

Bill of Rights in Action



SUMMER 2016

Volume 31 № 4

PUTIN'S ILLIBERAL DEMOCRACY



President of Russia (CC BY 4.0)

Russian President Vladimir Putin speaking at the Grand Kremlin Palace in Moscow in 2012 for the Russian Federation National Awards.

If you are a citizen of Russia today and you join an unauthorized demonstration or protest, you may be fined \$9,000 and face years in prison. If you plan a demonstration but fail to first get approval from the government, or if a demonstration for which you obtained approval causes property damage, you may be in for a much bigger fine and hard labor.

The subject of your demonstration can also cause you trouble. For example, if the demonstration you want to organize is for gay pride, you can be sure that your request for authorization will be denied. Moreover, you can be prosecuted for “offending the religious feelings of believers” if you question the existence of God in an online forum, like a blog or chatroom.

And if you are a political leader, your party must be sanctioned by the government. You might also pay for unsanctioned political activity with your very life. How did these circumstances arise in Russia?

The Promise of Democracy

Twenty-five years ago, the Soviet Union collapsed. The Warsaw Pact, the legal framework for Russia’s half century of domination of Eastern Europe, was officially terminated and many of the USSR (Soviet) republics achieved independence. The newly liberated states instituted popular elections throughout, as did Russia itself, making it seem that the world was entering a new phase of peace where the principles of Western-style liberal democracy would flourish.

The reality is that governments of former Soviet republics often had the trappings of democracy but maintained an illiberal, or authoritarian, character. For example, President Alexander Lukashenko of Belarus has held office since 1994. In 1996, he disbanded parliament but soon replaced it with a new parliament full of his handpicked allies. He has bragged to the press of his “authoritarian ruling style.” ▶

ELECTIONS AND DEMOCRACY

This edition of *Bill of Rights in Action* looks at case studies of factors affecting democratic processes in elections. The first article examines the rise of illiberal democracy in Russia under the leadership of Vladimir Putin. The second article looks at the unexpected election of Truman to the U.S. presidency in 1948. The third article explores the impact and implications of the *Citizens United* Supreme Court decision.

World History/Current Issues: “Putin’s Illiberal Democracy,” by guest writer Patrick Jennings.

U.S. History: “Harry Truman and the Election of 1948,” by guest writer Lucy Eisenberg, Esq., and CRF senior editor Damon Huss.

U.S. Government/Current Issues: “Elections, Money, and the First Amendment,” by longtime contributor Carlton Martz.



Tsar Nicholas II (center) with members of his family, the Romanovs, circa 1913. The tsar's suppression of political opponents and handling of World War I led to his abdication. He and his family were later executed by the ruling Bolsheviks (Communists) in 1918.

Since 1999, Vladimir Putin, the current president of Russia, and his personal friends — wealthy businessmen, military figures, and members of the intelligence services — have dominated Russia's economy, media, and political life. Russian military might is once again being used to threaten neighboring states and bolster Russian power abroad. The promise of a democratic Russia seems to be vanishing.

Russia: A Long History of Tyranny

Before 1991, Russians had enjoyed perhaps only seven months of democracy in a thousand years of its history. A feudal society until the early 18th century, Russia became a great European power under the Romanov Tsars (monarchs), who kept a large part of the population in serfdom (semi-slavery) and controlled the rest of the population with secret police, press restrictions, political imprisonment, exile, and execution.

The Tsarist monarchy was overthrown in a popular uprising in March 1917, which ushered in a brief period of Russian democracy. But that democratic experiment ended five months later, when the Communist Party came to power through revolution in October 1917. Picking up where the monarchy left off, the Communist Party instituted old Tsarist practices and added political indoctrination, widespread propaganda, mass internal deportations, and prohibitions on the ownership of property and business.

With the end of Communist domination in 1991, Russia was poised for a birth of political and economic freedom. Under the leadership of Boris Yeltsin, the first President of the Russian Federation, laws were passed to assure political freedom and individual

rights. The country also moved from a government-planned to a market economy. The government distributed ownership of state-owned industries to private individuals.

Unfortunately, despite attempts to ensure fair and equal distribution throughout the population, ownership of most enterprises ended up in the hands of government and management insiders. In addition, the transition from a state-planned to a market-driven economy led to serious drops in economic activity, severe inflation, job losses, and shortages of consumer goods.

The Rise of Putin

From an early age, Vladimir Putin had wanted to join the KGB (the Soviet Union's spy and security organization). He pursued his goal despite the opposition of his parents, both factory workers who had survived the siege of Leningrad during World War II. Told that the intelligence service preferred students with law degrees, he then enrolled at Leningrad State University, hoping to be recruited.

