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Putin as a State-Builder

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Putin as a State-Builder?¹

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If Vladimir Putin were to be asked whether he has been performing as an effective state-builder during the almost five years of his presidency, he would surely reply in the affirmative. And if he felt it necessary to buttress his response, he might mention his oft-cited promises to “strengthen the vertical” and establish “the dictatorship of the law” in Russia.

But has Putin been engaging in effective state-building? Has he in fact been strengthening the Russian state? If by the term state-building one means authoritarian state-building, then the answer would be: “maybe yes,” but also “maybe no.” On the other hand, if one is speaking of democratic state-building then the answer must be a unequivocally no.

The aim of this essay is to examine the issue of Russian state-building as it has been elucidated and discussed by Western political theorists and by Russian analysts in the pages of the Russian press during 2004. The results of recent Russian public opinion polls will also be scrutinized.

Setting the Scene: Putin’s Russia, as well as that of his predecessor, Boris Yeltsin, did not emerge ex nihilo. Both of their reigns had their roots in the country’s almost 75-year-long experiment with the communist system. That system, of course, impacted Russia and the Soviet citizenry in myriad ways. Let me mention just a few of them. The Communist Party of the Soviet Union—which claimed to be the repository of all truth and knowledge—sought to micro-manage the lives of all Soviet citizens. Outside the Communist Party and the institutions that it dominated there was no life at all: no civil society, no free press, no religious activity, nothing.

While possessing the trappings of a federal state, the USSR was a de facto unitary state, with bureaucrats in Moscow attempting to manage affairs throughout a vast country. Rigged elections were regularly held under the rubric of “a people’s democracy.” A key partner of the Communist Party was the secret police, which, under Stalin, engaged in genocide. A web of informers and secret police agentura blanketed the country.

To be balanced, one must note that the Soviet system was also a paternalistic one claiming to care for all the needs of its citizenry. As Gordon B. Smith has written: “The USSR was a very well developed, highly integrated society and political system with a successful track record of providing extensive services and benefits, such as pensions, education and health care. In addition, under Communism Russians came to expect guaranteed employment, steady wages, state-controlled prices on consumer goods, virtually free rent and utilities and affordable public transportation.”² In a certain sense, therefore, the Soviet citizenry had forged a kind of pact with their rulers: in exchange for

being deprived of a civil society and of political and economic freedoms, they were provided with the rudimentary necessities of life.

Once the Soviet Union and the Communist Party both collapsed in late 1991, all of this changed. Under the mercurial Boris Yeltsin, Russians quickly lost many of the services and benefits they had become accustomed to; their social safety net, leaky as it was, largely disappeared. Much of the nation's wealth was directly taken over by the so-called oligarchs through a corrupt process of privatization. Under Yeltsin, Russia first toyed with an unstable form of proto-democracy and then, beginning in 1994, began to move steadily in an authoritarian direction. Vladimir Putin, Yeltsin's chosen successor, set about undoing many of the political reforms that had been initiated by Gorbachev and by Yeltsin in his first term.

Putin as an authoritarian state-builder: State-building refers to the processes of the strengthening of the relative power of the state vis-à-vis society and other non-state actors. Max Weber long ago defined the state as “a human community that (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical forces within a given territory.”³ In this sense, and perhaps in this sense alone, Putin could be said to have been a successful state-builder. He has demonstrably strengthened the relative power of the state vis-à-vis society and other non-state actors (for example, certain of the well-known oligarchs). And he has established a high degree of control over the use of physical force in the country, one perceived as legitimate by most Russian citizens.

As a number of Western political theorists have underscored, however, there are serious pitfalls associated with seeking to establish such a degree of control. There exists a serious danger that one or more of the newly established institutions could grow too powerful and might come to dominate all other political institutions. That this has taken place in Russia can scarcely be doubted. Putin has built upon the super-presidentialism embodied in the Yeltsin Constitution of 1993 and has significantly ratcheted up the power of the so-called siloviki (power ministries), especially of the secret police, the FSB.

