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Russian Leadership: Good Intentions Failed Democracy

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Author:

Major Alison Janel MacBain

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Executive Summary

Title: Russian Leadership: Good Intentions Failed Democracy

Author: Major Alison Janel MacBain

Thesis: A new and fragile balance between democracy and autocracy has emerged and has allowed Russia to restore stability and to reclaim its status as a great power. An analysis of Russia's executive leadership, from Mikhail Gorbachev's era of Perestroika, through Boris Yeltsin's unsuccessful attempt of western style democracy, to Vladimir Putin's goal of regenerating Russian greatness, will demonstrate that change has occurred only through the unchallenged position of the new Russian presidency and the man who fills it.

Discussion: Following two failed attempts at democratic change, Russia's dominance on the world stage neared extinction when a return to an autocracy rescued them from achieving a failed state status. Change in the Russian society has and will continue to happen through the power and vision of one man. Russian history reveals the continued emergence of a single autocratic power, a single man whose desires for the country have come to fruition by force and through total state control. Russia has spent the better part of fifteen years experimenting with democratic policy and has concluded that other nation's versions of political structure do not suit and will not work for the Russian society. Frustrated with a on going state of great depression in the 1990's, many people have turned toward and even support with great dedication the autocratic principles that Vladimir Putin has implemented. The people are just now enjoying a debt free government supported through state controlled resources, as well as a secure environment that provides the essential services expected of a stable government. It is through these men of great power and reform that the nation has taken a turn for the better and returned to its place of heritage as a great power on the global arena.

Conclusion: Although Gorbachev initiated what at first resembled the signs of a democratic system, the current system incorporates a capitalist market economy to suit the needs of the global market with a political system that is autocratically centered. Through the necessary failures of his predecessors, Vladimir Putin has achieved success using his new presidential position steeped in autocratic policy. As this new and stable position of autocratic power continues to develop, it is crucial that the western world refocus its attention on Russia with its re-established political, economic, and diplomatic processes now on solid ground.

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Preface

First and most importantly, I would like to thank my husband who spent many of long days entertaining our one year old son so that I was free to focus on the task at hand; your dedication to me and my achievements is immensely appreciated and my love grows for you daily. I would also like to thank my mentor, Dr. Otis first for her encouragement to continue when completion looked unachievable as well as acknowledge her colossal patience and understanding in allowing me to work this project on my own timeline. To the ladies in the Leadership Communication Skill Center, Dr. Scanlon and Andrea, you are a lifesaver. For the hippest gal and truly my most favorite librarian, Rachel your assistance with my research was the key to the success of this paper, you rock! And last but not least, I would like to express my gratitude to my parents who never waived in stepping in when needed and taking care of ordinary household chores, especially the preparation of so many delicious meals as well as providing numerous words of encouragement. This research project has truly been a team effort and its completion is only due to your contributions. Without your support, I would not have been able to complete such an endeavor of education. Thank you to all.

INTRODUCTION

After twenty years of transformation under the influence of varying types of leadership, Russia is again emerging on the global front as a power to be reckoned with. Unlike the days of the Cold War when military strength was the key to world domination, Russia has resurfaced as a global power in which change is driven by globalization. The long and arduous road traveled by the people of Russia has been characterized with intense suffering and sacrifice. However, this course is amazingly similar to the path traversed several times over by Russia's forefathers in their consistent struggle to achieve security and stability while projecting an unquestionable position of dominance.

Unlike during its communist days, Russia understands it must find a balance between transparency on the global market and the inherent need for concealed objectives to maintain a military and diplomatic prowess. Even though Russia has sacrificed much to regain its credible position on the global scene, the outward look is a somewhat arrogant view on the part of the Russian leadership. To be viewed as anything less than a global power is not a reality that Russia is willing to accept and an inherent mindset that explains their constant drive toward greatness.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia has attempted structural and institutional transformation. Russian leadership has experimented with the Western version of democracy and has found that pieces of other political systems are difficult to implement. They have nearly come full circle from the days of communist rule, returning an undisputed autocratic power to the top political position of leadership where fear once again has the ability to maintain an internal peace and wield the nation's power relative to the rest of the world. A view into the past three leaders of Russia will show that Russian

politics have reverted to their historical past and are now knocking at the door of a renewed dictatorship. Following two failed attempts at democratic change, Russia's dominance on the world stage neared extinction when a return to an autocracy rescued them from achieving a failed state status.

