

## INTRODUCTION

It is often said, both inside and outside Russia, that Vladimir Putin restored order and power and revived Russia as a strong state. Wonder at Great Russia's rebound implies that the Putin model is good, since it suits the country's particular circumstances. The economy has seen steady growth from 2000 to 2008, the population's standard of living has improved and, with the exception of the poorest section, Russia is becoming a consumer society. Oil and gas revenues have given Russia the means to regain its place in world affairs. The country was severely hit by the world financial crisis of 2008, but the economy started to grow again in 2010 at a more modest pace.

Until the blatantly rigged elections of December 2011 that unleashed public protest, order seemed to reign: the Parliament always appeared to be in agreement with the Executive, as did the courts, and disruptive elements seemingly occupied only a very marginal position in society. Ordinary Russians supported the existing government and were happy to have elected Putin's young protégé Dmitri Medvedev as President, so as to be sure to retain the architect of this stability, Putin himself, as leader of the nation.

One big shadow looming over Russia since 1999 is terrorism that strikes Moscow at regular intervals, and extreme violence in the North Caucasus on a daily basis. The commanding authorities and media under their control present terrorism as a world evil. Russians are getting used to living with the Sword of Damocles and do not expect terrorism to recede.

The scenario painted by the admirers—and by the servants—of the regime was that of collective satisfaction among citizens and satisfied consumers. Everything was good compared to the chaos that followed the break-up of the USSR in 1991 and the collapse of the Communist regime.

## RUSSIAN POLITICS: THE PARADOX OF A WEAK STATE

And so the Putin system, aided by the high price of hydrocarbons, was seen as the key to Russia's remarkable recovery, achieved without the direct support of the West, thanks to Russia's distancing itself from the democratic prescriptions of Europe and the United States, considered unsuited to the situation in post-Soviet Russia. The economic upturn until the crisis of 2008 is indisputable. With revenues doubling in five years, the state coffers were comfortably full, and between 2002 and 2008 real salaries doubled on average, as did GDP per capita during the same period. Russia bounced back from a long way down, only returning to its 1991 economic level in 2006. The economic recovery was therefore a healthy development that has saved the country from stagnation, but not yet set it on the road to rapid, solid economic prosperity and social cohesion.

The setback caused by the credit crunch and the fall in commodity prices in 2008–2009 has shown that post-communist modernization falls short of systemic reform and long-awaited diversification of a rent economy. Russian and foreign economists stress that Russia is still in a catch-up phase, and are concerned about inflation and the concentration of resources in the hands of a few large state-owned conglomerates. The still considerable social disparities recall the bumpy history of the last two decades.

The elites are aware of their country's deep-seated problems and are frustrated with the decline in population, the dereliction of the health system, the bureaucracies' ineptitude and the irrepressible corruption that reaches out to the very top of the political pyramid. They are evidently keen to underline the dangers threatening Russia and jeopardizing its global ascension. Russia is facing a tough challenge, repeat the politicians, for if things are going well, then the threat of losing what has been accomplished is all the greater: central government control is therefore all the more vital. Economic progress requires a curb on pluralism and competition, in other words on freedoms, while those who oppose government policy are condemned for taking an anti-nationalist stance. The laws on non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and on extremism, for example, were introduced in 2006 to thwart individuals and organizations (NGOs, associations, parties) voicing opinions or acting against 'state interests'. Furthermore, media criticism is seen as jeopardizing the rebuilding of a strong state, and must therefore be silenced.

This then is the challenge: how to explain, by means of in-depth analysis of political and social Russia, the contradictions of the current situ-

## INTRODUCTION

ation, which is a mix of political repression and Internet contest, of weakened public institutions and a reinforced central government, of anti-Westernism and active cooperation with Western partners. The Russian state prides itself on being 'strong', but what kind of *state*, and what form of *strength* are we talking about?