At last, in his final year of university, he was offered a position in the KGB. He spent the first years of his career as a counterintelligence agent, monitoring the activities of foreigners in Leningrad (now St. Petersburg).

In the early 1980s, Putin received training in foreign espionage and was sent to East Germany, where he worked with the East German intelligence agency, the Stasi. His job was to find candidates suitable for intelligence missions in the West that targeted Western technology.

When the Soviet empire collapsed in 1991, Putin returned to St. Petersburg. There he headed academic and governmental organizations involved with promoting international relations and trade for the city. By 1996, he had moved on to Moscow, where he would head a number of positions in the Boris Yeltsin regime, including the Federal Security Services, a successor to the KGB. During this time, he also completed work on his dissertation for a Candidate in Science in Economics, equivalent to a PhD in the West.

Yeltsin appointed Putin to be acting prime minister in August 1999. One month later, a series of apartment house bombings in Russian cities killed nearly 300 people. The Russian government blamed terrorists from Chechnya, a largely Muslim former state of the Russian Federation. The Chechens had successfully gained independence a few years earlier after fighting Russian forces to a stalemate.

After the apartment bombings, Putin ordered the resumption of military operations in Chechnya. By February 2000, Russian forces had retaken Chechnya's capital, Grozny, and began the process of reintegrating Chechnya into the Russian Federation.

Meanwhile, in late December 1999, Yeltsin resigned suddenly and named Putin as acting president. Three

months later, Putin was formally elected president, having secured more than 50 percent of the votes.

Putin in Charge

Relatively unknown when he took over from Yeltsin, Putin focused on rebuilding Russia's economy and reestablishing its international position in the world. During his first two terms as president, from 2000 to 2008, Russia enjoyed impressive economic growth, due in large part to a worldwide surge in crude oil prices, one of Russia's principal exports.

Russia is the largest supplier of natural gas in the world, and its main customers are nations in the European Union. Over the eight years of Putin's first two terms, Russia's economy grew 70 percent, its poverty rate was cut in half, and disposable income doubled. By 2008, Russia had regained the economic power it had experienced at the end of the Soviet empire, although it continued to suffer a high rate of inflation.

Putin's popularity grew alongside the Russian economy. In 2000, he won the election with 53 percent of the votes. In 2004, he won with 71.9 percent. As the Russian constitution limits a president to two consecutive terms, Putin could not run in 2008.

Instead of running again, Putin endorsed and supported his protégé and former campaign manager, Dimitri Medvedev. Medvedev won with 71 percent and then appointed Putin prime minister of the Duma, Russia's legislature. Four years later, in 2012, Medvedev stepped aside as Putin ran a third time for president, winning with a 63.6 percent majority.

International monitoring groups complained of significant irregularities in both the 2008 and 2012 elections. Opinion polls taken at the time, however, showed high approval ratings for Putin. Still, opposition to him and his party, United Russia, has grown over the last few years. Massive demonstrations against election fraud followed the 2011 Duma elections as well as Putin's election in 2012.

Some observers claim that fraud in the 2012 presidential election accounted for as much as 14 percent of Putin's majority, and that Putin should have had to face a second round of voting. It is difficult to believe that he would not have won a run-off, however, as the nearest competitor was the Communist Party, which only polled 17 percent.

A Declining Democracy

Putin's control of Russia's political life has increased since his last election. This is partly due to the large number of candidates from obscure parties who have failed to come together to challenge United Russia. In addition, a law requiring candidates to obtain the support of 10 percent of the regional legislature,



Russian President Boris Yeltsin handing over power to Vladimir Putin, who would then serve as acting president, in 1999.

President of Russia (CC BY 4.0)

which is often heavily controlled by Putin's allies, has kept many opponents of United Russia off the ballot.

Political demonstrations are also severely restricted. Remember that protestors must obtain governmental approval for demonstrations or face heavy fines and possible imprisonment.

Many international organizations, such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, have been forced to register as foreign agents, subjecting them to audits and raids in which the state seizes their operating documents and records. Meanwhile, the Russian government has accused both demonstrators and international rights organizations of representing the interests of the United States.

Russia has also entered into what we in the United States call the "culture wars." Under a federal law "for the Purpose of Protecting Children from Information Advocating for a Denial of Traditional Family Values,"

it is illegal to promote "non-traditional sexual relationships." The intent of the law became clear with the first person arrested for violating it: a young man who held a banner stating "Being gay and loving gays is normal. Beating gays and killing gays is a crime!"