It was Gorbachev, who lifted the communist veil of secrecy opening the door to democracy and capitalism; it was Boris Yeltsin, who tried in vain to give democracy a chance; and it was Vladimir Putin, who reigned in the chaos in the only way he knew how - a flash back to dictatorship sprinkled with a dash of democratic flavor. It is this new and fragile balance between democracy and autocracy that has allowed Russia to restore stability and reclaim their status as a great power. An analysis of the executive leadership from Mikhail Gorbachev's era of perestroika, Boris Yeltsin's unsuccessful attempt of western style democracy, and Vladimir Putin's goal of regenerating Russian greatness demonstrates that change has occurred basically through the unchallenged position of the new Russian presidency and the individual who fills it.

Change is the most disruptive and uncomfortable state and for almost twenty years Russia and the surrounding republics struggled through this condition on a daily basis. Throughout the seventy years of communism, the Union was held together by an ideology that dictated everything from daily production rates to overall government structure. Change occurred through the direction of the communist party at the highest level. When the Soviet Union collapsed and the desperate state of affairs within was revealed to the world, the communist ideology was proclaimed a failure.

Without the extreme oppression of the communist ideology, the leadership struggled to identify a new unifying theme that could keep the Union from disintegrating. A people

without a cause where the current state of affairs was observed as: "... a deep economic crisis, a free-fall in living standards, the threat of unemployment, hyperinflation, a feeling of national humiliation ("as if we had lost a war"), the haunting awareness of a great loss ("everybody has something – only Russians have lost everything") the collapse of old ideas, and – as a result – a crisis of identity and an ideological void."¹ Over the next twenty years, the executive powers struggled to shape an ineffective and cumbersome political structure into a hopeful and productive democratic system.

In recounting the events of the past twenty years, one thing shines through as the largest shortfall of this attempted democratic change. The fact that the general population, the political officials, and the leadership lacked exposure to the internal workings of an effective democratic system accounts for the difficulty of the path traveled. The large deficit in the knowledge base and the contribution of numerous opposing opinions made it impossible to draft a comprehensive plan that could be implemented logically and sequentially. Without the existence of an overarching plan, drastic and sporadic change was forced into a rigid system incapable of change. Throughout the process, many mistakes and failed reform attempts fostered a great public disappointment in, and a vast political divergence of, viewpoints on the possibility of a democratic Russia. It is no surprise that as they worked through the problem they ultimately ended up back where they had started with a stalwart President surrounded by a tight body of executive leadership formulating and implementing a unified plan void of external input. In 1989, when Gorbachev stepped up to the plate and swung the bat of democracy, he inadvertently unleashed a democratic force of political destruction that would take almost twenty years to redirect in a constructive manner through Putin's autocratic rule.

GORBACHEV'S ERA OF PERESTROIKA

The first leader to introduce democratic possibility into a society that was beginning to lag behind its global counterparts was Mikhail Gorbachev. He was born in Privolnoye, Stavropol, a city in the heart of the Caucasus region described by Gorbachev in his memoirs as a province “at the juncture of continents, the crossroads of different civilizations, cultures, religions, the meeting-place of many peoples, languages, traditions and ways of life.”² Even though he expressed a great tie to his ancestral heritage, he had great exposure to the world. Born in 1931 to a peasant family, he was no stranger to the difficult times experienced by many if not all Russians during the communist times of Josef Stalin. Gorbachev suffered greatly during this period having two major events to shape his future views. The first was when his father was sentenced to nine years in the Gulag for the crime of withholding grain from the collective harvest; and the second took place during World War II when the city of Stavropol was occupied by German forces causing great death and despair. After the war ended, Gorbachev describes his generation, “Our Generation is the generation of wartime children. It has burned us, leaving its mark both on our characters and our view of the world.”³ Gorbachev embraced the communist system and worked hard in the agricultural fields and the education system and was recognized for his achievements in both.

Mikhail Gorbachev, an ordinary man, was armed with a strong work ethic and a charismatic personality that pushed him toward accomplishing extraordinary things. Although he had been brutally criticized by many, Gorbachev believed in the greatness of

the Soviet Union and sought to rebuild the country internally in order to maintain its position globally. As he assumed his position in 1985 as the last General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and the USSR head of state, Gorbachev provided his initial thoughts in his Address to the Soviet Citizens on December 25, 1991.

