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Kristin Mahn
Grand Valley State University

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Russia Democratic Retreat:

The Role of the Conflict in Chechnya, Declining Media Freedom and a Subdued Middle Class

Kristin Mahn

Introduction

The Cold War was a war that pinned the communist Soviet Union against the capitalist United States. Communism was all about state ownership of everything and a classless society. Capitalism was all about a society that focused on private ownership and competition. For decades these two ideologies worked against each other to stop the other from expanding. When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1990 there were celebrations across the world because the communist giant had finally been defeated. Many people thought that capitalism and democracy had prevailed. They thought there was no longer anything to worry about. For a while it seemed they were right and that Russia, the biggest country of the Former Soviet Union, was making the transition to democracy. However, this did not last and Russia is still far from a democracy. An absence of communism does not lead to democracy and Russia is a prime example of this. Although it has made serious strides, it is still miles from what would consider a strong democracy. The economic indicators are very bright and since Putin took office in 2000, Russia has enjoyed considerable stability of the economy. Putin and his state have excelled in regards to the economy but fallen behind in regards to the conflict in Chechnya, the freedom of the media and the struggles of the middle class.

This paper will address three major problems in Russia in attempt to prove that although Russia is no longer the oppressive communist state it used to be, it is currently experiencing a democratic retreat and is a long way from being considered a democracy. For a short period under Gorbachev and Yeltsin it appeared that Russia had real potential for transitioning into a democracy; the conflict in

Chechnya was raging but the media was much freer than it had been in the past and the middle class was starting to form. However, on the eve of the year 2000 this all changed. Yeltsin stepped down and appointed Vladimir Putin as his successor. Previous to this Putin had not received much media attention and no one knew what kind of president he would be. In just a short time he made his visions apparent; he wanted to make Russia more prosperous and stable. He successfully did this but he also robbed Russia of many of the freedoms that had been awarded under Yeltsin and Gorbachev. Since 2000 the conflict in Chechnya has intensified and media freedom has been decreased. The middle class has continued to grow and become economically stable but they have remained politically apathetic. Putin has improved conditions in some situations but he has also caused Russia to retreat on its journey towards democracy.

Overall, Russia is still a semi-authoritarian state. The problem in Chechnya is probably one of the biggest problems facing Russia today. The actions against Chechnya are more brutal than under Gorbachev. The Second Chechen War has been painted as part of the Global War on Terror and the Chechens have been portrayed as Islamist extremists. Chechnya is still experiencing serious conflict even though the Second Chechen War is over. The war is over but people are still dying and disappearing every day. The problem in Chechnya is not going to go away anytime soon, especially with Ramzan Kadyrov in power. Many Chechens are still calling for independence from Russia, but Russia is unwilling to grant Chechnya this independence. This is not a problem that will just go away. Russia is still far from democracy and will continue to be as long as it addresses its problem with Chechnya by using force.

The control of the media is also presenting serious obstacles to democracy. Under Gorbachev and Yeltsin the media started to enjoy some freedom. However, Putin has reversed this and the media is once again under state control. Not all media is under state control, just television. But this is still

discouraging because a majority of Russians get their information from television. Under Putin, national television has returned to state control. All of the national television stations are either state owned or owned by individuals who align with the Kremlin. The censorship is not as outright as it was under communism; For the most part the media can print whatever it want as long as it does not relate to politics. When it comes to politics the state still censors what can be broadcasted. If the state is not doing the censoring, then the journalists are. Self-censorship is gaining popularity in Russia. Journalists fear for their lives and so they are hesitant to report on anything that could get them in trouble. Russia is still a very dangerous place for journalists. The return to a controlled media has hurt Russia's chances to democratize because there is no transparency and accountability of the state.

The apathetic middle class and their struggles are another problem that hinders the progression of democracy in Russia. Under communism, there was no middle class so the mere existence of a middle class in Russia shows improvement. However, this also makes it hard to compare the middle class today with communism. So the middle class has to be looked at broadly and evaluated in terms of its political activism and vertical accountability. Theoretically, a middle class is the class that provides accountability and keeps the politics of the country in check. However, this has not happened in Russia. The middle class is still very small but it does exist. The economic stability after years of economic turmoil has lead to a middle class that is not politically active. There has been some improvement in the middle class since communism fell but there is still a lot of potential for change. This change might be occurring now. Recently, the Russian middle class has orchestrated the largest protests since 1991. These protests have the potential to bring about a lot of change in Russia. The middle class in Russia has improved but it still has a long way to go until it will be on the same level as established democracies. The middle class shows some promise of progressing Russia towards democracy.

