



## Russia



Last update:	27 March 2009
Author:	Marianna Tsirelson (Co-author)
Population:	140,041,247 (July 2009 est.)
Prime minister:	Vladimir Putin (since May 2008)
President:	Dmitriy Medvedev (since May 2008)
Governemental type:	Federation
Ruling coalition:	One ruling party – United Russia
Last election:	Presidential March 2, 2008
Next election:	Parliamantary December 2011
Sister parties:	Yabloko Youth Union

After the appointment of Dmitry Medvedev as the President of Russia in March 2008, the country's former President Vladimir Putin stepped down and became Prime Minister as he was not allowed to have a third presidential term. The West became aware that the once so strong presidential system would more or less fade away. Now the power would be handed over to the Prime Minister and the presidential role would become less important. Until a certain point analysts were right, since Medvedev's inauguration the media is mostly focused on Putin, inside Russia as well as internationally.

### INTRODUCTION

Different political decisions and developments have taken place since Medvedev became President of Russia in 2008. All these developments have an effect on the current international image of the country. In August 2008, the country for a brief period went to war with Georgia, over Georgia's breakaway region South Ossetia. A severe, hardly expected, economic crisis started in Russia in the final months of 2008, resulting in several massive demonstrations across the entire country. A controversial constitution change was adopted in December 2008, abolishing presidential term limits and extending them by two years.

Furthermore, in the new year history repeated itself and on the 1st of January 2009 Russia cut-off gas supply to Ukraine, which made several European countries face difficulties and even some European states to experience a complete gas-crisis due to a lack of gas supply. Russia's image in the international scene worsened even further when on 19 January 2009 in of broad daylight two journalists were shot on the streets of Moscow, critics arguing that the order came from the Kremlin. While the West was deeply shocked by these incidents, politics in the country continues. As Russia enters its first economic recession in a decade, Putin's capability to ease social unrest is seriously put to the test.

### ELECTIONS AND POLITICAL SITUATION

After the break up of the Soviet Union the Russian Federation gained independence on 24 August 1991. The country is a federal democratic republic with a strong presidential system. The people elect the president for a four-year term. Former president Vladimir Putin, who served as president from 2000–2008, was succeeded by Dmitri Medvedev, his appointed successor. The Federal Assembly has two chambers: The State Duma (lower house) has 450 members, elected for a four year term, 225 members elected in single-seat constituencies and 225 members



by proportional representation. The Federation Council (upper house) has 178 members, two delegates for each region.

#### Current political landscape

As of August 2008 Russia finds itself in political unrest. In addition, the economic crisis has hit the country much harder than expected. This has resulted in social unrest and dissatisfaction with the government throughout the country in late December 2008. After the first demonstrations broke out in December 2008, people are continuing to raise their voices against –what they perceive to be– unsatisfactory plans of the government to combat price inflation and the growing unemployment. This despite the high ratings of both the Prime Minister and the President and the mainly positive media coverage. According to a survey released in early February 2009 41% of the Russian citizens believe that the government is not succeeding in combatting price inflation, given the fact that incomes declined enormously as the Russian rouble faced rapid devaluation and a high inflation, while the number of unemployed has grown by 1.1 million since September 2008. Merely 10% of the polled had no complaints against the government. The participants of the different demonstrations in December 2008 and January 2009 varied from democrats and communists, to people used to serve in the military and even neo-fascists. Also, in the same period the so-called “March of the disagreeing” was held under the supervision of international chess champion and opposition leader Gary Kasparov.

In the meantime, in the Kremlin –what one could call– political uncertainties are going on. It appears that President Medvedev is creating some different views on certain aspects in Russian politics, notably concerning Putin’s economic policies.. In early February 2009, he surprised critics when he openly –yet mildly– for the first time since he was inaugurated criticised the government for its mismanagement of the economic crisis. Apparently, Medvedev is trying to slightly distance himself from Putin’s rigid and more or less autocratic rule. For instance, starting 2009 he ordered changes to a bill that would have made it easier to prosecute critics for treason. Also he met with an editor of an opposition news paper. It appears besides, Medvedev is creating his own circle of people. Observers say these might be the first signs that the President is trying to step out off the shadow of Putin. Nevertheless –as expected– Putin continues to be the most influential person in Russia, and the two continue to closely cooperate as advisors of Medvedev already assured his loyalty to the PM.

This loyalty proved itself by a legislative change that occurred in the end of December 2008, namely the amendment of the Russian constitution– the first actual change to Russia’s post-Soviet constitution since it was adopted in 1993. Allegedly, proposed by Medvedev, but critics argued that it was Putin’s plan. The constitutional amendment concerned the extension of the presidential term from four to six years, which was proposed by Medvedev on 5 November 2008. Also the term of the Duma members has been extended from four to five years and the parliament’s oversight of the government has been increased. Both politicians claimed the modification was essential to strengthen the Russian political system. Although the democratic opposition disputed the amendment by arguing Parliament is legally required to give the regions a year before ratifying any change to the constitution, complaints were ignored by Medvedev as he officially signed it on 30 December 2008. The speed with which the Kremlin rushed the amendment through both houses of Parliament and the regional legislatures– the procedure took less than 50 days– widely produced assumptions that Putin is planning to make his return as the President as soon as possible –perhaps already in 2009. So far, no specific initiatives have come from Putin to return to presidency. During a news conference in late December 2008 he even announced not to abandon the country in its economic crisis, considering the fact that in Russia officially the PM is responsible for the management of the economy.

#### Gas dispute Ukraine 2009

On the 1st of January 2009, Russia created a crisis situation in Europe amid a cold winter by cutting off gas supply to Ukraine. On 31 December 2008, it was already clear that Russia and Ukraine could not agree on gas prices. Russian energy giant Gazprom demanded that Ukraine paid a late fee of 1 bln and accepted a global market price of 8 per thousand cubic meters of gas for 2009. Ukraine did not agree with the new prices and gas through the main export pipeline going to Europe was cut-off. According to Gazprom the gas supply was cut in response to systematic Ukrainian “theft” of Russian gas destined for European markets –with about 80 percent of Russian export gas flowing through the pipelines of Ukraine. Although Head of Gazprom Aleksey Miller assured the European countries they would not experience any difficulties, soon countries such as Austria, Hungary and Poland were facing deficiency in their supplies, while countries as Bulgaria, Croatia, Romania and Serbia experienced a complete halt of gas supplies.



For the EU it was unacceptable that its gas supply came under pressure due to a quarrel between the two Eastern European countries. European diplomats, among whom President of the European Commission José Manuel Barroso, urged for an immediate resumption of gas flows. EU rotating Czech presidency even warned that diplomatic ties with the two countries could be strained if the dispute was not resolved immediately. Eventually on 19 January 2008, the two sides managed to agree on gas prices, leaving Ukraine to pay the European gas prices with a 20% discount, on the condition that it would provide its European customers with equal prices. From 2010 Ukraine would pay the full European price. Subsequently, gas shipments to and from Ukraine were resumed. A few days prior to this agreement, the two countries signed an agreement with the EU regarding a control mechanism that would monitor the supply and transfer of Russian gas through Ukraine, with the aim to prevent a similar dispute in the future.

#### The five-day August war

On 7 August 2008, Georgian troops attacked South Ossetia's capital Tskhinvali. The breakaway region is officially part of its territory, but in fact autonomous and mainly under Russian influence. Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili argued that Russian troops from the Northern Caucasus entered his country through the Roki tunnel. Russia responded with a massive military action, and in five days the Russian troops – which were far more expansive compared to the small Georgian army – bombed Georgian towns and occupied parts of Georgia's territory. Russian President accused Saakashvili of genocide of South Ossetia's population – which included a great number of ethnic Russians – and his popularity among Russian citizens increased enormously. The war claimed many lives of innocent people from both sides.

The West feared that Russia was trying to use this occasion to overthrow pro-Western President Saakashvili, while Georgia was being questioned as a reliable Western partner, hoping to become a NATO member in the near future. Both the EU and NATO called the Russian attack “disproportional”. Amid the fighting the then French EU Presidency initiated an agreement to end the war. Despite the fact that both parties agreed to the cease-fire “six-point-plan” Russia maintained its troops in the region and even started to set up “road checkpoints”. Accusations started to go back and forth; Russia accused Georgia of invading a peaceful town (i.e: Tskhinvali) thus breaking the cease-fire agreement signed in 1994, while Georgia called Russia's action an 'act of aggression'. A few weeks after the war South Ossetia and Abkhazia were recognised as independent states by Russia –claiming it was needed for security reasons. Next to some totalitarian states like Venezuela, no other country followed Russia's move. With this action Western critics claimed Russia was trying to regain its Soviet-era power.

On 15 September different international security structures –including the EU, the UN, the OSCE and the U.S. and Georgian and Russian officials– started the so-called 'Geneva talks'. During these talks the parties try to reach agreements concerning the humanitarian and security situation in the conflicted areas. After several unsuccessful talks, agreements were made on 17 February 2009 on the establishment of joint incident prevention and response mechanisms. This mechanism allows for regular meetings between the international security monitors and local security officials in the areas of tension. It is still to be analysed how and if these proposals will be implemented by the conflicting parties. Besides that, observers are concerned about Russia's military build-up in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, which could flare up new tensions in the already unstable Caucasus.