The degree to which the siloviki have strengthened their position in Russia has recently been convincingly demonstrated by a leading Russian sociologist, Olga Kryshtanovskaya of the Russian Academy of Sciences. As of the middle of 2004, she has reported, the siloviki comprised approximately 25% of Russia's ruling elite. “The greatest concentration of the siloviki,” she noted, “is in the highest leadership of the country. I call it the Politburo. Putin, in essence, has structurally recreated the Politburo of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.”⁴ Within the ranks of Putin's close entourage, Kryshtanovskaya points out, “the concentration of siloviki is maximal—58%.” In the Russian government as a whole, about 34% of top officials are siloviki, while in the Russian parliament, the State Duma, the figure is 18%. In addition, many deputy ministers and deputy governors also come from the ranks of the siloviki.

Within the siloviki, the role of leader and spearhead is played by the FSB and by the SVR (the Russian CIA). It seems to be no accident that the current heads of two key Russian

power ministries, the Defense Ministry and Ministry of Internal Affairs, are both former secret police generals.

This tendency, in Olga Kryshtanovskaya's view, is a potentially insidious one, since it serves to reinforce the widening gap in Russia between the ruling elite/siloviki and the popular masses. "The greater the gap between the elite and the people," she warns, "the more the people will hate the state." She notes that there have been bruited various schemes for the siloviki and their allies to keep a firm grip on power once Putin's second presidential term comes to an end in March of 2008. These schemes include: "a third presidential term [for Putin]", something which would require altering the Constitution; "a parliamentary republic with Putin serving as Prime Minister," and the formation of a "new Union State."

A major problem connected with the increasingly authoritarian power amassed by the siloviki in Russia, Kryshtanovskaya underscores, is that they are now involved in, and indeed direct, areas of national life for which they have little professional training or expertise: for example, "art, culture, the mass media, and even elections." Such a situation, she cautions, is "dangerous."

Tamping Down Democracy: Having become the de facto dominant stratum among Russia's political elite, the siloviki, in the opinion of Georgii Satarov, a former high-ranking advisor to President Boris Yeltsin, are attempting to carry out a program of "authoritarian modernization." During the year 2000, the first year of Putin's presidency, he recalls, the Russian bureaucracy suggested to Russian politicians that "a great economic leap forward" could be accomplished if the siloviki were to acquire greater powers at home.

But what actually happened? "No economic leap forward took place," Satarov concludes, "but they did manage to finish off democracy masterfully: the separation of powers was destroyed; federalism was destroyed; freedom of the press and political competition were curtailed; the institution of elections has been almost fully dissolved...; the threat of disapproval hangs over local self-rule; and the weak court system has been completely taken over by the regime." In the sphere of economics, by contrast, the regime has almost nothing to boast of "except for a stabilization fund created from the wild increase in the price of oil."⁵

Nikolai Petrov of the Moscow Carnegie Center has recently underlined that "the Kremlin is turning citizens into subjects, robbing them of the right both to form their government and to express their opinions about that government in any form other than offering humble thanks to the president. By weakening democratic institutions and undermining the basis of self-rule, the Kremlin has actively inculcated paternalism in Russian society, even resurrecting the Soviet system of 'citizens' appeals.' ... Under the guise of strengthening the state, the Kremlin is weakening it [my emphasis--JBD] by putting all of Russia's eggs in one basket. Putin is constructing a system in which everything goes through him. Without the president and his high popularity rating, this system cannot exist."⁶

It seems clear that Russia cannot in any sense be seen as engaging in democratic state-building. But is authoritarian state-building a creative or a merely destructive activity? In a liberal democracy, Valerie Sperling has reminded us, state strength means more than just physical power and coercion. It signifies “a strong liberal democratic state that protects individual rights, including public services, capitalistic property rights, an honest court system to protect the rule of law and apply it, and an honest bureaucracy to implement regulations. Mere military or police strength may indicate that a state has to rely on the use or threat of force in order to be effective rather than on strong institutions that the majority of the populace supports and views as legitimate.” There is thus, Sperling concludes, a fundamental distinction that must be made “between strong states that are repressive dictatorships and strong democratically oriented states.”⁷

