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# Between Assertiveness and Insecurity: Russian Elite Attitudes and the Russia-Georgia Crisis

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**Abstract:** A political scientist discusses the content and sources of Russian elite perspectives on international affairs. The “color revolutions,” the perceived specter of Islamic radicalism, contestation over Russian identity, and evolving perceptions of Russia’s international leverage are examined for their impact on elite attitudes. Discussion of the crisis in relations between Russia and Georgia illustrates the article’s theme about the relationship between insecurity and assertiveness.

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C current Russian elite attitudes exhibit a striking dualism: confidence, bordering on arrogance, about Russia’s growing influence on the international stage as a global energy superpower combined with anxiety and indeed insecurity about Russia’s political future. These seemingly contradictory attitudes are manifested in Russia’s increasing assertiveness in the international arena, on the one hand, and in a relentless and almost obsessive effort to control the domestic political environment and preempt any potential sources of opposition, on the other. While insecurity is hardly a novel feature of Russian politics, its sources have changed in recent years, and the assertiveness is altogether new. This article will explore the major sources of both assertiveness and insecurity, their expression in the new ideological construct “sovereign democracy,” and how they have come together in the recent crisis in Russian-Georgian relations.

The central and all-consuming issue engaging Russia’s political elite is the uncertainty surrounding the year 2008, when Vladimir Putin’s

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current presidential term comes to an end. The prospect evokes extreme concern because of the extent to which the entire system has come to revolve around the figure of the president. No clear mechanism of succession has been developed apart from the decisions of the president himself, which an election will simply ratify. And because power is highly concentrated, personalistic, and not deeply institutionalized, policy outcomes will be significantly shaped by *who* is selected. Moreover, in the absence of clearly defined rules of the game the future direction of the system is the subject of acute and continuing struggles and personal rivalries within the elite over power, policy, and especially property; fundamental questions of redistribution and social justice remain far from settled.

This article will focus not on the competing schemes that have been put forward—all of which contemplate the continuing influence of Vladimir Putin—or on the strengths and weaknesses of potential successors, but on several broader social and political developments that are feeding elite insecurity as well as assertiveness and are driving key policy agendas in the lead-up to the critical elections. These include the perceived threat of “color revolutions,” of Islamic radicalism, and of intensified contestation over Russia’s identity, all of them a reflection of the massive transformations still under way in Russia today.

## THE CHALLENGE OF COLOR REVOLUTIONS

At a broader level, this sense of insecurity is in large measure a response to globalization, which limits the ability of states to control the flow of ideas, capital, and people across national borders. In the case of Russia these trends are relatively novel. Because the Soviet system was able to function in a highly autarchic manner, it could largely insulate itself from such flows over a long period of time. This unaccustomed openness to the larger environment now evokes an acute anxiety about the ability of the regime to remain in control of its environment, and a fear of the way in which outside forces might intervene in or influence internal development, or even destabilize the existing political order.<sup>2</sup>

This broader anxiety was dramatically crystallized by the “color revolutions” in Serbia, Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan. The political upheavals in Georgia and Ukraine in particular were profoundly unsettling for the Russian leadership. In seeking to account for them, Russian commentators attached enormous weight to the alleged role of foreign political influence and funding—channeled through anti-regime NGOs—in organizing and managing the mass demonstrations. The domestic sources of popular discontent were minimized or even overlooked in an orchestrated campaign attacking external actors and holding them respon-

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<sup>2</sup>This anxiety about the possible role of outside actors was initially revealed in Putin’s otherwise puzzling reaction to the Beslan events, when he lashed out at foreign forces who, he alleged, were seeking to dismember or weaken Russia (*The New York Times*, September 5, 2004). These allegations have become more frequent and more explicit in recent years.

sible for inciting instability. However remote the prospect may seem to outside observers, these “color revolutions” evoked perceptible anxiety within the elite about the possibility of similar efforts at regime change in Russia, of a “soft takeover” in which domestic discontent is abetted by foreign sponsors.<sup>3</sup> These concerns are magnified by growing anxiety about encroaching Western economic, political, and military influence in the region, focused in particular on EU and NATO enlargement.

The government has sought to preempt such developments by ever tighter controls over political space.<sup>4</sup> The main lesson learned from the color revolutions was the danger of a mobilized public coalescing around an attractive opposition figure, and the goal of Russian policy has been to prevent the emergence of either. Despite the outward appearances of stability, a whole series of recent measures to increase central control over the mass media and the internet, constrain political pluralism, and undermine or eliminate critics all suggest that the leadership views the current regime as fragile and is in effect “overinsuring” against possible risks.

Gleb Pavlovsky, an influential Russian political consultant specializing in “political technologies,” exposed this sense of insecurity rather dramatically in a recent interview. Asked why the Kremlin was cracking down so harshly on demonstrations by Another Russia, in view of the small size and weakness of the opposition, he responded, “Establishing an ‘anti-society’ somewhere (preferably in the capital city) for a couple of weeks is all it takes.” He went to add: “Remember what happened in Kiev in 2004? ... Where Russia is concerned, the threat of extremism boils down to the danger of interfering with the elections through the use of a small group of people for hire. This threat is not exactly great at this point but it does exist.... There are lots of forces in the world who would like to see Russia turned upside down.... Dealing with provocateurs, you can never be sure if they are working for your geopolitical adversaries or business rivals. These marchers are but a conduit that leads to Washington or a couple of oligarchs in Israel.... Can’t say where to” (*Moskovskiy Komsomolets*, April 6, 2007, as translated in *Johnson’s Russia List*, April 6, 2007).