Fate had decided that, when I became head of state, it was already obvious that there was something wrong in this country. We had plenty of everything: land, oil, gas, and other natural resources, and God has also endowed us with intellect and talent – yet we lived much worse than people in other industrialized countries and the gap was constantly widening. The reason was apparent even then – our society was stifled in the grip of a bureaucratic command system. Doomed to serve ideology and bear the heavy burden of the arms race, it was strained to the utmost⁴

Gorbachev saw his path clearly; something had to be done to rejuvenate the country he believed in and loved. He spent his six years in office working towards transparency and implementing democratic methods to engage the people and the country's institutions into action on economic restoration.

Domestic Policy and Perestroika

From a KGB commissioned study, Gorbachev was made aware of the desperate situation of an ineffective economy and a military that was falling behind in the global arms race. This study revealed a far worse situation than what was known by the Communist Party or predicted by the West and would drive domestic policy over the next six years. Gorbachev attempted to address these issues through incremental reforms. However, these reforms were no different from past efforts to increase productivity through a people's patriotic call for personal sacrifice for the greater good of the nation, proving ineffective in producing real change. By 1987, a frustrated Gorbachev introduced his radical concept of reform labeled "Perestroika".

The concept "Perestroika", as a restructuring or rebuilding of the economy, was never well defined. For example, as in a capitalist system, directors were given increased autonomy in setting prices, wages and output targets on the market, but in true socialist style rules were in place that prevented any type of competition with the state. Although many believed that the reform was pushing the Soviet Union toward a capitalist system, Gorbachev was adamant that the Soviet Union was working towards a new socialist system. He claimed, "We are conducting all our reforms in accordance with the socialist choice. We are looking within socialism, rather than outside it, for the answers to all questions that arise."⁵ Unfortunately, the socialist system could not provide the answers necessary within its framework to address the problems that arose. The system was extremely successful in increasing corruption at many governmental levels, but woefully ineffective at affecting positive change within the economy to increase Gross National Production. Gorbachev's refusal to deviate from the socialist system in economic reform demonstrates his dedication to his goal to accomplish change within the current Soviet framework, but also paved the path to the fall of the Soviet Union.

Not only did Gorbachev feel the pains of failure within his economic reform, but Perestroika was ill received by the communist party. The Party members immediately perceived the concept as a threat to their established bureaucratic system and refused to support it. Within the communist system and its structure, Gorbachev was well aware that change could only be implemented from the top down; thus, without the support of the Party members he knew his plan would fail. To eliminate this opposition, Gorbachev exercised his executive authority and began to replace the Party's top leadership. Within his first year of assuming power, he had replaced nearly half of the Party's top leadership

and unwittingly embarked on a five year plan of political reform. Later in 1989, the party would experience a mass resignation of seventy-four central committee members in a protest against Perestroika reform. Unwavering in his dedication to principles of the socialist system, Gorbachev was frustrated with his socialist brethren and their inability to see the benefits to be gained by this new way of thinking. Once again in his frustration, he introduced his newest concept of "Glasnost", not realizing that it would eventually seal both his and the Soviet Union's fate.

The Affects of Glasnost

The motivation behind 'Glasnost' was to empower the lower levels of government in order to force a breakthrough in policy at the highest levels. Ultimately, Glasnost was an executive information campaign to educate the Soviet people and encourage a national movement that would represent the will of the people in favor of reform. Disguised neatly in a package of democratic reforms that included freedom of the press, freedom of speech, freedom of association and elections of party officials, both the people of the Soviet Union and the western world praised Gorbachev for his democratic reforms. These new found freedoms forced amendments to articles on the criminal code, in particular those addressing anti-Soviet agitation and propaganda. These amendments to Soviet law, freed many political prisoners who rode this new democratic wave to create new political parties that would eventually challenge and oppose Gorbachev's position as well as his vision of an improved socialist Soviet Union.

