

PUTINISM

THE SLOW RISE
of a
RADICAL RIGHT
REGIME IN RUSSIA

MARCEL H. VAN HERPEN



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Marcel H. Van Herpen

Director, The Cicero Foundation, the Netherlands

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*To Anna Politkovskaya (1958–2006)
and Natalya Estemirova (1958–2009)*

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Introduction

Defining Putin's system

Between 1999 and 2012 Putin was the undisputed ruler of Russia and, at this moment, his rule does not seem likely to come to an end any time soon. After his comeback as Russian President in 2012 he has theoretically the possibility of remaining in power for another 12 years, which would make his reign longer than that of Leonid Brezhnev (18 years) or Tsar Nicholas II (22 years). Putin not only dominates the political scene in Russia, but also plays an equally prominent role on the global stage. Queen Elizabeth II received him at Buckingham Palace while on a state visit to the United Kingdom and he was invited to the G7 when this forum was still a rather closed Western club. Western leaders were so impressed with him that US President Bush, after having looked him in the eye, got a "sense of his soul," finding him "straightforward and trustworthy."¹ Former German Chancellor Helmut Schröder and Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi became his buddies and the American magazine *Time* chose him in 2007 as 'Person of the Year'. Putin was praised in the West for his pragmatism and for having restored order after the chaotic Yeltsin years. Although his democratic credentials were less obvious, his friend Schröder did not hesitate to call him a 'lupenreiner Demokrat' (crystal clear democrat). And even as late as 2011 French Prime Minister François Fillon repeated that Russia was a democracy.

However, after 12 years of Putinism it is clear that calling Putin a democrat and his system a democracy is a full-blown lie. Therefore, Western observers have become more cautious. Most admit now that Russia is not a democracy. However, this does not mean that all have given up their wishful thinking, hoping that things will turn out better under Putin's third term as Russian President. Maybe Putin is not a democrat today,

they argue, but this does not mean that he could not *become* an exemplary democrat tomorrow. Christopher Caldwell, a columnist of the *Financial Times*, wrote, for instance, that “there may be liberalising tendencies in Mr. Putin’s camp.”² Caldwell is not alone. Jacob Heilbrunn, an American analyst, exclaimed in October 2011, after 12 years of Putinism, “Might not Putin turn out to be a closet democrat who revives his country over the next decade?”³ Others argued that, “once reinstalled in the Kremlin, Mr. Putin would reinvent himself as an economic liberal with a repressive streak (a Russian Pinochet, in effect).”⁴ This last vision still has the elegance of restricting Putin’s supposed liberalism to his economic performance, although it is clear that the kleptocratic economic system he has put in place cannot be liberalized without removing the kleptocrats, that is, Putin himself, together with his siloviki clan.

What is striking in these rosy expectations is that they completely *contradict* the trend of the last 12 years. This trend has been characterized by a growing repression and a continuous centralization of power. Countervailing powers, from the independent TV stations to the elected governors, were brought under the Kremlin’s control and in September 2010 even Yuriy Luzhkov, the all-too-powerful mayor of Moscow, was dismissed. Democratic procedures were baffled and the secret services strengthened their grip on civil society, using the “extremism law” to persecute political opponents. Bloggers can get up to six years in prison and since 2010 the FSB, the follow-up organization of the Soviet-era KGB, can also “invite” citizens and give them “warnings,” reviving a practice used by its Soviet predecessor.

Why do Western observers and analysts—despite ample evidence of the contrary—insist that Putin’s third Presidential term (his fourth when we include the “unofficial” term between 2008 and 2012) will give him a chance “to reinvent” himself? Did other dictators and authoritarian leaders, such as Saddam Hussein, Muammar Kadafi, Hosni Mubarak, or Benito Mussolini, “reinvent” themselves? It is not the first time in recent history that wishful thinking takes the place of a cool analysis of the facts. In the 1920s and 1930s similar hopes and expectations were expressed vis-à-vis the possible development of the dictatorships of that epoch. These optimistic expectations, however, were not fulfilled because they not only denied the facts, but also neglected the immanent *dynamic* of these dictatorships, as many had to learn later by bitter experience.

