

Putin's "authoritarianism" vs. the "commentariat"

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Calling Russia's regime under Vladimir Putin "authoritarian" is a hasty and dangerous exaggeration. Such an appellation undermines, dismisses, and misrepresents an important stage of development Russia is undergoing to becoming a strong and modern state. Western and Russian media specializing in Russia-bashing have been unconscionably irresponsible.

The "commentariat" simply refuses to think or is unable to think; it appears only to want to profit off of fear and old prejudices from the threatening idea called Russia.

Making a case against the "commentariat" is very easy – applying some logic and knowing some facts is all that is needed. What follows is a deconstruction of the case against Putin's "authoritarianism":

1. Restricting independent media. Media is very alive and well in Russia. Print media is expanding at a healthy pace. Everyday one can easily read articles that severely criticize Putin and the Kremlin. The diversity of political opinions found in Russian print media cannot be compared the United States, for example. Russia media includes far more differing opinions. Many of the popular print news outlets remain in the hands of oligarchs (two of whom – Boris Berezovsky and Vladimir Gusinsky – live in exile.) They use their considerable wealth to influence Russia's domestic political scene (they also agitate against Putin in foreign media). If Putin is such an "authoritarian," why doesn't he simply shut down these news outlets?

Electronic media is different. Television is, for the most part, either controlled or heavily influenced by the Kremlin. However, control or influence of television is not the product of an "authoritarian" mindset. Rather, state influence has been the response to individuals who owned television networks for personal and political ambitions – the oligarchs again. The Kremlin would have been guilty of irresponsibility if it had allowed the super wealthy to use airwaves to promote personal agendas (as they did during the presidency of Boris Yeltsin).

What of the charge that the Kremlin has shut down political debate on television? This simply is not true. What is true is that there are fewer political talk shows that focus on media specific personalities. Political figures continue to appear on political talk shows and continue to criticize Putin and his government. The Kremlin is also implementing some very controversial social reforms; television programs that used to pump their ratings through crude political debate only increased social tensions. The fact the Kremlin is mindful of uncontrolled, and at times grossly irresponsible, political debate on television certainly does not make it libertarian – but at the same time it does not make it "authoritarian."

Lastly, the "commentariat" is simply unwilling to ask itself a very simple question: "Are Russian television audiences informed enough to make rational decisions about their lives and the world around them?" Anyone who has watched Russian television programming would find the answer to this question as self-evident.

2. Pressuring opposition parties. Russia's political opposition is in disarray, but this is not the Kremlin's fault. The "commentariat" can't bring itself to admit that most Russian voters have little interest in the policy platforms of liberal-conservative Yabloko or Union of Right Forces (SPS). This

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applies to the Communists as well. The “commentariat” can’t admit that Russian political culture traditionally supports the state interests over society. United Russia, as boring as it is, does represent the state in the eyes of the electorate (for now). The “commentariat” will never admit that the more it criticizes Putin and the Kremlin, the greater chance that more Russian voters will join the ranks of nationalist Rodina (Motherland).

The woes of Russia’s opposition are completely self-inflicted. The fact that the Kremlin has taken advantage of this should not be surprising. Politics is about attaining and using power – this game is played out in every Western democracy, why the Kremlin is not allowed to play the same game is truly mystifying. The Kremlin presented a platform to Russian voters, through its vehicles United Russia and Rodina, and the Liberal Democrat Party. Platforms supporting economic growth, down with oligarchy and an independent Russian foreign policy have a strong appeal among voters.

The opposition, on the other hand, offers little to the average Russian. In fact, the opposition simply represents failure. Yabloko and SPS continue to represent the failures of Russia’s economic and political transformation since 1991. Their performance during the 2003 parliamentary elections was an embarrassment – de facto support of the oligarchic capitalism that destroyed any sense of normality for the average Russian was political suicide. That death wish continues with the recent Moscow conference denouncing Putin as a dictator – still the most popular political figure in Russia. If the platform of the opposition is simply “anti-Putin,” then liberalism in Russia is doomed for another generation. However, such a prognosis could quite possibly be too optimistic. Russian liberals have much more in common with Putin and his agenda than with the Communists or Rodina. The continuation of their “anti-Putin” agenda only promises that Putin’s successor will be far less liberal than Putin.

