freedom Index*, [Paris: Reporters Without Borders, 2013] http://en.rsf.org/spip.php?page=classement&id_rubrique=1054 (accessed April 11, 2013)

⁴² Clare Richardson, "Russia's Press Freedom Score back down after Crackdown," *Reuters News Blog*, January 31, 2013, <http://blogs.reuters.com/events/2013/01/31/russia-press-freedom/> (accessed April 13, 2013)

⁴³ Reporters Without Borders, *World Press Freedom Index*, 2013

⁴⁴ RIA Novosti, "Tens of Thousands Mass," December 24, 2011

⁴⁵ Marc Bennetts, "Russian Opposition Leaders Detained at Anti-Torture Protest," *RIA Novosti*, October 27, 2012, <http://en.rian.ru/politics/20121027/176973556.html> (accessed April 13, 2013); Amos, Howard and Telegraph Staff. "Russian Protests: Live", *The Telegraph*, December 24, 2011, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/russia/8976814/Russian-protests-live.html> (accessed April 11, 2013)

pointed to by some commentators as an indication that Russian civil society has finally matured to the point that it poses a threat to the continuation of illiberal governance.⁴⁶ However, a year later the protest movement has been unable to sustain its early momentum. While the government is still taking a hard-line approach – recently confining Udaltsov to house arrest for creating public disturbances – protesters have not been able to draw crowds of 300 – 400,000 as they did in February 2012.⁴⁷ Admittedly, support for Putin is down from its zenith but his approval rating in February 2013 was still 65%,⁴⁸ and the decline has not been accompanied by a corresponding increase in support for democratic governance.⁴⁹ All of these epiphenomena can be explained by the continued weakness of the Russian middle class as a societal and political actor.

In the aftermath of the December 2011 elections, Russia witnessed the largest protests in recent memory. The first coordinated event, held December 10, drew over 50,000 protesters in Moscow and 10,000 in St. Petersburg.⁵⁰ The protesters rallied around opposition to perceived electoral fraud – demanding that the results of the December 3rd election be annulled and new, clean elections be scheduled.⁵¹ By the time of the next

⁴⁶ Timothy Heritage, “Anti-Putin Protesters Show Staying Power in Russia,” *Reuters News*, February 5, 2012, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/02/05/us-russia-protests-idUSTRE8140D220120205> (accessed April 13, 2013)

⁴⁷ Radio Free Europe, “Russian Court Orders Udaltsov Under House Arrest,” February 9, 2013, <http://www.rferl.org/content/russia-udaltsov-house-arrest/24897645.html> (accessed April 13, 2013); Ellen Barry, “As Putin’s Grip Gets Tighter, a Time of Protest Fades in Russia,” *New York Times*, January 6, 2013; Michael Birnbaum, “Thousands Protest against Putin, but Opposition Momentum Has Slowed,” *Washington Post*, December 15, 2012, http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2012-12-15/world/35846772_1_bolotnaya-square-thousands-protest-moscow-square (accessed April 13, 2013)

⁴⁸ Interfax, “Russians Support Putin,” 2013

⁴⁹ Pew Research Center, “Public Opinion in Russia,” 2012

⁵⁰ The Guardian, “Russian Election Protests – Saturday 10 December 2011,” *News Blog*, December 10, 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/global/2011/dec/10/russia-elections-putin-protest> (accessed April 11, 2013)

⁵¹ The Guardian, “Russian Election Protests,” 2011

major protest on December 24, the movement had evolved beyond a simple demand for *chestniye vibori* – clean elections – to a broader attack on Putin's entire system of managed democracy.⁵² While Medvedev reacted in his State of the Union by promising electoral reform, he maintained the position that the elections had been legitimate and the results would stand.⁵³ After a six week break, the civil society movement For Fair Elections organized the largest demonstration yet – a mile long march from Kaluzhskaya Square to Bolotnaya Square in the city center – with estimates of attendance ranging from 35,000 by the police to 200,000 by event organizers.⁵⁴ Bolotnaya appears to have represented the high point of the protest movement. While civic society groups similar to the For Fair Elections movement have continued to organize events, none of them have drawn crowds on the same scale or been marked with such effective but non-violent demonstrations.⁵⁵ It is possible that some future event could catalyze the re-emergence of protests, but for now it appears that time and other factors have dampened the fires of democratic protest.