With the implementation of democratic elections of party officials, Gorbachev was successful in changing the dynamics of the existing system and began to fear retribution from the Communist Party top officials in the form of dismissal from his position of

General Secretary. In order to protect his position of power, Gorbachev began pushing for elections to democratically nominate the first President of the Soviet Union. This institutional reform did not seem to follow the democratic movement as stated by a liberal deputy, Ilya Zaslavsky:

The effort to break the CPSU's monopoly from below seeks to create a democratic, multiparty parliamentary system; while the effort to break its monopoly from above seeks to replace one-party dictatorship. It was with this goal in mind that one of the most reactionary laws generated by Perestroika, a law I would even describe as ultra-monarchist-the Law on Presidential Powers in the USSR-was so decisively, so unceremoniously, and so quickly pushed through the (soviet) parliament.⁶

In true dictator form, the Presidential position - although democratically elected, now came with powers that gave undisputed decision making capability void of a democratic checks and balances system. These changes were justified as the only means to expedite economic change and ensure a stronger Soviet Union capable of maintaining its position as a global power. At the time, most believed that the Soviet Union was working towards becoming a truly democratic nation; however, these presidential powers painted a different picture of an autocratic system that did not stray far from Russia's historical past.

Freedom of the Press

By 1991, the reforms implemented by Gorbachev created a major conflict internal to the party. The communist system migrated from a stable political system with a unified party, to a multi-polar structure that made agreement on orderly change nearly impossible. Two camps of thought had developed over the past six years: those who believed in the continuance and strengthening of the Soviet Union and those who believed the country could only move forward through the complete destruction of the communist system. The

newly found power of public opinion and freedom of the press became an external force that ultimately turned against the one individual who initiated the change.

Gorbachev had hoped to use the media as a tool to gain public support for his democratic reforms and involve the people in the political process forcing change from grassroots to the highest levels. As freedom of the press gained momentum, it instead became a liability to Gorbachev's political process. It exposed economic and social problems that the communist party had long denied existed and those items that Gorbachev's reforms were not effectively addressing. The failures of the Soviet government were broadcast for the entire world to view; and, after seventy years of political secrecy concealed by the cloak of the "iron curtain", the government suddenly appeared weak and completely incapable of meeting the basic needs of the people. Many varying political parties found their voice in this new media forum and used it to gain support for their political platforms while delegitimizing the communist party and the continued existence of the Soviet Union. Additionally, this new found freedom of the press fueled the fires of nationalist movements throughout the republics.

Due to the democratic changes imposed by Gorbachev, the USSR's central government in Moscow began to crumble and was no longer effective enough to impose its will on the constituent republics. The Baltic republics were the first to take advantage of this weakened central control and declared independence. This move toward independence bolstered a widespread nationalist movement throughout the republics remaining in the Soviet Union. Gorbachev had accomplished his goal of breaking the monopoly held by the communist party and unwittingly unleashed the sleeping dragon of ethnic tension. These

two factors combined sealed the destruction and collapse of the Soviet Union, a necessary occurrence that would allow democracy to run its course Russian style.

Throughout Gorbachev's six years of power, he used his autocratic powers to give democracy a chance. Although his goal was to pursue a new type of socialism that incorporated some of the freedoms of a democracy, the momentum created outpaced the central government's ability to direct and agree on change that would accomplish the original goals of economic reform.

The proliferation of new actors in society, the Party, and the state radically influenced Gorbachev's reform agenda. As the number of meaningful political actors increased, the agenda of change also expanded. Eventually, political actors adopted preferences for reform that radically departed from Gorbachev's original intentions.⁷

Although Gorbachev did not achieve his goal of a rejuvenated Soviet Union, the reforms he implemented were a necessary evil to pave a path for his successor, Boris Yeltsin, in the next phase of attempted Russian democratization. Time magazine describes Gorbachev's era as "...that bright if short period of time when the chains fell one after another, when every day brought greater freedom and hope, when life acquired meaning and prospects, when, it even seemed, people loved one another and felt that a general reconciliation was possible."⁸ Gorbachev was an ambassador of peace, who for the love of his country suffered great ridicule to attempt democratic reform for the greater goal of maintaining global power status.

THE YELTSIN ERA –

A SPIRAL DOWNWARD TOWARD FAILED STATE STATUS

During his eight years of power, Yeltsin worked to further democratic reforms in the hopes of rebuilding the country internally in order to reclaim its status as a global power. His dilemma was an entirely different range of issues from those of his predecessor Mikhail Gorbachev. “With its ideology under assault, its economy in crisis, and its empire gone, the major source of USSR’s international power was its military arsenal.”⁹ Throughout the years of Gorbachev’s rule, Yeltsin had worked with him to implement perestroika reforms and then against him in plotting the demise of the Soviet Union. As the Soviet Union teetered on the verge of collapse, so did the reputation of Gorbachev. The moment Yeltsin had waited for had come to pass. The throne of power was ripe for the taking and Yeltsin did not hesitate. After the 1991 Coup, the Soviet Union collapsed and Boris Yeltsin was elected by popular vote as the first president of the Russian Federation. Having taken his Presidential position by force, Boris Yeltsin assumed and created a new Russian position of power from which to reign.