Putinism can be expected to be with us for at least another six years, and possibly even 12. It is, therefore, of vital importance, not only to understand how the Putinist system works, but also to have a grasp of its deeper dynamic. The thesis of this book is that Putin is far from a “closet

democrat” and that in the coming decade Putinism least of all will be characterized by “liberalising tendencies.” On the contrary, the dynamic of the system points to another direction: that of a strengthening grip on civil society, a further repression of individual freedoms, combined with an aggressive foreign policy in the post-Soviet space, possibly including revisionist territorial claims. Helped by its oil and gas dollars, Putinism, with the help of well-paid Western communication firms, has tried to build a positive image in the West, concealing its growing authoritarianism behind its status of an “electoral democracy.” Another name for such a system is “competitive authoritarianism.”⁵ “In competitive authoritarian regimes,” wrote Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way, “formal democratic institutions are widely viewed as the principal means of obtaining and exercising political authority. Incumbents violate those rules so often and to such an extent, however, that the regime fails to meet the conventional minimum standards for democracy.”⁶ These authors assume that such systems have also a positive side: “the persistence of meaningful democratic institutions creates arenas through which opposition forces may—and frequently do—pose significant challenges.”⁷ In Putin’s Russia, where politics has become a stagnant, dead water, and where the opposition has been permanently excluded from competition, there was hope that such “significant challenges” were possible after the massive street protests in the winter of 2011–2012. The prospects, however, are bleak. The Putinist regime, strengthened by its newfound “legitimacy” after the rigged and fraudulent elections, will fight tooth and nail to defend its power and privileges.

The purported lack of democratic ambition of the “Russian character”

Western experts often show a tendency to consider the persistence of authoritarian regimes in Russia the result of a supposed “Russian character.” For the anthropologist Margaret Mead, for instance, there existed a “traditional Russian character structure,” which was “prone to extreme swings in mood from exhilaration to depression, hating confinement and authority, and yet feeling that strong external authority was necessary to keep their own violent impulses in check.”⁸ Recently, Richard Pipes, a prominent American historian and Russia expert, wrote a letter to the *Economist* in the same vein in which he referred to an article in this magazine in which was said that the Kremlin often defends its actions “by pointing to the ‘mindlessness’ of Russians and the lack of a strong civil society.” “Unfortunately,” wrote Pipes,

“this is largely correct. The great majority of Russians display no interest in politics, for they regard all politicians, at home as well as abroad, as crooks. How politicians get themselves elected and how they rule is of little or no interest to Russians, as long as they protect them from domestic and foreign enemies. This mentality enables their rulers to act with impunity under the guise of “managed democracy” and bodes ill for Russia’s future.”⁹ Interestingly, Pipes wrote these words under the heading “the coming Russian winter” just a few weeks before the mass protest demonstrations started in Moscow and Saint Petersburg. In fact, these theories are only new expressions of the old maxim: “Each people gets the government it deserves,” blaming the people for the misbehavior of their governments. The fact that the Russian people was not yet able to constitute itself as a “Body Politic” is certainly due to the historical legacy of 70 years of totalitarian rule. A historical legacy, however, is not a fatality. We should not forget that the Yeltsin years of the 1990s, generally characterized as “chaotic,” were also the most democratic years in Russian history. It was Putin, a product and an exponent of the repressive Soviet KGB, who intentionally and willfully derailed this process. That the great majority of Russians “display no interest in politics,” as Richard Pipes suggests, is not because of a supposed inborn disinterest in the *res publica*, but because the *res publica* has been stolen by the occupant of the Kremlin and his clan.