The Communists are hardly worth commenting on. They have missed their historical moment to transform the party into a European-style democratic party like their former Eastern European Communist counterparts. That important niche is still up for grabs in Russia, with forces close to Kremlin most likely to fill that void.

Why Putin is called “authoritarian” when the opposition can’t get its own house in order is beyond comprehension.

3. Reigning in regional governors. There had never been much interest in Russia’s governors on the part of the “commentariat” – but that has changed. Putin’s decision to appoint governors – instead of through direct election – is an issue the “commentariat” really likes to harp on. Putin’s announcement of this new initiative on the back of the Beslan tragedy was a public relations disaster. Appointing governors in the name of national security smacked of opportunism. The fact is that rumors of such a move had been anticipated a year ago. Appointment of governors is part of Putin’s “vertical power” agenda to strengthen Russian sovereignty and against internal (oligarchs and corruption) and foreign (governors making foreign policy) threats – having little to do with terrorism.

Reigning in regional governors does have a reasonable logic – whether it will actually strengthen Russia’s sovereignty is another issue. Appointing governors is not really about fighting terrorism (which is a real threat in Russia), but rather a continuation of Putin’s drive to deny the oligarchs meaningful political power in the regions, an offensive against corruption, and demand that governors be responsible to their constituents.

Putin, quite rightly, will also not allow for a moment any regional governor the opportunity to negotiate with a border country concerning issues related to Russia's sovereignty.

The real issue the "commentariat" should be addressing is not how this decision to appoint governors is inherently "authoritarian," but rather whether this decision will improve overall administrative governance of Russia. Putin's aim is to punish governors who serve oligarch interests ahead of the interests of local populations and the state. Putin is also interested in reversing the independence Yeltsin allowed governors to accumulate enormous fortunes, while at the same time pocketing state revenues destined to over social benefits. The recent protests against welfare reform (the monetization of social benefits) has been portrayed as protests against Putin, but fact the protests have demonstrated that many governors aren't up to the task of dispensing cost benefits effectively (or honestly).

Appointment of governors is part of Putin's administrative reform project – something we should lean more about shortly. Administrative reform is not "authoritarian." Russia is sorely in need of administrative reform to remain a strong sovereign state.

It is laughable to call Putin's system is "authoritarian" when he has to virtually put a gun to the head of each of the largely useless 1.2 million state bureaucrats to get anything done. The "commentariat" rarely reflects upon the fact that Putin has very few people he can really count on. It is a myth that the Kremlin has its eyes everywhere and controlling everything. Actually Putin controls very little. He wants to change that.

4. Cracking down on businesses and the "oligarchs." This is another favorite issue of the "commentariat." Calling jailed former CEO of Yukos Mikhail Khodorkovsky a "political prisoner" is an atrocity. If Putin had not challenged Khodorkovsky's economic ambitions (not political ambitions), he would have lost governing control of Russia. Khodorkovsky is quoted as saying that "The best business in Russia is politics." Well, he is getting what he deserves for his belief that politics is a commodity for purchase for those who can afford to pay the highest price. No single person, or group of fabulously wealthy individuals, has the right to determine Russia's economic future. Putin has actually been very responsible in addressing the "privatization of the state" by the oligarchs.

Has the Kremlin gone too far in breaking the back of Russia's oligarchic capitalism? This question is extremely complex, an issue the "commentariat" can't understand or won't address. The answer is no and maybe. Those individuals who, with corrupt state officials as a conduit, attained former Soviet assets for a song and consistently underpaid state taxes should not be given any quarter. Having garnered billions of dollars for personal use, these oligarchs should return just as much revenue in profits to the state. They should be also denied the possibility of purchasing state political power in any form, including in Russia's regions.

As far as businesses created after the fall of the Soviet Union and not related to natural resource exports, the heavy hand of the taxman should be reigned in (and soon will be). The recent back taxes travails of telecommunications giant Vimpelcom is a sham and it intimidates new businesses. The Vimpelcom case reeks of personal financial interests of a state official. This sends the wrong signals to the business community. Hopefully, attacks on companies like Vimpelcom will be limited and only part of some personal turf wars.

At the same time, it cannot be said that Western companies have never felt the heavy hand of the state. The US government at the turn of the 20th century focused much of its administrative energy against business empires that could over-shadow government rule. With that historical precedent in

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mind, Putin's attack on oligarchy has been logical and correct. Not a single oligarch will again attempt to pursue business policies without the state's blessing.