“Stable systems,” Donald Jensen, director of communications at Radio Free Europe-Radio Liberty in Washington, has recently stressed, “are those in which abrupt fundamental policy shifts, let alone the abolition of an entire system of regional governance, do not occur. Stable systems also have effective succession procedures. If Putin were to disappear tomorrow, we have no idea in which direction Russia would turn.”⁸

Expunging Federalism: Jensen’s reference to Putin’s recent decision to support canceling the election of Russia’s eighty-nine heads of regions would appear to be germane to our discussion of state-building. A recent Russia-wide poll showed that 48% of Russian citizens opposed the cancellation of the elections of Russian governors, while 38% approved it.⁹ The chairman of the Russian Central Election Commission has also come out strongly against this change. Nonetheless, on 25 October, the State Duma, a body de facto controlled by Putin and his entourage, voted by an overwhelming majority, 365-64 (in the first reading), to move forward with the abolition of governors’ elections.¹⁰ There have also been reports that Putin also supports abolishing the election of Russia’s mayors.

This giant step backwards from federalism has incensed representatives of Russia’s minorities, who comprise about 20% of the country’s population. As one might expect, the populace of Muslim autonomous republics have been particularly exercised, but even the region of Chuvashia, for example, has witnessed fierce anger and resentment.¹¹ The Chuvash are a largely Orthodox Christian people living in the Volga region who wish to preserve their own language and culture.

A number of Russian specialists on nationalities issues have been issuing warnings as to the deleterious consequences to be expected from Putin’s forthcoming assault on federalism. One well-known pro-Moscow Chechen scholar, Timur Muzaev, who lives in the Russian capital, has pointed out that the move is likely “to proceed along the ‘Chechen’ path in other regions of the Russian Federation,” with the result that there could emerge “such a ‘vertical’ as will paralyze real power throughout the country.”¹²

Putin's assault on federalism goes, of course, strongly against Western prescriptions for democratic state-building. The aim of democratic state-building, Steven Solnick has observed, is "to make government more representative and responsible to local demands.... Similarly, to deliver 'ethnic peace,' a federalist arrangement must grant minority groups authority over cultural and some political activities in the groups' 'homeland.' Without that guarantee, the territorially defined interests that represent the building blocks of a federation could easily become the seed beds of secession."¹³

This brings us to the "bleeding wound" of Chechnya. It seems likely that Putin's ill-conceived federal reform could result in the generating of new Chechnyas within the Russian Federation, especially in the combustible North Caucasus region with its heavily Muslim populace but also, though perhaps less likely, in the Volga region, in the Muslim autonomous republics of Tatarstan and Bashkortostan.

Despite President Putin's generally high approval ratings (65%-70%), the Russian populace has over the past years persistently disagreed with his hard and unbending stance toward Chechnya. In mid-September of this year, *Moscow News* reported that, according to the Levada Center, Russia's premier polling organization, 55% of Russian citizens favor conducting negotiations with the Chechen separatists while only 37% support continuing the war.¹⁴ Two-thirds of respondents also voiced their conviction that Russia is simply not capable of controlling the situation in the North Caucasus, while 78% believed that Putin would prove unable to cope with the problem of terrorism or to bring an end the war in Chechnya by March 2008, when his second presidential term comes to an end.

"It will soon be ten years," Russian economist and political leader Grigorii Yavlinskii recently noted, "since the day when Boris Yeltsin unleashed war in the North Caucasus and five years since Vladimir Putin... [decided to] continue it. The results are clear—the war is destroying Russia...."¹⁵ In addition to cracking down on extremist Islamic terrorists, Russia, Yavlinskii believes, needs "to halt the depredations of the [Russian] power structures—the disappearance of people, torture, mockery, murder, and punitive operations.... The need for a complete and responsible economic policy for the entire North Caucasus region is [likewise] obvious. Jobs are necessary—today unemployment there reaches 80%. Roads, contemporary infrastructure, education and medicine are needed. It is necessary for the North Caucasus economically to live at the average Russian level. That would prove expensive. By our calculations—it would cost 6-7% of GDP for the next 10-15 years. But if this is not done, then Russia will either lose the [North] Caucasus or events there will bring about the collapse of Russia itself."