From the very outset of his presidency, Putin’s central goal has been not to enhance democracy but rather to strengthen the state. The past six years have witnessed an ever greater concentration of decision-making in the hands of a small circle in the Kremlin, recruited in significant numbers from the military and security services, and the progressive weakening of independent sources of information and power. The development of an embryonic federalism that could simultaneously represent local interests and also serve as a check on the central government was halted by

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<sup>3</sup>See, for example, Surkov (2006a, 2006b). These speeches were addressed to foreign journalists in response to mounting criticism of the Russian government for reversing the process of democratization and curtailing civil and political freedom. The criticism has continued to mount; in late 2006 Reporters Without Borders ranked Russia 148th out of 168 countries in its World Press Freedom index (as reported by *Johnson’s Russia List*, November 21, 2006).

<sup>4</sup>For a perceptive analysis, see Silitski (2006).

measures that diminished the powers of republic and regional leaders. A campaign to reduce the number of federal subjects by folding smaller non-Russian regions into larger surrounding ethnic Russian ones, often over substantial resistance, was also an effort to weaken the political influence of compact ethnic groups. A whole series of other measures have been adopted aimed at bringing independent mass media under government control, weakening pluralism in economic and political life, and limiting political competition to officially sanctioned parties and candidates, all of which further undermined the elements of transparency and accountability which had begun to emerge in post-Soviet Russia.

During the past year these trends have accelerated. New electoral laws prevented a number of prominent political figures from entering the Duma by abolishing single mandate districts altogether, and further restricted the role of opposition parties by imposing onerous registration requirements.<sup>5</sup> These new laws also removed the minimum turnout requirement as a condition for the validity of elections, allowing candidates in recent regional elections to achieve victory with turnouts as low as 30 percent, and they also prevent voters from registering a protest vote by eliminating the possibility of voting for “none of the above.”<sup>6</sup> With public demonstrations and peaceful street protests among the few remaining ways to register opposition, both central and local governments have moved to curtail these as well, arbitrarily invoking laws against an ill-defined “extremism,” elaborating ever more—and sometimes ludicrous—restrictions on when and where any demonstrations or marches can take place, and on some occasions using violence to disperse them.<sup>7</sup> Even the federally-appointed Ombudsman for Human Rights, Vladimir Lukin, has criticized the reliance on indiscriminate and broad use of the term “extremism” to ban legitimate public protests and demonstrations.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>For example, the minimum percentage of the vote needed to win seats in regional legislatures and the State Duma was raised from 5 percent to 7 percent, the requirements for collecting signatures in support of a political party were tightened, and the registration fees for parties and individual candidates also soared. In St. Petersburg, in the recent regional elections, the registration fee for parties was more than \$3 million, and the Yabloko party—relatively popular in the city—was eliminated (On Amendments, 2006).

<sup>6</sup>In particular, Duma speaker Mironov criticized the decision to abolish the “against all candidates” option and the minimal voter turnout threshold. As a result, according to Mironov, voter turnout exceeded 50 percent in only six of the 44 regional elections held last year; in most cases, turnout was under 40 percent. Mironov claims that “many of our colleagues in the Duma are ignoring public opinion” in amending electoral legislation; and the latest amendments “were made too hastily last September.... Somebody out there is very scared, so they’re warping our electoral legislation, which isn’t all that brilliant as it stands,” said Mironov, hinting at his United Russia opponents (Natalia Antipova, “Distorted Elections,” *Izvestiya* [February 21, 2007], as published in *Johnson’s Russia List*, [February 21, 2007]).

<sup>7</sup>In one of the more ludicrous recent moves, the Moscow city government prohibited demonstrations involving more than two persons per square meter.

<sup>8</sup>Interview in *Novyye Izvestiya* (April 5, 2007), as published in *Johnson’s Russia List* (April 5, 2007).

Other measures now threaten the very existence of an independent civil society. Recent laws imposing elaborate new registration requirements for NGOs and onerous conditions for their continuing functioning have already provided a basis for refusing to register a number of groups, and for harassing others, particularly those with foreign ties or funding. The creation of an officially-sponsored imitation of civil society, the Public Chamber, exemplifies the wider effort to substitute official associations for independent voluntary initiatives. And aggressive efforts to silence critics or minimize their influence have generated an expanding list of victims of targeted assassinations, many of them journalists killed while investigating politically sensitive topics. Indeed, Russia today ranks as the second most dangerous country in the world for journalists, after Iraq, with 88 journalists killed from 1996 to 2006.<sup>9</sup>

## THE CHALLENGE OF ISLAMIC RADICALISM

A second major source of anxiety facing the Russian leadership today is the threat of growing Islamic radicalism and militancy, particularly across the Northern Caucasus. Neither the establishment of a nominally pro-Moscow government in Chechnya under Ramzan Kadyrov nor the killing of the key rebel military commander Shamil Basayev and several of his field commanders has completely ended the brutal war in Chechnya and the threat of continuing low-level insurgencies across the region.<sup>10</sup> Far from extinguishing the conflict, or confining it within the territory of Chechnya, the policies of the Russian government have contributed to the spread of violence and instability far beyond the borders of the Chechen republic. What began as a secular conflict over the political status of Chechnya in the early 1990s has progressively been transformed into a wider and increasingly Islamist insurgency across the republics of the Northern Caucasus that now threatens to destabilize the broader region. While some of the militants espouse an avowedly Islamist agenda, many of the attacks have been targeted at local authorities and security services in revenge for their repressive actions.