A counter-example of this “lack of interest”

A clear counter-example of the supposed “lack of political interest” of the Russian citizens cannot only be found in the recent mass protests, but also in the short period in which elections for the provincial governors and republican presidents of Russia’s sub-national units were held. When Russian citizens still had the possibility of voting and felt that their vote had a real impact, they showed a genuine interest. “Despite the rhetoric surrounding the Putin administration’s decision to eliminate popular elections, the contests held from 1996 through 2001,” wrote Andrew Konitzer, “yielded an element of accountability and seemed to outperform the system of appointees in neighboring Ukraine.”¹⁰ However, when between 2001 and 2004 Putin’s central government began to interfere, “the regional electorate appeared to lose interest in a process increasingly controlled by the Kremlin.”¹¹ Putin took the Beslan school hostage crisis of September 2004 as a pretext to suppress the regional elections altogether and appoint the governors directly. Abolition of democracy on a regional level was accompanied by the transformation

of national elections into a manipulated farce. Opposition parties were not only refused registration, they were harassed and marginalized. As a result Russians began more and more to vote with their feet. After Putin's announcement in the fall of 2011 that he would be a candidate for the Presidential elections of 2012, Lev D. Gudkov, director of the Levada Center, an independent pollster, said that about 50,000 people leave Russia every year and that this number could grow by 10,000 or 15,000 in the future. "There will be a dark and depressive mood in society," Mr. Gudkov said. "The situation is uncertain, there is a growth of anxiety, a feeling of stagnation and degradation."¹² Russians not only emigrate abroad: as in old Soviet times they also go into "internal emigration." According to Andrei Zolotov Jr., deputy director of the international service of the RIA Novosti news agency, "there is the feeling of not fitting into the system, a sense of alienation that nothing really depends on you, that you don't matter (...) and that results in what is called internal emigration. You stop watching television, you retreat into your private life, you disconnect from the country around you."¹³ And there is this fear from the past, "this fear: what if they close the borders? That is one of the fears in the background."¹⁴

According to *The Economist*, Putin's return in 2012, "is not a continuation of the past. It opens a new chapter in Russian history—one that may well end in crisis."¹⁵ The return of Putin as Russian President is, indeed, not just the formal continuation of his two earlier presidencies. The thesis of this book is that it will be the start of a radicalization of his regime, comparable with the radicalization of Mussolini's regime in the second half of the 1930s, which, tellingly, came also about 12 years after the *Duce* had acquired absolute power. The comparison with the *Duce* is here not made by chance. Already earlier analysts have observed a resemblance of Putin's style and policies with that of the *Duce*. "Mr. Putin's regime in many ways is similar to Mussolini's Fascism," wrote, for instance, Zbigniew Brzezinski. "Il *Duce* made 'the trains run on time.' He centralized political power in the name of chauvinism. He imposed political controls over the economy without nationalizing it or destroying the economic oligarchs and their mafias. The Fascist regime evoked national greatness, discipline, and exalted myths of an alleged glorious past. Similarly, Mr. Putin is trying to blend the traditions of the Cheka (Lenin's Gestapo, where his own grandfather started his career), with Stalin's wartime leadership, with Russian Orthodoxy's claims to the status of the Third Rome, with Slavophile dreams of a single Slavic state ruled from the Kremlin."¹⁶ Brzezinski wrote these words in 2004 after five years of Putinism. They seem to be even more valid today.

“Weimar Russia”: The validity of a historical parallel

The aim of this book is to analyze the internal dynamic of Putinism. In order to explore this dynamic, the book starts with an analysis of the historical parallel between the Weimar Republic and post-Soviet Russia. Does such a “Weimar Parallel” exist? I have subdivided the “Weimar Parallel” into five clusters. These clusters are 1. geographical and demographic; 2. economic; 3. political; 4. societal, and 5. socio-psychological. Subsequently I have compared 23 different items in these clusters. The conclusion of this detailed analysis is that there exists, indeed, a more than striking resemblance between the situation in the Weimar Republic and the situation in post-Soviet Russia.

The next question was: if there exists such a clear analogy between the two historical situations, does this mean that Russia is moving toward the same *dénouement*: a fascist Russia? In order to answer this question I had to deal, first, with the question what, exactly, fascism is. In the literature there are many different definitions. I chose to compare two approaches: a “thick” and a “thin” approach. The “thick” approach is based on Max Weber’s ideal type, a heuristic device in which one accumulates as many characteristics of a phenomenon as possible and subsequently compares the existing reality with the ideal type. The “thin” method is its opposite: it intends to give a minimal definition of what fascism is. This last method was developed by Robert Griffin, who defined “the fascist minimum” as the presence of an ideology characterized by ultra-nationalism and ideas of national rebirth. However, I considered Griffin’s definition, based only on the presence of an ideology, too minimal. Because fascism is not only an ideology, it is also a practice. For this reason I proposed an adapted version of Griffin’s definition, adding an important element of interbellum fascism—its aggressive, militaristic, and expansionist character. The next step was to compare Putinism with these “thick” and “thin” definitions.

