The Illusion of Democracy in Post-Communist Russia:
How Internal and External Relationships have Evolved After the Fall of the Soviet Union.
A Research Paper Submitted to the Graduate School in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Master of Arts in Political Science by Benjamin Kemp Dr. Francine Friedman Ball State University Muncie, Indiana May 2012
Introduction

December 1991 marked the end of the Soviet era in Russia, and with it came the first direct elections for Russia’s leader in its long and storied history. For over seventy-five years prior, Russia played a premier role in world politics, emerging as a superpower alongside the United States after World War II. It was granted one of the five permanent seats on the United Nations Security Council. It was the first nation to put a man-made object, an animal, and a person in space. Russia became the second nation to join the nuclear club. Its direct sphere of influence extended well into Eastern Europe, creating what was known as the Iron Curtain. Its indirect sphere of influence could be felt far into Asia as the People’s Republic of China and North Korea eventually became Communist states. Much to the chagrin of the United States, the island nation of Cuba also formed a Communist government a mere ninety miles from the United States coastline.

The ideological battle between the United States and the Soviet Union was hard fought but was eventually lost by Russia. This fall from the pinnacle could arguably be traced back to election of Ronald Reagan as President of the United States. The Reagan Doctrine began undermining Soviet-supported governments by funding resistance movements in those states. This support created a powerful resistance in Afghanistan that mired Russia in an unwinnable, nine-year war that led to over 14,000 Russian deaths and a cost of billions of dollars.
President Reagan also immediately raised military spending, causing Russia to raise its own defense spending levels to hit 27% of GDP. This increase in spending came at the expense of the production of domestic goods. A failing Russian economy began sinking further into economic decline. The disaster at the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant in the Ukraine in 1986 was crippling both in image and in the economy. Five hundred thousand workers and 18 billion rubles were needed to contain the contamination and provide local remediation.

By 1989, Russia began non-interference policies with regard to the internal affairs of Warsaw Pact member states. As a result, Eastern European nations once under the thumb of the Iron Curtain began falling to popular elections. While the Reagan Doctrine can be tied to some of these changes, the Gorbachev policies of perestroika and glasnost (restructuring and openness) can probably be tied to the rest of the changes. The unforeseen effects of these policies created extreme upheaval both inside Russia and among the member Soviet member states. The Soviet Federal Government was officially abolished December 26, 1991, instantly creating dozens of sovereign states overnight, and completing the fall of one of the most powerful nations in the world.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union immediately created a new identity for the Russian state. Russia was identified as the successor state of the Soviet Union, and with it came its arsenal of nuclear weapons. Russia was also allowed to assume the Soviet Union’s seat on the United Nations Security Council. This created a nation with an identity crisis. No longer is Russia a significant world economic power, yet the possession of nuclear weapons allows Russia to hang onto some semblance of former
power and glory. After being ceded all powers granted to the head of the Soviet Union, Boris Yeltsin won Russia’s first direct presidential election five months later. Yeltsin instituted wide-ranging economic reforms, including a shock therapy approach that threw the Russian economy into turmoil for many years to follow. The dissolution of the Soviet Union created an epic fall from the upper echelons of the world stage for Russia, but that fall from power did not last forever. When Vladimir Putin assumed power in 1999, Russia’s direction began to change. This fall and eventual reemergence of Russia is discussed in-depth in the pages that follow. Specifically, we review how Russia’s internal and external relationships have evolved from Russia’s decline in the Yeltsin era to Russia’s rise during the Putin era. Additionally, we attempt to determine the possible paths for the future of Russia as the Putin era continues.
Boris Yeltsin inherited a nation in 1992 that was mired in turmoil. Russia’s previous constitution was drafted in 1979, and so a new one would be needed to take its place. This task however, did not occur immediately, and Yeltsin used its provisions to appoint the people of his choosing to the positions of Vice-president and Supreme Soviet Chairman. The latter, Ruslan Khasbulatov, ended up being a thorn in Yeltsin’s side rather than an ardent supporter of the new Russian president. There wasn’t much that the Yeltsin Administration could do that didn’t draw the criticism of Khasbulatov’s bloc. Yeltsin’s response is a classic ‘wag-the-dog’ trick used by American presidents. Yeltsin blamed much of the street violence that was occurring in Moscow on the Chechens. Khasbulatov is a Chechen.

Russia’s New Constitution and Rigged Elections

As Vice President Alexander Rutskoi and Khasbulatov proceeded with the drafting of a new Russian constitution, Yeltsin became increasingly paranoid at the process. Believing that those two individuals would sabotage the process and divert power more to their benefit, Yeltsin increasingly became convinced that the only good constitution for Russia would be a constitution written by Yeltsin himself. These acts of subterfuge did not go unnoticed by Yeltsin’s adversaries, and when Yeltsin announced new parliamentary elections and a constitutional referendum (of Yeltsin’s constitution),
Khasbulatov and Rutskoi were prepared. They amassed people and arms at the headquarters of the Supreme Soviet, labeling Yeltsin a tyrant and calling for the reunification of the Soviet Union. Not to be outdone, Yeltsin surrounded the Supreme Soviet headquarters with the police and military, turned off the electricity and water, and shot cannonade into the windows in the early morning hours. The deputies of the Supreme Soviet had had enough. They were exhausted, terrified, and no longer supporters of Khasbulatov and Rutskoi. Both were labeled as anti-democratic and constitutional, and it was Yeltsin who saved democracy in Russia. The thought of Communism in Russia was effectively dead, but the practices that occurred during that time absolutely were not. The counting of the votes for the constitutional referendum was done completely in secret as vote counters were given explicit instructions to ensure that Yeltsin’s new constitution passed. Even with these measures in place, only 55% of the electorate voted and 58.4% of those voted in favor of the constitution. This gave an effective approval rate of only around 32%, and that’s with a bit of ballot stuffing. Not a particularly good start for an upstart democracy.