Armed with his visions of democratic reform, Yeltsin’s popularity, nationally and internationally, was at an all time high. Boris Yeltsin could do no wrong and was afforded great liberties in the realm of change. First and foremost, Yeltsin’s goal was to retain his place of great power undisputed, and secondly to ensure the continued independence of the Russian Federation. Thus, he put economic reform aside and focused his efforts on furthering the complete destruction of Mikhail Gorbachev, the communist party and its influence. In working towards this goal, Yeltsin used his executive powers to eliminate

opposition and to promote like minded-individuals who surrounded him and created his inner circle of power.

With the policies and reforms set in motion by his predecessor Gorbachev, Yeltsin not only had to deal with the collapse of the Soviet Union but a whole new set of unexpected issues that would further distract efforts from much needed economic reform. The borders of the states were no longer defined, former Soviet Union Republics were claiming independence in turn taking with them all the heavily relied upon economic resources and military forces.

The political widening between the numerous parties now in parliament was ever expanding and the levels of bureaucratic corruption were rising at an alarming rate. To further complicate matters, the rules by which politics would be organized could not be agreed upon and the government was without a ratified constitution to direct resolution in political disagreement.

Needless to say, neither Yeltsin nor his government had the knowledge or the expertise to address these issues nor did they have the unified front to make recommended solutions. Yeltsin recollects the difficulties he faced in his memoirs:

We had to figure out everything from the start. What was a vice president? How should a Russian constitutional court look? There was nothing but blank space because no such institutions had previously existed in Russia. ... We had to proceed not from how people did things somewhere else, but from our own experience. But we didn't have any. As a result, there emerged beautiful structures and pretty names with nothing behind them.¹⁰

This dilemma of the unknown realm forced many mistakes in political policies and ended the second attempt to install democracy.

Political Restructuring

In true Russian style, the way to accomplish change was through a single all powerful figure who was able to take the reigns of reform and implement ideas through a forced method; Yeltsin was no different than his predecessors. Although his people and the western world praised him initially for his democratic ideas, as was the case with his predecessor Gorbachev, Yeltsin began his term by increasing his autocratic presidential powers in the hopes of implementing democratic change. His first order of business was to issue a decree banning the Communist Party throughout the Russian Federation to allow for his unimpeded rule over Russian democratic reform. This constant upheaval of government structure and people did not stop at that point. Before Yeltsin turned over the country to the next President, he would have fired his entire cabinet four different times and replace his Prime Minister a total of seven times, this does not include Boris Yeltsin acting as both the President and Prime Minister for a period of six months.

Consistently searching for the correct balance of background, talent and action, Yeltsin worked his way through several different individuals at the prime minister level. His first Presidential appointed prime minister was an economist Yegor Gaidar, who introduced the 'Shock Therapy' policy of economic reform only to move it forward along a path not approved by Yeltsin. Gaidar was removed from the office of Prime Minister, followed by Victor Chernomyrdin in late 1992, who appeared much more successful and held the position for six years albeit a short interruption of five months by Sergei Kiriyenko. From that point forward, Yeltsin chose to staff the position with individuals "who had started their careers in the security or secret services: Yevgeny Primakov in

September 1998, Sergei Stepachin in May 1999 and finally Vladimir Putin in August 1999.”¹¹

Increased Presidential Powers

If the 1991 Coup marked the beginning of democratic reform for Yeltsin and his government, then the violent Coup of 1993 marked its end. Without a political structure arguments and disagreements between opposing political parties had no authority to settle disputes.

Prior to the 1993 Coup, Yeltsin took it upon himself to draft the first Russian Constitution. Knowing the constitution to be a contentious issue he took measures to veil its construction, “He and his advisors did so autonomously, independent of pressure from other state institutions, political forces, or society as a whole. In crafting a new constitutional arrangement, Yeltsin and his team tried to fill a lingering vacuum of institutional ambiguity surrounding political processes left over from the previous transitional moment in 1991.”¹² This constitution with its increased presidential powers incited the parliament to attempt a Coup to remove Yeltsin from his position of power. In the end, Yeltsin managed to gain the support of the military and defeated the Coup. With the opposition once again removed from office, he ratified his new Constitution and began exercising his new constitutional authorities.