As the previous chapters have shown, neither the electoral manipulation nor the

⁵² Phil Black, "Protesters Take to Moscow Streets, Calling for Fair Elections," *CNN.com*, December 24, 2011, http://www.cnn.com/2011/12/24/world/europe/russia-protests/index.html?hpt=wo_c2/ (accessed April 12, 2013); A popular slogan among protesters was "*Rossiya bez Putina*" - Russia without Putin.

⁵³ Ibid.,

⁵⁴ Al-Jazeera, "Interactive: Election Protests in Russia", February 28, 2012, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/interactive/2012/02/2012223112452977437.html> (accessed April 11, 2013)

⁵⁵ Lynn Berry and Vladimir Isachenkov, "Russia Protests: Opposition Floods Moscow Streets In Anti-Putin Rally," *Associated Press*, September 15, 2012, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/09/15/russia-protests-anti-putin_n_1886463.html (accessed April 13, 2013); Will Englund and Kathy Lally, "In Moscow, Peaceful Protest Turns Violent," *Washington Post*, May 6, 2012, http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2012-05-06/world/35458694_1_bolotnaya-square-alexei-navalny-sergei-udaltsov (accessed April 11, 2013); Some later events involved clashes between protesters and pro-government counter protesters or security forces which have reduced the popular appeal of the protest movement

managed transfer of power was a novel occurrence in Russia at this time. The protests however, were quite unprecedented since at least the constitutional crisis of 1993.⁵⁶ What then explains the change in behavior? A large part can be chalked up to the growth of a political middle class since the beginning of the 2000s. However a more complete explanation recognizes the catalyzing role of disillusionment. When Dmitri Medvedev assumed the presidency in 2007, Western liberals were not the only ones caught up in his promises of liberalizing reform – both economic and political.⁵⁷ After Medvedev proved unable to deliver on most of his meaningful reform proposals, the result was disillusionment especially among the middle class which stood to gain the most from successful reform.⁵⁸ By calling attention to the serious problems of Russian society and then failing to solve them, Medvedev appears to have dissolved the complacency of the middle class as they realized that meaningful reform would have to come from within society rather than the government. This new self-mobilization gained prominence after the elections of United Russia and Putin were fraught with illegitimacy which completed the middle class's disillusionment.

Evidence of the constraints facing the protest movement became evident early on. While some protests occurred in smaller cities, the largest events were constrained to

⁵⁶ Andrew Osborn, "Protesters Chant 'Russia without Putin' as Kremlin's Opponents Stage Unprecedented Rally by Moscow River," *The Telegraph*, December 10, 2011, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/russia/8948526/Protesters-chant-Russia-without-Putin-as-Kremlins-opponents-stage-unprecedented-rally-by-Moscow-river.html> (accessed April 13, 2013)

⁵⁷ Vladimir Frolov, "Medvedev's Legacy as President," *Russia Profile*, May 11, 2012, http://russiaprofile.org/experts_panel/58597.html (accessed April 11, 2013)

⁵⁸ Evgenii Guntmakher, "Fundament Peremen," *Gazeta.ru*, May 2, 2012, http://www.gazeta.ru/comments/2012/05/02_a_4569433.shtml (accessed April 13, 2013); Vladimir Frolov, "Medvedev's Legacy as President," 2012

Moscow and St. Petersburg.⁵⁹ This was due not simply to the concentration of individuals in those two metropolises, but their status as the centers of the Russian middle class.⁶⁰ Even at the height of the protest movement in early 2012, protesters were often viewed by the average Russian as elitists who were out of touch with everyday life.⁶¹ In fact, over half of the protesters could be considered middle class and only 5% upper class, but since the majority of Russians were still lower income they differentiated themselves from the protest movement.⁶² As a result, data from the Russian Public Opinion Studies Center (VTsIOM) shows societal support for the protest movement remained fairly low and dwindled even further as the elections become more distant.⁶³

There is some support for the idea that the protest movement's slow decline was due to the stark ideological differences of its supporters. At one rally in June 2012, right-wing nationalist protesters verbally clashed with liberals at an event ostensibly designed as a joint rally.⁶⁴ Perhaps instead of the demographics political partisanship is to blame for the fizzling protest movement. Such a divide likely played somewhat of a role, but

⁵⁹ F. Stephen Larrabee, "Russia Protests Are Overblown by West--Putin Is Here to Stay," *RAND Corporation*, April 17, 2012, <http://www.rand.org/blog/2012/04/russia-protests-are-overblown-by-west-putin-is-here.html> (accessed April 13, 2013)

⁶⁰ Maria-Luiza Tirmaste, "Boris Titov Proposes to the Government and the Opposition," *Kommersant*, February 10, 2012.