#### Political environment during the Putin-éra

During the Putin-éra, pressure on democracy and human rights in Russia has been increasing. Besides its increased wealth and political status in the world, Russia has also shown an increased level of human rights violations, repression of opposition parties and organisations, and an increased pressure on independent media. This view is widely supported by human rights organizations as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch. Opposition parties experience increasing difficulties in finding ways to get out their message: the media is increasingly dominated by the state and opposition parties and organisations have difficulties to organise protests and rallies. These problems are worsened by the new election law, which is in use since 2007. Important changes to the previous law include stipulations that voters are no longer allowed to cast their ballots against all candidates, and the increase of the election threshold for political parties from 5% to 7% of the vote to win seats in parliament. Another difficulty for smaller political parties is the legal minimum number of 50,000 members a party should have to compete in the elections. In July 2007, the Russian Communist Workers Party – Revolutionary Party of Communists challenged this law in court on the ground that the legislation illegally limits a citizen to participate in political life. However, the Constitutional Court ruled in favour of the legislation. The immense personal power that



is wielded by the president can also be seen in the 2008 presidential elections, in which Dmitry Medvedev, hailed by Putin as his favourite candidate, won an easy victory in the polls. He competed in the elections with the promise not to change the line of policy Putin has set out, and to appoint Putin as his prime minister.

#### Presidential elections 2 March 2008

Presidential elections took place in Russia on 2 March 2008. In the elections, four candidates competed. Outgoing president Vladimir Putin, who enjoys big popularity and high approval rates in Russia, had already served for 2 consecutive terms, and was by law prohibited from running in the elections. He would, however, firmly influence the elections by on 10 December 2007 endorsing Dmitry Medvedev as his favourite candidate, and 7 days later announcing his intention to serve as prime minister under his former protégé, before the official campaign had even started.

#### Candidates

Four candidates competed in the elections. Although several opposition parties and blocks had also announced their intention to put forward presidential candidates, eventually they were all blocked from participating in the elections. Boris Nemtsov, nominated by the Union of Rightist Forces (SPS) could not enter the ballot because the SPS is no longer represented in parliament. Yabloko, which also failed to gain representation during the December 2007 elections, did not officially nominate anyone, but announced to support the candidacy of Soviet-era dissident Bukovsky, who was refused participation in the presidential ballot due to official residency requirements, as he has lived abroad for many years. Garry Kasparov, leading the opposition umbrella movement 'Other Russia', announced on 13 December that he would not run in the elections, alleging the Russian authorities were frustrating his efforts to be registered as a candidate.

The final four candidates, which were announced on 27 January, all covertly supported the Kremlin. These were deputy prime minister and Putin's personal choice Dmitry Medvedev, supported by United Russia, A Just Russia, the Agrarian Party and Civil Force; Communist Party leader Gennady Zyuganov, nationalist Liberal Democratic Party leader Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, and the relatively unknown Democratic Party leader Andrei Bogdanov, who was alleged to be running as a puppet candidate of the Kremlin, running as an 'opposition candidate' in order to make the elections appear more 'free and fair'. In all forecasts, Bogdanov consistently polled below 1 percent of the votes.

#### Election campaign

The election campaign officially kicked off on 2 February, one month before the actual presidential elections. However, as the Central Election Campaign had on 21 January already approved the candidature of Medvedev, Zyuganov and Zhirinovskiy, 'unofficial' campaigning started earlier. During the campaign period, all candidates were given 42 hours of air time to spread their message, of which half was allocated for live debates. However, the refusal of Dmitry Medvedev, widely held to win the elections, to participate in the televised debates between the candidates, greatly diminished the importance of these events, which led to some frustration with the other candidates. In their further coverage, all the television stations but one allocated considerably more air time to Medvedev than to any of the other candidates, both in his role as a presidential candidate as well as in his functions of deputy prime minister and chair of the board of directors of Russia's energy giant Gazprom. On average, on the bigger channels Medvedev got around 30–40 percent of airtime, whereas the other candidates had to do with figures ranging from 0.1 to 6.8 percent. Furthermore, a considerable amount of airtime (about 50 percent) was allocated to Vladimir Putin, in which he frequently endorsed Medvedev as his preferred candidate. Seeing the status Putin enjoys in Russia, his announcement to run as prime minister under Medvedev was also very important in the election campaign.

#### Outcome of the elections:

Dmitry Medvedev	70.2%
Gennady Zyuganov	18.15%
Vladimir Zhirinovskiy	9.69%
Andrei Bogdanov	1.27%

Voter turnout: 69 percent



Immediately after the first preliminary results were known, Vladimir Putin congratulated Dmitry Medvedev on his election. Speaking to the press at a concert on Red Square on election night, Medvedev told the public that his policies will be a "direct continuation" of current president Vladimir Putin's. He furthermore said that he would "work jointly with Putin", who has become prime minister and in this function continues to wield influence on Russian politics.

#### International election monitors

On 6 February 2008, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) decided not to monitor the Russian presidential elections of 2 March as, according to the OSCE, the Kremlin continued to impose too many restrictions to make any monitoring of the vote meaningful. The OSCE had earlier also abstained from monitoring the 2 December 2007 parliamentary vote. The decision was made after days of negotiating between the OSCE and Russia, after the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) had threatened already on 30 January not to monitor the elections unless Moscow eased restrictions on the number of monitors the organisation could send, and the duration of their stay. The Russian Central Election Commission had earlier decided to restrict the ODIHR mission to 70 short-term observers, who could only enter the country 3 days before the elections. After the negotiations, the Kremlin invited 75 OSCE/ODIHR observers from 20 February onward, presenting this as a big concession. The OSCE, however, thought otherwise, and decided to cancel the mission. According to Curtis Budden, spokesman for ODIHR, Moscow's 'final offer' did not give monitors the time they need to monitor the full election process. Speaking on 6 February, Budden furthermore stated that "we still don't have any observers on the ground and they are saying that we can come three weeks after the campaign starts. (...) So, there are tremendous limitations being placed on us." According to the OSCE, the conditions imposed by Russia violate the country's own commitments as a member of the organization. Moscow disputes this, accusing the OSCE and ODIHR of "playing political games." According to director of the Russian foreign ministry's European Cooperation department Sergei Ryabkov, also speaking on 6 February, "For us it is obvious that our election practice is in full compliance with all international norms, including those laid down by the OSCE and the norms that have been or are being worked out in the Council of Europe, where the Russian Federation, by the way, insists that a unified legal convention be adopted that defines standards for international election monitoring. We are in the forefront of that effort and we hope ODIHR will recognize this fact." Meanwhile, Budden pointed out that Russia's plan, which calls for the reports created by the election observation missions to first be approved by the permanent council, which works on a consensus basis, in fact would mean that any country that would not like criticism of their elections could veto the reports.

A delegation of 25 members of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) arrived in Russia on 27 February to monitor the elections. However, after head of the delegation Andreas Gross said in an interview on 28 February that the elections would be voting without real choice and expressed his disappointment with the refusal of Medvedev to take part in televised debates, predicting that the 2 March elections would be neither free nor fair, chief of Russia's Central Election Commission (CEC) Vladimir Churov immediately responded with a warning to the PACE observers that "any comments made ahead of the country's presidential elections would be considered as interference in Russia's internal policies." According to Churov, missions should limit themselves to "correct election monitoring, excluding interference in a country's domestic affairs."

The PACE monitors were critical of the elections, saying that 'although the results reflected the will of the people, the election was not entirely democratic'. According to Andreas Gross, "This election repeats most of the flaws revealed during the parliamentary election in December 2007. none of the concerns of the pre-election mission were dealt with ahead of the 2 March vote. Candidate registration concerns couldn't have been accommodated, putting into question the degree of how free the election was." As a specific example, Gross mentioned that "Equal access of the candidates to the media and the public sphere in general has not improved, putting into question the fairness of the election."

Local election monitors reported they were hindered at some polling stations. Poll observers also reported several cases of workers being forced to vote in order to boost voter turnout. Election monitors from other organizations in which Russia plays a central role, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), were also present at the elections. They were, however, widely expected to assess the elections positively already beforehand.

Parliamentary election 2 December 2007



During his presidency, Russian president Vladimir Putin passed a decree that all 450 seats in the Duma were from then on to be elected through a proportional electoral system, with a 7% election threshold. This was a departure from the former election regulations, which stipulated the Duma to be elected through a mixed electoral system, in which half of the seats were elected through proportional representation with an election threshold of 5%, and half through single member districts. Furthermore, parties were from now on legally required to have a minimum of 50,000 members in order to be able to register for elections. The new election regulations were first valid during the 2 December 2007 parliamentary elections. These changes have had a strong impact on the 2007 Duma election, as the number of parties that gained representation in the Russian parliament has lessened due to the heightened election threshold, and there is no longer an option for independent candidates to run in the elections.

#### Contesters

At the beginning of 2006 there were 35 political parties in Russia. However, the new election law requires that each political party should have minimum 50,000 members by 01.01.2006 and more than 45 regional branches with a minimum membership of 500 each. Based on these requirements only 11 of the 15 parties that initially registered for the ballot received confirmation that they could participate in the elections of 2007.

Of these 11 parties, by far the most important was United Russia, Russia's largest party that had since its foundation been associated with president Vladimir Putin. Although these ties were never publicly admitted by Putin or the party, in the run-up to the parliamentary elections, on 4 October 2007 Putin announced that he would lead United Russia's candidate list. This move was commonly interpreted as a way for Putin to remain influential in Russian politics as soon as his presidency would end in May 2008. By now, it has become clear that he indeed will probably become prime minister under his personal favourite successor Dmitry Medvedev.