Yeltsin’s dubious political wrangling did not end with the passage of this constitutional referendum in 1993. Instead, the successful rigging of the 1993 referendums and disbanding of the Supreme Soviet acted only to further fuel Yeltsin’s anti-democratic tendencies within the government. When the chairman of the state-owned TV station ORT refused to keep his reporters from investigating scandals within Yeltsin’s presidency, Yeltsin managed to get the man sacked for his trouble. As Yeltsin endured in his presidency, he increasingly allowed his aides and functionaries to run
various aspects of government, but Yeltsin would randomly reinsert himself into the thick of government politics and punish those for any perceived disobedience. Furthering the trend of dysfunctional elections, Yeltsin planted long-time friend Viktor Chernomyrdin as head of the Our Home is Russia Party, which basically supported the government in its current form. This party had the money, media, and government for support and still managed to get only 45 of 450 seats in parliament. The Communist Party on the other hand won 157 seats, by far the most of any party. This little technicality did nothing to deter Yeltsin. While only controlling about one-ninth of the parliament, Yeltsin still appointed Chernomyrdin as Prime Minister of Russia and named Our Home is Russia as the governing party. In the 1996 presidential elections, Yeltsin faced stiff competition from the Communist Party candidate. He was carrying a roughly 3% polling rating. The opposition called on Yeltsin to call off the election as he didn’t have a chance to win any referendum. As a result, Yeltsin took his advice and attempted to call off the election but there was no intention by Yeltsin to cede power. When that failed, Yeltsin used his backdoor wrangling to promise the first candidate eliminated from the presidential election, Alexander Lebed, that he would be the Secretary of the Security Council. In return, Yeltsin gained Lebed’s support and the support of his followers. This support earned Yeltsin 54% of the popular vote in the final election and the office of the Russian presidency for many years to come. Furthering Yeltsin’s trend of eliminating anyone and everyone within his government, Prime Minister Yevgeni Primakov made the mistake of opposing Yeltsin’s economic policies and failing to stop investigations into alleged financial scandals undertaken by the presidential family. He also managed to get his name thrown around as a possible presidential candidate in the 2000 elections. This led
to Primakov’s dismissal in May 1999. Three months later, Primakov’s replacement was also sent on his way out the door of the Kremlin. His replacement? Vladimir Putin.

Flawed Economic Policy

Russia’s economy was in gross decline during the years leading up to the dissolution of the Soviet Union. This economic crisis led to a 50% drop in both GDP and industrial output between the years of 1990 and 1995. A ‘shock therapy’ policy was adopted by the Russian government. Wide-spread privatization of previously state-owned assets occurred. Price and currency controls were withdrawn and state subsidies were lost. The economic downturn in Russia and other post-Soviet countries was twice as intense as the Great Depression in the United States. The poverty rate in the post-Soviet bloc increased more than ten-fold. The birth-rate plummeted and the death-rate skyrocketed. As the successor state of the Soviet Union, Russia inherited all of the Soviet Union’s external debts while having only roughly 50% of the Soviet Union’s population. All of these troubles came to a head in 1998 as the Ruble was catastrophically devalued, leading to a default on Russian debt.

The policies of Russian president Boris Yeltsin did nothing but further the economic woes facing the new Russia. Price controls were removed on just the second day of Russia’s new existence as an independent state. By the end of 1992, the skyrocketing cost of just about everything caused the Ruble to be a mere 4% of its original value one year prior. The government response to soothe the people’s worries was to say that this was normal for a liberalizing economy and that eventually foreign trade would increase the creation of better jobs and wages as a result. While these
reforms did cause an end to the massive hoarding that shops engaged in during the Soviet years, it instead simply allowed the people to see the things that they now can’t afford. In an effort to avert rebellion at the hands of poor, hungry people, Yeltsin and acting Russian Prime Minister Yegor Gaidar took steps to minimize unemployment, but this was done at the expense of increasing productivity, which would have been in the long-term for Russia. The Russian government also cut down on the duties and tariffs tacked on to imported and exported goods in an increased effort to bolster trade. This maneuver had the adverse effect of merely allowing cheaper goods to flood Russian markets, crowding out the Russian manufacturers. Not only did Russian production fall in the years following, but the income from tariffs also fell precipitously, creating an enormous drop in income for the Russian government. Yeltsin also pushed for increasing oil and gas exports in lieu of reinvigorating an industrial base. While this policy seems sound in principle (Brezhnev used the same strategy as a way to keep finances balanced), it blew up in practice. Investors started pouring money into energy gathering businesses instead of other sectors, and a drop in energy prices in the mid-1990s led to even higher budget deficits as income dropped further. International efforts to ease the ruble’s decline even found a way to be mishandled. In 1992 and 1993 alone, $67 billion was allocated by the International Monetary Fund and the G8 nations to use for repayment of debts and economic restructuring. Instead, the only things restructured were the number bank accounts that government officials held in foreign countries such as Cyprus and Switzerland.
The mid-1990s were no kinder to the ruble and Russian economy. By the end of 1994, the Ruble had devalued another 27% as compared to the beginning of 1993. As Yeltsin was starting to realize the amount of money he would need to win reelection, he looked to those who had the money to burn. He was loaned money in return for receiving partial ownership in government resource gathering companies. This ended up being a win for both Yeltsin and for those who loaned him the money. Yeltsin got free money at the expense of government assets that were eventually lost as the government defaulted on the loans. Yeltsin was reelected, the rich got richer as they accumulated massive amounts of what was government property, and the Russian economy suffered further as the government received even less income than it had before. All of these troubles finally came to a head in August 1998. Mountains of debt started to weigh in on Russia’s ability to secure new bonds at lower interest rates, and when Russia went to the International Monetary Fund for help, it was viewed by investors as a sign of Russian economic weakness. This resulted in the near abandonment of the Ruble by investors. Incompetence compounded upon incompetence led to one of the worst economic meltdowns in recent history.

Chechnya

Domestic policy during the Yeltsin years cannot be described without the inclusion of the events that occurred in Chechnya. Chechnya, a tiny nation which is a part of the larger Russian Federation, has roughly 1.2 million and is located in the Northern Caucasus Mountains. As with many other Soviet countries after the fall of the Soviet Union, the Chechen Republic sought independence after the dissolution of the
Soviet Union. This did not sit very well with Russian President Boris Yeltsin. He argued that Chechnya was not an autonomous nation during the years of the Soviet Union and, thus, does not hold a claim to the same level of independence as other nations. While this position doesn’t paint Yeltsin in a bad light for media and public relations purposes, the real reasons for Yeltsin’s position show a man with a different agenda. As was mentioned prior, large sums of money and resources were used by Yeltsin’s government to bolster energy resource gathering efforts. This sector was the preeminent form of income for Russia. Chechnya just happened to be a major hub of oil infrastructure, both collection and distribution. A loss of Chechnya would further hurt a decimated Russian economy. In addition, Yeltsin feared that, by allowing nations such as Chechnya to gain independence, and then other nations such as Tartarstan would attempt the same thing.

Prior to the military campaign in Chechnya, Yeltsin held the world’s favor. They were able to paint the Chechens as terrorists and thugs willing to kill innocent civilians as a means to gain their independence. While this isn’t entirely a false statement as there is proof of Islam extremist involvement and funding in the region during this time, it did not justify the resulting bloodbath at the hands of Russian troops that followed. The Russian forces invaded in 1994 and came in cocky. They found themselves fighting a guerilla force that wasn’t afraid of gunships or landmines. The Chechen forces had been brainwashed with the thoughts of eternal paradise should they die in battle against the invading Russian army. Tens of thousands of people died on both sides of the conflict. Russia couldn’t win, and the Chechens refused to lose. In an effort to save face with a public wary and critical of the Chechen War during the election year, Yeltsin portrayed himself as a peacemaker by calling for talks to convene with the goal of ending the
bloody stalemate. Peace was brokered by Alexander Lebed following Yeltsin’s election, but allowing Lebed to stay in government would take too much glory away from Yeltsin. So Yeltsin sacked Lebed and benefited from efforts Yeltsin himself took no part in. Chechnya was able to gain independence, but the state was by no means stable or ready to maintain their hard-fought sovereignty.