All three of these problems have roots in the post-soviet period but are still present in Russia today. None of these problems have gone away just because Russia is not longer a communist state. The problems were not exclusive to communist Russia. These three problems are an integral part of why Russia has not democratized since communism fell twenty years ago. Chechnya is worse than under communism. The media is only slightly better than it was under communism. The middle class is showing some potential for improvement but overall it still has problems with political activism. The problems have deep roots in the politics of Russia and because of these problems; Russia is only slightly closer to democracy than it was under communism. These three problems will be explored throughout this paper in an attempt to discover why they still occur. Russia is still a semi-authoritarian country and will remain so until the previous problems are addressed.

The Improvements

Russia is not doing badly in every aspect. The Russian economy has seen much improvement since the fall of communism in 1991. This is why so many people believe that Russia is in a better place now than it was under communism. This is completely true. When you compare the Russian economy today to what it was under communism, the country has experienced great improvement. Before communism fell in 1991 the Russian GDP and economic growth rate was very poor. In 1990 GDP Per capita in Russia was \$3,485(Index Mundi 2011). This number declined immediately after the fall of communism but started to rise again in 2001. The growth rate of the Russian economy was -3% (World Bank 2012). Today the GDP for Russia is much higher with a GDP per capita of \$10,440 in 2010(Index Mundi 2011). This number is slightly lower than what it was before the Global Economic Crisis, but Russia is recovering. The growth rate is also much better. In 2010 Russia's annual growth rate was 4.03% (World Bank 2012). This number has seen quite a bit of fluctuation but has managed to stay positive since 1999 (World Bank 2012). The Russian economy also exports much more now than it did under

communism. Today Russia's exports total \$498.6 billion and Russia is the 10th biggest exporter in the world (CIA World Factbook 2011). In 1992 this number was only \$58.7 billion (CIA World Factbook 2011). This means that in 9 years Russia increased its exports by 850%. This is a dramatic and extremely positive statistic. The economic measures show that there has been improvement in Russia.

It is true that since Putin took office in 1999 that the Russian economy has shown great improvement but this does not mean that Putin is responsible for this improvement. Often the story of Russia's economic improvement is attributed to Putin and the decrease in democratic freedoms is portrayed as necessary to stabilize the Russian economy. McFaul and Stoner-Weiss refer to this as the "Myth of Putinism" (2008). Putin and his policies are not the reason for the economic turnaround; in fact Putin may have caused the economic situation to rebound less quickly than if his policies were not carried (McFaul and Stoner-Weiss 2008). Putin's centralization of power has actually had a negative effect on the economy (McFaul and Stoner-Weiss 2008). The semi-authoritarian regime in Russia has hurt the public safety, health, corruption and the property rights of Russia (McFaul and Stoner Weiss 2008). The frequency of terrorist attacks and murders has increased and Russia is actually performing economically worse than most other post-soviet countries (McFaul and Stoner-Weiss 2008). So even though Russia is doing better than it was before Putin took office, it is not due to Putin and his democratic retreat.

There are also some political measures that demonstrate how Russia has improved since the fall of the Soviet Union. The Freedom House Score for Russia is also slightly better than it was before the fall of 5 for civil liberties and 6 for political rights (Freedom House 2012a). Under communism, both of these categories received a 7. This means there is slightly more freedom in Russia than during communism but Russia is still not free. The Polity IV score for Russia has dramatically improved also. The Polity IV score is measured on a scale from -10 to 10. -10 indicates complete autocratic control in the form of a

hereditary monarchy and 10 indicates a consolidated democracy. Before the fall of communism, Russia measured to be -7 on the scale (Polity IV 2010). As the system started to open and communism started to deteriorate this number started to go up. It reached an all time high of in the mid-2000s (Polity IV 2010). Today the Polity IV score for Russia hovers around 5 (Polity IV 2010). This means that there is much less authoritarian control of Russia which in turn means there is more democracy in Russia. However, this number is not quite high enough to indicate that Russia is a democracy. The Gini index is another good indicator of the progress that has been made in Russia. The Gini index measures the equality of income distribution in a country. One is considered to be perfect inequality and 100 is perfect equality. In 2009 Russia's Gini Coefficient was 40.1 (World Bank 2011). In 1993 this number was 48.4 (World Bank 2011). This shows that although Russia still has quite a bit of inequality, it is slowly improving. For the sake of comparison, the United States Gini coefficient was 45.3 in 2011 (World Bank 2011). So Russia's income distribution is slightly better than the United States'.