Of the parties competing, all the genuine opposition parties were unlikely to pass the 7% election threshold.

#### Campaign

According to election observers, the media was heavily biased in favour of the pro-Kremlin party United Russia, led by president Vladimir Putin. In addition, opposition parties included in the elections were obstructed from holding campaign rallies in the open. During a protest against Putin on 25 November, Boris Nemtsov, former leader of the Union of Rightist forces, was briefly detained. Garry Kasparov, the leader of the opposition movement 'Another Russia' was also detained, as well as several activists. His movement was, however, barred from the elections as it did not meet the requirements as stated in the election law. Council of Europe secretary-general Terry Davis responded with concern to the crackdown on protesters by the Russian authorities, noting that Russia is a signatory of the European Convention on Human Rights guaranteeing freedom of assembly, and adding that "these are preconditions for a real democracy." Chief of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) mission Luc van den Brande called the election campaign not fair, and cited the "unprecedented" example of a president still in office running in parliamentary elections. According to Van den Brande, president Putin had exerted an "overwhelming" influence on the campaign.

Meanwhile, the OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) decided not to send an election mission after disagreement with the Russian authorities over the number of observers and the time frame in which they would operate. On 31 October, Russia invited some 70 observers from the OSCE to monitor the Duma ballot on 2 December. During the previous elections in 2003, the OSCE sent 450 observers. Russia said it reserves the right to decide on the scope and duration of all ODIHR monitoring missions on its territory. However, when entry visas for the observers were still not issued by 15 November, the ODIHR decided to abstain from monitoring the elections. ODIHR director Christian Strohal said to regret this conclusion, but that due to the delays and restrictions, ODIHR was unable to deliver its mandate: "The ODIHR therefore concludes that the authorities of the Russian Federation remain unwilling to receive ODIHR observers in a timely and co-operative manner and co-operate fully with them."

#### Elections

According to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) these elections were neither free nor fair and failed to meet many OSCE and Council of Europe commitments and standards for democratic elections. In its assessment PACE stated "in general, the elections were well organised and observers noticed significant technical improvements. However, they took place in an atmosphere which seriously limited political competition and with frequent abuse of administrative resources, media coverage strongly in favour of the ruling party, and an election code whose cumulative effect hindered political pluralism. There was not a level political playing field in Russia in



2007”.

The assessment also noted that “the new election law creates a pure proportional list system in which only established political parties can seek election, eliminating the possibility for local and independent candidates to run for office”. The registration procedure was complicated and the election code contained significant financial disincentives for smaller parties to participate. Moreover, the seven percent threshold and the ban on forming electoral blocs had a negative influence on the development of new political parties and a more pluralistic representation.

Furthermore, PACE stated that there were persistent reports of harassment of opposition candidates, detentions and confiscation of materials. Since United Russia chose not to participate in political debates, voters were denied an open campaign

On election day, the voting took place in a mostly calm and friendly atmosphere. However, it was noted by observers that voters who were not registered and without absentee certificates were allowed to vote. Voting arrangements did not provide adequate privacy. The seals on some ballot-boxes were inadequate. And some international observers faced obstructions to their work including, in isolated cases, refusal of access.

Results of the 2 December 2007 State Duma elections:

Party:	% of votes:	amount of seats: ( total450)
United Russia	64,1	315
Communist Party of the Russian Federation	11,6	57
Liberal- Democratic party	8,2	40
Fair Russia: Motherland, Pensioners, Life	7,8	38
Agrarian Party of Russia	2,3	-
Yabloko	1,6	-
Civil Force	1,1	-
Union of Rightist Forces	1,0	-
Patriots of Russia	0,9	-
Party of Social Justice	0,2	-
Democratic Party of Russia	0,1	-

Voter turnout: 63.7%

#### Politics and Gender

After the collapse of communism many women became involved in small businesses. Women make up more than 54 percent of the Russian population, and the number of those holding fulltime jobs is about 45 percent. However, among the so-called oligarchs, the leaders of Russia's largest companies, there is not a single woman. Likewise, men still heavily dominate the political scene.

Women are generally better represented in local government in the Russian Federation, and some subject councils have a majority of women members. Observers reported that women were deeply involved in the election administration, with many holding senior positions such as the chairpersonship of election commissions.

A presidential decree on 30 June 1996, recommended that the presidential administration introduce a minimum quota for women, as well as create a system of female cadre training. The initiative was not acted upon. This was not only because male officials resisted it, but also because the idea of quotas for women--as well as special parties for females--had little appeal for women themselves.

There are two reasons for the unpopularity of a women's political movement. One is that public consciousness still associates women in politics with failed personal lives. The other is that women are inclined to believe that a



"female party" would not gain any power. The party "Women of Russia," which appeared in the 1993 Duma, failed to clear the 5 percent barrier in subsequent elections. Among women's public associations, the most influential to date is the Union of Soldiers' Mothers. It has achieved a high political profile in addressing problems related to the army and its operations in Chechnya.

## IMPORTANT POLITICAL ISSUES

Move towards authoritarianism?

In general, Putin's domestic policy is characterised by his search for law and order and his aimed return to "basic values". In practice this means state control over information exchange, restriction of the power of the governors and the enforcement of the Federal Security Agency (FSB – successor KGB). Furthermore, Putin has gradually started to replace or "tame" members of the former Kremlin elite and Kremlin-connected oligarchs.

Western and Russian civil rights campaigners accuse Putin of restricting democracy by abolishing the election of provincial governors, pursuing a legal vendetta against the YUKOS oil company and tightening the Kremlin's grip on the media.

In reaction to the dramatic event in Beslan and the fear for more terrorist attacks, President Putin decided to ban the gubernatorial elections. In December 2004, the State Duma approved President Vladimir Putin's plans. As a consequence the president is to nominate governors. Many observers see this development as another move towards an authoritarian regime. However, others – among them Russian social democrats – support this move, claiming the elections cost money and bring power only in the hands of criminal oligarchs. On 6 February 2005 the last direct election of regional governor was held in Okrug. In reaction to the final abolishment of direct elections of regional governor, small protests took place. In Moscow a new youth movement named Marching Without Putin joined a rally with young members of Yabloko and representatives of the Union of Right Forces.

Early March 2007, the umbrella opposition organisation "Other Russia", led by former world champion chess Garri Kasparov (1963), organised the "March of Dissent" in respectively St. Petersburg. The goal of the marches was protesting against the Putin-regime in general, and the lack of democracy in Russia specifically. Around six thousand people protested peacefully in both cities. On 14 and 15 April 2007, "Other Russia" organised another two protests: one in Moscow (14 April), one in St. Petersburg (15 April). Both protests were quiet and attended by approximately 1000 people. However, police officials made brutally an end to the protest in St. Petersburg, arresting around 150 protesters, including opposition leader Kasparov. Kasparov was released the same day, after the police had questioned him. The way the police made an end to the protests, was heavily criticised afterwards. This made the Kremlin admit that they had "overreacted" somewhat in handling the protesters. They stated that they tried to ensure "law and order" in the streets of both cities.

The case against top businessman Mikhail Khodorkovsky from YUKOS, is seen as another sign that alternative politics are not appreciated. The company's record is dubious, but this can be said of most of Russia's largest businesses. Analysts say that the haunt on Mr. Khodorkovsky has also to do with his political activity. He was the first Russian businessman to openly support two liberal opposition parties – the Union of Right Forces and Yabloko. In fact, YUKOS shareholders sponsored various political parties, from the Communist Party to the pro-Kremlin United Russia.

Political rights and civil liberties have become so restricted in Russia that the Freedom House downgraded the country from "Partly Free" to "Not Free," in December 2004. The global survey, "Freedom in the World," shows that Russia was the only country to register a negative category change in 2004. According to the Freedom House "Russia's step backwards into the Not Free category is the culmination of a growing trend under President Vladimir Putin to concentrate political authority, harass and intimidate the media, and politicise the country's law-enforcement system." In their report of 2006, Freedom House maintained its verdict over Russia's press freedom: "Not Free".

On 6 July 2007, the Duma overwhelmingly adopted the new law on "anti-extremism". This is "to intensify the fight against extremism in Russia". The law increases police surveillance powers and broadens the definition of extremism. Critics of the Kremlin stated that the new law could also be used to intimidate the or ban the opposition. The National Bolshevik Party, one of the co-founders of the March of Dissent on 14 and 15 April 2007, was on 19



April banned by the Moscow City Court. All its activities were banned. More recent developments that raised criticism are the controversial legislation on nongovernmental organisations and the unresolved murder on Russia's most outspoken independent journalist, Anna Politkovskaya. More on the Politkovskaya-case, see below.

The above legal-measures, the actions against oppositional parties, the pressure on the press and the growing cult-status of President Putin are all together an combination with should be followed closely. The presidential elections of March 2008 should determine whether this process of growing authoritarianism will continue.

#### Social-economic developments

In the economic field, President Putin has pursued persistent economic reforms. Since 1999, Russian economy has recorded growth by an average of 6 percent annually (benefiting from high oil prices and a weak ruble), which revived business and investor confidence over Russia's prospects in its second decade of transition. Yet serious problems persist. Russia remains heavily dependent on exports of oil, gas, and timber, and its industrial base is in an increasingly desperate need of modernisation or replacement.

Other problems include the widespread corruption, lack of a strong legal system, capital flight, brain drain, and poverty. According to the Labour Minister Aleksandr Pochinok, 34 million Russians, about one quarter of the population, live below the poverty line. This means that they have a monthly income of less than 1,500 rubles (about 43 Euro). In addition, there is a huge gap between the rich and the poor and wealth is distributed disproportional over the regions.

