

Conflict Studies Research Centre



**Beslan -
The Political Fallout**

Dr Mark A Smith

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Key Points

- * Putin has steadily tightened his control over the political system since 2000, giving rise to fears of creeping authoritarianism. The media has become less free, and the business oligarchs politically submissive.
- * The Beslan incident led Putin to make major proposals for changes in the political system which would further tighten his control. The key changes are:
 - * Regional governor to be appointed by the president;
 - * The entire Duma (lower house of parliament) to be elected by proportional representation.
- * These changes would make it easier for Putin to push through constitutional changes.
- * Further moves cannot be ruled out. Putin may seek to extend his term in office or amend the constitution so he can run for a third term.

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The terrorist incident in Beslan in North Osetia at the beginning of September 2004 will result in significant changes to the Russian political system, pushing it in a more authoritarian direction. Since he came to power in December 1999, President Vladimir Putin has undertaken several steps which have enhanced the power of the state, and particularly the presidency.

- In 2000, he acquired greater control over the regions in the Russian Federation by creating seven federal districts, which were overseen by a presidential plenipotentiary representative, appointed by the president and solely accountable to him.
- In 2000 he also curbed the power of regional governors, by removing them from the Federation Council, the upper house of parliament. He also acquired the power to dismiss regional governors who violated federal legislation.
- Investigation into the financial affairs of business oligarchs such as Boris Berezovskiy and Vladimir Gusinskiy have been used to intimidate Russian big business into becoming politically compliant and to ensure that the electronic media does not challenge the Putin leadership. NTV, which was owned by Gusinskiy, no longer provides critical news coverage.
- The Yukos affair, which led to the arrest of Yukos boss Mikhail Khodorkovskiy in October 2003, has also had the effect of further intimidating the business community into remaining politically submissive. Khodorkovskiy had been giving financial support to liberal political parties which were critical of Putin.

Putin's control over the political system is now greater than that enjoyed by Boris Yel'tsin during his presidency. In addition, the Duma elections of December 1999 and December 2003 produced a lower house of parliament with an overwhelming pro-Kremlin majority, giving Putin a compliant legislature. The term "administered democracy" has been used to describe the post-Soviet Russian political system, and as the Putin era has progressed, the "administration" element of this concept has become more noticeable, whilst the "democratic" element has diminished.¹ The Russian presidency enjoys enormous powers under the 1993 constitution, and the system has been described as an electoral autocracy. The parliament is correspondingly weak, and is little more than a talking shop. Planned changes to the judiciary will give the president a greater say in the appointment of judges, which could well undermine the independence of this branch of power.

The Nord-Ost siege in Moscow in October 2002, when Chechen terrorists seized a theatre, led to demands for tighter control over the media in reporting terrorist incidents, and also boosted concern that the political system might further evolve in

an authoritarian direction.² Since then, such events have escalated in number and scale. The aftermath of the Beslan crisis has resulted in Putin calling for further changes in the structure of the political system. These will be the first changes since 2000. In a speech on 13 September, Putin proposed:

- Regional governors will be appointed by the president and confirmed by regional legislatures.
- The entire Duma will be elected on by proportional representation (PR) from party lists.
- Public forums will be set up to permit citizens to play a greater role in fighting terrorism.
- There will be greater efforts to tackle poverty in the Northern Caucasus.
- A new security system for the Northern Caucasus and the country will be created.
- Extremist organisations will be banned.

Putin also issued a decree creating a Ministry of Regional Development. Vladimir Yakovlev, who had been presidential plenipotentiary to the Southern Federal District, was appointed to head this ministry.

The proposed changes to the political system will have to be drafted as a bill to be considered and approved by the legislature. Given that both houses of the Federal Assembly are strongly pro-Putin in their composition, it can safely be assumed that these measures will become law.

They will obviously have the effect of strengthening the presidency, and making it more difficult for presidential power to be challenged. The decision to have governors appointed instead of elected is an important step away from the electoral principle. Governors were initially appointed in the Yel'tsin era, and the move in the second half of the 1990s to have elected governors was seen as a major step forward in the democratisation of the political system. This process is now being partially reversed. There had been some discussion after 2000 of having governors appointed, but Putin had always rejected this idea. The fact that he has now accepted it (albeit subject to the approval of the regional legislature), is therefore of great significance. Power flowed away from the political centre in the 1990s; since 2000, Putin has reversed the flow. Regional autonomy will now be further curbed, as Putin will obviously not appoint governors inclined to challenge the centre. Since half of the representatives in the Federation Council are appointed by regional governors, the upper parliamentary chamber will become even more compliant to the federal centre.

The changes to the Duma – the lower parliamentary chamber - will also benefit the presidency. Half of the Duma seats (ie 225) are currently chosen by PR through a party list system, and the other half are directly elected on a constituency basis. There was discussion in the Yel'tsin period about having two-thirds of the Duma elected on a PR basis, but the idea was abandoned. Only parties which receive more than 5% of the total vote can be represented in the PR part of the Duma. If this system is extended to the entire Duma, then it will favour the larger parties such as the pro-presidential Yedinaya Rossiya and its allies. Smaller anti-Putin

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liberal parties and regional interests represented by independent deputies will no longer appear in the Duma. A Duma elected under the proposed new system is likely to be even more pro-Putin. This would accordingly make it even easier for the leadership to push through any constitutional changes that would further enhance the power of the presidency.