The economic and political measures paint a very positive picture of Russia. They do a great job of demonstrating all the ways in which Russia has improved. Both Russia's economy and political system have shown some improvement. However, they do fail to demonstrate that Russia still has many serious problems. Although the Russian economy is doing much better than it was under communism this is not the only thing to consider when deciphering how Russia has changed since 1991. The economy in Russia is great. Yes, Russia is slightly more free and equal and less authoritarian than before. But these are not the only aspects to consider. Russia is still a far way from democracy. There are multiple problems with democracy in Russia but this paper will focus on the conflict in Chechnya, the lack of media freedom and the subdued middle class. All three of these situations must be addressed before Russia can make any dramatic strides towards democracy. In the next part of this paper the problems will be addressed in depth. First the conflict in Chechnya will be discussed, then the media freedom will be evaluated and

finally there will be some dissection of the middle class and the recent protests that have occurred in Russia.

Chechnya

Chechnya is one of the most dangerous regions in Russia. It is a place where basic human rights are violated every day and people are killed for no apparent reason. Chechnya is one of the foremost examples of a way in which Russia is still a country far from democracy. The first instances of disagreement in Chechnya occurred way before the Soviet period and still exist today. Chechnya was conquered by Russia in 1859 and has gone through multiple struggles for independence since. It has briefly gained quasi-independence multiple times, but each time Russia has managed to rein Chechnya back in. One of the most devastating occurrences in Russian/Chechen relations was the deportation of 1944. The Chechens were deported to Central Asia because Stalin suspected they had collaborated with Nazi Germany during WWII. Thirteen years later, in 1957, they were finally allowed to return to their homeland.

From 1957 until the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Soviet state kept a close eye on Chechnya and allowed them very little power or say in the way they were governed. This is not a feature unique to Chechnya, rather it is something that occurred in many of the regions throughout Russia. With Gorbachev's introduction of glasnost and perestroika, the Soviet system was opened up. This led to secessionist movements all over the Soviet Union. Chechnya was one of the regions that had a strong secessionist movement. Jokhar Dudayev, who was elected as the president of Chechnya in the last months prior to the Soviet Union's collapse, declared independence from Russia. This is where current conflict starts. From 1991-1994 there was sporadic conflict between Russia and Chechnya. Russian officials were humiliated many times because they underestimated the resolve of the Chechen

authorities. Russian authorities also failed to realize the access the Chechens had to military stockpiles from the Soviet period and the advantage the Georgian border would provide (Hughes 2007).

In 1994, the First Chechen War began. Both the Chechens and the Russians understood that this war was about the secession of the Chechen Republic (Hughes 2007). Once again Russia underestimated the power of the Chechen forces and failed to carry out a successful and decisive victory. Instead, the war continued until 1996 when a peace agreement was reached, and Russian forces withdrew from Chechnya. Chechnya was granted more autonomy than before, but it still did not receive full independence. During the first war much of Chechnya's infrastructure had been destroyed, and when Russian troops left, crime escalated. This would cause problems for Chechnya in the future.

Many groups in Chechnya were not satisfied with the peace agreement that was reached at the end of the First Chechen War. The First Chechen War left the Chechen infrastructure and economy in shambles. Unemployment was high and there was an increase in criminal activity. This made the Chechen people vulnerable and prime for radicalization. By 1999 many were frustrated with the dysfunctional official economy, limited autonomy and high levels of crime that many rebelled. On top of this a new Supreme Court was put in place and this court ruled by Sharia Law (Zuercher 2007). Islamic principles were embraced by the Chechen government and in turn the people (Zuercher 2007). The Chechen fighters crossed over into Dagestan and supported the declaration of independence for certain parts of Dagestan and Chechnya. This movement has one characteristic that the First War did not have; this movement was an Islamist in orientation (Hughes 2007) whereas mobilization of fighters during the first Chechen War was based on ethnicity (Giuliano 2005). However, there is some disagreement about how Islamist this movement really is. Is it a terrorist movement or a secessionist movement carried out by Muslims? Recently, it has been painted as a terrorist movement (Zuercher 2007). Newly appointed Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin quickly cracked down the rebellion. Putin was also quick to blame