Social problems include the negative demographic development (declining population number, high mortality rate and relatively low life expectancy) and the deteriorating public health. HIV/AIDS is becoming a huge problem in Russia with an estimated 940.000 infected people at the end of 2005, of which approximately two third is between 15 and 24 years old, and the number is steadily growing.

Tuberculosis also remains a serious threat to public health. The tuberculosis mortality index has risen significantly in the past years (since the beginning of the 1990s) and is the highest in Europe. On the other hand, there have been significant improvements in the education system (with the help of the World Bank) and in general there is a much more positive attitude towards education, which is increasingly viewed as a steppingstone to success in life.

The social benefits reforms caused an unprecedented wave of protest all over Russia, early 2005. The reforms abandoned privileges to pensioners, soldiers, and invalids. This means that the already weak economic position of these groups was further undermined. The federal government blamed the regions for not implementing the change properly. A vote of no confidence in the Duma initiated by the Communist Party did not pass, due to many abstentions.

#### Tragic incidents during the Putin-era

The past years major tragedies, which shook Russia and the outside world, occurred in Russia, indicating its still unstable society.

The tragic sinking of the Kursk in August 2000, was the first serious political setback for Putin, who chose to continue his vacation in Sochi and only after a week came back to Moscow. Meanwhile, the rescue attempts of the Russians had failed, a request for international assistance had come too late and all the 118 crewmembers had died. Surprisingly, the popularity of Putin seemed unharmed, while more events followed in this seemingly doomed month of August 2000, like the fire at the Ostankino television tower in Moscow and a bomb explosion in a Pushkin square underpass, killing 8 people.

Another drama took place in October 2002, when armed Chechen fighters held approximately 700 people hostage in a Moscow theatre. The hostage takers refused to negotiate with the government and demanded a complete withdrawal of Russian forces from Chechnya. After three days, on 26 October, the security forces made an end to the hostage drama by pumping anaesthetic gas into the ventilation system and storming the building. All hostage takers and 117 hostages died from the effects of the gas. Both from within Russia and from abroad harsh criticism was uttered blaming the deaths of the hostages on the lack of coordination between law enforcement officials and health-care professionals. Among the public, Putin's popularity rating remained extremely strong. At the end of the year 2002, field commander Shamil Basayev, a key figure among the Chechen separatists, claimed responsibility for



the hostage taking.

In September 2004 the world was shocked by another terrorist attack on Russian soil. This time Chechen rebels had stormed a school in Beslan in the Russian province of North Ossetia, taking more than 1,000 children, teachers and parents hostage. More than 320 people – half of them children – were killed in the siege. Also for this drama Chechen leader Shamil Basayev took responsibility. He stated to be planning more Beslan-style attacks in the future.

#### The conflict in Chechnya

A continuing problem is the conflict in Chechnya. The roots of the conflict between Russia and Chechnya over Chechen independence dates back to the time of the Czars 200 years ago. Under Communism, Chechnya was grouped together in a single republic with Ingushetia and experienced hard times, including deportation of many Chechens. When the Soviet Union fell apart, the Chechen Republic declared independence from the Russian Federation in 1991. However, the political situation was not stable and the economic situation began to worsen.

In 1994, Yeltsin's troops invaded Chechnya. They were able to occupy all urban areas, but unable to defeat the guerrillas in the mountainous north. In August 1996, the rebels re-took Grozny. Under the Khasavyurt Peace Accords, Russia withdrew from Chechnya and agreed to discuss its independence after five years. Subsequently, rebel military commander Aslan Maskhadov won the presidential elections. However, the political situation remained unstable with competing clans and a high criminality rate. Kidnapping and assassination were commonplace. In August 1999, rebel military commander Basayev invaded neighbouring Dagestan to establish an Islamic state. At the same time apartment bombings in Moscow and two other cities killed 300 people. The Kremlin blamed Chechen extremists. It sent troops to Dagestan and invaded Chechnya again.

Four years later, in 2003, the Russian government claimed that the armed conflict is over and that the situation is normalising. However, the political crisis there is still unsolved. Both on the side of the Russian military and on the Chechen side casualties are still reported. The reports on the numbers vary widely with civil movements such as Memorial and Mothers of Russia claiming the highest figures.

Human rights organisations like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch accuse the Russian army of severe violations of human rights. However, Putin tries to isolate Chechnya from the general foreign policy issues. He reacts very sharply and opposes the enduring criticism, claiming it to be an internal affair and relating the conflict to the war on terrorism. At the end of 2002, the OSCE failed to reach an agreement with Moscow on the terms for prolonging its mandate. Despite international pressure, the OSCE office in Chechnya was officially closed on 21 March 2003.

Meanwhile, the Kremlin has admitted the region is completely devastated by the ongoing battle and announced it is time for "reconstruction". An administration was installed, headed by Akhmed Kadyrov.

In March 2003, a referendum over a new draft constitution for Chechnya was held. Though Russia had announced it would not object to international organisations including OSCE monitoring the plebiscite, there were no official international observer teams. Both the OSCE and the PACE reporter Lord Frank Judd had previously noted it was too early for a referendum, given the continued presence of the Russian troops (80,000 Russian troops are present in the region). On the other hand, anti-Kremlin (former) Chechen President Aslan Maskhadov tried to convince the Chechens to boycott the referendum. However, 89.5 percent of the voters turned up to vote. Around 96 percent of them approved the new draft constitution and the draft laws on presidential and parliamentary elections. This result paved the way for a further implementation of a pro-Moscow administration (granting the region an autonomous status).

In the September 2003 elections, Akhmad Kadyrov, the de facto Chechen president installed three years earlier by Russia, officially became president. Human rights groups as well as several nations questioned the fairness of the elections. Eight months later in May 2004 Kadyrov was killed in a bombing by rebel leader Basayev. On 29 August 2004 another Kremlin-backed leader, Alu Alkhanov, was elected president of Chechnya with 73.5% of the vote. However, de facto the son of Akhmad Karymov, Ramzan, became the leader of Chechnya. Because of his age, a person needs to be 30 or older to become president, he first took office as prime minister. However, on 15 February 2007, after a series of conflicts with President Alkhanov, the President was replaced and Kadyrov took office as President. Since his installation (and also before), Kadyrov has tried to create himself a cult-status. For instance, on



17 April 2007 he ordered the creation of a presidential palace, worth 55 million euros. Kadyrov's leadership is characterised by an enormous concentration of power. Kadyrov is backed by Moscow and this gives him full authority to govern Chechnya according to his own plan. He even has his own "militia", the the Kadyrovtsy, which works and fights along the side of the Russian army. The Kadyrovtsy have control over great parts of Chechnya, which allows the Russian army to pull out of Chechnya.

#### Racism

According to several reports racism has increasingly become a problem in Russian society. Foreign coloured students and minorities, especially from the Caucasus and Central Asia, are stereotyped and subject of violent attacks. Analysts attribute this increased racism to the terrorist attacks and the enduring war in Chechnya, which makes that Muslims are more often approached with suspicion. The search for a scapegoat for daily problems related to poverty and the continuous influx of labour migrants from Central Asia and the Caucasus is an often mentioned explanation.

In a survey by the All-Russian Center for Public Opinion Studies (VTSIOM) published in August 2004, 61% of those polled approved of the "Russia for Russians" slogan, almost twice the 31% level recorded in 1998. According to a study by the Moscow-based Ekspertiza Foundation, an independent think tank, 60% of those surveyed wanted to limit the presence of people from the Caucasus in the country, while 51% wanted similar constraints on the Chinese and 42% wanted to limit the influence of Jews.

According to an analyst of the International Bureau for Human Rights there are over 50,000 skinheads in Russia. Russian skinheads are openly admiring and imitating German Nazi's. Therefore they are also called Russian neo-Nazi's. Russian neo-Nazi organisations generally define themselves as standing outside of the political process. The most prominent organisation is the Russian National Union led by Aleksandr Barkashov. In the political scene it is particularly the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia, lead by Vladimir Zhirinovskii, which can be associated with racist views. During the 2003 election campaign observers noted examples of "black PR" campaigning with a racist character.

On 3 September 2007, Russian human rights organisations published shocking new data on the extent of racist violence in Russia. It was reported that by 3 September 2007, already 38 people had been murdered in racist killings, and more than 300 people had been injured. The organisation stated that the victims mainly came from Central Asia and the Caucasus, but that also racists have begun targeting minorities like homosexuals.

On 22 February 2008, the Kyrgyz parliament passed a resolution calling on Russian lawmakers to address the increase in hate crimes in Russia. Kyrgyz president Kurmanbek Bakiev, in Moscow on 22 February to attend the informal CIS summit, also urged Russia to do more to curb the wave of racially motivated crimes. The resolution was passed by the parliament after ten Kyrgyz citizens has been murdered in the first two months of 2008 alone. Russian officials did not yet publicly comment on the killings. According to the Kyrgyz interior ministry, so far eleven people have been detained in Moscow in connection with the killings of two Kyrgyz. Human rights groups, however, criticize Russian prosecutors for filing many racially motivated attacks as "hooliganism", a charge which carries lighter sentences than hate crimes. It therefore remains to be seen how dedicated the Russian authorities in fact are to stem the surge of racism in the country.