This book attempts to answer the question that arises from this extraordinary paradox: Russia is generally praised or criticized for its intense statism and centralism, for the government institutions' grip on society and the Kremlin's ability to unite lands and peoples. However, analysis of the modern-day Russian state arrives at opposite conclusions. The state as an institutional construction and embodiment of public life is weak and dysfunctional. The nature of the Russian polity has been transformed during the drift towards authoritarianism, personalized power and patron-client networks. Energy wealth and the economic growth of the 2000s are undoubtedly shoring up a system where power and resources are concentrated in the hands of individuals and networks that are not accountable to society. How then do we explain the persistence of a mythical vision of Russia, both inside Russia and abroad?

More than twenty years have passed since the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the communist system. This book goes to print shortly after the twentieth anniversary of the August 1991 putsch against Gorbachev—the last and failed attempt at stopping reforms and saving the Soviet state. In December 1991, the USSR died, as did the centuries-old Russia empire.

The present work aims to shed new light on the recent history of post-Communist Russia and offer an interpretation of the political and social changes taking place. It also seeks to develop a critical analysis of the political regime under Putin since 2000, the most recent stage in Russia's transformation. The executive duo formed in May 2008, the Putin-Medvedev 'tandem', was led by Prime Minister Putin, with President Medvedev in the position of loyal associate. After a four-year interval, Vladimir Putin is striving to get his presidential post back in 2012. If he succeeds, he will be a weak president confronted to mounting criticism and protest.

Looking back at the Gorbachev reforms and their immense consequences with the hindsight of two and a half decades gives us the necessary distance to at least attempt a formalized and well-argued critique of a political system that is still today in the process of change. This anal-

ysis does not claim to be putting forward a definitive model of Russian society and government, and it will certainly need expanding and refining over the coming years. However, the social scientist cannot always wait for the end of a process, as the completion of a historical cycle is more symbolic than real and does not spell the end of developments or changes in a society. Current trends should not erase from the scholar's memory and critical apparatus the lessons learned from the many episodes that had a profound effect on the different stages of the transformation in the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s. It is up to us, political scientists, sociologists and contemporary historians, to weigh up and fit together the pieces of a fast-moving historical puzzle without claiming to see the whole picture at any given moment.

This is all the more important since for the last few years the Russian authorities have been doing their utmost to act in precisely the opposite way from the scientific approach. For Vladimir Putin and his advisers, an event that has not been 'a victory' never happened. According to their narrative, the Orange Revolution that rocked Ukraine at the end of 2004 did not happen; it was an American attempt at subversion, as proved by subsequent events, since the Orange coalition did poorly and lost the presidential election of January 2011. Another example of rewriting history: Chechnya is 'back to normal', and the war waged by the Russian Army for years is summed up as a battle won in the 'fight against terrorism'. Any other analysis is considered ill-intentioned, antipatriotic and biased.

The silencing of criticism from within Russia gives added importance to analysis and interpretation by outside observers who do not risk constant interference in their private and professional lives when they touch on sensitive issues. The subject of this book is in principle the most sensitive issue of all, since it tackles the question of the Russian state and government, in other words the issue of political power, an area that is dangerous by definition in a context where the rulers jealously guard their preserve. The gist of the official response can be summarized as follows: 'The state is harsh and intransigent; it can be so because it has become strong again. That comes as a disappointment to some, but the majority of Russians are delighted'.

The ruling elite is irritated by, but does not completely censor, the 'rants' of independent journalists, experts and political opponents who criticize the regime's abuses of authority and violations of freedoms and basic rights. But at the same time, the real world of the exercise of power by officials

## INTRODUCTION

in the Kremlin and their henchmen is a taboo subject. There is no way of penetrating the secretive inner workings and cronyist practices of those in power. As soon as an issue touches on financial interests, judicial affairs or reciprocal gifts between influential figures, the authorities use all the means at their disposal to silence the troublemakers. The other dangerous subject is the excessive use of force by the state and the groups it protects, like the ruling clan in the republic of Chechnya, supposedly pacified because it is controlled by fear. The two wars in Chechnya have left at least 150,000 dead since 1994; on the Russian side some tens of thousands have been killed, mainly soldiers, including young conscripts.