Putinism is not a fixed, but a dynamic category

A first observation I made was that “Putinism” (both as an ideology and as a system of governance) is not a fixed category. If one compares Putinism in 2000 with Putinism in 2012 one can observe important differences that indicate an immanent dynamic of the system. This dynamic is characterized by a movement away from an open and democratic society to an authoritarian state. Putin’s reign started with a brutal war in Chechnya that has led to accusations of genocide. Russia’s

multi-party democracy was changed into a strongly manipulated system in which the incumbents remain in power by massively falsifying the elections. United Russia, which began as a conservative party of former apparatchiks, developed in recent years three “party wings,” two of which preach an ultra-nationalist ideology and do not exclude a revision of international frontiers. In addition, the *Nashi*, a new youth movement, was set up by the leadership, with the aim to spread the Kremlin’s ultra-nationalist and neo-imperialist ideology. This movement was used as an instrument to intimidate and harass opponents. The war in Georgia in 2008 was an important watershed. It was the first time since the invasion in Afghanistan in 1979 that regular Russian troops invaded a sovereign foreign country. With the invasion of Georgia, Putin’s regime had crossed the Rubicon: it had invaded and dismembered a small neighboring country, which evoked reminiscences of what happened in the 1930s.

While in the year 2000 Putinism still could be given the benefit of the doubt, this was no longer the case in 2012. The growing ultra-nationalist fervor of the regime, coupled with an ideology of national rebirth, seemed to justify the use of Griffin’s definition of the “fascist minimum.” However, many questions remained about the precise character of Putin’s regime. Although this regime seemed to fulfill some minimal criteria of fascism, it seemed at the same time more moderate, not to say “more liberal,” than the fascist regimes of the interbellum. There were no paramilitary blackshirts, and although the opposition was repressed, it was not totally crushed. Elections were still held, and there even existed a few independent papers and radio stations. Putin’s Russia, in short, was and is not a totalitarian state.

Putin, Napoleon III, and Berlusconi

This brought me to compare Putin’s regime with two other regimes: that of Napoleon III in France and with a new form of modern populism, represented by the regime of Silvio Berlusconi in Italy. The similarities between Putin’s Russia and the regime of Napoleon III were striking. Like Putin’s regime, the regime of Napoleon III was characterized by an omnipresent secret police, the existence of a formal multi-party system with a weak and manipulated parliament, the objective to enlarge the national territory, and military adventures abroad. The regime of Napoleon III is generally considered a *proto-fascist* regime. However, Putin’s system was more modern than French Bonapartism. It also exhibited characteristics of modern *populist* regimes that have replaced physical repression of the

population by electoral manipulation and psychological brainwashing through the (controlled) mass media. This system has probably found its best expression in the regime of Italy's media tycoon Silvio Berlusconi. In a special chapter the friendship between Putin and Berlusconi is analyzed. This friendship was not only based on personal chemistry, but also on ideological conformity: both men share a neo-liberal and individualistic ideology, which preaches the message: "Enrich yourselves." This ideology is at odds with the collectivism of both communism and fascism. Therefore Putinism, which shares with "classical" fascism its ultra-nationalism and its ideas of national rebirth and imperialist revisionism, cannot be reduced to this classical form of fascism, nor to a modern version of Bonapartist proto-fascism in the style of Napoleon III. Putinism is rather a totally new, hybrid political system that combines elements of classical (interbellum) fascism with older, Bonapartist proto-fascism, and modern, twenty-first century populism. This hybrid system combines pre-modern and modern features. It combines internal repression with the adoption of the advanced globalized capitalist economy. It claims to be a modern democracy with a functioning multi-party system, but has in fact privatized the political sphere, establishing the power monopoly of a single political party in the service of a clan. It preaches "the dictatorship of the law," but puts itself above the law. It claims to respect international law, but breaches the elementary rules of international law by bullying its neighbors, invading a neighboring country, and dismembering it. It declares that its objective is to modernize the country, but two essential ingredients of a modern country, political freedom and the alternation of power, are absent.