#### Politically motivated murders

On 19 February 2009, the three men accused for the murder of the prominent Russian journalist Anna Politkovskaya were acquitted by the jury at a Moscow court after a four-month trial. Any hope that the one who ordered the murder would be prosecuted, faded away among supporters of Politovskaya. Critics have always argued that the order came from the Kremlin. The acquittal of the three accused –as was stated by Human Rights Watch– proves that the country can get away with political murder. While the three accused have been found not guilty, the director of the independent Russian journal Novaya Gazeta, for which Politovskaya was working, said in February 2009 that the journal has started its own research on the murder. "While they have been acquitted, their guilt has just not been proved yet", as was stated by Novaya Gazeta's director. According to him media freedom exists in the country, but once journalists get too close to facts regarding the Kremlin, they face serious punishments.

The murder of Anna Politovskaya happened on 7 October 2006 as she stepped into the elevator of her apartment in Moscow. She was known for her criticism of President Putin and the way Russia handled the war in Chechnya. She



wrote several books about these issues, which are nowadays very well-known in- and outside Russia. Observers state that the Politkovskaya-murder was in line with the growing feeling of fear and the increasing level of repression of state-critics. Edward Lukas, editor for "The Economist" argued that "Politkovskaya's killing was part of a larger pattern of growing repression that started almost immediately after the Soviet collapse and picked up pace under Putin."

The verdict came a month after the murder of a human rights lawyer and a 25-year-old reporter in broad day-light in the centre of Moscow. On 19 January 2009, prominent human rights lawyer Stanislav Markelov was shot not far from the Kremlin, as well as the journalist Anastasia Baburova who was working for Novaya Gazeta and was on the day of the murder walking together with Markelov. The West was shocked by this double murder and the silence that followed within the Kremlin raised questions among critics. This situation once again increased pessimism on the human rights situation that involves political violence. On top of that, lawyers who have been fighting for human rights in Russia raised fears that this murder will not be the last in the country.

Stanislav Markelov was famous for his defence in several cases in which members of Russia's security services were accused of violating human rights in Chechnya. The most famous case was that of an 18-year-old Chechen girl named Elza Kungaeva, who was raped and murdered during an interrogation by the Russian Army Colonel Yuri Budanov in late March 2000. Three of Budanov's assistants were convicted of this crime, but charges against them were dropped later. Markelov represented the victim's family. The Budanov case received widespread coverage, both in Russia and abroad. Mainly thanks to this publicity, the UN Human Rights' Commission passed a resolution in April 2000 calling on Russia to create a national commission to investigate such crimes.

On 21 November 2007 Alexandr Litvinenko, another well-known critic of the Russian authorities, died after having been poisoned by the radioactive substance Polonium-210. Litvinenko, who had in the past worked for the Russian security service, left the FSB in the late '90s. He spent 9 months in prison after revealing a plot by the FSB to kill oligarch Boris Berezovsky. In 2000 he fled to Great Britain, where he was granted political asylum. From his new country of residence, he remained a staunch critic of the FSB. In 'Blowing up Russia: Terror from Within' he even went so far as to accuse the FSB of having deliberately planned bomb attacks on Moscow flats in order to be able to accuse the Chechens. Litvinenko furthermore was actively conducting an investigation into the Kremlin's campaign against the management of Yukos, most noticeable the imprisonment of former oligarch Khodorkovsky. Immediately after the death of Anna Politkovskaya, Litvinenko announced that he would also start an investigation into her case.

On 1 November, Alexandr Litvinenko fell ill after meeting with 2 former FSB agents in the Millennium Hotel in London. Three days later he was taken in the hospital as his health continued to deteriorate. Investigations pointed out that he had been poisoned with the radioactive substance Polonium-210. On 21 November, Litvinenko died from this poisoning. Shortly before he died he had written a statement declaring that he was convinced of the Russian authorities' involvement in this case. The British investigation team would later point out Mr. Lugovoi as the main suspect. However, despite repeated requests, the Kremlin does not wish to hand the suspect over to the UK authorities. This has led to a diplomatic crisis between London and Moscow in July 2007, and an overall deterioration of the diplomatic contacts between the two countries.

Although nobody has been officially convicted in the Litvinenko case, many suspect the Russian authorities to be behind the murder. The Kremlin, in its turn, accuses Boris Berezovsky of having murdered his aid in an attempt to discredit Moscow.

#### Gas and oil

As the second largest oil producer, Russia is a major player on the world energy market. Moreover, Russia imports cheap Central Asian oil for its domestic use, enabling it to export even more energy. As such, the country has gained a lot of influence due to its natural resources. Furthermore, as Russia's economy largely depends on energy exports, and energy prices have skyrocketed over the past years, Russia has experienced considerable economic growth. However, the importance of energy exports to the Russian economy also means it is quite vulnerable to fluctuations in oil prices.

Neighbouring countries and the European Union are largely dependent on energy supplies from Russia. However, they are increasingly looking for other ways to secure energy imports as several concerns have arisen over



dependence on energy from the Russian Federation. Analysts see that there is neither enough capacity nor investments to guarantee that Russia can fulfil the growing demands for oil and gas.

But the major concern is related to the tightening control of the Russian government over the country's energy supplies, and the way in which it uses energy policies as a means of pressure in its foreign policies. YUKOS, the former energy giant led by Mikhail Khodorkovsky, has been broken down and its assets moved into the hands of the state owned energy company Gazprom. The law says that not less than 50 percent of an oil or gas company must belong to the state.

During the past years, Russia has repeatedly come into conflict with Ukraine and Belarus over energy supplies to its two neighbours. Russia was quickly raising the gas prices for Ukraine after the pro-Western government of Viktor Yushchenko came to power, causing a severe crisis between the two governments. In January 2006 Russia briefly cut the gas supply to Ukraine, in a dispute over prices. And in the beginning of 2008, Gazprom again partially cut the gas exports to Ukraine, claiming that the country has not yet paid its debts to the company. While Moscow's most loyal former Soviet ally, Belarus, is still paying a lower, subsidised price, this price has also risen considerably, causing tension between the two countries. These developments are worrisome for the EU, as cuts in gas supplies to Ukraine and Belarus, countries on the transport route for Russian gas to the EU, do ultimately also affect supply to the EU.

Stable and secure energy supplies are very important for the European Union, considering the fact that about 30 percent of its gas comes from Russia. The EU has been trying for years to get Russia to sign the Energy Charter, which aims to streamline energy relations. Russia refuses to ratify this energy charter, as it would have to grant foreign companies indiscriminately access to its energy reserves. In reaction, and also due to the increased use by Moscow of energy supplies as a political pressure instrument, the EU seeks to diversify its energy imports, mainly focussing on the Central Asian countries. However, projects in this area are not likely to be realised in the short run.

All in all it can be stated that during the Putin-era, gas and oil have led to two developments: 1) the growing wealth in Russia (although not all Russians profit from the increased wealth) and 2) the increased level of political power (oil and gas used as means of pressure). Despite the end of Putin's presidency, it is highly unlikely that the developments mentioned above are ending as well.

#### US–Russia relations

Until the crisis over Iraq, relations with the United States developed slowly but in a progressive way. Both presidents had several meetings, among which one on Bush's range in Texas, where Bush called Putin "my friend". The terrorist attack in the United States on 11 September 2001 was a crucial event in the U.S.–Russian relations. Putin was forced to respond quickly, and hence to position Russia in the international order. He chose to align himself with the United States, radically improving the tone of U.S.–Russian relations and silencing some militant anti-U.S. voices in Russia by replacing high posts in the ministry of defence and in the army.

Subsequently, Putin allowed the Americans to make use of army bases in Asia during their attacks on Afghanistan. Despite this progress in relations, the US administration continued with their unilateral policy, withdrawing from the ABM treaty and pushing ahead with plans for a national missile defence system (NMD). Russia's response was surprisingly mild with Putin assuring the Russians that the development did not threaten Russian security.

However, the US-led campaign for military action against Iraq turned the tide. Despite expectations, Russia kept firm in its opposition, insisting that UN weapons inspectors be given as much time as they needed to do their work. Once the operation "Iraqi freedom" had started, Putin reiterated calls for an end, adding that the U.S.–led military operation in Iraq is the most serious crisis since the end of the Cold War and is "in danger of rocking the foundations of global stability and international law."

In the ongoing world wide battle of the US and its allies against terrorism and the crises concerning the countries of the so-called "axes of evil", Russia has to balance between its strategic relations with a superpower like the United States and the traditional (economic and political) ties with states like Iraq, Iran and North Korea.

Tensions between President Bush and President Putin sharpened, as the former openly questioned whether Russia has an independent free press. During his trip to Europe in February 2005 Bush said that Russia must renew its



commitment to democracy and the rule of law. President Putin reacted by saying that Russia must adapt democracy on its own and would not allow the issue to be used by other countries for their foreign policy goals.

In 2006, the plans of the United States for an anti-missile shield in Eastern Europe lead to a dispute between the U.S. and Russia. In order to stop a possible nuclear-attack in the future from, for instance Iran, the United States planned to develop an anti-missile shield in parts of "New Europea" (i.e. the Eastern European NATO-member states). The possible new location of the anti-missile shield was (and is, by 2007) seen by Russia as a threat to its territorial integrity, because the range of the missiles was big enough to encompass also large parts of Russia. In order to find a solution, Putin proposed to place the anti-missile shield on a former-Soviet radar station in Azerbaijan. This proposal was refused by the U.S. By November 2007, the U.S., EU and Russia have not reached an agreement on the installation of the anti-missile shield yet.