⁶¹ Vadim Nikitin, "What Links Putin and US Republicans? Their Rivals Look like Elitists," *The Guardian*, January 20, 2013, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2013/jan/20/putin-republicans-rivals-look-like-elitists> (accessed April 13, 2013); Maria Portnyagina, "Summer Plans? Russians Take Their Protests on the Road," *Kommersant*, June 23, 2012, <http://worldcrunch.com/world-affairs/summer-plans-russians-take-their-protests-on-the-road/c1s5710/#.USrUL6VQG8A> (accessed April 13, 2013)

⁶² Leon Aron, "Russia's Protesters," 2012

⁶³ RT.com, "Protests Kaput? Russia's Enthusiasm for Rallies Dwindling – Poll," May 22, 2012, <http://rt.com/politics/protests-russia-putin-elections-presidency-2012-862/> (accessed April 13, 2013)

⁶⁴ Clara Weiss, "Protests in Russia: Liberals, Pseudo-Left March alongside Far Right," *International Committee of the Fourth International*, June 16, 2012, <http://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2012/06/prot-j16.html> (accessed April 13, 2013)

fails to explain why the initial protest movement failed to expand beyond the traditional power base of the middle class. The urban – rural divide represents a somewhat more plausible alternate cause, however, protests were especially widespread in Moscow and St. Petersburg compared even to other urban centers like Nizhni Novgorod.⁶⁵ The proof is by no means definitive, but at the same time it does support the centrality of the middle class to the development of democracy in Russia and the inhibitory nature of a large population of lower income individuals on that same development.

Looking towards the Future

While the last year was tumultuous for Russian society, as the dust settles the most striking result is what has not changed. Despite indictments by public opinion on the state of democracy in Russia, approval ratings for Putin have remained high.⁶⁶ Putin's current 65% approval rating is down from the heights of his first term but is actually on the rise in recent months.⁶⁷ The third relevant data point is the approval rating of the State Duma which stands in contrast to Putin's approval ratings at just 36%.⁶⁸ Taken together, the results of these three polls suggest that the majority of Russians still value pragmatic things like standards of living and economic security over the abstract concerns of liberal democracy. High approval of Putin indicates that public disapproval of the Duma is related to a widespread belief among Russians that the legislature is unable to take effective action to improve everyday life rather than a rejection of the illiberal nature of

⁶⁵ Leon Aron, "Russia's Protesters," 2012

⁶⁶ Pew Research Center, "Views of Democracy," 2011

⁶⁷ Interfax, "Russians Support Putin," 2013

⁶⁸ Ibid.,

the entire government.⁶⁹ Such data, combined with the polling data showing higher support for democratic values among middle class Russians, suggests that without a significant enlargement of the middle class future political reforms are likely to be focused on increasing government effectiveness rather than changing the illiberal nature of government itself. The optimism surrounding the recent protests – like the optimism immediately after the fall of the Soviet Union – is likely to remain unfulfilled as Russia opts for a continuation of the status quo over fundamental reform.

⁶⁹ Olga Doronina, “Russia's Regions Go Back to the Streets to Protest,” *Russia Beyond the Headlines*, March 12, 2013, <http://russialist.org/russias-regions-go-back-to-the-streets-to-protest/> (accessed April 11, 2013); Further support for this idea can be found in an examination of ongoing social protest movements in the Russian hinterlands. In contrast to the Moscow and Petersburg protests, these movements are not political in nature. While they may have political ramifications for the current crop of regional elites, they are more likely to change the hands holding the reins of power rather than the system of power itself.

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<http://assembly.coe.int/Mainf.asp?>

[link=/Documents/AdoptedText/ta07/ERES1547.htm](#) (accessed April 16, 2013)

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December 10, 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/global/2011/dec/10/russia-elections-putin-protest> (accessed April 11, 2013)

Levada Analytical Center, *Russian Public Opinion 2010-2011* [Moscow:Levada Center, 2012],

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