Putinism: An unstable system of hybrid "fascism lite"?

This hybrid system of "fascism lite" which combines elements of proto-fascism, fascism, and post-fascism presents a softer face than Mussolinian fascism. However, it still contains a hard core of ultra-nationalism, militarism, and neo-imperialism. Therefore, one can expect that Putin, confronted with a growing internal opposition, will resort to increased repression at home and will conduct an anti-Western (read: anti-American) foreign policy abroad, eventually coupled with neo-imperialist adventures in Russia's Near Abroad. These neo-imperialist adventures are aimed to forge a broad consensus behind his leadership.

However, Putinism, as an authoritarian system, is bound to the personal fate of the leader and his clan. It is therefore highly unstable.

The big question is, therefore, how it will develop in the near future. The system of Napoleon III liberalized at the end of his reign. Berlusconi, although attacking the independence of the judiciary and undermining parliamentary democracy, was unable to destroy Italian democracy: in the end he was forced to quit. The systems of the interbellum, on the contrary, developed a deadly, totalitarian dynamic. What direction will Putin's Russia take? There are reasons for concern. The internal dynamic of the Putinist system in the first 12 years of Putin's reign was characterized by a continuing centralization of power and the elimination of potential competing power centers, bringing civil society more and more under the control of the government. After 12 years of Putinism there are clear signs of a "Putin fatigue" in Russian society. This will only strengthen the resolve of the regime and one may not exclude a scenario in which the "Weimar Parallel" will develop further. Much will depend on the strength of the democratic forces in Russia. But also the West has here a role to play by not letting its policies be guided by narrow commercial and financial interests or by the illusions of an ephemeral "reset." It should take vis-à-vis Putin's Russia a principled attitude by not condoning infringements on democratic procedures, it should not turn a blind eye on violations of human rights, and it should not resign to breaches of international law. This is also in the interest of the West itself. Because Putinism is not only a political system that denies the Russian citizens their fundamental democratic rights, nor is Putinism only a threat to Russia's immediate neighbors. Putinism is far more: it is a new right-wing radical *political model*, ready to be exported abroad. In the present economic and financial crisis, we can witness in the European Union the emergence and the worrying growth of populist and right radical political parties. Leaders of these parties are not only motivated by a deep-seated anti-Americanism and an aversion of liberal democracy: many of them consider Putin's Russia as a model to be followed. Marine Le Pen, leader of the French *Front National*, for instance, expressed in an interview in autumn 2011 with the Russian paper *Kommersant*, her admiration for Putin. "I admire Vladimir Putin," she said, adding: "we need to develop relations with Moscow and not with Washington."¹⁷ The Putinist model has already found an adept in Ukraine's President Yanukovich. Even governments of EU member states are tempted, as the example of the government of Viktor Orbán in Hungary makes clear. "Both Orbán and Yanukovich," one can read in a recent report of Freedom House, "have been accused of pursuing the 'Putinization' of their countries."¹⁸ The high expectations of 1991 were that Europe would function for Russia as an example and inspiring

beacon of democratic rule. Today these expectations have been turned upside down. In a European Union that is struggling to survive its most existential crisis since its foundation, the attractiveness of the European model is at a nadir and liberal democratic governance is increasingly challenged by populist, autocratic, and right-wing alternatives. Putinism, this new, hybrid mixture of pre- and postmodern authoritarianism is one of these alternatives. It casts its shadow over Europe in a similar way as Italian fascism did in the aftermath of the First World War.

Part I

“Weimar Russia”

The Validity of a Historical Parallel

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Russia and the Weimar Republic: Does a “Weimar Parallel” Exist?