No matter how effective President Yeltsin may have thought this new constitution, many criticized its composition, specifically Philip Roeder and Edward Walker, both political analysts of the time. They predicted that this new constitution would lead to an autocratic system rather than stabilize a democratic one. Roeder writes, “The structure of executive power has many of the hallmarks of autocracy found in other successor states; it

seems to be taking on a neo-Soviet form in which the Security Council makes the policy, and the staff of the President that verifies fulfillment of policy, loom behind the minister of the Government.”¹³ Additionally, Edward Walker remarked on the future path of undermining effects to the current desire for a democratic Russia in his comments directed at Yeltsin in 1993. “Russia’s latest tragedy may be that the man who has done the most to contribute to democratic consolidation in Russia may be unwittingly creating an institutional order that undermines what has already been achieved.”¹⁴ Since its ratification, the Constitution had succeeded in creating a Russian flavor of democracy that is driven by Presidential freedoms and political party inefficiencies, which is easily translated into autocratic power.

In autocratic fashion, the 1993 Constitution removed all the checks and balances normally present in a democratic system and gave the President the freedoms to make decisions without the approval of Parliament. For example, in 1994 without Parliamentary consent, President Yeltsin authorized the military to enter into conflict over the national movement for independence in Chechnya.

The constitution was drafted to overcome many of the issues that Yeltsin faced in his constant battle for reform and amazingly has lasted throughout the years when many predicted it would have been rewritten soon after its ratification.

Yeltsin’s Legacy

With all of the competing issues of his administration, Yeltsin chose to address economic reform; these efforts were unsuccessful due to the consistent interruption of political dissention and the growing ethnic tensions throughout the Region. Unable to

focus on his initial reform desires, Yeltsin discovered that without a stable political system, reform was exceedingly difficult. Yeltsin reflects on this failure in his memoirs.

Maybe I was in fact mistaken in choosing an attack on the economic front as the chief direction, leaving the government reorganization to perpetual compromises and political games. I did not disperse the Congress and left the Soviets intact. Out of inertia, I continued to perceive the Supreme Soviet as a legislative body that was developing the legal basis of reform. I did not notice that the very Congress was being co-opted. The deputies suddenly realized their omnipotence and an endless bargaining process ensued.¹⁵

Yeltsin attempted to overcome these weaknesses in government and large obstacles to democratic reform by bypassing the system all together and empowering himself and a select group of close confidants to implement change through increased presidential powers. Not so far off from his historical predecessors, he unwittingly continued down the path of his forefathers to a future of autocratic leadership sprinkled with few democratic freedoms. The impact of his reforms successfully dismantled the communist system, but did little to return Russia to its once great position of power. In the end, the people of the former Soviet Union lost faith in the abilities of Boris Yeltsin and his democratic system that failed to produce results. He was forced to depart office in ill health and leave a country in the grips of deep depression to Vladimir Putin.

VLADIMIR PUTIN – RESURGENCE OF RUSSIAN GREATNESS

Riding a public wave of disappointment in Yeltsin's failed attempts at democracy, Vladimir Putin moved into the Presidential position ready to test his hand at Russian reform. The challenge of "righting Russia" was substantial considering the nation was two

steps away from failed state status.¹⁶ This quote provides a perspective on the state of affairs.

The 1990s were a catastrophe for Russia. It went from being poor but a world power to being even poorer and a regional disaster. Boris Yeltsin's government basically lost control of Russia, and the result was a mish-mash of domestic theft on a grand scale, coupled with Western advisers' hare-brained schemes to turn Russia into a Western European nation.¹⁷

Having been raised in the secret and security services realm (1975 to 1991 in the KGB), Putin appeared to be well informed and equipped to handle the task of transformation. The new President was dismayed with the current situation of his once great nation and in his mission statement released on January 1, 2000; he made a promise to his nation. "He identified the long-term objective of restoring Russia's status as a great power and the well-being of its people and also for the first time set up a time-specific goal of bringing Russia's per capita gross domestic product (GDP) to the level of Portugal by the year 2015."¹⁸ Putin's overarching goal was to return Russia to "Great Power" status and in doing so he focused his efforts on removing the oligarchs from national political power, diminishing regional level power, and returning the media to state control.