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<sup>9</sup>See the recent report by the International News Safety Institute ("Killing the Messenger," 2007) as well as the annual report on Russia by Reporters Without Borders. Although conclusive proof of ultimate responsibility is unlikely to be forthcoming, the assassination of journalist Anna Politkovskaya in Moscow, the suspicious death of another journalist, Ivan Safronov, and the assassination of Alexander Litvinenko in London with the use of radioactive polonium—which British authorities claim is traceable directly to the FSB—are the most prominent of recent additions to the lengthening list of Kremlin critics who met sudden violent deaths.

<sup>10</sup>In the fall of 2006 General Yevgeny Barayev, the commander of the Russian military group in Chechnya, reported that "the number of acts of sabotage, terrorist acts, and raids of the militants" had increased, that young Chechens continued to join the rebel ranks, that up to 700 rebel fighters were still hiding in Chechnya's mountains, and that the Russian army continued to shell and bomb Chechen territory (*Eurasia Daily Monitor*, October 26, 2006).

Concerns about the future role of Islam in Russia, however, are not limited to the Northern Caucasus, although the continuing outmigration of ethnic Russians from that region is creating what one analyst has described as a growing “regional apartheid” (Sergey Markedonov, in [www.caucasustimes.com/article.asp?id=12365](http://www.caucasustimes.com/article.asp?id=12365)). Broader demographic trends, as well as immigration from the Southern Caucasus and Central Asia, are increasing the number and share of Muslims not only in the Northern Caucasus but also in the Russian population as a whole.<sup>11</sup> At a time when the overall Russian population is shrinking by as much as 700,000 per year as a result of low birth rates and high death rates, continuing high birth rates in Muslim regions and populations are altering the ethnic demography of the Russian Federation. While the precise figures for the size of the Muslim population are uncertain, problematic, and hotly contested—ranging from a high of 24 million cited by Ravil Gainutdin, chairman of the Russian Council of Muftis, the figure of 20 million cited by President Putin and other Russian officials, to the 14.5 million recorded in the 2002 census—in any case, Russia has the largest Muslim minority in Europe.<sup>12</sup> Most live in Russia’s seven North Caucasus republics or Tatarstan and Bashkortostan in the Urals. But there are Muslim communities in central Russia and as far north as Arkhangelsk and Murmansk inside the Arctic Circle. And Moscow itself is the home to an estimated 2.5 million to 3 million Muslims, giving it the largest Muslim population of any major city in Europe.

This population has come under increasing scrutiny by local and federal law enforcement officials in recent years and has faced rising public hostility. The growing prominence of the issue, and the fears surrounding the potential for Islamic mobilization and radicalism, is in part a result of the spiritual and cultural revival of Islam in the last two decades. Perestroika, and the subsequent demise of the Soviet system, created a more permissive environment for religious expression more generally, while the ideological void created by the end of Communism also facilitated this renaissance. Russia had only 150 mosques when the Soviet Union imploded in 1991, but some 6,000 by 2006 (Goble, 2006).<sup>13</sup>

But radicalization has also been a product of broader political, economic, and social trends. The war in Chechnya itself precipitated a shift from secular nationalism to radical Islam among some segments of the Muslim population in the Northern Caucasus. Popular discontent was further exacerbated by the larger socio-economic crisis of the region, which is experiencing extreme poverty, high birth rates, high unemployment, and

<sup>11</sup> According to Paul Goble, an eminent expert on Russian ethnic and demographic issues, Russia’s Muslim population has increased by 40 percent since 1989 (Goble, 2006).

<sup>12</sup> For penetrating discussions of the uncertainties, political agendas, and definitional problems surrounding these figures, see Walker (2005), Hunter (2004, pp. 43–46) and Heleniak (2006, pp. 430–432). Gainutdin’s figures include 20 million native inhabitants and 3–4 million immigrants from former Soviet Muslim republics.

<sup>13</sup> See also Tatiana Shaumian in *The Pioneer* (India) (October 23, 2005).

widespread landlessness. The incompetence and corruption of local pro-Moscow leaders, and the repressive policies of federal and local security agencies, has also been responsible for the upsurge of violence. The suspicion and Islamophobia of local officials, and Moscow's disorganized and violent attempts to suppress Caucasian Muslim insurgents, have swept up thousands of innocent believers in the process. The police raids, mosque closures, and brutal arrests and detentions that especially target young males appear to be alienating a population that until now had largely sympathized with attempts to quash terrorist attacks, and it is no accident that security posts and police stations have become the major targets of strikes by disaffected youths in a number of republics.