Both Europeans and Americans increasingly assume that peace and calm are the natural order of things in Europe and that the first 45 years of this century, not the most recent, were the aberration. This is understandable since Europe has been free of war for so long that an ever-growing proportion of the Western public, born after World War II, has no direct experience with great-power war. However, this optimistic view is incorrect.¹

John J. Mearsheimer

Introduction: The danger of Praetorianism

In 1968 Samuel Huntington published his classic book *Political Order in Changing Societies* in which he warned that the outcome of sudden political changes in countries with ineffectual political institutions could be chaotic. A sudden increase in political participation, he wrote, instead of promoting democracy, could lead to a *praetorian system*. A praetorian system was, according to Huntington, a system in which “social forces confront each other nakedly; no political institutions, no corps of professional political leaders are recognized or accepted as the legitimate intermediaries to moderate group conflict. Equally important, no agreement exists among the groups as to the legitimate and authoritative methods for resolving conflicts (...) Each group employs means which reflect its peculiar nature and capabilities. The wealthy bribe; students riot; workers strike; mobs demonstrate; and the military coup.”² Huntington’s description of a praetorian system seemed rather adequate to describe the transition period in the Soviet

Union from 1988 to 1991—even before the abortive KGB-inspired coup against Gorbachev.

Huntington's analysis was later adapted by Jack Snyder in an article published in the spring of 1990 in *International Security* with the title "Averting Anarchy in the New Europe."³ In this article, Snyder pointed already to the possibility that the introduction of a market economy and a pluralist parliamentary democracy in—what then still was—the Soviet Union, would not, in itself, herald an epoch of international peace. On the contrary, it could be the beginning of an epoch of new, unknown conflicts. Snyder was concerned over what would happen in the Soviet Union, "which was undergoing a huge leap in mass political participation in the context of an authoritarian tradition and a demonstrable de-legitimation of its previous governing institutions. 'Traditional' elite groups, in this case the conservative sectors of the Party and the military, have corporatist interests that in the past have inclined them toward a conflictual approach to international politics."⁴ Snyder mentioned the Weimar Republic as a possible model for political developments in Soviet Russia: "In the 1920s, for example, Weimar Germany and Taisho Japan were societies on the cusp of emerging from praetorian patterns. Liberal, democratic, free-trading, non-militarist institutions were potentially emerging in these two states in the 1920s (...). When this relatively liberal international order collapsed with the Depression at the end of the 1920s, however, the liberal regimes in Germany and Japan collapsed along with it."⁵ Fifteen years later, Snyder's doubts about a possible negative evolution of post-Soviet Russia had all but disappeared. In a new book, *Electing to Fight—Why Emerging Democracies Go to War*, written with Edward Mansfield,⁶ the authors wrote: "The period of democratization by great powers has always been a moment of particular danger, in part because when states are militarily strong they may seek to use their force in pursuit of nationalist goals. Vladimir Putin, for example, calculated carefully in using the Second Chechen War to win election as president in Russia in 2000."⁷

From optimism to pessimism

Shortly after Snyder published his first article, the Soviet Union disintegrated. From that moment the possibility of the Weimar Parallel has been evoked on different occasions. Could the new, democratizing Russia develop into a new version of the Weimar Republic? That was the question. The answers varied according to the historical situation of the moment and the views of the different authors. Former U.S. President

Richard Nixon was after Snyder one of the first to warn against a Weimar scenario. In his book *Seize the Moment* (1992) he wrote: "Perilous historical analogies can be drawn to the tumultuous change sweeping the former Soviet Union. We could see a replay of the Bolshevik Revolution, with a fragile democratic order crushed by a reactionary coup. We could see a reprise of the fall of the Weimar Republic, with an economically wounded democratic government gradually eclipsed by ultranationalists promising renewed glory."⁸ Two years later, in 1994, a Weimar and Russia Forum was organized by the Institute of International Studies at the University of Berkeley. One of the speakers was Andrei Melville, Chair of the Department of Political Science at the Moscow State Institute for International Relations MGIMO. Melville saw some parallels between the new Russia and Weimar. He stressed "the extreme importance" of "the fact that in Weimar Germany and in post-Soviet, post-communist Russia, we are dealing with a *post-imperial* context. The Weimar Republic emerged out of the rubble of the Wilhelminian empire through the defeat and imposition of the humiliating Treaty of Versailles."⁹ Equally, in the Russian case, there was a country that "suffered from wounded national pride," a country "that faced domestically a serious revanchist opposition."¹⁰ But was this post-imperial trauma, that post-Soviet Russia shared with Weimar Germany, enough to conclude that there was a parallel between both situations? For Melville there was no reason for despair. On the contrary, he was more inclined to see "reasons for cautious optimism." One of these reasons was the emergence of a civil society. "The genie is out of the bottle," he said. And if someone would ask him: "Is the glass half-full or half-empty?" he would answer: "I believe it is half-full."¹¹

