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Vladimir Putin and Russia's Course: An Exchange of Views

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February 04 2005, 3:30 p.m. - 5:30 p.m.

Event Summary

"Truly democratic development is the harmonious development of institutions, and in Russia today, say Putin's advisors, this means slowing down the development of those democratic institutions that have gone too far and allowing the rest to catch up," according to **Nicolai Petro**, Professor, Department of Political Science, University of Rhode Island, and former Title VIII-Supported Short-Term Scholar, Kennan Institute. At a 4 February 2005 Kennan Institute seminar, Petro and **Michael McFaul**, Peter and Helen Bing Senior Fellow, Hoover Institution, Stanford University; Associate Professor of Political Science, Stanford University; and Senior Associate, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, debated the positive and negative aspects of President Vladimir Putin's leadership of the Russian Federation. Petro argued that Putin and his advisors have a very specific plan that may bring democracy and prosperity to Russia, while McFaul argued that Putin is reversing the progress toward democracy that was made during the Yeltsin era.

According to Petro, during the Yeltsin era, "the collapse of Soviet institutions led to the rise of regional feudalisms." Putin came to power hoping to remedy the chaos of the Yeltsin era and accomplish three sets of reforms: stabilization of the ruble, creation of a unified legal space throughout the federation, and governmental reforms. Petro argued that while Putin has been quite successful in the first two areas of reform, his governmental reforms have been effectively blocked by regional governors, who are virtually unassailable by either regional voters or the federal government. Putin chose to address this problem by bypassing the governors and utilizing the FSB, the successor organization to the KGB, as "an alternative managerial elite, one that while professionally less competent than private managers, has the benefit of being committed to the welfare of the state, and can be relied on to administer national assets for the good of the country as a whole."

Petro added that Putin and his advisors—while acknowledging that this use of the FSB is not an ideal situation—hope these policies will lead to a number of desirable outcomes, including: convincing large businesses to prioritize the national interest over personal gain; decreasing regional corruption; increasing the number of small and medium businesses (and by so doing strengthening civil society); increasing trust in local government; strengthening national political parties; and incubating civil society groups through the newly established social chamber.

Putin's strategy, in Petro's view, is a typical example of developmental authoritarianism. While Russia is by no means a democratic state today, Petro argued that developmental authoritarianism has brought economic growth and, eventually, democracy to other countries, and may do the same for Russia. He contended that the development of a true liberal democracy in Russia will depend on whether Putin's new governmental structures are seen as responsive to popular needs and whether economic growth is accompanied by a decreasing gap between rich and poor. Petro added that "the speed and extent to which Russia integrates into Western institutions as a full participant" will also play an important role in its democratic development.

McFaul responded that he and Petro "have a fundamentally different conception of the role of the state and the market, and of what democracy is." While he expressed agreement with Petro's assessment of Putin's strategy, he argued that this strategy is more a cause for concern than for hope. According to McFaul, despite all the negative aspects of the Yeltsin era, Russia developed the basic elements of electoral democracy in the 1990s. Putin's policies, he contended, have eroded the limited pluralism that existed in Russia, which will be detrimental to the future of democracy. "Elimination of pluralism, and centralization of decision-making...within the executive branch—that to me has been what Putin's project has been all about," he said. McFaul listed a number of ways in which Putin has decreased pluralism within the Russian polity, including: conducting a brutal war in Chechnya, eliminating independent national media, decreasing the independence of regional governors and the Duma, and breaking the power of the oligarchs.

Putin's policy of centralizing decision-making power is based on "a fundamental misconception about states in the 21st century," McFaul said. "He believes that this increase in authoritarianism...is the equivalent of making the state stronger and more capacious." Developmental authoritarianism was a successful strategy for turning rural societies into modern, industrial societies, but, in McFaul's view, it will not be helpful for Russia today. Russia's goal is not industrialization but the development of a post-modern, information-based economy, and state control will stifle innovation. McFaul also cautioned that authoritarianism in states that depend heavily on oil exports is a recipe for corruption rather than for development.

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In spite of their disagreements on whether Putin's policies of centralization will be harmful or beneficial to Russia, McFaul and Petro agreed that the future of democracy in Russia deserves attention from the U.S. and the international community. According to McFaul, "we both want Russia to prosper and thrive...and I think the reason we wanted to have this debate...is to think about the arguments that will help Russia get toward that."

Washington, D.C. 20004-
Email: kennan@wwic.si.e
Tel: 202/691-4100

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Ronald Reagan Building and International Trade Center
One Woodrow Wilson Plaza
1300 Pennsylvania Ave., NW
Washington, DC 20004-3027
T 202/691-4000