As long as one plays by the rules, there are no obstacles to studying the decline of public institutions, media control, petty corruption and poor governance, even for Russian academics. At regular intervals President Medvedev, and sometimes even Prime Minister Putin, paint a dark picture of their country and underline flaws in government.<sup>1</sup> Their official think tanks publish blunt reports that make the reader wonder why the power-wielders have met with such little success in solving some of the haunting problems since 2000. Why does an authoritarian regime convey a negative image of its political and social organizations, continually condemn corruption within the state and regularly deliver up provincial governors, mayors, company directors to public opprobrium?

One answer is that the servants of the regime are easy scapegoats, responsible for Russia's ills in place of the boss. Another answer lies with the leadership's contempt for both social organizations and representative institutions. Vladimir Putin chose to concentrate power in a few selected places: the presidential administration, the government, the special branch of the Federal Security Service (FSB), the Interior Ministry and the police, the energy and industrial giants, and international diplomacy. Ultimately, one can write about public institutions since those institutions, in essence and in formal organization, are of no primary interest to those who claim to govern them.

This book suggests an interpretation of contemporary Russian politics which takes as its starting point the study of the state, a question that has been relatively neglected by Russian and foreign analysts. The familiar narrative framework chosen by many observers since the collapse of the USSR has been the transition towards democracy and a market economy: is Russia following the expected exit route from Communism and heading naturally towards Western-style democratization?

My analysis of the political regime through a study of the state, and relations between state and society, does not call into question the relevance of studies of transition towards democracy (see Bibliography). It offers a counterpoint and a slightly different approach, perhaps more 'French' than Anglo-Saxon.

This line of attack is well understood by Russian scholars, but with a few exceptions, they do not trust it for their own research. The state has too long been an impossible and unappealing subject. It fairly soon emerged that Russian experts, like the journalists and spin doctors (*polit-tekhnologi*), seized on Anglo-Saxon methods of analysis, adopting the terms 'delegative democracy', 'managed democracy' and 'electoral authoritarianism', precisely because this thinking was foreign to them; it was less painful for them and more neutral to write and speak of their own country using these foreign tools, detached from the profound realities which they had such difficulty formulating.

By choosing the construction and deconstruction of the state as a narrative framework, I am seeking to dispel the illusion of Russia's successful consolidation through authoritarianism and the pushing back of democracy, an illusion upheld by the ruling powers. On the contrary, as this book endeavours to show, the methods and the authoritarian mindset advocated by Russian rulers are undermining the state, public institutions and the law, and hampering Russians' social and cultural development.

The Putin regime has overwhelmingly sought to re-establish the paradigm of the interventionist and controlling state. In so doing, it has rejected that of the unifying, negotiating state, representing diversities and specificities without crushing them in a political straitjacket. Federalism has become a hateful notion, even though formally the state is a federation. In the economic sphere, those in power have monopolized a considerable share of the country's resources and curbed the independence of industrial and financial players, thus prejudicing free competition in the new market economy.

This book examines the relationship between state and society—between those who wield executive power and hold a monopoly on 'legitimate violence' and those who are governed. On what basis is the interaction between those who govern and those who are governed organized? Is there a form of consensus between them?

The problem of causality is particularly pertinent since the same unanswerable question always arises: are the people to blame for the short-

## INTRODUCTION

comings of their government? Or are the authoritarian rulers and their mindset, allegedly inspired by 'oriental despotism', responsible for an apathetic, subjugated society incapable of embracing democracy?

A significant part of this study focuses on the mindsets and attitudes of the ruling elites and ordinary Russians, on the quality of the leaders, their advisers, the values they claim to defend. Inward-looking suspicion of 'the Other' (foreigners, strangers, and dissidents) is the hallmark of Russian society, as well as a wariness towards the institutions of government. Threats and enemies are often imaginary, and these perceptions are more persuasive than is reality in a Russia that appears to be quite the opposite of a country that is besieged and under threat. Never, in all its history, has Russia objectively been in a situation of greater security. The Cold War is over, Russia is better integrated into international institutions, and most of its neighbours have an interest in trade cooperation. Vladimir Putin has chosen to promote a siege mentality and suspicion of the outside world among his citizens. He convinced Russians, through media propaganda, that the Georgians were enemies and that a military conflict was inevitable in 2008. He has also pushed Russians to be inward-looking, to guard against competition, and to be content with a very mediocre public life in which they do not participate. The regime's authoritarian line represents a setback compared with the remarkable transparency and openness instigated by Mikhail Gorbachev when Russians felt for the first time that they were fully entering the world in every way.