This same cautious optimism was still shared by Stephen Sestanovich, Director of Russian and Eurasian Studies at the Washington-based Center for Strategic and International Studies. In an article in *Foreign Affairs*, which was published in the same year, he wrote: "New democracies in danger always call forth comparisons with the doomed Weimar Republic, and there is no denying that the analogy is useful for thinking about Russia's prospects."¹² He went on to suggest that the situation in Russia was even worse, because "Russians have to create what they call a 'rule of law' state," while "Germany in the 1920s was (...) a *Rechtsstaat*"¹³ But despite its many handicaps he thought that Russia could overcome its problems and concluded his article with a hopeful: "The struggle is far from over. Yet for all the country's troubles, the disorder of everyday life and the lack of constitutional traditions, it is getting easier to imagine Russian democracy's success."¹⁴ Three years later, in 1997, this same

cautious optimism could still be observed in another article in *Foreign Affairs*, written by David Remnick. In this article, with the title “Can Russia Change?,” Remnick characterized Yeltsin’s Russia as follows: “The rise of oligarchy summons up Argentina, *the power vacuum evokes Weimar Germany*, the dominance of the mafia hints at post-war Italy, and the presidential constitution recalls De Gaulle’s France of 1958.”¹⁵ Despite these qualifications, Remnick’s overall assessment of the situation, like those of Melville and Sestanovich before him, remained globally positive. “But while Russia’s problems alarm the world on occasion,” he wrote, “none of these analogies takes into account the country’s possibilities.”¹⁶

However, one year later, in 1998, this relative optimism was no longer shared by Andreas Umland, who published a comprehensive study on “Weimar Russia.” According to Umland, “Russia’s fragile unconsolidated democratic regime is operating under political conditions which are in some regards indeed relatively similar or equivalent to those of Weimar Germany.”¹⁷ Therefore, “‘Weimar Russia’ seems to be a not altogether inappropriate metaphor and conveys some insight into the condition of post-Soviet Russia.”¹⁸ The relative optimism, expressed earlier by foreign Kremlin watchers, seemed to have made place for *doubt*. According to Umland, “to make a definite assessment—whether more optimistic or pessimistic—is difficult.”

Seven years later, after Putin’s first term as Russian President, the Weimar metaphor was used again, this time by the British historian Niall Ferguson. Ferguson sounded not only concerned, but outright alarmed. In an op-ed that appeared in the *Daily Telegraph* on January 1, 2005, with the title “Look back at Weimar—and start to worry about Russia,”¹⁹ he wrote that “the resemblance between Russia now and Germany in the 1930s seems especially apt.” And he continued: “The Weimar parallel is not encouraging. Germany’s descent into dictatorship went in stages: there were three more or less authoritarian chancellors before Hitler, each of whom sought to rule Germany by decree. The question that remains open is whether Putin is just a more successful version of one of these authoritarian warm-up acts, or a fully fledged Russian *führer*. Either way, he is fast becoming as big a threat to Western security as he is to Russian democracy.”²⁰ Two years later, on May 28, 2007, Ferguson came back on the Weimar analogy in an op-ed that was published in the *Los Angeles Times*. He wrote that “the man who succeeded Boris N. Yeltsin (...) is doing much to vindicate our analysis.”²¹ And he continued: “Yet this is not Cold War II. Unlike in the 1950s and 1960s, Russia is not self-confident but insecure. (...) It is a waning power. The value of the