If Putin were a democratic state-builder, then he would want to heed the counsel of a leading Russian economist and pro-democracy politician. But he will predictably ignore Yavlinskii's apt cautionings.

The Factor of Corruption: Asked in August of this year whether "the level of stealing and corruption in the country had changed since Putin was elected president," 51% of Russian respondents replied that the level of corruption in Russia remained about the

same as it had been under Yeltsin. Twenty-two percent thought that there was “less corruption,” but 21% believed that there was in fact “more corruption.”¹⁶ Obviously a high level of corruption serves to block or hinder any efforts at state-building, even authoritarian state-building. Referring to the present-day Russian ruling elite, Georgii Satarov has commented: “They simply don’t have time to administer the country. They are stealing from it on such a vast scale as was not even dreamed of by the privatizers [of the early 1990’s].”¹⁷ Recently it was reported that Putin and his finance minister were only with great difficulty preventing Russian ministers from plundering the country’s stabilization fund.

During his second term, Putin has begun targeting representatives of Russian big business. The arrest of Russia’s richest and most successful entrepreneur, oil magnate Mikhail Khodorkovskii, is well known. But other big businessmen also appear to be in the sights of the Russian leadership. As one leading commentator, Aleksandr Budberg, has recently noted, General Augusto Pinochet harshly suppressed all dissidents in Chile, but he also carried out “extraordinarily unpopular measures” to form a business class that were opposed by the bureaucracy and the police but that ended up strengthening the Chilean state. “The result is well known: Chile modernized and returned to democracy.”¹⁸

“In Russia today,” Budberg continued, “the situation is the exact opposite. The ‘screws are being tightened,’ but no measures are being undertaken to develop private initiative. Just the opposite is happening. They are trying to deprive business of independence and freedom.” Instead of capitalism, Budberg concludes, Putin is fostering “state capitalism.”

In Russia today, the ruling elite and the upper ranks of the bureaucracy are “joining the ranks of the oligarchs.” To take one example, Putin’s chief of staff also serves as the chairman of the council of directors of the huge gas monopoly, Gazprom.¹⁹ Not surprisingly, popular support for a market economy has been on the wane in Russia. In 1998, 20.9% of respondents supported “the creation of an effective market economy”; by 2004, that level of support had dropped to 15.5%.²⁰

While the ruling Russian elite, spearheaded by the FSB, grows increasingly prosperous, and while much of Russian business languishes, the masses of the Russian populace are at best only barely able to scrape by. In a poll by the Levada Center which was reported in June of 2004, fifty-six percent of respondents selected the choice, “It is difficult to live but one can bear it.” However, 20% chose the significantly more despairing response: “It is impossible to bear our calamitous situation.”²¹ Russians are, to be sure, a people used to toughing it out. A May 2004 poll showed that 27% of respondents had to spend all of their income on groceries and basic necessities; 23% spent two-thirds of their income toward that end, while 32% spent approximately half their income on groceries and necessities.²² Authoritarian state-building has not brought any degree of real prosperity to a majority of Russians.

The Courts and the Police: It would seem to be self-evident that any effort at successful state-building would require the existence of a largely uncorrupted judiciary and police force. A recent poll taken by the “Public Opinion” Foundation (FOM)

showed, however, that only 12% of Russian citizens are convinced that Russian judges are honest and uncorrupt. Sixty-seven percent of those contacted (that is, two-thirds) contended that, in rendering their decisions, “judges in general are not ruled by the law and they pass unjust sentences.” Sixty-two percent believe that in rendering their decisions Russian courts are ruled not by the law but by “other circumstances.”²³ What are these “other circumstances”? Forty percent cited the personal greed of the judges, while 8% singled out pressure from the higher organs of power.

