

# Russian President Putin moves toward authoritarian rule

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Last month Russian President Vladimir Putin presented a package of measures aimed at the establishment of an authoritarian state with tightly organised central powers. At the heart of the measures was a so-called administrative reform, ostensibly intended to "increase the effectiveness of federal power in the regions" and secure "the constitutional authority of the president".

To this end, the powers of the heads of Russia's 89 regions are to be severely limited. According to a presidential decree that Putin submitted on May 13, seven federal districts will be established, in which a representative appointed by the president will enjoy powers comparable to those of the governors general under tsarist rule.

The boundaries of the new districts coincide almost entirely with the territories of the military districts into which the army is divided. The only exceptions are the Nizhniy Novgorod region, which is to be integrated into the new Volga district, and the Kaliningrad.

The centres of the new federal districts are almost without exception the respective headquarters of the military districts. Beside the Volga district already mentioned (with its centre in Nizhniy Novgorod) and the Central district (Moscow), a north Caucasus district (Rostov on the Don), a Northwest District (St. Petersburg), a Urals District (Yekaterinburg), a district in Siberia and a far-eastern district will be formed.

With two exceptions, the appointed heads of these new territorial units were people from the military who are close to President Putin. One exception is former Prime Minister Sergei Kirienko, who will manage the Volga district. Kirienko was formerly the leader of the pro-market Duma fraction "Union of Right-Wing Forces" and a member of the "Young Reformers" group of Gaidar-Chubais. The other exception is the former diplomat Leonid Dratchevski, who will lead the Siberian district. The others are without exception representatives of the armed forces or secret service.

The two key districts—the Central and the Northwest—are to be led by up-and-coming figures from the Soviet secret service. Georgi Poltavchenko, lieutenant general of the powerful tax police, was appointed as the president's representative in the Central district. He gained his apprenticeship in aircraft manufacture and in 1979 completed the KGB's advanced training course in Minsk. Afterwards he worked for almost 15 years in the KGB leadership in the Leningrad area and since 1992 has led the St. Petersburg tax police. It is assumed that this was when he became close to Putin.

The head of the Northwest district, Viktor Cherkosov, lieutenant general of the FSB (the successor organisation of the KGB), according to his own accounts counts among those closest to the president. He worked during Leonid Brezhnev's rule in the investigation department of the Leningrad KGB as a specialist in the pursuit of dissidents, and in 1984 was awarded the KGB's "red star" medal for his services. Most recently he was deputy director of the FSB.

The Ural district will be led by the former deputy minister of the interior, Colonel General Piotr Latychev; the North Caucasian district by

Colonel General Viktor Kasanzev and the Far Eastern district by Lieutenant General Konstantin Pulikovski, commanding officer during the first Chechen war.

The president's representatives will not merely fulfil formal functions. The official description of their functions includes control of all armed forces in their respective districts, as well as control of budgetary items and the activities of the heads of the previous federal regional units. The president's representatives are also to become equal members of the Russian Security Council. Also announced was the creation of special district departments of the chief public prosecutor's office.

The newspaper *Sevodnya* commented on the president's appointments with the words: "Russia embarks on a new stage, in which the country's political power is given to people with epaulettes."

A key element of the administrative reform is a radical change in the status of the Federation Council—the upper chamber of parliament.

The previous federal power structures can be traced back to Yeltsin's arguments with his political opponents. At that time, opposition was concentrated in the Supreme Council of Russia and later in the *Duma*, the lower chamber of parliament. To strengthen his power, Yeltsin rested on the regional potentates, whom he granted more and more rights and authority. Yeltsin's well-known expression, "Take as much power as you can", was addressed to the regional elite and was used by them to the full. The Federation Council became the counterweight to the Duma and the bulwark of regional separatism.

Thus a situation arose in which at least one-fifth of regional laws no longer corresponded with federal laws, while some federation subjects enjoyed semi-independent status (for example Tatarstan on the Volga or the large Yakutia in east Siberia). Although the Russian constitution does not specify who exactly can represent a region in the Federation Council, almost all of these positions are usurped by the governors and regional legislatures, which usually consist of close personal contacts of the governor.