Chechen independence equaled nothing more than lawlessness in the region. Ransoms collected from the kidnappings of Russian and Western tourists during the years following independence brought in more money than any other industry. Chechen women were used as suicide bombers. Refugees were leaving Chechnya by the thousands, entering into the neighboring nations of the Russian Federation. As the leaders of those nations feared suicide bombers to be in their midst, they turned the fleeing masses away, further exasperating hostilities among the nations. A new war was needed to bring Chechnya back in line with the rest of the Russian Federation. All that was needed was to convince a public with a long memory of that same necessity. A bomb that ripped open three apartment buildings in September 1999 provided the needed spark. The blame was pinned on Chechen terrorists, and the public refused to listen to cries from the media calling the connections made by the Russian government vague and untrue. Then-Prime Minister Vladimir Putin convinced Yeltsin that the time was at hand to destroy the rogue state. Media coverage of the second invasion was censored, and only stories supplied by the government concerning the war were given to the public. One eyewitness described Grozny as a spitting image of Stalingrad after World War II. Thousands died in the bombardment and thousands more died in detention camps. When
the Chechen Army struck back at the Russian Army, it was the prisoners in those
detention camps that were slaughtered in retaliation. While this level of butchery was not
unknown to Russian leaders of the past, none of those leaders was wearing the cloak of
democracy.

International Policy Failures

Boris Yeltsin tried to use the international political arena as a tool for returning
his country to its previous levels of power prestige. As a nuclear power, it was already
afforded a measure of cautious respect from the other world powers. Yeltsin saw old its
old Warsaw Pact nemesis NATO move into parts of Eastern Europe once a part of the
Soviet Union. In 1994, Hungary, Poland, and the Czech Republic were announced as
eventual members of NATO. As the buffer zone between old West Germany and Russia
crumbled, Russia could do nothing more than issue idle threats to the West, lest they lose
vitally needed aid. Yeltsin could do nothing to respond to the advances made by NATO
and that proved increasingly humiliating. In 1993, Yeltsin drafted the Foreign Policy
Concept of the Russian Federation. This document called for Russia to remain a Great
Power in the world. It called for stabilizing and maintaining relations between Moscow
and the former Soviet fringe states, allowing provisions for sending troops and supplies
should the need arise. The Concept also shot back at NATO advances in Eastern Europe,
claiming them as Russia’s historic sphere of interest, and it openly stated that there will
be times when the interests of Russia and the United States will not coincide. That being
said however, anytime that United States President Bill Clinton and Yeltsin met to
negotiate, it was Yeltsin who conceded any points of contention time and time again.
The Chechen War was one piece that garnered international attention that did nothing to improve Russian standing in the world, as flagrant human rights violations were leveled against the Russian government. To counter United States wishes, the Russian government opted to sell arms to any state or organization that they choose, allowing Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein to purchase arms even after Russia agreed upon United Nations sanctions barring such an action.

Among the worst blunders Yeltsin undertook as leader of Russia was the support of Slobodan Milosevic and the Serbian government’s actions in Bosnia. Instead of creating peace for the sake of saving lives, Yeltsin did so in order to garner personal success and prestige. He pressured Milosevic to relent at the request of Western governments, and, by temporarily succeeding in that endeavor, he was enabled by earning President Clinton’s praise. This praise was short lived as Milosevic turned his attention to Kosovo. As NATO readied a campaign to bomb Serbia, Russia protested, but those protests fell on deaf ears. Serbia was bombed, and once again Yeltsin was humiliated at his general ineffectiveness to accomplish anything on the international stage. In an attempt to save face, Yeltsin moved into Pristina, Kosovo and took control of a large area to show that they should ‘share’ in the military occupation of Kosovo. In return, Russia was given a small area to administer, falling to international humiliation once again. When Slobodan Milosevic fell from power, Russia lost its last friend in the former Soviet bastion of Eastern Europe, something that Vladimir Putin would not forget once Russia regained some of its past glory.
Interest in other Soviet Union states also remained very high on Yeltsin’s radar. Problems among all of the former Soviet states were not hard to find, and Yeltsin felt that many of these problems could easily be solved with closer ties. After all, a large diaspora existed within the old Soviet bloc. Twenty million ethnic Russians were clustered along the Russian borders of Estonia, Kazakhstan, Ukraine, and Moldova, and it was Russia’s responsibility not to ignore their compatriots abroad. Russia’s real intentions in the matter could easily be found in Crimea and the status of Russia’s Black Sea fleet. Ukraine merely saw these claims as a return to domination by Moscow after finally breaking free from the Soviet Union. Cooler heads prevailed as the fleet was split between Russia and Ukraine, with Russia being eliminated to keep a naval base in Crimea for many decades to come. Other countries such as Belarus welcomed what the Ukraine sought to avoid. Yeltsin seized this opportunity to bring more subjects under Moscow’s control. Belarussian leaders agreed to share military infrastructure, currency, and most importantly gas and electricity facilities, but as Belarus came back into the Russian fold other post-Soviet nations joined an organization that was poised to rival Russia as a world superpower.

The growth of the European Union added another challenge to Yeltsin and his desire to rebuild Russia’s former power and glory, but Yeltsin also used the European Union as a tool to try to push the Americans out of Europe. As the European Union expanded, former Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact states such as Estonia and Latvia quickly lined up to add their names to the list of European Union hopefuls. The introduction of Finland into the European Union in 1995 placed an adjoining border
between Russia and the European Union. Germany began investing heavily into the Czech and Polish economies and even started dabbling into western portions of Russia itself. While the European Union was a threat, it was a much smaller threat than the one posed by NATO, and cooperation with the European Union was essential, at least in the short-term, for Russia to regain its footing and rejoin the world powers.