On 22 October, the chairman of the Russian Constitutional Court, Valerii Zorkin, announced that he was formally declaring the “burial” of Russia’s judicial reform launched thirteen years previously under President Yeltsin. Zorkin stressed his conviction that Russian judges have become corrupt and that they completely ignore the statute on judicial reform.

The deep suspicion and even contempt of the Russian citizenry for their police force are well known. (I recall the driver of a van in which I was riding being shaken down for a bribe by traffic police in Western Siberia in 1996.) Asked by the Levada Center in May of this year whether the practice by the police of soliciting bribes, shakedowns, extortion and so on represented a “stable system,” 58% of Russian respondents answered that it did indeed constitute a stable system, while 28% cited individual instances of corruption.²⁴ Self-evidently, a corruption-ridden judiciary and venal police render the prospect of effective state-building unlikely.

Asphyxiating Civil Society: In the opinion of the aforementioned former aide to President Yeltsin, Georgii Satarov, the Putin regime presently finds itself on the opposite side of the barricades from endangered Russian civil society. “There is a civil society in Russia,” Satarov stressed in early November 2004, “It is more honest, smarter and more far-sighted than the regime. It is different from the regime, not the same thing. Civil society is working in the interests of the country while the authorities have their own concerns. They are working for themselves and against the interests of society. Consequently the authorities are working against the country. That is why they wall themselves off from society and do not adopt its ideas.”²⁵

What would be an example of what Satarov means by civil society? The website Gazeta.ru recently wrote that a recent speech by Putin had served as “a signal for an attack by the authorities on all independent civil organizations.” “Today,” the website continued, “the Union of Committees of Soldiers’ Mothers is the most flourishing and popular of all Russian public organizations, perhaps the sole active fragment of civil society in Russia. The situation in the Russian army is terrible, and the army is controlled neither by the Moscow [high] command nor, even more so, by the Kremlin.”²⁶

“We can only regret,” Valentina Melnikova, the head of this Union recently affirmed, “the many billions of rubles taken away by the war [in Chechnya] from our dying health and education systems. Disappeared into the bloody slaughter-house of the Chechen conflict are funds for raising pension, scholarships and grants for children.”²⁷ A poll by the Levada Center of Russian women living in large cities found that 72% of

respondents approved of the activity of the mothers' committees. Two-thirds of those contacted also approved of the mothers' acting as an intermediary in negotiations between the federal forces and the Chechen separatist fighters.²⁸ On 6-7 November 2004, 164 activists from 50 regions of Russia gathered in Moscow and created the United People's Party of Soldiers' Mothers.²⁹ The new party's main stated goals are to abolish the Soviet-era compulsory military draft system and to participate in the State Duma elections of 2007. Melnikova noted in an interview that the new party might well encounter severe bureaucratic difficulties when it tries to register with the Russian Justice Ministry.

A "Demographic Catastrophe": Let us now examine one way in which Putin's concept of state-building could end up harming Russia not only in the short term but over the coming half century. Of late the Russian press, as well as the Western media, have been replete with articles devoted to Russia's perceived "demographic catastrophe." On October 18, the Russian minister of health and social development, Mikhail Zurabov, warned that Russia's current population of 144.2 million is "far too small."³⁰ The official Russian Orthodox Church has recently stepped in to help bolster Russia's dwindling population, condemning abortion and offering support for endangered Russian families.

The 26 April 2004 issue of the newspaper *Izvestiya* carried an interview with Anatolii Vishnevskii, a leading Russian demographer, which attracted considerable attention.³¹ "If one does not count on [new] migrants and leaves everything the way it is now," Vishnevskii warned, "then with its low birth rate and monstrous death rate by 2025 there will live in Russia 125 million people in place of the current 145 million. By 2025 there will be less than 98 million, and by 2100 only 64 million. A country which as recently as the year 2000 occupied the sixth place in the world in terms of population, has now dropped to eighth place, and by the year 2050 it will drop to approximately eighteenth place."

What then is the solution? To raise fertility? Vishnevskii replies: "That is not a reality: fertility has dropped in all developed countries and the sharp declines of fertility in Russia and, say, Germany and Italy, look very similar. It is a global tendency." What, then, about banning abortions, such as was tried in Poland? "In Poland," Vishnevskii writes, "they did manage to raise fertility by prohibiting abortions. Fertility is higher there, but by only an insignificant amount."