The Kremlin is now trying to rob the governors of their status. Apart from the withdrawal of control over the armed forces and part of the budget, it has already been suggested that the governors be banned from sitting in the Federation Council. Moreover, a law is to be enacted for the initiation of criminal procedures against governors and their removal from office.

The announcement of these measures was met with unconcealed enthusiasm by most of the mass media and the dominant political forces. V. Trechakov, the editor-in-chief of *Sevodnya*, controlled by Boris Beresovsky, called Putin's decisions "absolutely right in principle and politically strong and consistent". The Internet site *Gazeta.Ru* gushed that a state was being forged. According to the site, the initiatives of the Kremlin are not "reforming state power, but creating it anew". These measures are "the first step in creating a system of state power, not family, oligarchy, governors' power, but a real state power".

According to the newspaper *Isvestia*, Putin's initiative to reform the

power structures of the state "draws a line under the first 10-year development period of the political system in Russia. Almost the entire earlier state formation is shattered and by this autumn ... we will live in a completely different country."

This reaction to Putin's measures makes clear that the mood in Russia's new ruling class has changed fundamentally. The political course which Boris Yeltsin took in 1991 with the collapse of the Soviet Union is being corrected, and the difference between the "Yeltsin epoch" and the "Putin epoch" is emerging clearly.

The Yeltsin period was based on two different myths and illusions. According to the first myth, capitalist reforms would lead to increasing prosperity for all citizens and the liquidation of the privileges of the old Soviet *nomenclature*. According to the second, the development of capitalism would form a natural basis for democracy and the stabilisation of civil rights and liberties.

But towards the end of Yeltsin's rule, and especially after the financial crisis of August 1998, it became clear that the real development was taking a completely different course. The defence of the interests of the new ruling class required not the development of democracy, but rather the introduction of increasingly authoritarian and repressive methods of rule.

Yeltsin wanted to go into history as the creator of "Russian democracy" and therefore hesitated to take responsibility for decisions demanded with ever greater vehemence by the Russian financial and political elite. Putin set as his task the implementation of this new program. It is based on a clear understanding of the contradiction and incompatibility of the interests of the very thin layer of *nouveaux riches*, on the one hand, and the mass of working people on the other.

Putin's reforms also have another aim: to protect Russian capitalism from the destructive impact of competition from international companies. For this reason, the present undertone of confrontation with the West became a necessary and integral part of Kremlin policy.

Putin's measures are not at all original. He is largely putting into practice proposals advanced at the end of the 1980s and beginning of the 1990s by the ultra-nationalist demagogue Vladimir Zhirinovskiy. These proposals were based on the premise that the internal instability of Russia (and before that the USSR) was not due to the failure of prevailing social and economic policies, but to the federal principle under which the country was organised.

Russian nationalism traditionally responded to the internal problems of the country by rejecting any cultural or autonomous rights for the regions. Based on this principle of unification and "equalisation", the military-bureaucratic system of the last tsarist dynasty, the Romanovs, suppressed the strivings of national minorities or sub-populations for elementary democratic rights with merciless cruelty. This was why the Romanov's empire was dubbed the "prison of the peoples".

The federal principle was implemented with the October Revolution of 1917. The Bolshevik leaders believed that the different economic levels of development of the regions and the absence of a uniform national market necessitated a federalist state structure. They pursued a consistently democratic policy and anticipated that the gradual development of the economy by socialist means would create the material basis for overcoming the difficulties and contradictions of the internal administrative structure.

But the increasing influence of Stalinism soon led to a revival of the old forms of a centralised bureaucratic state. Already in 1922, during the preparation of the first constitution of the USSR, Stalin attacked Lenin, accusing him of "national-liberal inclinations". In the end, under Stalin, a system was created which ignored the democratic rights of citizens and subordinated everything to one goal—the preservation of power in the hands of a privileged bureaucratic caste.

Yeltsin relied upon those sections of the former *nomenclature* who

sought to retain their privileges by transforming them into private property. The regional separatism encouraged "from above" led Russia to the verge of collapse.