The personnel policies of the Putin government have also been a contributing factor in that they rely on centrally-appointed officials who often lack real familiarity with and ties to the region. A high proportion of President Putin's appointees to key positions in the regions are drawn from the military and security services, selected for their presumed loyalty to the president but often lacking political skills or understanding of local conditions. And yet, the substitution of appointed for elected officials does not necessarily guarantee either loyalty or competence. It is worth noting that during the Beslan hostage crisis the president of the North Ossetian government, Aleksander Dzasokhov, was virtually absent from view and proved himself completely inept, while the one figure who emerged with authority and legitimacy to lead negotiations was Ruslan Aushev, the former president of Ingushetia, who had been removed from his position by Moscow for resisting pressure for more coercive policies.

Finally, the growth of Russian nationalist sentiments and movements, of which the Movement Against Illegal Immigration (DPNI) is most active, has exacerbated political and social tensions. Often avowedly hostile to immigrants, these movements have contributed to an atmosphere of xenophobia and as well as Islamophobia conducive to violence against minorities and foreigners. At least 54 people were killed in the Russian Federation in racially-motivated attacks during 2006, and 520 were wounded, according to Sova, a Moscow-based institute that monitors violence against ethnic minorities, compared to 36 deaths from such attacks in 2005, with 399 people injured (*Johnson's Russia List*, April 5, 2007). The most serious of many violent episodes occurred in the Karelian town of Kondopoga in September 2006, when a barroom brawl triggered deadly clashes between local Russians and Chechens, followed by demonstrations demanding the expulsion of all Caucasians from the city. Another episode of ethnic violence erupted in Stavropol in June 2007 following the death of a Chechen student on May 24 in a clash with skinheads, allegedly abetted by local OMON riot police. The fatal stabbing of two Russian students in revenge set off massive demonstrations demanding the expulsion of non-Russians from the city (*RFE/RL Report*, June 6, 2007). While these episodes set off shock waves across the country, neither local authorities nor the federal government has taken strong actions to prevent and to punish such crimes.

To date, the Russian government has lacked a coherent policy for dealing with these problems. In Chechnya it has acquiesced in the establishment of a brutal regime by Ramzan Kadyrov, which enjoys substantial autonomy—and displays an increasingly Islamist orientation—in exchange for professed loyalty to president Putin. In the Northern Caucasus more broadly, Dmitriy Kozak, the Presidential representative to the Southern Federal District, appears to understand the seriousness of the situation but has been unable to implement a comprehensive strategy that addressing it would require. In a remarkable report to President Putin, which was partially leaked to the media during the summer of 2005, he warned of a backlash over corruption and poverty that could lead to instability across the northern Caucasus: “The unsolved social, economic and political problems are now reaching a critical level. Further, ignoring the problems and attempts to drive them down by force could lead to an uncontrolled chain of events whose logical result will be open social, inter-ethnic and religious conflicts in Dagestan.” He has sought to introduce some new initiatives, most recently attempting to strengthen what the government defines as “traditional Islam” against more radical forces by allowing the creation of new religious schools and curricula. Arguing that religious confessions can be a force for social stabilization, Kozak announced that the Russian authorities would help fund two new Islamic universities—one in Makhachkala, the capital of Dagestan, and the other in Nalchik—to train mullahs and imams in “traditional” Islam.

Notwithstanding the widespread alarm over Islamic militance and domestic terrorism, the potential for a significant increase in Islamic radicalism inside Russia is limited. By contrast with European cities, in which a considerable share of Muslims are immigrants, Russian Muslims are an indigenous population with their own territorial homelands, or immigrants from other republics of the former Soviet Union who share with other former citizens of the USSR many elements of a common language and culture. Moreover, the republics themselves have limited horizontal ties and are preoccupied with defending their own national interests; they lack both the motivation and capacity to unite in a common struggle against the center. Consequently, absent either a campaign of widespread and severe repressive measures by the government or a serious escalation of nationalist and xenophobic hostilities, the current situation is likely to remain challenging but not unmanageable.

## CONTESTATION OVER RUSSIAN IDENTITY

A third and related challenge facing the Russian elite today involves the continuing contestation over the issue of Russia’s identity, which in turn feeds the insecurities and anxieties that contribute to both domestic repression and international assertiveness. In the 1990s insecurity was driven by fears about whether Russia itself would hold together or would follow the path of the USSR. Although the fear of disintegration has

receded, other anxieties surrounding Russia's identity as a nation and its role in the international system have taken its place.

Still reeling from the enormous consequences of the Soviet collapse, Russia to this day lacks a consensus on "what, where, and with whom" Russia is (Legvold, 2007, p. 28). Domestically, new forms of nationalism and xenophobia have arisen in response to the demographic trends described above as well as the impact of unaccustomed levels of immigration from the Caucasus and Central Asia. While immigrants have provided Russia with much-needed low-skilled labor at low wages, they have also evoked a variety of hostile responses and become the catalyst for new efforts to develop and promote a conception of Russia's identity in which ethnic Russians occupy a central and privileged place.

One of the signal achievements of the Yel'tsin leadership after the dissolution of the USSR was its embrace of a civic rather than ethnic conception of Russia's identity.<sup>14</sup> In elevating citizenship rather than ethnicity as the unifying principle of the Russian Federation, and supporting new if still embryonic federal arrangements, the government sought to accommodate highly mobilized non-Russian nationalist movements and to defuse potential separatist impulses.