The good news is that the Kremlin has been forced to address to negotiate with the business community as equals in pursuit of a common goal. Finally, both have found themselves on the same page – promoting economic growth. This is a very positive sign - and not a sign coming from an "authoritarian" Kremlin. The Kremlin has been given the choice of collecting back taxes at the expense of future economic growth – or billions of dollars now instead of collecting billions of dollars in the near future. It is a not an easy decision to make. But, in the end the latter opinion will be made over the former. At the end of the day, a rational economic decision will prevail.

If Russia is to become a modern market economy and a representative democracy, economic oligarch must be tightly controlled, if not destroyed. Destroying market oligarchism is profoundly modern, democratic, and economically sound – having nothing to do with "authoritarianism."

5. Aggressive foreign policy. Putin's Russia is profoundly defensive in terms of foreign policy. However, the "commentariat" claims otherwise. Russia's foreign policy has been reported on as ranging from tragic, comic, and even burlesque. Putin is not hoping to export "authoritarianism." The fact of matter is that Russia's foreign policy is extremely pragmatic, with the exception of a number of high profile blunders (akin to the US war in Iraq – states make mistakes sometimes). Russia's foreign policy is actually quite simple: "You like me - then I like you."

Putin has enough on his hands at home to overly worry about advancing Russia's interests beyond its nearest borders. Forgiving a large part of Syria's foreign debt to Russia, for instance, is not about siding against the West or the U.S., it is about Russia reasonably claiming it has its own foreign policy. This really bothers the "commentariat."

According to the "commentariat" Russia should have a foreign (and domestic) policy that kowtows to Western and U.S. interests – in fact, Russia should not be allowed to have a domestic and foreign policy – it "lost" the Cold War after all! It was so much better when the boozed-up Boris the bear did tricks for his Western paymasters. These perceptions border on the lunatic fringe and seriously damages what the West, Russia, and particularly the U.S. have in common – international security. By the way, the Bush people may over play the threat of terrorism to legitimize its rule, Putin's Russia doesn't have to – Beslan, as screwed up as it played out, is a very threatening reality for Russia.

Then there is, of course, the "meddling" in Ukraine's presidential election. Indeed, there was lots of outside "meddling" there. Of course the "commentariat" focuses on the Kremlin's "meddling," which should be expected. Russia's aim in Ukraine was not to subvert democracy or export "authoritarianism." More than anything else, the Kremlin hoped that a Russia-friendly candidate would be elected. The Kremlin miscalculated – most likely because it mistakenly believed in Ukraine's "Crook Number 1" Leonid Kuchma.

Viktor Yushchenko is no saint, Yulia Tymoshenko is most probably "Crook Number 2," but neither person should be deemed to be able to divide Russia and Ukraine. Yushchenko is no fool and the "gas princess" will eventually and hopefully pay the piper for her past deeds, but neither can (including Putin) change the economic, historical, and cultural bonds that exist tying Ukraine and Russia. Ukraine has every right to stand on its own. Russia should support this stance. Both countries stand to benefit from this.

There is nothing “authoritarian” about the Kremlin’s intentions in Ukraine or its so-called “near abroad.” In the case of Ukraine, there was no attempt to export a political model. More than anything else, Putin is interested in security and certainty on its borders. There is nothing “authoritarian” about these desires.

6. Excessive central control and under the grip of the “siloviki.” The “commentariat” never misses the chance to point out that the highest state positions (including state-owned companies) are held by present and former members of the Soviet security forces. The implication is that former “totalitarians” are today’s “authoritarians.” Well, who exactly should Putin be promoting to high state positions? Liberal-conservatives refuse to work for the Kremlin. Business leaders are not welcomed – that was done under Yeltsin (with the obvious disastrous outcome). The first post-Soviet generation is more interested in the private sector because the much higher wages. Doesn’t every leader in the West surround him/herself with people who are known to them? As impolite as it may appear, members of the Soviet security forces were well trained and educated. They also have a sense of social solidarity among themselves.

The “commentariat” often claims the “siloviki” determine all state policy, particularly economic policy. There is scant evidence of this. The Kremlin’s leading liberals (Alexei Kudrin and German Gref) remain in powerful policy roles (though it is questionable if all their policy opinions are acted upon – certainly not in the energy sectors – but then again the energy sectors have been an important political imperative for the Kremlin).