**Restrictive Domestic Policy**

A new democratic Russia created one very big problem internal problem for President Boris Yeltsin. The people viewed the Soviet Union and communist Russia with nostalgia, and by the mid-1990s the Russian government had done very little to show the ordinary citizens of Russia that life in the Russian Federation was any better than it had been in the USSR. So Yeltsin decided to initiate what was perhaps the first truly democratic policy of his presidency by offering the people of Russia a chance for their voices to be heard and to win a little money as a result. The people could submit a five to seven page paper describing “The Idea of Russia,” and the best papers would earn a spot for their work on the front page of newspapers around Russia. The overall winner would earn 5 million rubles (about $1,000 or around the amount of money the average clerk made in two years). Before this contest, the Russian government employed some old tactics. Radio, television, and schools were used as carriers for why Russia was good. The only problem with television was the costs to run those stations. Increasingly, those stations needed large donations from private persons, and, as a result, the state-run television stations simply became propaganda machines for those private investors. Government controlled programming that did still exist on the airwaves focused on the
dangers that the Soviet Union posed to themselves and the rest of the world during the Cold War. These shows managed to garner additional air time in the weeks before presidential elections. Any programs that gave credence and supported the government’s claims that communism and the old Soviet Union were evil were given primetime viewing slots. In schools, the Russian government did grant some freedoms for what was taught, but directives were brought down from the Kremlin that students needed to be taught about the government’s anti-communist objectives. The method of textbook selection approved for school use also raised some eyebrows. An author could submit a book for consideration to a panel of experts for review, and any textbooks that were approved would undoubtedly receive large sums of money from their eventual sale to schools. As any good corrupt government would do, members that were on the expert panel submitted their own works, and it doesn’t take a genius to figure out which books were selected and approved by the panel. In existing literature, communist elements were quickly removed and edited to show the evils of communism instead. Lenin was no longer considered a man to be idolized, but a man to be vilified instead. Marxism and Leninism changed from the perfect ideology to the scourge of the twentieth century overnight. While Yeltsin and the Russian government did not prescribe exactly what should be taught and should be shown on private television and radio stations, those institutions were not left to their own devices. The Russian government gave distinct direction as to what they deemed appropriate. To Yeltsin and his government’s benefit, nothing was censored unless it was in direct violation of the constitution, even if the constitution was drafted by Yeltsin himself.
Conclusion

To say that Boris Yeltsin didn’t try everything he could to create a democratic Russia after the Soviet Union’s collapse would be neither correct nor incorrect. He was a man who cut his teeth in the ways of Soviet policy. It was what he knew. However, he also knew that a new direction was needed for Russia to survive and become the power that it once was, and, as the analysis of Vladimir Putin’s reign in Russia begins, we will see that he was successful in that regard. Democracy and capitalism had won the Cold War so that was the direction that Yeltsin knew Russia must follow. He managed to win two presidential elections, the first of their kind ever in Russian history, but can these really be considered democratically sound with allegations of corruption and manipulation? He allowed freedoms in both the media and education, but can these really be considered freedoms if the government merely gives you the freedom to say and teach what you want only if it aligns with what the government wants you to say? While there’s no doubt that Boris Yeltsin tried to create a democratic Russia, he had no more success than an infant trying to solve a physics problem. Yeltsin’s success and failures created the only other man to hold power in post-Soviet Russia, and his democratic policies are much harder to find.
Putin’s Russia

Vladimir Putin was elected to be only the second man to hold the title of president of the Russian Federation. He first assumed office after the surprise resignation of Boris Yeltsin at the end of 1999, but he was voted into the office in 2000 and reelected again in 2004. The Russian constitution does not allow for a sitting president to serve three consecutive terms in office, but this small roadblock didn’t keep Putin out of the Kremlin. After Dmitri Medvedev won the presidential election in 2008, Putin was appointed as the Prime Minister and the two were in a so-called “tandemocracy.” Putin ran for his third term as Russian president in 2012 and won without the need for a runoff in the first round. Upon completing his third presidential term in 2016, Putin will have been at or near the top of Russia politically for 16 years, remaining in power for longer than many of his Soviet counterparts, and there is reason that Putin will not run for and win a fourth term as president in 2016. Putin’s popularity in Russia is not without good reason. He oversaw Russia reverse the economic trend seen in the 1990s with nine consecutive years of GDP growth, increasing six-fold during his first tenure as Russian president. Poverty has been reduced by 50%, and average monthly salaries have increased by 800% during that same time frame. Yeltsin’s energy policy of the 1990s, that threw the Russian economy into great turmoil, has reaped untold benefits for Putin in the 2000s. The money generated from Russia’s ability to gather and distribute energy resources has
allowed Russia to regain a perch atop world politics. Russia will host the winter Olympics in Sochi in 2014. Life in Russia is undoubtedly much better now under Putin than it ever was under Yeltsin and even some of his Soviet comrades.

Like Yeltsin, Putin also cut his teeth within the inner workings of the Soviet Union. He was trained as a KGB operative working in foreign affairs after graduating from Leningrad State University with a degree focus on international law. Once the Soviet Union fell, he continued his political career in St. Petersburg, Russia, working as an international policy advisor for the mayor. He joined Boris Yeltsin’s staff in 1997 and moved up in government as Yeltsin repeatedly dismissed his numerous underlings. He became Russia’s fifth Prime Minister in only eighteen months, and the public initially did not hold much long-term hope for the latest person chosen as the new prime minister.

Chechnya and Georgia

Chechnya once again reared its ugly head for Russia, and it was Putin’s turn this time to find a solution. Chechen terrorists took over a theater on October 23, 2002, during a musical presentation. Forty men and women held over 900 people hostage for over two days. Putin refused to wait for a peaceful resolution, storming the theater by force, and causing the deaths of more than 140 people. The significance of the date of the siege was not lost on Putin and the rest of the world. As was mentioned previously, then-Prime Minister Putin authorized the use of force in Chechnya once again after a pair of terrorist bombings in Moscow killed hundreds of people in their sleep. The connections made between the bombings and Chechnya were dubious at best, and those individuals that continued to push the issue managed to find themselves dead.
Opposition lawmaker Vladimir Golovlyov was shot while walking his dog. A leading liberal member of parliament Sergei Yushenkov also met his demise following a gunshot in his direction. Yuri Shchechkochikhin, a reporter for an opposition newspaper died from lengthy illness that had a startling resemblance to poison. Mikhail Trepashkin was a lawyer who was going to testify that much of the evidence was planted; he was arrested on weapons charges just days before he was scheduled to appear in court. Miraculously, he survived even after his release from prison. There was nothing and nobody that could stop the Russian army from reentering Chechnya for a second time. Popularity for Putin soared as he drew a hard-line stance against the Chechens, creating a few conspiracy theories about the true cause of the explosions. Did Putin himself pull the strings to have these bombings occur so that he could come in as the savior, raise his popularity, and win the coming presidential elections?