That approach has been challenged, and indeed explicitly repudiated, in recent years both from below and from above. The heightened mobilization taking place among ethnic Russians in recent years is evident in the emergence of new nationalist movements and parties attacking immigration and targeting immigrants as well as seeking more privileges for ethnic Russians, and rallying popular support under the slogan "Russia for Russians." According to President Putin himself, as well as recent survey data, these efforts have had wide resonance.<sup>15</sup> A telephone poll conducted by the respected Levada Center in August 2006 found that 50 percent of respondents supported the idea of "Russia for Russians," as well as restrictions on citizens from different ethnic groups, while 26 percent saw it as "pure fascism" (Levada Analytical Center, 2007).<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>The English word "Russian" conflates two different words in the Russian language, one referring to an ethnic Russian and the other to a citizen of the Russian Federation.

<sup>15</sup>Citing reports, President Putin said that Russia has about 50,000 skinheads and another 15,000 people who are active in radical nationalistic organizations. "On the whole, far-right nationalists have been intensifying their activity in Russia. The level of intolerance toward ethnic, religious and sex minorities remains high," he said. Radical, nationalistic, and openly neo-Nazi organizations have their websites in the Russia segment of the Internet. "They post lists of 'enemies' and their photographs and addresses. Some carry instructions on how to make bombs, as well as Hitler and other Nazi leaders' biographies. And there are more intellectual websites carrying pseudo-research papers on the inferiority of ethnic minorities" (*Johnson's Russia List*, November 11, 2006).

<sup>16</sup>See also the press conference with Yuriy Levada on February 14, 2007 ([www.fednews.ru](http://www.fednews.ru)), and the survey data of the Public Opinion Foundation (FOM) on "The Nationalistic Mood in Today's Russia," April 20, 2006 at <http://bd.english.fom.ru/report/cat/societas/nation/xenophobia/ed061622>; and see Malashenko (2006) and Gudkov (2006).

Moreover, not only has the government failed to take decisive measures against such extremism; the government itself on occasion appears to endorse the slogan of "Russia for Russians" put forth by nationalist groups. In the spring of 2006, an effort to develop a new conception of nationality policy introduced the idea of Russians as the "state-forming" core nationality of the Russian Federation, and Putin himself has referred to ethnic Russians as the "koryennyi narod." Unflattering references to the role of non-Russians became even more prominent in the weeks and months following the Kondopoga events. President Putin himself sought to justify recent measures banning all but "native Russians" from working in markets by linking immigrants to criminality. During a government meeting on October 5 he asserted that the markets are often run by criminals with "ethnic flavor" and called on the government to take measures to "protect Russian producers and the local population." A government resolution adopted December 15, 2006 which went into effect January 1 banned foreign workers from selling alcohol and medicine and limited the number of trading places open to non-Russians to 40 percent of the total. A blanket ban completely forbidding foreigners from trading at markets and other retail operations took effect April 1.

If one thrust of efforts to forge a sense of national identity has focused on identifying and exaggerating the threat posed by individuals and groups labeled enemies of Russia—whether political critics, Islamic terrorists, or non-Slavic immigrants—another thrust has been the attempt to consolidate Russian society around new patriotic symbols and holidays as well as around a new officially-endorsed version of Russian and Soviet history. The very creation of the political party Unity, intended to embrace virtually the entire political spectrum, was the most dramatic evidence of Putin's effort to eliminate the sharp political contestation characteristic of the Gorbachev and Yel'tsin eras and to find a way to embrace Russia's entire national past, incorporating the Czarist heritage, the Soviet anthem, and the post-Communist order in a new set of symbols. The replacement of November 7 with November 4 as a new Russian holiday, now named the Day of National Unity, was one such effort. The new holiday was designed to celebrate the end of the Time of Troubles associated with the collapse of the Russian state after the Polish invasion in the 17th century, a pointed use of historical metaphor to emphasize Russia's revival under Putin. In this particular case, however, the effort backfired. The holiday was coopted by the Movement Against Illegal Immigration (DPNI), and other Russian nationalist and fascist groups, and was used as a platform for preaching their cause. On November 4, 2005 they staged a public rally called the Russian March, which brought out thousands of people in over 20 cities and called for ridding Russia of foreign nationals. When in 2006 the same group sought to repeat the Russian March on a grander national scale, with support from a number of nationalist legislators from the State Duma, and proposed among its slogans "Kondopoga: A Hero City," the Kremlin ultimately banned it.

However, the ongoing effort to consolidate Russian society around a new national ideology with a strong statist orientation has recently come to focus on the creation and promulgation of a new officially-endorsed version of Russian and Soviet history. At a Kremlin-organized meeting convened in June 2007 to discuss "Contemporary Issues of Teaching Modern History and Social Sciences," President Putin criticized existing history and social science texts for devoting too much emphasis to "black pages" in Russia's history and argued that "we must not allow others to impose a feeling of guilt on us" (*Kommersant*, June 21, 2007, as in *Johnson's Russia List*, 138, June 21, 2007).<sup>17</sup> He also implied that foreign funding had encouraged the authors of such textbooks to, in effect, dance to the tune of their sponsors. Two new volumes were unveiled on the occasion, one on history and another on the social sciences, written in part by Kremlin political consultants and intended as guides for teachers and for new textbooks to be introduced in 2008. Both reflect the dominant themes of official discourse, including a laudatory treatment of President Putin's years in power and extreme hostility toward the United States. As Leonid Polyakov, a professor of political science and editor of the social studies manual, explained their purpose: "We are developing a national ideology that represents the vision of ourselves as a nation, as Russians, a vision of our own identity and the world around us.... Teachers will then be able to incorporate this national ideology, this vision, into their practical work in a normal way and use it to develop a civic and patriotic position" (Finn, in *The Washington Post*, July 20, 2007). For many commentators in official circles, the new textbooks are viewed as an instrument in a larger international political and ideological struggle. As Polyakov noted in subsequent discussions in the media, an emphasis on Russia's "national interests" would infuse students with a skeptical view of the outside world, while another commentator asserted that "national history" was an "effective instrument" in the fierce competition over politics, economics, and ideology that Russia faced from the outside world.