After the 1990s, which were marked by the dismantling and very imperfect rebuilding of government organizations, Vladimir Putin sought to undermine all the institutions that did not come within the compass of the central state from his point of view. Whereas Boris Yeltsin had let institutions decline, his successor pursued a systematic strategy of hollowing out public institutions. Putin's system of rule is focused on the executive power and its economic networks, and on the administrative and corporatist control of actors and resources. It succeeded in establishing the economic and political sovereignty of the central federal state, which was achieved at the expense of the autonomy of the provinces, and of independent stakeholders, like the Yukos oil company and its CEO, Mikhail Khodorkovsky.

The paradox of this new authoritarian model is that it pushes ordinary Russians outside the political arena and gives them a form of autonomy and freedom that they did not have during the Communist era. They may

distance themselves fully from public affairs and stay away from any form of social mobilization. The private individual is now free while the public citizen is very weak. A *civil society* struggles to exist in Russia, but finds it difficult to become a *political society*, because of the lack of democratic and effective public institutions to carry forward protest and claims. Russians are willingly escaping the reach of institutions in which they have no faith and which the Kremlin is seeking to undermine, like the Parliament and elected assemblies. They are also suspicious of alternative institutions—NGOs, foreign businesses and government opponents. They do not want to see the re-establishment of a police state, but rather a form of economic, social and moral order. They tolerate the existing regime, but are increasingly able to impose their individual choices, in particular the choice not to take part in the political charade spearheaded by the Kremlin. They no longer think that elections are free and fair, and know that they do not choose the successors to the Head of State or the government, or the leaders of provincial administrations. Dmitri Medvedev was designated by Vladimir Putin to occupy the position of President; the population endorsed this choice on 2 March 2008, via a controlled, rigged ballot. And the new President, according to the agreed scenario, appointed his mentor as Prime Minister. Putin's famous 'stability' was guaranteed. Officially, the Constitution lived, and the 'free vote' too. The negative consequences of the 2008 political trick are unfolding before our eyes at the end of 2011.

Society has not been completely stifled, since individuals find ways of adapting and circumventing. Most Russians do not participate in public life, because it has been emptied of content. They have no hold on state institutions and they deal with this by turning away from them, to the extent that those in power no longer know how to manage the populace or control them effectively. The following pages open a few doors into this strange political and social world that is neither democratic nor neo-Communist.

The opening chapter analyzes the construction of the state and the empire during the Tsarist period. As in every country, the mindsets of the elites and of ordinary citizens are forged by the past and major historical events. In Russia especially, this heritage has been doctored and rewritten to suit the needs of those in power. The relationships of Russians to the government, the state, and to Russian soil have been shaped by these successive reconstructions of the national imagination.

Chapter 2 offers an analysis of political and social change under and after Gorbachev and puts forward two paradigms: opening up to the out-



## INTRODUCTION

side world as the key to transformation; national-imperial identity as a major impediment to post-Communist liberalization.

Chapters 3, 4 and 5 focus on political developments since the collapse of the USSR, and the problems of building institutions and holding free elections. They are not a straightforward chronology of two turbulent decades. The aim, rather, is to gain an understanding of relations between the ruling elites and society, between the actors at the top and the grass-roots, between economic interests and political ambitions, by looking primarily at the political scene. From the end of the 1990s, the decay of democratic institutions was accompanied by a curtailing of rights and freedoms.

Society's attitudes are the subject of Chapter 6. Opinion polls and Russian sociological studies bring to life and interpret the views and behaviour of Russia's 140 million inhabitants.

Finally, the last three chapters offer an interpretation of the system of rule under Putin.