The charge of “excessive” control is a very curious – “excessive” compared to what? Under Yeltsin, different oligarch groups determined who got what ministry. Those ministers were responsible to the oligarchic clans that paid them – and not to the prime minister or president. Oligarchs lobbying to have their people in powerful positions has ended under Putin.

It is not “authoritarian” to demand government officials to be responsible to elected officials.

7. Economic reform is “stalled” because of excessive centralization. Reforms are not stalled; they are just not getting the attention they deserve (and the problem of the 1.2 million bureaucrats). The Yukos affair took up a lot resources and energy. The same and resources and energy will be employed elsewhere.

A great deal of Putin’s reform efforts appear to be largely forgotten – mortgage reform, financial markets reforms, bank deposit insurance, railroads, the on going restructuring of UES, and the continued push to abolishing Gazprom’s “ring fence.”

Slowing of growth – yes – but growth has taken on a new meaning during Putin’s second term. During his first term, solid fiscal policy and new tax rules were the most important macroeconomic policies that contributed to growth. However, none of the truly hard (and primarily social) reforms were attempted in the first term. The hard reforms are public tariffs (housing charges, telephones, utilities, rail, transport, and military). These reforms have been given little attention, now they are. No member of the “commentariat” has the guts to state that Putin is using his political capital (high public opinion poll numbers) to pass into law the most unpopular, though necessary, reforms. The “commentariat” has no guts; Putin is showing courage at the expense of his personal popularity.

The “commentariat” has really latched onto the social protests against the monetization of social benefits – gleefully hoping to see Putin’s political demise. The “commentariat” also claims street protests are proof of Putin’s “authoritarianism.” In fact, the protests suggest just the opposite – the

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Kremlin is listening and reacting. "Authoritarianism" implies there are no check and balances on a regime. Over the past few weeks, there are very clear checks and balances on Kremlin control.

Much of the same could be said of Russia's business elite. Very quiet over the past year due to the Yukos affair, businesses have challenged the Kremlin claiming its policies (particularly the use of the tax authorities) have become dysfunctional. Within two working days after their complaint, the Kremlin agreed to reign in the tax authorities.

Is this how "authoritarian" regimes work?

8. The lack of support of civil society. The "commentariat" has no idea what civil society is about in Russia. No two countries have identical civil societies. Civil society is a process and not a particular set of social-state arrangements. Russian civil society is not overtly interested in politics or political parties. Russians are amazingly pragmatic, as well. In a nutshell, civil society here demands only one thing – improving living standards. Under Putin rule, overall living standards have improved impressively each year and there is little indication that will change during the balance of his second term.

The "commentariat" laments Russia's civil society because it can't find what civil society means to it. If they can't find what they understand civil society to be, then it must not exist. This is very silly reasoning and a tautology.

Putin's attitude to civil society is benign. Russian civil society expresses itself when it believes its interests are threatened. The recent protests demonstrate that there is a society/business-state dialogue. This dialogue is set to increase. Is this how an "authoritarian" regime interacts with society and businesses?

9. Returning to the Soviet past. Over the past few years, this charge has been the "commentariat" favorite topic – it is so easy, you don't even have to know anything about Russia to make this claim. How many members of the "commentariat" ever visited or lived in the Soviet Union is unclear to this writer. What this writer knows after living in Communist Poland, visiting most of the Eastern European communist bloc, and visiting the Soviet Union is that Putin's Russia has virtually nothing to do with the Soviet period.

Of course some symbols and traditions have been retained or re-introduced, but the Soviet ethos is not present. The regime does not attack society, does not force any ideology in the public sphere, and no one is forced to be "political."

Vladimir Putin is no angel. Putin is not a democrat. Putin is a reformer. He is also committed to Russia's national interests. Putin's policy approach is to create a modern economy in which the majority of Russia's citizens can participate. Putin has broken the back of economic oligarchy, standing up to enormous international criticism over the Yukos affair. That same criticism has been well funded by Yukos shareholders. Putin is determined that Russia should have its own independent foreign policy. Putin also makes mistakes, like any leader. But most world leaders don't have the daunting tasks Putin faces.

Under Gorbachev and Yeltsin, Russia danced like a caged bear for vodka shots for the West. Putin prefers beer and doesn't dance for anyone. I suppose the "commentariat" deems Putin an "authoritarian" because he does not dance.



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