To further promote this political and ideological struggle against Western influence the Kremlin has supported the creation of several youth organizations, of which Nashi is the most prominent. First launched by the government in the wake of the "color revolutions" in Georgia and Ukraine, and currently claiming some 100,000 members across Russia, Nashi seeks to promote patriotic values and support for President Putin and his policies among young people. In summer camps that combine recreation with indoctrination, young people are taught the elements of Putin's domestic and foreign policies and also receive instruction in organizing mass actions as well as in paramilitary and police training. Although formally established to advance educational and cultural goals, in fact these youth

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<sup>17</sup>He went on to remind his listeners that unlike others, Russia had never used nuclear weapons against civilians, nor dropped chemicals and large numbers of bombs on a tiny country like Vietnam, nor had such bleak pages as Nazism.

organizations operate as political auxiliaries of the Kremlin,<sup>18</sup> patronized by senior officials, funded by the Kremlin and its affiliated business figures, engaging in actions that would be deemed illegal if not for official support, and often promoting extremist and xenophobic agendas.<sup>19</sup>

Efforts by the Russian political elite to encourage the development and promotion of a new national ideology have also been supported by the Russian Orthodox Church, which has sought to enhance its own role in defining and shaping Russian identity. Its effort to introduce a compulsory course on Foundations of Orthodox Culture in Russia's educational system, however, instead of keeping it an elective subject, provoked a backlash among members of other confessional groups who in turn stressed the dangers of an exclusionary approach in a multi-ethnic and multi-confessional society. The Council of Muftis of Russia in particular expressed concern about the growing influence of the Russian Orthodox Church, and announced it would in turn press the government to expand instruction in Muslim culture beyond the Muslim republics in the North Caucasus to other regions with large Muslim communities.

These efforts to define and promulgate a new Russian national identity based on the statist ideology of the Putin leadership have not gone unchallenged. In media commentary, among scholars and educators, and in ethnic and religious communities, voices have been raised about the dangers of reverting to a Stalinist like-mindedness, and of treating history teaching as a tool to mobilize society against external enemies. Arguing that these efforts are a step backwards toward the Soviet past, they view these efforts as incompatible with a modern democratic and open society. Whether or not these efforts will be successful, they are an expression of the fundamental insecurity of Russian political elites who lack the confidence that their views and policies can stand the test of open competition in Russian society without direction and tutelage from above.

## **RUSSIAN ASSERTIVENESS AND THE CONCEPT OF "SOVEREIGN DEMOCRACY"**

While the three challenges discussed above help account for the sense of anxiety and insecurity within the Russian political elite, other developments are contributing to a new sense of confidence and assertiveness, particularly evident in the international arena. The new assertiveness so characteristic of President Putin's second term has several sources. First and foremost has been growing Russian disenchantment with the Bush

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<sup>18</sup>Its recent activities have included aggressively hounding the British ambassador to punish his attendance at an opposition conference and organizing a week-long siege of the Estonian Embassy in Moscow, along with cyber attacks on Estonian government communications networks, in retaliation for the relocation of a Soviet war monument.

<sup>19</sup>Other pro-Kremlin youth groups have disrupted opposition events, picketed the Georgian embassy, organized migrant-catching expeditions at produce markets in the Moscow region, and picketed universities, calling for illegal aliens to be evicted from student dormitories.

administration, particularly after the brief honeymoon that followed the events of 9/11. U.S. policies are increasingly viewed as counterproductive and dangerous, and nowhere more so than in launching the war in Iraq. Secondly, mounting Western criticism of Russia's domestic policies, and particularly the sharp divergence of views concerning the "color revolutions," strengthened the hand of those in the Russian elite who considered Western democracy an alien and even dangerous political model, and Western foreign policies an effort to weaken Russia and reduce its influence in neighboring states.

Finally, the dramatic increase in the price of oil, from \$35 per barrel in 2004 to \$72 in 2006, generated huge budgetary surpluses and freed Russia from dependence on Western loans. As concerns about energy security became a major preoccupation around the globe, Russia's role as a global energy superpower, controlling both supplies of gas and oil and transport routes to Europe, altered the geopolitical environment. As Robert Legvold has put it, "Energy as a source of power and standing filled a void and gave the Putin leadership the confidence that Russia was no longer a 'taker' in international politics" (Legvold, 2007, p. 10). In repudiating many of the policies associated with the Yel'tsin era, leading spokesmen of the Russian government, and indeed President Putin himself, assert that the era of Russian economic and political weakness—and of subservience to and patronization by the West—has ended and that Russia is now in a position to pursue its own self-interest as defined by Moscow.