The resulting war in Chechnya was nothing short of a massacre. Men under were not allowed to flee areas of fighting as they were thought to be rebels in disguise. Those caught were summarily executed. Evidence gathered by the Human Rights Watch describes examples of Russian troops throwing grenades into cellars where civilians were hiding from the incessant shelling. Residents of Grozny were told by troops to go to the nearby village of Kulary only to be shelled and shot on the roads between the towns. Those that survived and went back to homes found those that remained to be tortured and killed. Muslim burial traditions were refused as bodies were buried quickly to hide any evidence. When these surfaced in Moscow, there was promise of action. Putin denied that any abuse had occurred and that there would be no investigations. As Russian
victories mounted, Putin’s propaganda machine worked its magic, and any journalist who attempted to release any material that contradicted the official story faced grave consequences. Andrei Babitsky made that mistake and was made an example of by Putin. Babitsky attempted to release a video that contradicted an official version of events that occurred in Chechnya. He was arrested and labeled a traitor by Putin, and Babitsky was used as a tool in an exchange for three Russian soldiers held captive by the Chechens. The Russians were able to eventually claim victory in Chechnya but not without the maintenance of a large military contingent in the region for security. After Putin claimed victory in Chechnya, he pushed for regional elections to show that democracy would prevail, but these elections carried a decidedly predetermined tone. Moscow’s chosen leader of the area easily won the election, and it was certified as fair by groups such as the Arab League and the Organization of the Islamic Conference, two groups that are no stranger to allegations of corruption themselves. Chechnya was as big a thorn in Putin’s side as it was in Yeltsin’s side. Neither president was able to avoid allegations of misconduct, but Vladimir Putin not only managed the suppression of information domestically, but also the utter annihilation of the people of another state.

The might of the Russian army was also focused on the country of Georgia in 2008 when Georgia attempted to reassert control in the South Ossetia breakaway region. In April 2008, Vladimir Putin signed resolutions to begin negotiations with South Ossetia and Abkhazia, another breakaway region within the country of Georgia, with the hopes of legitimizing the secession movements in those regions. When Russian forces shot down an unarmed surveillance drone in Abkhazia, the Russians proved that their peacekeeping
force was truly a fighting force itching for a fight. Hostilities between the Georgian military and South Ossetian militia came to a boil on August 7th as Georgia began shelling South Ossetian buildings and villages. Human rights and South Ossetian military officials confirmed that these villages did in fact harbor militiamen. The nine day war that followed essentially pitted the Georgian army against that of the Russian army, with Putin using the Russian army and the guise of peacekeeping in order to wrest control of a region from a sovereign nation, and he didn’t stop at the border of Georgia and South Ossetia.

Once the Georgian army was pushed back out of South Ossetia, Putin and Medvedev saw fit to punish Georgia and their civilians. The city of Gori in Georgia bore the brunt of the fighting. When the Russians said that they were bombing arms depots, they instead managed to hit multiple apartment buildings and schools. As Russian forces took and began occupying Gori, they denied humanitarian aid missions aimed at providing basic provisions to those who didn’t flee the advancing Russian army. The Russian army also failed to stop the South Ossetian militia from looting and kidnapping civilians.

In the Black Sea, the Russian navy created a “security zone.” They couldn’t create a blockade because that would indicate that Russia was actually at war with Georgia. Georgian ships that entered the security zone were fired upon by the Russian navy and sunk. That sounds remarkably similar to a blockade. The Russians also opened a second front far away from where the initial Georgian incursion occurred near the Abkhazia region. The Russian army used paratroopers to drop men and material into areas of Georgia that were completely undisputed, and the Russian air force bombed the
international airport in the Georgian capital city of Tbilisi. A cease-fire wasn’t even enough to stop the Russian army from stopping their raids inside Georgia. They took it upon themselves to force the demilitarization of Georgia by destroying Georgian weapons and equipment. It took two years for Russia to completely remove all of their troops and checkpoints from Georgia, South Ossetia, and Abkhazia. Russia also took it upon themselves to unilaterally issue decrees recognizing the autonomy of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Only six countries have joined Russia in their recognition of the breakaway regions, and that list of nations does not even include their closest ally of China. While the Georgian military incursion into South Ossetia was arguably extreme and unnecessary, the Russian response in defense of supposed Russian interests in South Ossetia and Abkhazia was grossly disproportionate.

Suppression of the Oligarchs

As with Yeltsin, Vladimir Putin would not allow for those with power to openly oppose his leadership or ability to lead. NTV was the largest privately owned broadcasting company in Russia. Its leader, Vladimir Gusinsky, learned first-hand about the problem that can arise should there be disagreement with Russia’s leader. The two met for dinner shortly after Putin was anointed as Prime Minister. Accounts of the meeting describe an encounter that ranges from uncomfortable at best to outright confrontational, with Gusinsky allegedly calling Putin a puppeteer and saying that it would take a $100 billion credit for NTV to support Putin. Putin was not a man to take kindly to those oligarchs who gained power and money during the 1990s by using less-than-honorable means. NTV had repeatedly used bribes to run programming that did not
always run in line with government wishes. As other television stations started to fall in line with the interests of the Kremlin early in Putin’s presidency, NTV instead stayed the course and aired what Gusinsky wanted. In return, the Kremlin used the guise of property rights and fraud to bring down the mogul and his media empire. Gusinsky borrowed heavily from the government with no real means to pay those bills back. The Russian government and tax police performed smaller, but very public, raids on NTV assets by using armed assault teams. As Gusinsky was being interrogated for other alleged acts of corruption and embezzlement, he was arrested and sent to prison, and in the early morning hours of Easter Sunday in 2001, Russian officials occupied and took control of NTV’s offices. A private entity was forced into government control, and in the process, Putin sent a clear “stay in line or else” message to all others who dared to oppose the government.

Gusinsky’s public lesson directed at the other oligarchs by Putin somehow managed to still fall on deaf ears. While these individuals helped Boris Yeltsin directly and Vladimir Putin indirectly rise to power during the 1990s, Putin decided very early to rewrite the rule book and other examples needed to be made. Boris Berezovsky was one of the few to realize what was happening and leave Russia before it was too late. He was integral to Yeltsin’s reelection in 1996 as one of only a handful of bankers that controlled the majority of Russia’s GDP at the time. It was Berezovsky’s mistake, however to confront Putin by telling him, “Just because I have supported you up until now does not mean I will continue to do so.” Putin retaliated by jailing one of Berezovsky’s lieutenants and forcing the sale of his many companies for pennies on the dollar.
Berezovsky fled Russia and gained asylum in Britain before he was arrested himself. The leaders of the oil group Lukoil, the metals group Norilsk Nickel, and the electricity group UES all found either themselves or their company in court for allegations of tax fraud, privatization irregularities, and the illegal sale of shares to foreigners. The “Family” that had supported Yeltsin during the 1990s was under assault by the Kremlin.