Vishnevskii also lays stress on the current high death rate in Russia. A Russian male lives an average 15.2 years less than his American counterpart, while a Russian woman lives 7.5 years less than does an average American woman. What then is the solution? "If Russia want to preserve its present population numbers," Vishnevskii asserts, "it will need each year to accept from 700,000 to one million new migrants." To be sure, he is prepared to admit, such a policy would incur risks, but to do nothing would incur even greater risks. Other Russian demographers have expressed agreement with Vishnevskii's analysis.

But what are the nationalities that would want to migrate to Russia in large numbers? Most of the Orthodox Slavs who wanted to return to Russia following the breakup of the USSR have already done so. That leaves, in the main, “dark-skinned peoples” from the South Caucasus and Central Asia, especially Azerbaijanis and Tajiks. It also leaves representatives of certain foreign peoples, such as Vietnamese, who are eager to come to Russia for economic reasons.

Unfortunately, xenophobia has been markedly on the rise in Russia since 1991, and especially since 1994, which saw the outbreak of the first Russo-Chechen war. The slogan “Russia for the ethnic Russians” (*Rossiia dlya russkikh*) is increasingly being bruited, while dark-skinned peoples—be they students from Vietnam or Africa or Azeris selling food at open air Russian markets—are increasingly being assaulted and, on occasion, murdered. During the year 2000, 15% of Russian residents offered full support for the slogan “Russia for the Russians”; by 2004, that percentage had grown to 22%. An additional 34% (37% in 2004) opined, “it should be carried out within reasonable limits.”³²

In October 2004, the newspaper *Russkii kurer* published the results of a poll that had asked respondents this question: “Should one limit the dwelling on the territory of Russia of...?” Those peoples whose presence on Russian soil the respondents wanted to limit were: Peoples of the Caucasus, 46%; Vietnamese, 39%; Gypsies, 32%; peoples of the Central Asian republics, 31%; Jews, 15%; all nations except ethnic Russians, 14%.³³ The “Holocaust Foundation,” which is based in Russia, told Moscow Echo Radio in mid-October 2004 that a recent sociological survey had found that 28% of Russian citizens wanted to reestablish the pre-revolutionary Pale of Settlement for, in the first place, Jews and Peoples of the Caucasus.

Recently there have been some signs that elements among the Russian leadership are growing alarmed over this tendency, which pits 80% of Russia’s populace against the 20% who are minorities. President Putin in mid-October attend the Second All-Russian Congress of Russian Azerbaijanis and in his address admitted that in certain instances mistakes had been committed.³⁴ On 1 November 2004, the governor of St. Petersburg, Valentina Matvienko, a Putin supporter, assailed recent acts of ethnic violence in her city and excoriated such slogans as, “Russia for the Russians.” The savage murder of a Vietnamese student by young fascist toughs on 13 October was strongly condemned by Matvienko, who promised that “a program of [ethnic] tolerance” would be launched in Petersburg.³⁵

It remains doubtful, however, whether the Russian leadership will be able to cope successfully with a genie of ethnic hatred which it itself had earlier released from the bottle. The strong upsurge in ethnic animus, especially directed toward so-called “blacks,” dates from the period of the first Russo-Chechen war, launched by Yeltsin, and especially from the second war, spearheaded by Putin in 1999. It was Putin’s vengeful cry, “Rub out the bandits in the crapper!” that triggered much of the ethnic animosity that we see today. Of course, resentment over the role of non-Russians at open air markets throughout the country has also been a contributing factor.

To summarize, Russia finds itself threatened by a perceived “demographic catastrophe.” Demographers have sketched out a way by which the problem could be ameliorated, but the ethnic hatreds released by the Yeltsin and particularly the Putin leaderships render such a plan largely unfeasible. Has this seemingly dead-end situation, one must ask, been the result of intelligent state-building?