#### NATO-enlargement

As a consequence of the August war with Georgia, the NATO decided to cease its political dialogue with Russia. Relations with the alliance became even more strained after Russia recognised the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia shortly after the conflict. Recently, on 5 March 2009, a meeting was organised between NATO ministers and Russia. Subsequently, the alliance came to the agreement to as soon as possible formally resume relations with the country, and with this also the NATO-Russia Council meetings (NRC), including at Ministerial level. The parties agreed to use the NRC as a forum for dialogue with Russia on all issues – where they agree and disagree – hoping to eventually resolve remaining problems and to build practical co-operation. Main issues that still worry the alliance are the recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states, Russia's intention to set up new military bases in Abkhazia, and the country's decision to suspend the implementation of the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe.

The ongoing process of NATO enlargement to Eastern Europe has been a sensitive issue for many years. To encounter this problem and to boost post-Soviet era relations, the two sides agreed in May 2002 to establish a NATO-Russia Council giving Russia an equal role with NATO countries in decision making on policy to counter terrorism and other security threats. Despite the approach of NATO and Russia in 2002, Russia decided in November 2007 to suspend participation in the Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) Treaty. This treaty was signed at the end of the Cold War between NATO and the Warsaw-pact in order to limit the number of conventional armed forces in Europe. The suspension came after the failure to reach an agreement on the Russian troops and equipment deployed in Georgia and Moldova and after the plans for a US-missile Defence Shield in Central Europe.

#### EU-Russia relations

On 6 February 2009 the first EU-Russia top-level meeting since the gas cut-off of Ukraine was organised in Moscow where Barroso met with President Medvedev and President Putin. The two parties tried to put relations back on track after a year that was marked by their worst ties ever. Russia and the EU have always had close trade ties but relations have been strained for several years as a result of different issues, among which the Russian gas war with several of its neighbouring countries, the Kremlin poor record of human rights and the country's support for separatists in Georgia and Moldova.

Relations worsened even further after Russia's conflict with Georgia in August 2008, in which Russia's military occupation strongly increased fears among the EU on Russia's power excursion in the post-soviet region. Furthermore, Russia's gas cut-off to Ukraine in January 2009 increased doubts among EU member states about the reliability of Russia as a gas supplier, given the fact that the EU receives a quarter of its natural gas from the country.

After Russia's invasion of Georgia the EU decided to suspend talks with Russia on a new Partnership and Cooperation Agreement until October 2008, i.e. the month in which Russian troops were to withdraw from the occupied areas in Georgia according to the six-point plan agreed upon by both Russia and Georgia. On 28 October 2008, an EU-Russia meeting was organised during which the two parties were supposed to agree on a new partnership, yet talks failed as Russia did not comply with its obligations concerning the complete withdrawal of its forces by 10 October 2008. Russia's plans to build up its military presence in the Georgian regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia without the consent of the Government of Georgia are highly feared in the EU as the bloc considers this a serious violation of the principle of Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity. This would besides be a violation of the cease-fire agreement of September 2008. The EU also warned that the military build-up would



strongly jeopardize the region's stability and security by once again increasing tensions.

During the top-level talks on 6 February 2009, EU President José Manuel Barroso met with President Medvedev and Prime Minister Putin, discussing matters such as the global economic crisis, energy and trade relations –with the aim to eventually conclude a “strategic partnership”. However, the EU and Russia are still quarrelling about energy and security issues as Russia has refused to join the Energy Charter that aims to boost the rule of law regarding energy issues. Despite the fact that the EU has pledged several times for Russia to become party to the treaty. Besides that Russia has even stated a new treaty should be established, given the fact that apparently the current one does not work effectively considering what happened in January 2009. Although at the meeting Barroso agreed that conditions should be created to prevent such a situation in the future, he asked Russia to present more credibility in international relations and the country should do more to restore EU's confidence. They agreed to deploy international observers to oversee the gas flow from Russia through Ukraine. The EU President also confronted both Russian officials with Kremlin's bad track of human rights, referring to the double murder in the beginning of 2009.

Since 1997 the legal basis for bilateral relations between Russia and the EU is the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement. Already from January 2007 the two parties are negotiating about the future of the PCA. The partnership centers on the so-called four common spaces: Economic co-operation, freedom and justice, external security, and scientific research and education.

A first obstacle in the process is the different perceptions on the role of democracy and human rights. While the European Union places these concepts central to the relationship, Russia is fed up with the European paternalism and argues it is time to argue on a basis of equality. Secondly, Russia and the EU have conflicting interests in common neighbouring countries. Both Russia and the EU have an interest in influencing the development in these countries. While the EU offers incentives in the political and economic field, Russia uses more often pressure, sanctions, and boycotts. A special problem is the support of Russia for separatist movements in Georgian South Ossetia and Abkhazia, and Moldovan Transnistria. Another key problem will be the different approaches in the field of energy. While the EU is dependent on Russia for its energy supply, Russia is dependent on the demand from the EU. Conflicting developments include the rising political influence and domination of the energy sector in Russia versus the rising liberalisation of energy markets in the EU. Also the rising Russian influence in the EU and the shared neighbourhood and more and more difficulties for EU investors are a problem.

Russia, for its part, wishes to address the conditions of Russian-speaking minorities in the Baltic states. The issue of visa-free travel is also an important dossier as are Moscow's concerns about transit from Kaliningrad, the Russian enclave, that has been surrounded by EU countries since enlargement brought 10 new countries into the Union in May 2004.

Though the EU wishes to speak with one voice, inside the EU different experiences with Russia in the past play a role. The new member states with Soviet occupation fresh in their minds appear to have a much harsher view. In November 2006 Poland blocked the start of the talks on the new Partnership and Cooperation Agreement because Russia refused to lift its embargo on meat imports from the country.

After the Russia-EU summit in May 2007, EU-politicians expressed their concerns about the human rights situation in Russia. German Chancellor Angela Merkel stated that she was concerned about the fact that opposition leaders were not able to travel freely to participate in an opposition rally in Samara.

#### Relations with former Soviet states

In 1999, Russia and Belarus signed a union treaty. In the planned union state Russia and Belarus will retain their sovereignty, but a separate legislature and a government will be installed that interacts with the respective national governments. The scope of functions and powers of union bodies, as well as the operation of a single money-issuing institution, have not yet been determined. In general, there has been little sign that Putin is serious about moving toward creating a union with Belarusian President Lukashenko.

The main issue in relations with Kiev remains Ukraine's gas debt for Russian natural gas deliveries. Former Ukrainian President Kuchma relied much on the good will of Putin, which Putin showed him at some crucial moments. Also the pro-European Viktor Yushenko has stated to be in favour of a good relationship with Russia.



Relations with Moldova are tense because of the presence of Russian armed troops in the separatist region of Transdnistria.

Although oil exploration continues, there has been no breakthrough in resolving the long-standing dispute over the Caspian Sea's legal status. Iran and Turkmenistan continue to resist the Russia-backed plan to divide the seabed into national sectors, mainly because they fear they will be unable to reach an equitable agreement with Azerbaijan over how to demarcate their respective zones and how to share access to oil fields that bridge the zones. However, during the course of 2001, Moscow stepped back from opposing the projected Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) oil export pipeline, something it had vigorously opposed in the past. With this step, relations with Azerbaijan seem to begin to improve.

Meanwhile, Russia still supports Armenia with defence systems, with which Armenia can keep its military dominance over Azerbaijan. Relations with Georgia have been tense for many years. Issues are Russia's control of two military bases in Georgia and Russia's introducing simplified visa procedures for the separatist provinces Abkhazia and South Ossetia. In addition, Russia accuses Georgia of being a safe haven for Chechen rebels. Relations between the countries worsened in September 2006, when Georgia detained four Russians on spying charges and Russia in turn imposed a trade and travel embargo against Georgia.

The relationship with Russia became even more tensed when on 6 August 2007 Russia dropped a 700kg. bomb from a plane on Georgian soil, 70km. from Tbilisi. The bomb (fortunately) didn't go off, but the Georgia still accused Russia of an "Act of Aggression". Russia denied the allegations, stating that on the time of the bombing, no Russian airplanes were in the air. In the days after, the two countries continued to bicker over the incident. Russia's military chief of staff, General Yuri Baluyevsky, stated that Georgia had provoked Russia by producing reports on the Russian origin of the bombs. He added that Georgia was in a state of confusion of the future of its rebel territories. In the meantime, Georgia tried to seek international support when he called foreign governments to condemn Russia for the bomb-incident.

The the most recent development in the bad relationship between Russia and Georgia has been the brief war in August 2008. After the declaration of independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia by Russia following the war, Georgia broke off diplomaic ties with Russia in early September 2008. End of August, Georgia announced its ambassador in Moscow who was withdrawn in August from Russia would not return. Moreover, Georgian staff working in the embassy in Moscow was also instructed to leave by the end of August 2008. Georgia's main reason for straining diplomatic ties was due to a set of reports that Moscow was intending to increase its involvement in the two break-away regions.

Also in early October, 20 Russian diplomats together with Ambassador Vyacheslav Kovalenko from the Russian embassy in Georgia hailed their work and returned to Moscow. Although a small group of Russian diplomats and technical-administrative staff stayed in Tbilisi it was unclear what their status and their performing functions would be in the country. According the Russian ambassador it was up to Georgia to decide on this issue. He also expressed his hopes that due to the close of both the Russian and the Georgian embassy there would be no negative consequences for the representation of the Georgian diaspora in Russia and the Russians living in Georgia. According to him because it was Georgia that broke off ties, it should also be Georgia that should try to restore relations. Although there are no diplomatic ties at the moment, the two countries are jointly negotiating at the Geneva talks. So not all hope is gone that diplomatic ties will not be restored in the near future.