From the standpoint of the Putin leadership, the proposal to make greater efforts to tackle poverty and social problems in the Northern Caucasus make sense. However, in the past funding for such programmes has often mysteriously disappeared due to corruption in the state machine; it remains to be seen whether any new programmes will be any more successful.

He also issued two decrees, "On urgent measures to increase the effectiveness of the fight against terrorism" and "On the creation of a commission for coordinating activities of the federal bodies of executive power in the Southern Federal District" envisaging:

- creating a new system for the interaction of forces and resources in the North Caucasus region and a new system to avert and eliminate crisis situations on the territory of the Russian Federation;
- creating an effective system of state management in crisis situations, to warn of and to avert terrorism in any form, and to confirm corresponding plans of action by government and executive bodies;
- putting forward proposals for fundamentally new approaches to organizing the activities of law-enforcement bodies, taking into account the administrative reforms currently in progress.

These measures imply an enhancement of the role played by the power structures (ie the Federal Security Service, Interior Ministry, etc) within the political system. This, along with the abolition of directly elected regional governors and the emergence of a tame legislature, constitutes a significant "deliberalisation" of the political system. The abolition of elected governors and creation of a Duma elected solely on a PR basis will do little or nothing in themselves to create a more effective anti-terrorist system. The package taken as a whole seems to indicate that Putin, who is very much a product of the old Soviet system, is reverting to a form of Sovietisation when faced with a major challenge to internal security. The dismissal of the Izvestia editor Raf Shakhirov for his criticism of the government's reluctance to give full information about Beslan has also raised fears about the future of press freedom in the Russian Federation.

Russian liberal circles such as Yabloko, the Union of Rightist Forces and Committee-2008 have predictably criticised these moves, as has the CPRF. Putin's approval ratings have dropped since Beslan. The VTsIOM polling organisation reports that his approval rating since Beslan is 66% compared with 81% in March 2004 (at the time of the Kursk submarine disaster, his rating fell to 60%). VTsIOM also reports that almost 49% oppose the idea to abolish direct gubernatorial elections. 38% of those polled supported this idea.

Putin's proposed reforms have also met with a negative reaction in western countries. Both the US and European Union have expressed concern over the weakening of democracy in the Russian Federation.

The commission for the Southern Federal District (SFD) is tasked with ensuring the coordination of federal power organs in the SFD, and their interaction with regional and local government. This interaction is particularly aimed at ensuring the better implementation of socio-economic policy in the Northern Caucasus and in preventing acts of terror. It is headed by the new presidential plenipotentiary to the SFD Dmitry Kozak. That it will do more than merely add another administrative layer is unlikely. The creation of the Federal Districts in 2000 was in itself intended to ensure that federal policy was implemented in the regions; the SFD commission seems to be tasked with the same mission.

Further moves to create a more authoritarian system cannot be excluded. Putin has in the past ruled out either extending the presidential term for himself, or running for a third term (which is currently not possible under the constitution).³ However, if Russia suffers another major terrorist outrage in the run up to the 2008 elections, then such moves are quite conceivable.⁴

ENDNOTES

¹ For a discussion of the concept of administered democracy, see Dr Mark A Smith, Putin's Regime: Administered Democracy, CSRC, E108, June 2000.

² See Dr Mark A Smith, Russian Perspectives on Terrorism, CSRC, C110, January 2004.

³ On 28 February 2000. Putin said on NTV on the idea of extending the term of presidential powers: "One can put such a question to the country after the 2000 elections, when it will be possible to work on this issue in this or that form. However, this decision, if it is taken by the country's population, must only apply to the person who is elected president in 2000." NTV International as reported by BBC Monitoring. <http://news.monitor.bbc.co.uk/> The issue of extending the presidential term has arisen from time to time since 2000. In December 2001 and July 2002, the chairman of the Federation Council Sergey Mironov spoke in favour of extension. In February 2004, the Duma rejected a proposal made by the Ivanovo oblast duma to extend the presidential term to seven years. An article in *The Sunday Times* (19 September 2004) by Mark Franchetti has again recently claimed that Putin was considering introducing legislation to either extend his presidential term to seven years or permit him to run for a third term.

⁴ See the discussion on what will happen in 2008 in Dr Mark A Smith, Russia After the Presidential Election, CSRC, Russian Series, 04/01, April 2004. The possibility of terrorist incidents taking place at "convenient" times, giving the Russian leadership a suitable pretext for introducing such measures should also not be ruled out. The terrorist bombings in Moscow in 1999 gave the Russian leadership a pretext for launching the second Chechen war, which created a strong pro-Kremlin mood in the population in the run up to the Duma elections in December 1999, leading to the election of a pro-Kremlin Duma, followed by Putin's election as president in March 2000.

Want to Know More ...?

See: Dr Mark A Smith, "*Putin's Regime: Administered Democracy*", Conflict Studies Research Centre, E108, June 2000, <http://www.da.mod.uk/csrc>

Dr Mark A Smith, "*Russia After the Presidential Election*", Conflict Studies Research Centre, Russian Series, 04/01, April 2004, <http://www.da.mod.uk/csrc>

C W Blandy, "*Chechnya After Beslan*", Conflict Studies Research Centre, Caucasus Series, 04/27, September 2004, <http://www.da.mod.uk/csrc>

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