Foreign Affairs: President Putin represents a generation of conservatively-inclined KGB officers who were outraged over the tumultuous processes that resulted in the collapse of the USSR and the Soviet political system. Newly independent states that, in his view, properly belong firmly within Russia’s political sphere of influence (Ukraine, Kazakhstan, Georgia) ended up in 1991-1992 as full members of the UN. With the U.S., viewed in a certain sense as attempting to play the role of “world policeman,” being bogged down in a debilitating war in Iraq, Putin may believe that the time is ripe for Russia to begin cautiously but steadily to reassemble as much of the former Soviet Union as is practicable. To date, his focus appears to have been on northern Georgia, where two separatist regions—Abkhaziya and North Ossetiya—represent targets of opportunity. More than half of the citizens of North Ossetiya have already been given Russian domestic passports, as have a number of Abkhazian citizens. Recently Putin announced that he favors granting dual citizenship (Russian and Ukrainian) to residents of Ukraine. Putin thrust himself rather boldly into the recent Abkhazian election, and he spent three days in Ukraine de facto agitating for the candidate he favored for the Ukrainian presidency. When that candidate came in a close second in the first round of elections, Putin then announced that he would be paying a second visit to Ukraine.

In a recent op-ed appearing in the International Herald Tribune, Nina Khrushcheva, a relative of the late Soviet leader, accused Western leaders of pandering to Putin’s neo-imperialist tendencies. Why, she wondered, “do they agree with the perspective of a rebirth of the Russian empire?”³⁶

Summing Up: The title of this paper has posed the question: “Is Putin a State-Builder?” The answer should be self-evident. While Putin and his entourage see him as representing a vigorous state-builder, he has de facto (ob’ektivno, as the Russians say) been engaged in weakening the Russian state. The chief reason this is so is because he has rejected the model of democratic state-building, with its separation of powers, free parliament, independent judiciary, rules of the game and dynamic federalism.

“Look,” one Russian diplomat tried to explain to me several months ago, “Russia has always been a state ruled by one man. When it has been successful, that has been the model that worked.” The “American model,” by contrast, the diplomat emphasized, could never work in Russia. When Gorbachev and Yeltsin tested out elements of it, the country came close to collapse. While the diplomat was advancing his own views, it seemed clear that he believed them also to be those of the Russian leadership. I think that the diplomat was correct in this assumption.

Putin, in my view, and in that of a number of Russian political analysts, is simply incapable of succeeding as a state-builder. The logical results of his reforms, one Russian commentator, Evgenii Trifonov, emphasized recently “include omnipotence of the presidential administration, a dramatic weakening of the legislative branch and the judiciary, and—as a result—absolute lawlessness, elimination of independent enterprise, and unchecked corruption.”³⁷

One would hope, to conclude, that the U.S. government and the leaders of the Western democracies pay closer attention in the future to what is occurring in Russia. America, the capable U.S. ambassador to Russia, Alexander Vershbow, recently underlined, “is interested in a strong Russia based on firm democratic institutions.”³⁸ But is, one must ask, Putin’s Russia based on firm democratic institutions? And if it is not (patently it is not), then can Russia in any way, shape or form be deemed a strong state?

¹ This essay represents a revised and updated version of a keynote address delivered on 4 November 2004 at an international conference devoted to “The Problems of the Post-Communist State,” held at the Havighurst Center for Russian and post-Soviet Studies, Miami University, Oxford, Ohio.

² Gordon B. Smith, “After Yeltsin: The Emerging Agenda,” in Gordon B. Smith, ed., State-Building in Russia (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1999), p. 219.

³ Valerie Sperling, “Introduction,” in Valerie Sperling, ed., Building the Russian State (Boulder, CO: Westview, 2000), p. 2.

⁴ Ol’ga Kryshchanovskaya, “Otdel’nyi razgovor,” Novaya gazeta, 30 August 2004.

⁵ Georgii Satarov, “Demokratura,” Novaya gazeta, 25 October 2004.

⁶ Nikolai Petrov, “The Return of Paternalism,” Moscow Times, 4 October 2004.