Not even the richest man in Russia was free from persecution from the Kremlin. Mikhail Khodorkovsky was leveled with a charge of over $1 billion in tax evasion and fraud. As with the other oligarchs, Khodorkovsky’s fall from grace was swift and ruthless. Khodorkovsky was one of the few far-sighted oligarchs. He realized that short-term gain at the expense of Russian interests would no longer work under Putin and began reinvestment and philanthropy efforts inside Russia. Secretly, however, Khodorkovsky had political plans of his own. Those around him even went so far as to claim that eventually Khodorkovsky wanted to run for president or become Prime Minister. Publicly, he criticized Putin’s position on the Iraq War and over the ludicrously corrupt sale of Severnaya Neft, a public oil company Khodorkovsky wanted to buy. Putin and the Kremlin soon began questioning how Khodorkovsky and his companies had obtained the sheer amount of money that was in their accounts, and on October 25, 2003 Khodorkovsky’s place as the richest man in Russia came to an end as he was arrested and detained by Russian officials. Once again, Vladimir Putin showed that those who had power by money only kept it for so long as Putin allowed.

Eliminating the Outspoken
Oligarchs who opposed Putin weren’t the only ones to find suffering and even death from opposing the Russian president. Anna Politkovskaya, whose information serves as a source, was once such Putin critic. Politkovskaya wrote the book *Putin’s Russia* in 2004 as an account for what life is like in Russia under the thumb of Vladimir Putin. She was born in New York; her father was a translator for the United Nations. Four years later, she was in the Soviet Union as a member of the upper middle class. This afforded her the chance to go to school to study journalism. She wrote fiery articles speaking out against alleged government misdeeds and in support of those in Russia who had no voice. The first attempt on her life nearly worked, as poison was slipped into her tea while on a flight back to Moscow. Two years later, bullets were used instead of poison to much greater effect.

Alexander Litvinenko was next to fall victim. Litvinenko was a former KGB officer who accused his superiors of ordering the assassination of Boris Berezovsky. He was arrested twice for the charge of exceeding his authority at work but was either acquitted or had the charges dropped on both occasions. He knew it was time to leave the country, and he was granted asylum in Britain. He criticized Putin during his time in asylum, blaming Putin for the Moscow apartment bombings preceding Russia’s second war with Chechnya and for the death of Anna Politkovskaya. Less than a month after Litvinenko’s very public accusation of Putin in the death of Politkovskaya, Litvinenko fell ill himself after meeting with two Russian businessmen in a London hotel. This meeting occurred on November 1, 2006, and Litvinenko would be declared dead on November 23rd of the same year. He had been poisoned by polonium-210. Polonium-
210 is extremely rare and was used by Russia in the Lunokhod lunar rovers and as initiators in Russia’s atomic bombs. While there is no proven direct link between Russia and either Litvinenko’s or Politkovskaya’s death, the circumstances surrounding each death are extremely suspect and seem to all point back at Putin.

Consolidation of Domestic Power

The Russian Federation was divided into 89 semi-autonomous regions, each electing their own governor and legislature. The upper chamber of Russia’s legislature was composed of the governors of those regions, which in and of itself is quite undemocratic in Western terms as someone is allowed to hold office in both the executive and legislative branches. Under Yeltsin, these regions were allowed to assume whatever levels of autonomy that they could manage, and that was one policy that quickly changed once Putin assumed the Russian presidency. The 89 regions were quickly divided into 7 larger federal super-districts. Each super-district was run by an appointee that was chosen by Putin. Of the first 7 leaders Putin chose for each district, only one was a diplomat and one a politician. The rest were officers in the military or police. Their charge was to provide supervision over regional government activities and ensure that any new measure passed by those regional governments matched federal mandates. Putin also managed to push through a law granting the super-district leaders the authority to remove any regional governor from power should they come under federal investigation and also to dissolve any regional legislative assembly should a measure pass that contradicts the Russian constitution. If a regional governor decided to go against Putin in any way, then all that was needed was cause to convene a federal investigation and away
went a fairly elected representative. In true Putin form, examples were quickly made of a few regional governors with loose ties to the new president. The governor of Kursk, Alexander Rutoski, became first to go after allegations of nepotism and mismanagement barred him from reelection just one day before voting was to occur. One of his crimes, it turns out, was a failure to de-register a six year old car that he sold during his reelection campaign. Ruslan Aushev of Ingushetia unexpectedly resigned a few months before his reelection. He had the misfortune of questioning Kremlin policy in Chechnya. Aushev’s chosen successor fared no better than Aushev himself as he was dismissed by the courts. The man eventually elected as governor of Ingushetia was a former KGB official with strong ties to Putin.

Putin also changed the composition of the upper branch of Russia’s federal legislature. No longer would the regional governors be allowed to serve in that chamber. Instead, they were allowed to merely nominate persons to represent them. No governor dared protest this drastic loss in power lest he find himself staring at an investigation by the Inspector-General. The change in voting patterns was enormous.

During Yeltsin’s presidency, nearly 25% of the legislation that reached the upper chamber was not passed. After Putin’s reforms took effect, the same rate fell to just 3-6%. Given Putin’s disdain for anyone who opposed his policies, it’s surprising that the bill failure rate was anything above 0%.

Vladimir Putin’s consolidation of economic power also came from the continuous rigging of parliamentary elections. It didn’t matter who the people voted for; the United Russia party, the party that supports Putin and his policies, would always manage to
garner a majority of the parliamentary seats. This corruption became so frustrating that political parties refused to field candidates in either the parliamentary or presidential elections. The Russian United Democratic Party “Yabloko” was one such party that refused to field a candidate in the 2004 Russian presidential election. They cited the non-democratic nature of the previous parliamentary election as reason for why it’s hopeless to even try and stand against Putin and the Kremlin. Business didn’t dare provide monetary support to the other candidates lest they face punishment from the Kremlin for unsanctioned political involvement. One of the candidates who managed to gain the needed support from both the Central Electoral Commission and the Party of Life political party, Sergei Mironov, announced that he hoped that Putin would win the very same election in which he was a candidate. Also, in the lead-up to the election, many minor political parties decided to abandon their chosen candidate and placed their support behind Putin for president. Presidential candidate Ivan Rybkin, who probably had about the best chance of defeating Putin, flew to London to gain the advice of some of the oligarchs who were in asylum in Great Britain. He never made it back to Russia after requesting and gaining asylum himself. NTV refused to provide airtime to the opposition candidates, because their low ratings in opinion polls would mean nobody would watch the programs (as was mentioned previously, the Russian government wrested control of NTV in 2001).

Seventy-one percent of the electorate voted for Putin on election day, and the only documented infringement of election law was from a street vendor accused of selling
vodka too close to a polling location. The Central Electoral Commission wouldn’t want anybody to be too drunk to find Putin’s name on the ballot.