Chechen rebels for bombings in Moscow and Ryazan that occurred in 1999, and he used these as a pretext to renew full-scale armed hostilities with the Second Chechen War. This was the first time that the Chechen conflict had moved to Moscow. This is devastatingly brutal war that still continues in Chechnya today. Russia has claimed the war is now over and that the fighting has stopped but people are still killed in Chechnya for opposing the Russian Government.

Now that the Chechen wars are over, the Russian government has adopted a new approach to dealing with Chechnya. Since the end of the Second Chechen War Chechnya has experienced much more stability and cooperation with Russia. Some attribute this stability to Chechenization. Chechenization is the pacifying of separatist and radical movements by the Chechen people themselves. The radicalization and conflict in Chechnya is being combated by the Chechens themselves. This movement would not have been possible without former Chechen president Akhmed Kadyrov and his son and current president, Ramzan Kadyrov. Akhmed Kadyrov became president in October of 2003 and was assassinated in May of 2004. His assassination caused great discontent throughout the country and threatened to destroy the newly instated strategy of Chechenization (Russell 2008). At the time of Akhmed's death, Ramzan was only 28 years old, which meant he was not old enough to assume the presidency. Instead, Alu Alkhanov was appointed to the position and remained there until Ramzan turned 30 and was able to become president. During the time Alkhanov was president, Ramzan was still seen as a very important political figure and some even viewed him as the unofficial president (Russell 2008). Ramzan has had a huge impact on Chechen politics as of late, and he has played a key role in the stabilization of the country.

Although Ramzan has played a key role in the stabilization of Chechnya, there is a lot of uncertainty about where Ramzan's loyalties really lie. Does Ramzan's loyalty lie with his fellow Chechens or with Vladimir Putin? Many argue that Ramzan is Putin's man and was put into office as a tool for

Putin to indirectly control Chechnya and stop the conflict (Russell 2011, Russell 2008). When Akhmed Kadyrov was assassinated, Putin took Ramzan under his wing (Russell 2008). This close bond between Putin and Ramzan seems to have created parallels in their personalities and the way they address problems. Both Putin and Ramzan have a history of being hostile and unwelcoming to journalist who are critical of the regimes. Both Putin and Ramzan also focus on reducing the ability of the opposition to engage in any meaningful competition with them. Both Putin and Ramzan also belong to the United Russia Party. Ramzan is also very brutal to the Chechens if he believes that they are competition or what is often referred to as “bad Chechens.”(Russell 2011). “Bad Chechens” can be radical Islamists who have links to terrorist organizations or simply individuals who fought against Russia in the Chechen Wars. This is a very broad term and often people are classified as being Bad Chechens when they did nothing more than disagree with Ramzan and his ways. In some cases Ramzan’s treatment of his constituents has been more brutal than the treatment during the Chechen Wars. Ramzan has also been very supportive of Putin’s policies (Russell 2008, Russell 2011) and even went as far as to name a road after him (Vatchagaev 2012). Ramzan also publically supported Putin’s recent run for President (Utsayev 2012). This support is mutual and Putin is often traveling to Chechnya to support Ramzan (Vatchagaev 2012). Putin’s most recent visit to Chechnya took place at the end of 2011 and was designed to support Ramzan who had been facing much criticism in the weeks previous (Vatchagaev 2012).

Even though there is a lot of disagreement over whether or not Ramzan is doing what is best for the Chechens, Putin, himself, or all of these, there is very little disagreement over whether or not Ramzan has helped to stabilize Chechnya. Ramzan is good for Chechnya if just stability is considered. If democracy promotion and human rights are looked at then Ramzan has not helped the situation in Chechnya and some would argue he has even made it worse. Chechnya is far from perfect, but with Ramzan it has seen stability that has not been present since the fall of communism. The removal of Ramzan, by the Chechens, Russians or through an assassination, could destabilize Chechnya and destroy

all the progress that has been made in recent years (Russell 2011) or it could help Chechnya by freeing them from an oppressive dictator. It is impossible to know just how influential Ramzan is. Ramzan is also well loved and has a large personality cult following him. The news programs on Chechen television follow the activities of Ramzan and songs and poems praising him are a part of the everyday media coverage in Chechnya (Vatchagaev 2012). He is very popular in both Chechnya and Russia and has managed to unify his people with the Russian state. After his first 100 days in office he received an approval rating of 85% with most of his support coming from the common Chechens (Mamchur 2006).