⁷ Valerie Sperling, “Introduction.”

⁸ “Where Russia is going,” UPI, interview with Peter Lavelle, 20 September 2004.

⁹ “Bol’shinstvo vystupilo protiv Putina,” Gazeta.ru, 23 September 2004.

¹⁰ Reported by Grani.ru, 29 October 2004.

¹¹ “Gossovet Chuvashii: Putinskie reformy nekonstitutsionny,” Grani.ru, 28 October 2004.

¹² Timur Muzaev, “Chechenskaya elita,” kavkaz-forum.ru, 24 October 2004.

¹³ Steven L. Solnick, “Is the Center Too Weak or Too Strong in the Russian Federation?” in Valerie Sperling, ed., Building the Russian State, p. 150.

¹⁴ “My ne soglasny, no odobryaem,” Moskovskie novosti, 17 September 2004.

¹⁵ Grigorii Yavlinskii, “Chechenskaya voina razrushaet Rossiyu,” Novaya gazeta, 28 October 2004.

¹⁶ Reported at the site russiavotes.org, 1 October 2004. The polling was done on 13-16 August.

¹⁷ Satarov, “Demokratura.”

¹⁸ Aleksandr Budberg, “Rossiya v poluraspade vlasti,” Moskovskii komsomolets, mk.ru, 29 October 2004.

¹⁹ Gyuzel’ Fazullina, “Chinovniki ukhodyat v biznes,” Rodnaya gazeta, 12 November 2004.

²⁰ “Golodnyi narod o demokratii dumaet v poslednyuyu ochered’,” Novaya gazeta, 11 November 2004.

²¹ “Pokazateli,” Moskovskie novosti, 18 June 2004.

²² “Rossiyane tratyat na edu pochti vse svoi den’gi,” Lenta.ru, 17 May 2004.

²³ “Zor’kin govorit o provale sudebnoi reformy,” Utro.ru, 25 October 2004.

²⁴ “Pokazateli,” Moskovskie novosti, 21 May 2004.

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- ²⁵ Georgii Satrarov, "Demokratura-2," Novaya gazeta, 1 November 2004.
- ²⁶ "Voennaya ataka na grazhdanskoe obshchestvo," Gazeta.ru, 20 October 2004.
- ²⁷ "Soldatskie materi: 'Daite miru shans!'," hro.org, 13 October 2004.
- ²⁸ "Otnoshenie k komitetu soldatskikh materei," Moskovskie novosti, 12 November 2004.
- ²⁹ Oksana Yablokova, "Soldiers' Mothers Form a Party," Moscow Times, 9 November 2004.
- ³⁰ "Mikhail Zurabov," Strana.ru, 18 October 2004.
- ³¹ Anastasiya Naryshkina, "Dlya sokhraneniya chislennosti naseleniya Rossii nuzhny migranty," Izvestiya, 26 April 2004. Interview with Academician Anatolii Vishnevskii.
- ³² At Levada.ru, 9 September 2004.
- ³³ "Gde zhe pyataya kolonna?" ruskur.ru, 4 October 2004.
- ³⁴ "Putin: V bor'be s ksenofobie dopuskaem oshibki," Grani.ru, 19 October 2004.
- ³⁵ "Fashizm v bol'shom gorode," vremya.ru, 1 November 2004.
- ³⁶ Nina Khrushcheva, "Kto voskresil sovetskuyu imperiyu?," Insosmi.ru, 1 November 2004. Original text published in the International Herald Tribune under the heading "The empire sneaks back."
- ³⁷ Yevgeny Trifonov, "Chronicles of an ice age," Novoe vremya, 7 November 2004, translation in Johnson's Russia List, no. 8448, 11 November 2004.
- ³⁸ "Amerika zainteresovana v sil'noi Rossii...," Komsomol'skaya Pravda, 6 November 2004. For a useful analysis of many of the themes broached in this essay, see M.N. Afanas'ev, "Rossiiskaya Federatsiya: slaboe gosudarstvo I 'prezidentskaya vertikal'," Polit.ru, 19 October 2004.