The connections with the regions were further weakened by the integration of the Soviet economy into the structures of the world market. The weak and unprotected regional economies "escaped in all directions" and became increasingly dependent on different sectors of the world economy.

The present change in Kremlin policy arises from the course that has been pursued over the last 10 years. As under Yeltsin, the interests of the new layer of private property owners are being secured. In order to achieve the same aim in a new stage, Putin is utilising means that were officially discredited and rejected under Yeltsin.

It is remarkable that Putin's plans have not encountered opposition from the governors. Quite the opposite, the majority of them support the Kremlin.

For example, the governor of the Kemerov region, Aman Tulejev, explained: "I support the actions of President Vladimir Putin. In my opinion, they serve to stabilise state power. A formless power is the worst."

Another well-known governor, Dimitri Ajatzkov from the Saratov region, said: "The Federation Council must not become an economic council, but should concern itself with formulating legislation. Therefore I support the initiatives of President Vladimir Putin completely."

Ajatzkov said he had already expressed his support several times for the right of the president to confirm or recall elected governors, and expressed his backing for a Federation Council on a professional basis.

What is the reason for this reaction?

Putin's administrative changes are not primarily directed against the power of the regional heads and do not at all signify a democratisation of the state leadership. Rather, in view of the increasing discontent of the working class "from within" and the rising pressure of international companies "from outside," their real aim consists in consolidating the new ruling layer.

By erecting a centralised, vertical state structure the regime is preparing to participate effectively in the geopolitical battles with the world's prominent powers, and, moreover, to mercilessly suppress the rights of working people inside the country. The governors will be able to "establish" themselves in the new system. They will lose some of their authority on a federal level, but can compensate for these losses with additional rights and possibilities within their own regions.

The representative of the Daghestan Council of State, Magomedali Magomedov, best expressed the mood of the governors, saying he was ready to subordinate the republic completely to the centre, if he was assured complete control inside his region.

Additionally, a Council of State is to be formed which predominantly consists of the governors. The regional powers will thus gain the possibility of becoming part of a "strong state".

A further indication of the Kremlin's increasingly authoritarian policy is its attack on oppositionist media since mid-May. The object of this attack is the holding company of one of the most powerful Russian "oligarchs", the Media Most company of Vladimir Gusinsky.

On May 11, just three days after Putin entered office, the secret service unexpectedly searched the offices of a subsidiary company of the Media Most group. Armed units in black masks occupied the offices for an entire day, seized many documents and even removed technical equipment. The formal reason for the raid was claims by the secret service that the holding company was committing illegal acts by monitoring and bugging its own workers, as well as well-known Russian politicians and entrepreneurs.

Those who provided the political inspiration for this action from behind the Kremlin's walls made no secret of the fact that it was in response to similar actions last year. At that time—during the government of Yevgeny

Primakov, Putin's rival—the offices of Boris Berezovsky's media empire had been searched.

The recent action is more serious, however. It concerns less the struggle of one oligarch clan against another, and more an attempt by the Kremlin to intimidate and suppress oppositional media.

Memories of what happened to *Radio Liberty* journalist Andrei Babitzky are all too fresh. Criminal proceedings were initiated against him because he reported on events in Chechnya from a point of view which contradicted official Kremlin propaganda. It is now clear that this was not a mere episode.

Apart from Media Most, the television channel *TV Zentr*, controlled by Moscow Mayor Yuri Lushkov, and a series of foreign-owned media are being pressured by the government. The Kremlin announced that it wants to tighten conditions for journalistic work on Russian territory.

Secret service officials also searched the offices of the Internet company Senon NSP. With approximately 2,000 customer web sites, this company is one of the largest Internet providers in Russia.

According to official government propaganda, the measures initiated by the government serve to establish a "dictatorship of law". This term is, however, extremely ambiguous. It is claimed that Putin's measures are aimed at establishing elementary order, controlling corruption and criminality, and implementing fundamental democratic rights and liberties for the ordinary citizen. In reality, the reforms are for the preservation and strengthening of an order which serves only an infinitesimal percentage of society—those who were able to enrich themselves in recent years.



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