**Newfound Economic Power**

Increasing economic fortunes for Russia from its energy exports started to give Russia the ability to flex its muscles once again in the former Soviet bloc. For a time, Russia ran neck and neck with Saudi Arabia as the world’s largest oil producer, and, as a result, Russia’s coffers filled very rapidly in the early 2000s as energy prices spiked. Russia was a major energy export partner to countries like the Ukraine and Belarus. These and other Eastern European nations relied on Russia for energy at a subsidized rate, and Putin wasn’t going to let this advantage go to waste as energy became an increasingly important political lever used to get what he wanted. Russia was responsible for providing a third of all the energy consumed by Eastern European nations, and what Russia gives it can very quickly take away. Ukraine had the misfortune of holding outstanding debts with Russia. In the months prior to the winter of 2002, Putin announced that there would be no energy shipments without renewed efforts to begin paying down those debts and that new energy shipment would be charged at the market rate instead of the subsidized rates they were used to. Russian state energy groups, such as Gazprom and UES also began muscling out Western energy companies in the poorer former-Soviet nations. Moscow would soon have near-full control of the energy resources of all of Eastern Europe and the Caucasus. If any nation in one of those regions decided that Russia was a foe and not a friend, then they could quickly find themselves without power for basic necessities, and then they’d be paying a higher price for those
energy needs as a reminder of their past “mistakes.” Where would any good democracy be without the strong arm of extortion as a tool to achieve the desired results? It is Russia’s hope to further extend their ability to export energy to the Western European nations of Great Britain, France, and Italy with the construction of new gas pipelines.

Failures of the Kremlin

It’s a safe assumption to say that most, if not all democracies hold the military and their officers to extremely high standards. In return, those in uniform and their families can expect a measure of security and respect from their country. Not so in Putin’s Russia. In Volgograd Province, Russia, 54 soldiers left a military base after their comrades were beaten by drunken officers who were in charge of their military outpost. They were accused of losing an unmanned aerial vehicle, which just happened to be right where it was the day before. As the officers went to dinner after beating an initial group of soldiers to the point where they couldn’t walk, the 54 others decided not to wait for their turn to be beaten and left. The soldiers were found and sent back to the very officers that intended to beat them the first time. Putin’s position on army accountability is grounded in the belief that the military polices itself and no additional oversight is needed. Misha Nikolaev died on an army outpost on Anuchina Island. He was forced to cook meals for the garrison even as his skin was visibly rotting from sores and uncontrolled infections. Private Dmitry Kiselev was essentially sold into slavery by his commanding officer to work as a farm hand in neighboring fields as a way to make extra money. He was digging a trench with seven other conscripts one evening. That trench collapsed suffocating all seven soldiers. No trial was ever convened against the
commanding officer. Other stories include beatings and thefts at the hands of superior officers, many of which result in the victim dying either from the beatings themselves or from suicide afterwards. The apathy shown by the Russian government is akin to the condoning of such behavior by the Russian government, and this behavior is not the conduct becoming of a real democracy.

The Russian army is not alone in their lack of support from the Kremlin. Early in Putin’s presidency, he showed just how willing he was to hide one of the worst naval accidents in Russia’s history. Explosions that measured greater than 4 on the Richter scale were measured by seismic stations in Europe. The Russian nuclear submarine Kursk sank in the Barents Sea carrying 22 nuclear tipped cruise missiles. Initially, Russian naval admirals hid the disaster from the Kremlin. Once the Kremlin got wind of the disaster and the potential implications, then they too began a campaign of clumsy stories and lies, and, while the Kremlin did everything possible to divert attention away from what might have happened to the Kursk, the few who managed to survive the initial explosions suffocated because Putin refused to ask anyone else in the world for help. In fact, Putin at first did not find the tragedy worthy of interrupting his vacation at the Black Sea. He only accepted Norwegian help as a way to avoid the impression that he and other political authorities weren’t completely inept and heartless. As a result of Putin’s pride and desire to not be disturbed while on vacation, 118 Russian sailors lost their lives.

Conclusion

Vladimir Putin rose from obscurity at the end of Boris Yeltsin’s presidency and was in the right position at the right time. Putin won over the populace by invading
Chechnya for a second time, doing what most Russian politicians wouldn’t. Once he had his power, he never looked back. He didn’t even let the term limits stand in his way by cherry-picking Dmitri Medvedev to be next president and having Medvedev appoint Putin as his Prime Minister. No one dared oppose these decisions for fear of reprisals, and those fears were very well warranted. Time after time, Putin’s administration showed that they would either eliminate or bully anyone who dared stand in the way. In what is supposed to be a democracy, an autocracy is instead found in its place. Putin desires one thing and that one thing is power. Not just power for himself, but power for Russia as well. He was able to bring Russia back into an international standing that Boris Yeltsin could only dream of having, and he accomplished this with brute force and threats. Putin has defined an era in Russia that harkens back to both the Soviet Union and tsardom. The practices of Putin are oftentimes compared to those of Joseph Stalin and Tsar Ivan IV. Vladimir Putin will continue to hold Russia in his grip for at least the next four years as he begins his second stint as president. How long will Putin be able to continue his hold over Russia? That question can only be answered by the will of the people, and the winds of fortune might finally be starting to blow against Putin.
Russia’s Future

Upon Vladimir Putin’s exit from the office of the Russian presidency in 2008, he created no doubt that his place at the top of Russia’s political structure would not change, nor did it change over the next four years. While the guise of a ‘tandemocracy’ between Medvedev and Putin was shown to the public at large, those with any power of observation knew who still held the reins of the Russian government no matter whose name came after the word President. Once Medvedev’s four years were up as Russian president, he was pushed aside in order for Putin to once again win the presidential election. For the next four years, Putin will once again have the full might of a new Russia at his back; a Russia that he rebuilt to be a world power once again, but will Putin continue to hold on as leader of the world’s largest country? If Putin is finally forced out as president, who takes his spot? Does Russia continue its meteoric reemergence as a world power, or will the global winds of change blow in another direction once again?

Putin’s Future

According to the Russian constitution, a president is only allowed to serve two consecutive terms as president. Unlike the Constitution of the United States of America, there is no set limit on the number of years that any one person can serve as Russian president. For Russia, this means they could be seeing a lot more of Vladimir Putin for a very long time to come. Should Putin’s popularity/rigging of elections continue for the
foreseeable future, then Putin will win reelection as Russian president in 2016, become Prime Minister again in 2020, win reelection again in 2024 and 2028. In 2032, Putin will turn 80 years old, likely bringing his political career to a close, should he still have a political career. While this seems unlikely in the eyes of many Americans, the possibility of Putin holding power in Russia for over 30 years should not be understated. Putin’s popularity ratings took a major hit in 2011 as he received criticisms over alleged parliamentary election fraud. These sparked larger, more widespread protests nationwide against Putin and his apparent continuous power grabbing (more on these protests later). As quickly as Putin’s approval numbers dropped, however, they rose back above 50% once again in the weeks preceding the 2012 presidential elections. After winning the election, his approval rating neared 70% once again. This seems to show that Russians have a very short memory. Within the span of three months, Putin’s approval rating first fell 10% following election fraud allegations then rose nearly 20% as he won the presidency. The Russian public’s ability to forgive and forget about political misgivings can only serve as a massive boon for Putin. He’s able to orchestrate an event of his choosing, and he knows that the public will soon forgive his actions. This grants Putin power that no other democratic leader in the world has and will allow him to remain in power for as long as Putin desires that power. The possibility of Vladimir Putin remaining in power until 2032 is not a stretch of the imagination by any means.