The Dissolution of the Russian Oligarchy

During the 1990's, a small group of businessmen was able to take advantage of the new privatization laws incorporated under Yeltsin's economic reforms. Not only did these men get rich while the rest of the country grew increasingly destitute, this small group sought to corrupt politicians and officials. Before too long, the corruption had grown ominous and spread throughout the entire government system. As a result, reforms were blocked or made ineffective.¹⁹

The central government lost complete control of policy at the regional and local levels “It was estimated that under former Russian President Boris Yeltsin, more than 20,000 regional laws were passed without the Kremlin’s Knowledge.”²⁰ It was this situation that Putin sought to destroy; thus, he crushed the eighty-nine regional territories and in their place created seven districts with presidential appointed governors. In executing this reform, he effectively destroyed the oligarch power base at the regional level in turn reducing the levels of corruption and ultimately giving him direct control over all seven regions through his governors. By 2001, the impact of these reforms was far reaching and effectively put Putin directly in charge of the country’s overall administration, his first step towards continued autocratic power.

Having come from the secret service arena, Putin was well connected and began replacing Yeltsin supporters in influential positions of government and big business with a tight network of “silovik” (former secret service and military personnel). After the 2001 shakeup, when he replaced several ministers including defense, interior, atomic energy and security ministers with his handpicked team, it became obvious that he would surround himself with like-minded individuals from a common background and mindset. This continued changing and surprise tactics on Putin’s part kept the nation and the world guessing as to the nature of the agenda. His type of leadership was described by many as a calculated chaos, which allowed him to maintain his position of dominance and to continue to institute radical reform unquestioned.

With the execution of his drastic reform of governmental restructure, it was predicted that Putin would not be willing to share power with the nation’s big business oligarchs thus making them his next target. Putin secretly devised ways to control and

eliminate this realm of competition. If he did not have the legal jurisdiction to outright relieve an individual, as was the case in big business, he concealed his direct motives behind a plethora of criminal investigations and charges, including tax evasion. As was the case for Mikhail Khodorkovsky, Russia's first oil magnate, who found himself in jail and his assets seized by the government due to a litany of investigations and criminal charges. Not only did Putin seize control of the administration realm but believed it necessary to control big business for the betterment of the nation's economic GDP. In light of this inevitability, many oligarchs offered their cooperation over imprisonment and sold their assets to state-controlled groups. Individuals like Boris Berezovsky, who controlled auto manufacturer Avtovaz, oil firm Sibneft, and the airline Aeroflot, willingly allowed the state to buy up the stock. Through his position of power, fear, and intimidation, Putin was able to accomplish his goal and eliminate all power competing forces.

The Return to State Controlled Media

Understanding the power of persuasion held by the media, Vladimir Putin was determined to undo what Yeltsin had done with respect to freedom of the press. At the beginning of Putin's first term, the media had been successful at criticizing government leadership and reform, as well as injecting a seemingly lethal dose of realism for the nation. Putin understood that in order to further the country's development and his continued undisputed power position, negative press was not an option. He needed to ensure that he controlled the information campaign, nationally and internationally.

And so it wasn't enough to drive Vladimir Gusinsky out of the country. Putin was determined to oversee all of the country's major broadcast outfits. No one understood better than Putin just how powerful television could be in the new Russia and that he who controls it controls the country.²¹

In 2001, Putin began an all out war against the media using the same tactics employed against the oligarchs - a surge of criminal investigations. The end result was that the state took ownership of both National Television (NTV) and TV6. The state did not stop there. Several other media outlets were forced to report only as directed or succumb to state control. It was rumored that the state applied pressure on independent journalists as well.²² Not deviating from the path that his forefathers traveled, Putin's autocratic intentions were crystal clear. There can be no democratic system without freedom of the press.

Putin's Reformation

Within the first three years of Putin's first term, he managed to eliminate all opposing forces of power within the governmental realm as well as the area of big business.

