

# Illiberal Democracy and Vladimir Putin's Russia

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Over the last two decades electoral politics have spread far beyond the wealthy West, crossing economic, ideological, and cultural frontiers, so that now most countries can claim to be democracies. Yet various scholars have raised doubts about the depth and quality of this democratization. Some have used the concept of "illiberal democracy" to convey their doubts about putting these new democracies in the same category as the old democracies.

One country that seems always to defy easy classification and that has persistently taxed the conceptual imagination of political scientists and others -- Winston Churchill's "riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma" -- is Russia. It is now considered an example of illiberal democracy. What are the characteristics of illiberal democracy? How does it help us understand Russian politics?

## Defining Illiberal Democracy

Democracy is a bundle of institutional and behavioral components, including regular competitive elections, full enfranchisement, free speech, an accessible and critical media, and freedom of association. Proponents of the concept of illiberal democracy strip basic liberties from the bundle. Democracy is conceived more minimally as the occurrence of competitive elections.

Fareed Zakaria explains the concept of illiberal democracy in his book *The Future of Freedom: Illiberal Democracy at Home and Abroad* (2001). Liberty and democracy may go together in the West, he says, but they are not necessarily connected. Indeed, the curtailment of liberties may be popular and have the support of the majority of voters. He argues that, "democracy is flourishing; liberty is not." Reading Zakaria's argument brings to mind the old nineteenth-century liberal fear of a tyrannical majority and the subsequent intellectual effort to cordon off individual freedom from majority opinion and decision-making. Democracy is fragile, its self-regulating mechanism is often sluggish, and it is highly vulnerable to breakdown during the lag between repressive action and an effective critical response. Zakaria argues that Russia is democratic but also illiberal, pointing to Putin's "superpresidency" and restrictions on the media.

Let us see how well Zakaria's concept applies in the light of recent events in Russia. How is it that a constitution that provides for the separation and division of power and enumerates fundamental rights does not protect liberty? The 1993 constitution of the Russian Federation is a mixed or hybrid presidential-parliamentary constitution, similar to the French constitution (also drafted in an atmosphere of coup and crisis). There is a dual executive with a directly elected president, who has to achieve 50 percent of the vote in one or two rounds of voting as necessary, and a prime minister.

The prime minister is chosen by the president and confirmed by the Duma, the lower house of the Russian bicameral parliament. Like the French president, the Russian president has the power to dissolve the lower house and call new elections. The Duma is directly elected using a German-style mixed-member proportional system of election. The upper house, the Federation Council, is composed of representatives of the federal regions and republics. The constitution provides for freedom of speech, a free media, and a constitutional court. There is a separation of powers and a division of powers, as well as a judicial branch with long-term if not lifetime judges.

In America we commonly associate these features of constitutional design with the protection of basic liberty within a democratic framework. In Russia this constitutional design produces democracy, but also "illiberalism." To understand what is happening we might be tempted to fall back on the sorry history of freedom in Russia, from czars to commissars. Are Russians in the grip of an endless winter of oppression? No doubt all of us are cursed with national character failings, but it seems a lazy piece of analysis to attribute Putin's Russia to some political permafrost, to some Siberia in the national soul. Instead, it is worth thinking about leadership, the decisions being made, and recalling the concept of power.

## Sources of Power in Russia

We can identify three major elements of power: coercion, incentives, and persuasion. (See W. Phillips Shively's *Power and Choice: An Introduction to Political Science*, 2003.) The coercive powers of the Russian state were on display immediately before the December 2003 legislative elections, with the arrest of Mikhail Khodorkovsky, the Yukos Oil executive. He was arrested on charges arising from his business dealings, but most commentary pointed to his support of political parties opposed to President Putin. The arrest apparently did not sit well with Alexander Voloshin, Putin's chief of staff (who resigned), nor with the current prime minister, Mikhail Kasyanov. Before that, in the fall of 2003, Putin's candidate for the presidency of Chechnya won the election after the withdrawal of rival candidates. Organizations that monitor human rights violations reported widespread killing, disappearances, and the use of torture by the Russian authorities in suppressing the insurgency in Chechnya. You would be forgiven for thinking that Putin's presidency just goes to show that you can take the man out of the KGB, but you cannot take the KGB out of the man.

Actually, the Putin administration is taking more and more men and women from the KGB (or the Federal Security Service, as it is now called). A recent analysis by Russian sociologist Olga Kryshtanovskaya finds that the *siloviki* (security services personnel) represent almost one-third of top government officials, and over one-half of the president's closest advisers are former KGB. To compensate for the federal division of power, Putin has established seven large administrative districts run by appointed presidential representatives (prefects in France), five of whom are *siloviki*.

The use of coercive power is not unpopular and coincides with the recent good performance of the Russian economy. Putin's approval ratings are high. Putin won the presidential election in 2000 on the first round (electoral rules require a run-off if no candidate gets a majority), and he is likely to win reelection in 2004 with no difficulty. Voters dislike the rich businessmen or oligarchs like Khodorkovsky, fear Chechen terror, and respond positively to the incentive of the improving Russian economy. At the same time, government officials respond to financial incentives in the form of corrupt payments. Russia ranks as one of the more corrupt countries in the world, which reduces democratic accountability but does not appear to be a policy priority for the Putin government.

Political persuasion is a function of the competition among leadership groups and political parties and the resulting messages delivered by the media. In Russia, journalists themselves operate in a dangerous environment, attributable in part to organized crime and a high overall murder rate. Between 2000 and 2003, 13 journalists were killed in Russia. The major television networks are owned by the government or by Gazprom, the natural gas company in which the government has a sizable stake. One of the criticisms offered by international election monitors of the December 2003 Duma election was the media bias in favor of political parties supporting the government.

## Putin's Role

As imperious as General Charles De Gaulle, this former KGB officer also stands above the competition among the parties. President Putin is not a formal member of United Russia, the major political party supporting the president. The opposition parties most easily identified with liberal freedoms failed to make the electoral threshold, leaving the communists as the major opposition party. Even the communists only managed 13 percent of the vote, about half their 1999 total. The media in any political system have an important effect on political parties, but political parties are the source of policy alternatives and visions that constitute meaningful political discourse. The weakness of the parties and lack of media independence in Russia justify concern. The idea of illiberal democracy is useful in drawing attention to these issues; to the multiple components bundled in the concept of democracy; and to the observation that on occasion, and over some political terrain, there may be friction as these components rub against each other. Less useful is the implication that you can strip out liberty and keep democracy running. Somewhere there is a tipping point where the reduction of freedom so affects political competition that it moves an election-holding political system from illiberal to non-democracy, even if the majority remain on board.