Religious freedom is another culture war in Russia. A 2002 law defines "extremism" as promoting the "exclusivity, superiority, or inferiority of citizens" based on religion. This led to banning several translations of the Koran (Islam's most sacred text) in 2007 and imprisoning readers of the banned materials. In 2016, Russian authorities prosecuted a man who wrote "there is no God" in an online chatroom under a 2013 law against offending persons of faith. The crime carries a maximum punishment of one year in jail.

As a result of these laws, most international democracy monitoring organizations now regard Russia as one of the least democratic nations. One such organization is Freedom House. "The Russian

From an early age, Vladimir Putin had wanted to join the KGB.

government seems determined to prevent free expression in any form,” said Freedom House President Mark P. Lagon in 2015, “including in social media.”

Putin and his supporters disagree, claiming that Russian democracy is just different from Western liberal democracy. He calls it “majoritarian democracy.” Sergei Markov, a scholar and adviser to Putin, describes majoritarian democracy this way:

In the West there are elaborate protections for minorities, whereas in Russia the protection of the majority is the priority. It’s still democracy [M]inorities must subordinate themselves to the interests of the majority

By contrast, protecting minority rights, or civil rights, is a hallmark of liberal democracy. For example, the United States Constitution was amended to include the Bill of Rights specifically to limit the power of government, especially over individuals. James Madison himself warned against the “superior force of an interested and overbearing majority.”

Majoritarian democracy, or sovereign democracy, as Putin has defined it elsewhere, appears to be working for him. His approval ratings climbed in the years following the 2012 election, in part because the Russian population supported his aggressive foreign policy. Like Putin, many Russians regret the loss of global influence Russia suffered following the demise of the Soviet Union and are suspicious of Western culture and Western interference in Russian affairs. Putin’s regime carried out military actions not just in Chechnya, but also in Georgia, Crimea, Ukraine, and Syria, all of which bolstered his approval rating to almost 90 percent in the first months of 2016.

Russian Democracy’s Future

Some have argued that Putin’s policies and popularity can be traced to Russia’s conservative and imperialistic roots in the Tsarist and Soviet eras. Putin’s easy election wins and high approval ratings certainly

suggest that he has tapped into illiberal biases developed in 20th century Russian society.

On the other hand, it can be argued that the Russian population has been misled by the Putin government, which owns or indirectly controls Russian television and much of its press. Indeed, since Putin’s rise to power, almost two dozen journalists investigating government corruption have been murdered.

Alexander Litvinenko was a journalist critical of Putin. He had publicly claimed that Russian secret services were behind the 1999 apartment house bombings. He then died by poisoning in the United Kingdom, and the government of the United Kingdom has linked his death directly to Putin.

Putin’s government has also targeted opposition political leaders, most notably Boris Nemtsov. Nemtsov denounced Putin for Russia’s military aggression in the Ukraine and was shot dead on a bridge near Red Square less than two weeks later.

This record of punishment of political and religious dissent concerns human rights advocates worldwide. Also, given the Russian people’s apparent endorsement of restrictions on civil rights and freedom of expression, it is hard to be optimistic about the future of democracy in Putin’s Russia.

DISCUSSION & WRITING

1. Before 1991, how much experience did the Russian people have with democracy? Describe how that could affect the present population’s attitudes toward civil rights and liberties.
2. What was Putin’s path to the presidency of the Russian Federation? What accomplishments made him popular with the Russian people?
3. What restrictions have been placed on democracy under Putin’s administration? Contrast “majoritarian democracy” with “liberal democracy” with examples from the article.

ACTIVITY: Russian History and Freedom

1. Divide the class into eight groups. Assign each group one of the following Russian leaders:

Catherine the Great	Nicholas I	Alexander I	Alexander II
Nicholas II	Vladimir Lenin	Joseph Stalin	Mikhail Gorbachev
2. Each group will research the following issues about the respective reigns of the above leaders:
 - What were the notable events during his or her reign?
 - How did he or she view Russia’s role in the world?
 - How was the government organized under his or her reign?
 - How much freedom did the people have during his or her reign?
3. Each group presents its findings to the class.
4. Engage the class in a discussion to compare Putin’s Russia to the Russia of his predecessors.

Electronic-only Edition of *Bill of Rights in Action*

Sign-up or switch to an electronic-only subscription. Your copy of *Bill of Rights in Action* will arrive much sooner – as much as two to three weeks before the printed issue. Sign up today at: www.crf-usa.org/bria