## POLITICAL PARTIES

Russia party's system is weakly developed. There are many minor and only a few major parties, of which only the Communist and to lesser extent Zhirinosky's Liberal Democratic Party of Russia have a countrywide organisation. To improve Russia's ineffective system of political representation, a new law on political parties was introduced in 2001 and again in 2006. Under the newest law, a political party should have at least 50,000 members, it should have branches of no less than 500 members in more than half of Russian regions, and the other branches should have no less than 250 members. In October 2006 the Federal Registration Service announced that 16 out of the 35 applications for party registration would not be granted. This leaves only 19 parties to take part in the 2007 parliamentary elections.



## SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC PARTIES

### Social Democratic Party of Russia

The Social Democratic Party of Russia is the party of former President Mikhail Gorbachev. It was founded as the Russian United Social Democratic Party in March 2000 with the aim to unite the several political parties, that claim to have true social democratic principles. In 2001, the party was re-registered as Social Democratic Party of Russia. The party program adopted by the SDPR founding congress calls for "social partnership and a historic compromise between labour and capital, society and the state, the individual and society," which will "lead Russia to social and spiritual progress." The program also calls for Russia's transformation from a presidential republic into a presidential-parliamentary republic.

The SDPR did not participate in the Duma elections of 2003, which is illustrative for the weak position of this party within Russia. At that time a strategy was missing due to an internal conflict between then party leader Mikhail Gorbachev and current leader and businessman Vladimir Kishenin. Also the financial position of the party was weak.

In the run up to the presidential elections of 2004 the party stated to support President Vladimir Putin, because the SDPR "stands for the course of stabilisation and democracy in Russia. At the moment we don't see an alternative in any other registered candidate."

In February 2005 the party signed an agreement with the People's Party (see below). It seems this move worsened the already existing tensions in the party. Parts of the youth think that the party is too close to the Kremlin.

In October 2006 the party received the news that it was denied registration. According to the Federal Registration Service (FRS), the SDPR has 52,303 members and 37 branches of no less than 500 members. The party therefore does not comply with the federal law because it has branches in less than half of Russian regions.

During a conference the European Forum organised in Moscow on 27 and 28 October 2006, SDPR leader Vladimir Kishenin objected to the numbers the FRS mentioned in connection to the SDPR, saying that the door-to-door member count was executed in the summer, when only few people were at home to actually be counted. According to the party's figures (61 regional branches and 70,000 members) re-registration should not be problematic. The party will therefore appeal the decision. In case the SDPR's appeal will not be granted, the party will not be allowed to take part in the 2007 parliamentary elections.

The party decided to stay out the new leftist party Just Russia (Rodina, Party of Life and Pensioners Party) that has been created in November 2006. The new party is controversial as it is seen as a creation of the Kremlin. Instead, SDPR focuses on unification with other leftist parties. In November party leader Vladimir Kishenin signed an agreement with the newly created bloc formed by the People's Party led by Gennady Gudkov, the Party of Revival of Russia led by Gennady Seleznev, Patriots of Russia led by Gennady Semigin, and the Party of Social Justice led by Alexey Podberezkin. The main objective of the leaders of parties is to create a new integrated party based on the principles of social democracy and patriotism.

The Social Democratic Party of Russia has a consultative status in the Socialist International.

Leader: Vladimir Kishenin

Other social democratic oriented parties, such as the Social Democratic Party of the Russian Federation of Sergei Beloserzev or the Social Democratic Union of Vassili Lipitsky, were not re-registered after the new law of 2001. In addition, parts of Yabloko (see below), which adopted a social liberal course, share values with a social democratic approach.

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## OTHER POLITICAL PARTIES



#### United Russia

In February 2002, Moscow Mayor Luzhkov's Fatherland party and the All-Russia movement, and United Russia all held congresses in Moscow at which delegates agreed to dissolve their respective political organisations in favour of forming a new party of power called United Russia.

Chairman of the party's and Interior Minister Boris Gryzlov said that the middle class, to which, he said, 75 percent of the country belongs, is not satisfied with its standard of living, and the main task of the party will be to activate the interest of this class and to seek its support. The party describes itself as centrist. However, observers and opposition parties note that the party has no real program – except supporting the President.

United Russia claims to have around 1,540,000 members (July 2007). The party overwhelmingly won the 2003 parliamentary elections with the help of a privileged position in the media. The party fills a large majority of seats in the Duma. For the coming parliamentary elections, it is foreseen that United Russia will win again with a landslide. The role of President Vladimir Putin is in this case remarkable. He is placed on top of the list of candidates for United Russia. However, it is not expected that, once elected, Putin actually will take his seat in parliament. He could rather become Prime Minister, in order to maintain some of his great political influence he has as President.

The campaign of United Russia for the parliamentary elections is based on the popularity of Putin and the results of his policy of the last decade. United Russia's motto is: "Putin's Plan Is Russia's Triumph" This slogan tells us everything about the focus of the party's campaign: Vladimir Putin.

Leader: Boris Gryzlov

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#### Communist Party of Russia

The Communist Party of Russia (KPRF) is the successor to the Communist Party of the Soviet Union that ruled for 74 years. After the attempted coup in August 1991 the party was temporarily banned from political activity. In 1992 a court ruling allowed the party to return to the political scene. In terms of membership the KPRF is still the largest political party with around 500,000 members, organised in 20,000 local branches.

Although the Communists struck a deal with Putin just after his coming to power, party leader Zyuganov subsequently turned against the President. According to the Communist leader, Putin has compromised the entire electoral system in Russia and has failed as guarantor of the Russian Constitution. "Putin cannot guarantee anything to anybody, except war in Chechnya, smog over Moscow, a split with Belarus, new threats to Georgia, and unfettered crime." The Communists played an important role during the demonstrations following the social benefits reforms early 2005. The party is in favour of a planned economy Belarus-style and pledges for nationalisation of companies and full integration of Soviet states. Party officials describe the Communist Party as the only real opposition party in Russia.

In the course of 2002 power struggles within the party occurred, mainly between the so-called right and leftist camps, lead by Duma speaker Gennadii Seleznev and the Zyuganovites. In June, Seleznev and ranking parliamentarians Nikolai Gubenko and Svetlana Goryacheva were expelled from the party. Subsequently, Seleznev founded his own Rossiya movement. Zyuganov hastened to assure the public that there had been no such thing as a schism in the party. In the mean time, a new star has risen in the party, State Duma Deputy Sergei Glazev. However, Glazev's efforts to bring the Communist Party into a larger leftist umbrella movement in which the Communists were just one component rather than the lead organisation failed. So Glazev, together with Duma Deputy Dmitrii Rogozin, founded a new electoral bloc called Motherland-National Patriotic Union, which comprises 29 leftist-patriotic parties and organisations.

In February 2005 the party managed to beat the ruling pro-Kremlin party United Russia in elections to the regional legislature of Nenets Autonomous Okrug, obtaining 27% of the popular vote. However, in the run-up to the 2 December parliamentary elections, the Communist Party seems to be less successful than in the regional elections of 2005: United Russia is expected to win a majority of the seats. However, as polls indicate in November 2007, the Communist Party could become the only party, besides United Russia, to enter the State Duma. The high electoral threshold is high, seven percent.



For the 2008 presidential elections, party-leader Zyuganov already declared to be running for president.

Leader: Gennadii Zyuganov

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#### Liberal Democratic Party of Russia

LDPR is the party of Vladimir Zhirinovskiy and the first party to be founded after the constitution was changed in 1990. The personality-cult surrounding Zhirinovskiy tends to absorb all the party's attention and time. Since the 1999 Duma elections, Zhirinovskiy is Duma Deputy Speaker. Several times, deputies proposed to remove him from the post, due to his "unorthodox oratory and extreme remarks". The party's ideology is one of extreme nationalism with imperialistic aspirations, and inclined to strong, even fascist, authoritarian beliefs. The methods it uses, both in and outside the Duma, are highly populist which accounts for the party's ambiguity over economic questions. The LDPR draws most of its support from the marginalised populations of the provinces who have suffered most from transition and reform.

Leader: Vladimir Zhirinovskiy

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#### Motherland National-Patriotic Union (Rodina) (Just Russia)

The Motherland National-Patriotic Union electoral bloc was registered by the Justice Ministry on 14 September 2003. It comprises 29 left-patriotic parties and organisations and emphasises the importance of the construction of a broad coalition oriented towards social justice on the basis of patriotism and overcoming of ideological differences. The party wishes to mobilise left oriented, patriotic voters and because of this it received criticism of the Communist Party. They see it as an attempt to split the Communists' electorate.

Rodina declined to field its own candidate in the 2004 presidential elections. This created a schism within the party: Glazyev insisted on running for President under the banner of an officially separate Rodina party, but Rogozin was able to consolidate his support and defeat Glazyev.

From the start the party supported President Putin. However from the beginning of 2005 rifts in the party became apparent. Party leader Rogozin protested against the social benefit reforms. Co-leader Sergey Baburin left the bloc and founded a second Rodina group in the Duma, together with 9 other deputies. Baburin is leading the People Will Party. This split led to a reunification of Rogozin's and Glazyev's supporters. Rogozin became more and more critical of United Russia's policies the State Duma. In November 2005, Rodina was barred from taking part in the local elections in Moscow, following an official complaint on the content of their campaign for being racist.