There is one Achilles heel for Putin that should be heeded, however, and that is oil. Russia and Putin’s rise back to prominence was no fluke. Without the rising energy prices that were seen in the 2000s, it could be argued that Russia would still be
floundering about within a sea of debt. Almost half of the massive budgets that the Kremlin has produced over the past decade have been financed through the export of oil. What happens as oil continues to rise and the world begins turning to alternative energy sources? Consumption in the United States, the world’s largest consumer of energy resources, has plateaued. Energy efficient cars, renewable energy sources such as wind and solar are powering more homes than ever, and even coal is making a comeback, as its usage is becoming a relatively clean option. As the price of oil continues its rise back to record levels, migration to other energy sources is inevitable, and Russia’s economy is not diversified enough to take a massive hit. In the short term, emerging economies such as China and India would be able to cover much of the drop in consumption, but oil is not a viable long-term option. In February 2010, the United States Joint Forces Command issued a warning to all United States military commands. That warning stated that oil production would peak in 2012 and that supply shortfalls of over 10 million barrels per day would occur by 2015. While this statement might not come true in 2012, it will come true eventually. When it does, Russia and Putin’s cash cow will have an expiration date.

Another problem for Putin’s future as leader of Russia could lie in the younger generations. This younger generation saw first-hand what determined and coordinated protests could accomplish last year with the Arab Spring. Those who had an iron grip on power for much longer than Putin fell under the will of the people. This group saw many candidates that shared their political beliefs and ideologies rejected from running in the latest presidential election by the state-run Kremlin Election Commission. They’ve taken
notice when those who speak out against Putin are removed from their jobs or badly beaten. These liberal youth point to an instance where even a precinct in Chechnya voted overwhelmingly in favor of Putin for president. It was so overwhelming, in fact, that more people voted for Putin than were even registered to vote in that precinct. Stories such as those now have the ability to get onto sites such as Facebook and Twitter, whereas before they would have just been censored by the state-run media. More young people are able to see and read about all of the instances where Putin and the Kremlin have used their iron fists to take what they have not earned. If there’s one thing that Putin cannot control, it’s the will of the country’s young people, and that may very well be where Putin very soon finds his toughest opposition.

Russia’s Place in the World

The sheer size of Russia allows it access to two oceans and one major hub of explosive economic growth. Russian relations with China have rarely been better and the future fortunes of the two nations are highly interconnected. At the heart of that need for cooperation is energy. While China currently only imports about 3% of its energy from Russia, that number is expected to increase to nearly 30% by 2020 as the Chinese economy continues to grow at breakneck speed. The construction of energy infrastructure surrounding Lake Baikal and in Siberia seems to further show Russia’s intention of not only Europe but Asia as well.

Future participation in the European Union or the United Nations remains a question mark. In recent years, Russia has reasserted itself as a nation that will not easily bow to the wishes of the other permanent members of the United Nations Security
Council. Sanctions against Iran for its domestic nuclear programs and against Syria and its domestic bombing are prime examples of this change. The United States and other Western countries and organizations have needed to initiate their own sanctions against Iran and Syria as Russia has begun to exercise its veto power. Putin has even been quoted as stating that Russia’s veto will be used to protect the interests of his own nation before the other nations of the world. As Russia increases its resistance in the United Nations, will there ever be a possibility for Russia to join the European Union? The Kremlin has largely ignored the advances of the European movement towards shared sovereignty, usually only taking notice when the European Union courts a former Soviet nation. Putin has also sent a number of mixed signals as to Russia’s possible future of with the EU. There are times when Putin describes Russia as a purely European nation, but there are other times when he touts Russia’s “Asia-ness.” The rotating six-month presidency of the European Union doesn’t seem to align with Russia’s pattern of continuity at the top of the Kremlin. Current economic and currency insecurities within the Eurozone also bucks the Russian trend of economic security. Given Russia’s recent affinity towards doing what they want to do, how they want to do it, it seems very highly unlikely to see Russia as the next EU member.

Conclusion

If the definition of democracy was that from time to time people go out and cast a vote for a series of candidates, then Russia has a democracy. However, if democracy really means a system of government that must follow due process as a limit to its power, have a predictable set of rules that must be followed, and have a working system of
checks and balances that is based on a reliable constitution then Russia needs to revisit their idea of democracy. Democracy, though, seems to hold a bad taste in the mouths of many Russians. They look at the failed policies that led to high unemployment and poverty during the Yeltsin years that were implemented in the name of democracy. At present, Russia’s political structure more closely resembles that of China. One of centralized one party control which uses overreaching state planning to guide and control the nation’s economy, and one that maintains an iron grip on its power, strategically eliminating those who pose a threat to the government or speak out against the government. The term of “enlightened authoritarianism” has also been thrown around to describe Putin’s form of government. As long as the oil is flowing, however, then Russia will be able to finance the economy, curb inflation, and ensure that pensions and wages are paid. So far, this has been enough to hide the memories of the last Soviet decade and the Yeltsin years and provide Putin with enough of a buoy to show that his policies are truly better.

Russia’s future is tied to the continuous flow of oil and natural gas. This concept is not lost on Russia’s president-elect, Vladimir Putin. He continuously pushes for the diversification of the Russian economy toward the higher technology, research, and education fields, because he knows that the wells will eventually run dry. For the time-being, however, economic growth is completely tied to the price of oil. When oil prices rose, so did the rate at which Russia’s economy grew. This is also a point not lost on Vladimir Putin. That’s why there is massive new investment from Gazprom in oil and gas pipelines to bring new resources in from Siberia. However, Russia’s ability to supply
oil and natural gas affects more than just their economy. Europe’s dependence on Russian energy will give Russia unparalleled leverage over those countries that they’ve only just begun to use, and the ability to exercise this leverage is only going to grow in the near future as Gazprom continues investments farther and farther into Western Europe. Russian threats to cut off energy were once only limited to nations once under Soviet control. Soon, they will have this power over all of Europe. Currently, 40-50% of European gas consumption is supplied by Russia, and, as China continues to use more and more oil from the Middle East, European reliance on Russian energy will increase further. Energy is the new currency, making Russia one of the richest and most powerful nations in the world. What they do with that power is still a big unknown, but if their past is any indication, then the rest of Europe will soon be bowing to the will of the Kremlin lest there be no gas to heat the homes of Germany or Great Britain in the middle of winter.
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