This new assertiveness is strikingly captured by a new ideological construct: the concept of "sovereign democracy." First formulated by Vyacheslav Surkov, deputy chief and leading ideologue of the presidential administration, it was echoed in a July 12, 2006 speech by Putin in the run-up to the G-8 summit in St. Petersburg (ITAR-TASS interview, July 12, 2006)<sup>20</sup> and is a major focus of the new social studies textbooks discussed above. In the 1990s, Surkov argued, when Russia was economically and politically weak, the West had many levers on Russian domestic and foreign policy. Today, he asserted, the situation had radically changed: the levers of influence have disappeared, even as the Western desire to influence Russia's domestic affairs continues.

The phrase "sovereign democracy" serves two main purposes. The emphasis on democracy is intended to refute the widely voiced charge that Russia is retreating from democracy and moving toward authoritarianism. Visibly stung by declining ratings in Freedom House indicators of political freedoms, as well as less favorable ratings in Transparency International's corruption index and in measures of media freedom, and by the suggestion that Russia compares unfavorably with countries not noted for their degree of political liberty or economic rectitude, various public figures have sought to denigrate these Western rankings as biased and methodologi-

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<sup>20</sup>Interview with U.S. and European TV networks (ITAR-TASS, July 12, 2006) as published in *Johnson's Russia List*, July 12, 2006.

cally flawed. Rejecting the view that there is some universal set of norms against which Russia can be judged, they argue that democracy takes many different forms and that Russia is pursuing a form of democracy consistent with own distinctive values and history.<sup>21</sup>

The emphasis on “sovereign” in this new concept is intended to convey the rejection of tutelage, of dependence on foreign political and economic support, now portrayed as features of Russian policy during the Yel’tsin era. Russia today, by contrast, insists on its right to restrict the impact of international law, of global economic bodies, and of world public opinion on Russia’s domestic policies, and will no longer be bound and constrained by Western critiques, opinions, or norms. Indeed in recent months the Russian leadership has made it clear that it will no longer consider itself bound by treaties or other obligations that it views as infringing its national interests.

In the economic sphere, the new doctrine also provides justification for state domination or control of vital sectors of the national economy: strategic communications, including the print media and broadcast television, energy and pipelines, the national electricity grid, railroads and highways, and the financial system. The dismantling of Yukos and the piecemeal resale of its assets to Russian state companies, the use of alleged environmental violations or tax evasion to force revisions of energy production agreements with Western energy companies or to compel them to turn over assets to Russian state companies, and the introduction of sharp price increases for energy supplied to neighboring post-Soviet states, often in the context of political conflicts, all reflect a new and more assertive conception of sovereignty.

## THE RUSSIAN-GEORGIAN CRISIS

The current crisis in Russian-Georgian relations is a dramatic manifestation of these intersecting trends, an example of how the combination of insecurity and assertiveness has been reflected in Russian policy in a key region. The crisis played out against a longer background of conflict: over Russian support for the separatist regions of Abkhazia and Southern Ossetia, over the continuing presence of Russian bases on Georgian territory, and over Russian “peacekeeping” operations, which are viewed by the Georgian government as obstacles to resolution of the conflicts.

But it was Georgia’s Rose Revolution of 2003, and the embrace of the new government by Western countries, which played a major role in the more recent escalation of tensions. The orientation of the new Georgian

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<sup>21</sup>These views were echoed by prominent representatives of the Russian Orthodox church at the 10th World Congress of the Russian People held in Moscow April 4–6, 2006. Metropolitan Kirill, among others, criticized Western definitions of democratic values, defended Russia’s specific vision of democracy and human rights, and questioned the idea that the separation of powers and a multiparty system were an integral part of common human values (*Gazeta*, April 5, 2006, as published in *Johnson’s Russia List*, April 5, 2006; see also Torbakov, 2006).

government toward integration in Euro-Atlantic structures (the European Union and NATO), its efforts to distance itself from Moscow-centered economic and security organizations, and the campaign to substitute an international presence for Russian peacekeeping forces were perceived in Moscow as a humiliating affront. Moreover, at a time when Russia was widely viewed in the West as increasingly undemocratic and corrupt, Georgia was being hailed as an example of a serious commitment to democratization and market reforms.<sup>22</sup> The 2006 Freedom House report (Freedom House, 2006) ranked Georgia above Russia in seven of eight indicators of political rights and civil liberties, while Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index ranked Georgia as less corrupt than Russia (Transparency, 2006).<sup>23</sup>

For all these reasons, Georgia came to be perceived as a "heretical model" in Russian elite circles, posing the danger of further contagion in the region and a threat to Russian political and military preeminence. It precipitated a major campaign to delegitimize President Saakashvili and his government in the eyes of the Russian public as well as the West. Official speeches and media portrayed him as authoritarian, anti-democratic, militaristic, reckless, and unstatesmanlike, and even compared him to Hitler and Beria. Russian sources went to great lengths to exaggerate the military buildup under way in Georgia, treating it as a prelude to the use of force against the separatist regimes in Abkhazia and Southern Ossetia and threatening to come to the aid of compatriots there should they be attacked. These charges sought to divert attention from Russia's growing support for these separatist regimes and to deflect Western pressure on Russia to help resolve the conflicts by treating the Georgian government as the real threat to stability in the region.