Rogozin stepped down as party leader in March 2006 and was replaced by businessman Aleksander Babakov. Analysts see this move in the light of easing pressure from the Kremlin, while others think it is an attempt to moderate the party's views, as Rogozin was known as a staunch nationalist.

On 28 October 2006 Rodina merged with the Russian Party of Life led by Sergei Mironov and the Russian Pensioner's Party led by Sergei Zotov into the "A Just Russia". Observers say it is the most serious effort by the president administration to advance the Russian "managed" or "sovereign" democracy towards bi-party system where both centre-right and centre-left are credibly represented.

"A Just Russia" has a social-democratic platform. The party has recently obtained observer status in the Socialist International.

Leader: Sergei Mironov

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#### Yabloko

Yabloko was formed just before the 1993 elections and at that time operated as a bloc of regional organisations



(about 60). Until the 2001 law on political parties, Yabloko called itself an association. Like other movements and parties, Yabloko has encountered several internal struggles. In the past ten years its position on socio-economic issues reflected both social-democratic and liberal values. Inside the party, the social democratic camp was represented by Igrunov, the liberal camp by Yavlinski.

In 2001, Yavlinski depicted the position of Yabloko for the coming years in a pamphlet called "New Course". In this document he warns for the "make-believe democratic system with bureaucratic authoritarian rule at the core", which is being established at the moment in Russia. The only answer to this defective democracy, according to Yavlinski, is "a stable democratic liberal and therefore socially oriented development of Russia". He works out in details the liberal measures for a proper functioning of the free market economy, like minimum state intervention in the economy; guarantees to investors; strictly set and observed rules of civil turnover of land, demonopolisation of the markets, free trade, reduction in taxes and their simplification, elimination of currency restrictions and real deregulation and liberalisation of access to income distribution. Furthermore, Yavlinski stresses the fact that Russia is a European country and should therefore orient itself on a European socio-economic structure.

After the Communist Party, Yabloko is the strongest opposition force in Russia. It draws its main support from middle-aged professionals. Yabloko used to be one of the major democratic forces in the Duma and in opposition to the government. Yavlinski sharply criticises Putin's performance in Chechnya and openly doubts his democratic caliber. However, after the last parliamentary elections of 2003 the position of Yabloko declined. The party failed to enter the Duma again. Yavlinski twice ran for president (1996 and 2000), but both times did not make it to the second round. In an attempt to pass the 10 percent threshold for the Moscow local elections, they formed a coalition with the Union of Rightist Forces. Together they managed to get 11 percent.

During the Yabloko party congress on 21 June 2008, Yavlinski resigned as leader of the party. Yavlinski was the leader of Yabloko for fifteen years and in the early 1990s played an important role by the development of a market economy in Russia. However, critique on Yavlinski grew within the party after Yabloko failed to gain representation in the Duma in the latest parliamentary elections in 2003 and 2007. After the failed elections of December 2007, there were increasing calls for his resignation. Yavlinski was succeeded as party leader by Sergey Mitrochin, leader of the Moscow branch of Yabloko. With the election of Mitrochin, Yabloko seems to have chosen for the moderate wing of the party as opposed to the more radical wing, which is led, amongst others, by Yabloko St. Petersburg leader Maksim Reznik.

The party is a member of the Liberal International.

Leader: Sergey Mitrochin

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#### Union of Rightist Forces

SPS is a coalition of small parties, united around Democratic Choice of Russia (DCR), a party headed by two of Russia's lead reformers, Yegor Gaidar and Anatoly Chubais.

In December 1998, Democratic Choice of Russia took the initiative to form a coalition, called Right Cause, with the aim to unite centre-right parties that were not able to pass the 5 percent threshold individually. Among the smaller parties were Young Russia, the party of former Deputy Prime Minister Boris Nemtsov, Democratic Russia (the party of the murdered Duma member Galina Starovoitova) and Irina Khakamada's Common Cause. In August 1999 former Prime Minister Sergej Kirienko and Samara governor Konstantin Titov and their respective parties (New Force and Voice of Russia), joined Right Cause. The name Union of Right Forces was adopted.

During the 1999 campaign SPS criticised both Yabloko and Fatherland/All Russia. The party was openly supported by then Prime Minister Putin and returned this support in the 2000 Presidential elections. In 2002, some prominent members, among which Sergei Yushenkov and Viktor Pokhmelkin left the SPS, saying the party "is too close to the Kremlin policy". They subsequently created a new party "Liberal Party" with Berezovsky's financial assistance.

SPS now turned against the President, though the party supports the unpopular social benefits reforms of early 2005. In St. Petersburg and Moscow the party formed an opposition coalition together with Yabloko. The SPS is



pro-Western and strongly inclined towards market reform. It has drawn considerable support in the provinces.

Leader: Boris Nemtsov

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#### People's Party

The People's Party was founded by Duma deputies from the People's Deputy Group under the leadership of Gennadi Rajkov. At the time of registration, 30 October 2001, the party had 39.000 members. Meanwhile Rajkov claims to have 61.00 members in 80 regions. As the party used to be represented in the Duma, it attracted quite a lot of (media) attention. However, in the last Duma elections they failed to get representation. In reaction, about 20 deputies joined the pro-Putin United Russia faction in the Duma.

On 3 March 2005 the deputies from the People's Party threatened to leave the United Russia faction in the State Duma, to protest the government's social-benefits reforms. As a result, The United Russia faction could lose its constitutional majority in the Duma. People's Party leader Gennadii Gudkov claims that more than half of the party's regional branches have already passed resolutions calling for a withdrawal from the United Russia faction. Though Gudkov is critical towards the system and pledges for more democracy, he supports President Putin.

The Social Democratic Party of Russia signed a cooperation agreement with the People's Party in February 2005. In reaction to the formation of Just Russia, the People's Party signed a declaration stating the wish to unite with the Party of Revival of Russia led by Gennady Seleznev, Patriots of Russia led by Gennady Semigin and the Party of Social Justice led by Alexey Podberezkin. The social democrats signed the declaration also. The small leftist parties try to unite in order to stand a chance in the December 2007 elections.

Leader: Gennadii Gudkov

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#### "The Other Russia"

"The Other Russia" is an umbrella organisation, consisting of several political parties and NGO's who all share one point of view: their critique to the Putin-government. They variety of parties and organisations is big: from communist parties to human rights organisations. The organisations was founded on 11 and 12 July 2006 in Moscow. On 16 December 2006, the first joint rally was organised. On 14 and 15 April 2007, "The Other Russia" organised two big opposition rally's, called "The March of Dissent", in respectively Moscow and St. Petersburg. At the rally in Moscow, many protesters (including Kasparov and former premier Kasyanov) were arrested.

"The Other Russia" has suffered quite an amount of repression of its initiatives. The organisation has difficulties to get permits for their rally's and in May 2007, the leaders of the organisation were prevented from boarding flights from Moscow to Samara, were an anti-government rally was planned.

"The Other Russia" will not compete as a single party in the elections. The Other Russia was barred by the Central Election Committee from participating in the December elections. The rejection was expected by The Other Russia, but Kasparov acknowledged that submitting the papers was a quixotic effort meant mainly to draw attention to the tight Kremlin control over Russian politics. However, Kasparov will be contesting the presidential elections of March 2008.

Key-figures of "The Other Russia" are:

Lyudmila Alekseeva (Moscow Helsinki Group), Mikhail Delyagin (Institute for Globalisation Issues), Yuri Dzhibladze (Center for Development of Democracy and Human Rights), Viktor Gerashchenko (Rodina, former Chairman of the Soviet and Russian Central Bank), Andrei Illarionov (Former senior economic advisor to the president), Garry Kasparov (Former World Champions chess, United Civil Front), Mikhail Kasyanov (People's Democratic Union (Russia), former Prime Minister), Eduard Limonov (National Bolshevik Party), Yelena Lukyanova (Law Professor at Moscow State University), Vladimir Ryzhkov (RPR – Russian Republic Party), Georgy Satarov (Information Science for Democracy – INDEM)



Leader: multiple, of which former chess World Champion Garry Kasparov is best known

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Union of Social–Democrats (Movement) Mikhail Gorbachev, Russia's last Soviet leader, founded on 20 October 2007 a new political movement to rid the country of "extreme political forces" and champion liberal values. The movement consists of NGO's and political parties. A statement issued by the movement said that "the potential for free democratic choice and political competition is being limited. "This is why social–democrats are uniting to fight for the values of freedom and fairness." At the founding congress of the Union of Social–Democrats in central Moscow, Gorbachev told delegates: "We are putting our hopes in the efforts that [President Vladimir] Putin is making" to reform Russia.

Leader: Mikhail Gorbachev

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#### Right cause

On 16 November 2008, Russian liberals launched a pro–Kremlin political party called the "Right Cause" supposedly with the aim to defend middle class values. Critics, however, claimed that it was merely a mechanism for the authorities to steal the support from the real opposition movements. At a meeting between the leaders of the newly–formed party, it declared they would win seats in Russia's parliamentary elections in 2011 by maintaining the slogan: "Freedom, property, order".

The Right Cause is a merger of the opposition party Union of Right Forces (SPS) with the largely pro–Kremlin Democratic Party and Civic Force. As the SPS did not win any seats during the last parliamentary elections it claimed to merge with the new party in order to survive in the political arena. Opponents do not see a real future in the party as its ideology is communicated top–down from the Kremlin

Leader: Boris Nadezhdin