...Putin already had weakened the powers of the governors, rewritten the rules for constituting the federation Council, and embarked on a campaign to muzzle NTV, Russia's only private television network with a national audience. In addition, the State Security Service under Putin's leadership also has harassed core elements of civil society, including investigative journalists, environmentalists and human rights activists.²³

Although his methods can be directly categorized as autocratic, Putin's reforms have produced results. He has rescued the Russian Federation and the Commonwealth of states from failed state classification, returned Russia to global power status, and managed to deliver necessary essential services to the people of the nation. His popularity in 2008 is higher than it has ever been throughout his eight year term and the people are willing to choose his autocratic methods of leadership to further the nation's continued growth.

CONCLUSION

“At the end of the day, Russia is Russia and has always been different socially, economically, politically and ethically.”²⁴ The attempted western democratization of the former Soviet Union under Gorbachev, Yeltsin and Putin turned out to be a failure. The failure is blamed on the lack of democratic knowledge and poor implementation of the democratic idea, but also because Russians grew impatient with the consistent down spiraling effects and lost faith in the leadership’s ability to implement change.

Russian democracy had a flavor of its own driven by Presidential freedoms and political party inefficiencies. From 1991 to 1993, the people experienced the trials and tribulations of a changing society and economic system. They viewed these problems as failures in the newly liberal political parties’ ability to quickly provide a stable economy. From this disappointment arose a desire to return to communism founded on a nationalist movement. The people wanted a return to the last place they knew stability – however fictional. Both Gorbachev and Yeltsin remained focused on building upon the Presidential powers in order to force reform at the executive level, believing that the democratization of Russia would eventually bring the economic stability desired by the people.

It is this ongoing desire for stability that allowed President Putin to fulfill his duties in an autocratic fashion with little objection from the people. His new form of government has provided the stability to the political process, and has allowed the economic institutions a sound base on which to rebuild the nation’s power, all while providing for the public’s basic needs.

As this new and stable position of autocratic power continues to develop, it is crucial that the western world now refocus its attention on the position of the great man leading the nation and the reform he implements. It is only with undisputed power at the highest level combined with a man of great resolve that Russia can continue to implement positive political, economic and diplomatic reform. Russia's resurgence as a global power along with the executive branch, once again mired in secrecy with a leadership founded in the art of concealment will keep the world guessing to its desires on the global scene. The sheer size of Russia, rich in natural resources and placed adjacent to most of the world's developing and industrialized nations deserves the respect that it once held less than a quarter century ago.

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- ² Mikhail Gorbachev, *Memoir Mikhail Gorbachev* (New York: Doubleday, 1996), 19.
- ³ Gorbachev, 34.
- ⁴ Gorbachev, xxvii.
- ⁵ Michael McFaul, *Russia's Unfinished Revolution* (New York: Cornwell University Press, 2001), 43.
- ⁶ McFaul, 53.
- ⁷ McFaul, 63.
- ⁸ T. Tolstoya, "Mikhail Gorbachev." *Time* 100, 1998, 4.
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- ⁹ Daniel Yergin and Thane Gustafson, *Russia 2010 and what it means for the world* (New York: Random House, 1994), 244.
- ¹⁰ Boris Yeltsin, *Struggle for Russia* (New York: Belka Publications Corp, 1994), 129.
- ¹¹ V. Volkov, "A political balance sheet of the Yeltsin era" world socialist website (21 Jan 2000).
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- ¹² McFaul, 226.
- ¹³ P. Roeder, "Varieties of Post-Soviet Authoritarian Regimes," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 10, no. 1 (1994): 95.
- ¹⁴ Edward Walker, "Politics of Blame and Presidential Powers in Russia's New Constitution." *East European Constitutional Review*, 2-3 (Fall 1993/Winter 1994): 116.
- ¹⁵ Yeltsin, 127.
- ¹⁶ Stratfor, "Russia's Geopolitical Imperative." (Sept 18,2007)
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- ¹⁹ Anders Aslund, "Russia's Collapse." *Foreign Affairs* (September/October 1999): 1.
- ²⁰ Stratfor, "Russia's Geopolitical Imperative." (Sept 18,2007)
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- ²¹ Peter Baker and Susan Glasser, *Kremlin Rising* (New York: Scriber, 2005), 83.
- ²² Jane's Intelligence Review. "Jane's Sentinel Security Assessment – Russia and the CIS internal affairs." (April 14th, 2008) www.janes.com (accessed May 2nd, 2008).
- ²³ McFaul, 363.
- ²⁴ Stratfor, "Geopolitical Diary: Putin's Real Place in History"
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