But the campaign went beyond just an effort to delegitimize the "Rose Revolution." It involved a larger effort to weaken and undermine the Saakashvili government and to promote regime change through the application of economic pressure intended to weaken his domestic political support. The first steps in the spring of 2006 banned the import of Georgian wine and then of mineral water, two of Georgia's leading exports to Russia for decades, on the ground that they failed to meet Russia's health standards (Parsons, 2006; "Russia Bans," 2006). In October, in retaliation for the arrest of four Russian officers accused of spying but promptly returned to

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<sup>22</sup>The Georgian government has cited a September 2006 World Bank and International Finance Corporation report that called Georgia the world's fastest reformer as proof that its reform policies are attracting investors and improving the business climate. The report ranked Georgia 37th out of 175 countries surveyed for ease of doing business, a 75-place improvement compared with the year before ([www.doingbusiness.org/documents/Press\\_Releases\\_07/DB\\_Globalpressrelease.pdf](http://www.doingbusiness.org/documents/Press_Releases_07/DB_Globalpressrelease.pdf)).

<sup>23</sup>Georgia was also selected by the U.S. government for one of its Millennium Challenge grants, an aid program aimed at rewarding countries seeking to improve governance, carry out sound economic policies, and invest in health and education; see [www.mcc.gov/countries/georgia/index.php](http://www.mcc.gov/countries/georgia/index.php).

Moscow, the Russian government introduced broader economic sanctions, ostensibly to stop illegal money flows from Russia to Georgia, suspending all transportation and postal services links to and from Georgia, and launching new background and visa checks of businessmen and workers of ethnic Georgian origin residing in Russia. And in November Russia's Gazprom announced it would double the prices it charged Georgia for gas.

One of the more odious features of these measures was the roundup and deportation of ethnic Georgians allegedly illegally residing in Russia, which rapidly escalated into a campaign against any and all Georgians in a number of Russian cities. The campaign played into the anti-immigration sentiments already widespread in the Russian population, in this case diverting hostility from Muslim Caucasians to a group not typically targeted. When the awkward intersection of the nationalist rallying cry and state policy for Georgia resulted in widespread attacks on Georgians and their property, President Putin publicly emphasized his "great respect" toward the Georgian people and asserted that "ethnically motivated" law enforcement actions were "inadmissible" (*Vremya novostey*, October 26, 2006). However, the series of punitive measures against Georgia stirred up nationalist and patriotic movements that could claim that they were merely seeking to implement the orders of the president. If the government had previously encouraged xenophobia through its inaction, it was now actively stirring it up.

A more assertive Russian policy toward Georgia was also reflected in its use of energy supplies as a political tool. While Russian spokesmen have insisted that increases in the price of energy charged to foreign customers reflect purely commercial considerations, in the case of Georgia the decision of Gazprom to double the price charged for exports of gas to Georgia in November 2006 coincided with the use of all these other forms of economic pressure aimed at demonstrating the frailty of Georgia's statehood and its dependence on Russian benevolence.

Finally, in recent months the Russian government has given increasingly overt support to the unrecognized separatist regimes in Abkhazia and Southern Ossetia, using the threat of possible recognition to dissuade the Georgian government from pursuing NATO membership.<sup>24</sup> At the end of 2006 the Russian State Duma expressed its support for the aspirations of the unrecognized republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia to independent statehood, but until recently the government itself had refrained from taking such a stance (*RFE/RL Newslines*, December 7, 2006). On February 6, 2007, however, Russia's ambassador in Tbilisi, Vyacheslav Kovalenko, publicly called on Georgia to adopt a status of neutrality, implying that Georgia might definitively lose Abkhazia and South Ossetia unless it desisted from its efforts to join NATO. On February 28, the Russian Minister

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<sup>24</sup>The threat was also an effort to dissuade Western governments from supporting the Ahtisaari plan for EU-supervised independence for Kosovo by trying to create a linkage between the two situations.

of Foreign Affairs, Sergey Lavrov, declared that the prospect of Georgia and Ukraine joining NATO "is unacceptable to Russia" (INTERFAX, February 6, 2007, as in *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, March 15, 2007). And in a March 21 speech to the Russian Duma, Lavrov for the first time referred to Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Transnistria as "republics," soon after his Ministry had begun referring to those enclaves' leaders as "presidents" in its official documents (*Eurasia Daily Monitor*, March 23, 2007).

The relentless campaign by the Russian leadership against its small and relatively weak neighboring state, like its campaign against a weak and fragmented opposition in Russia itself, betrays the same combination of insecurity and assertiveness—*anxiety that opposition is highly contagious and potentially threatening to Russian interests and confidence that growing Russian economic power and political influence can and should be mobilized to preserve and indeed expand Russia's dominant role in the post-Soviet space. It also reflects an effort to revive the "image of the enemy" in both domestic and foreign affairs as a way to consolidate internal political support and forestall elite fragmentation during a major struggle over succession. Under these conditions the present Russian government is likely to continue to reject Western criticism of its increasingly repressive domestic policies as unwelcome interference in its domestic affairs, while pursuing an increasingly confrontational foreign policy that seeks short-term gains in domestic public opinion at the expense of more constructive and cooperative long-term relations with its neighbors or with the West.*

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