Ramzan has also been granted more autonomy than Chechnya has been allowed in the past because Putin seems to trust him (Russell 2008). Ramzan has even managed to start rebuilding some of Chechnya and demanded more funding from the Russian state (Russell 2008). Ramzan realizes that it is crucial to stay connected to the Russian state because they are able to provide many resources Chechnya could not provide on its own. So, even though Ramzan is detrimental for human rights and democracy promotion he has managed to stabilize the region for now. Even though he has managed to help Chechnya in some ways, he is still not a good leader for Chechnya. However he does provide stability. The real question is whether or not the stability in Chechnya is valuable enough that an unjust ruler should be allowed to rule and violate human rights every day. He is not the best leader, but at this point in time he is better than some of the past leaders of Chechnya.

The Chechen wars have created a lot of discrimination against the Chechens living in and beyond the republic. Chechens find it difficult to do the simplest things. They cannot travel freely from one city to another without having to worry about paying bribes, being searched and even being harassed. The Chechen wars have created a lot of discrimination against the Chechens living in and beyond the republic. Chechens find it difficult to do the simplest things. They cannot travel freely from one city to another without having to worry about paying bribes, being searched and even being

harassed. There are still checkpoints in some areas of Chechnya even though the war is considered to be over (Ria Novosti 2008). Even though the war is over, Chechens are still not free to move around as they please.

Although Russia is a relatively rich and modern country, many Chechens live in conditions similar to those in other developing countries. Many Chechens are forced to live off the food they can grow in their gardens and the animals they own (Baiev 2003). Ninety percent of Chechens live below the poverty line (ReliefWeb 2005). Many cities in Chechnya are in ruins from aerial bombardments but the Chechens cannot rebuild because there is a lack of building supplies in the region. This means that many Chechens are living in buildings with holes in the walls and dirt floors. Many Chechens have rebuilt their houses multiple times with whatever materials they can find. Some rebuilding has been done by Ramzan Kadyrov since the end of the Second Chechen war. However, the workers who are rebuilding Chechnya have very little, if any, experience in construction work (Klussman 2007). Many of the workers have not been paid their full salary in months. Although the structures are being rebuilt they still lack water and sewage (Klussman 2007). Electricity in Chechnya is also a luxury outside of the major cities. The majorities of power lines have been destroyed through bombings and have not been rebuilt. People use holes in dirt walls for refrigerators and candles for light. Communication devices such as radios and telephones are only available to the rich and elite. Chechnya does not seem to fit in a country that has developed cities like Moscow and St. Petersburg.

So many Chechens have died from the bombings that there is a large number of orphans in Chechnya (Seirstad 2008). The conflict in Chechnya has left 1,600 children orphaned (Unites Nations 2002). Some of these children have managed to recover from the tragic losses they have experienced, but many of them have not. Many of the children in the orphanages have both physical and mental scars that may never heal (Seierstad 2008). The orphanages they stay in are not real orphanages, either.

Instead, they are simply homes of generous couples who have large hearts and are willing to help those in need. There are easily enough orphans in Chechnya to fill 10 orphanages, but Chechnya only has 3 orphanages (Ramazanova 2006). On top of all this, President Kadyrov does not believe in orphanages. He believes it is wrong to take these children from their homes (Seierstad 2008). It is scary to think that people at such a young age are going through such tragic experiences.

Chechens in Chechnya live in fear every day as do the Russians who are stationed in Chechnya. There is no telling when individuals may be kidnapped in the middle of the night and taken to an undisclosed location where they are tortured until they confess to a crime they know nothing about or reveal information that is based in very little truth. In Chechnya people disappear in the middle of the night with disturbing regularity (Seierstad 2008, Baiev 2003, Politkovskaya 2003, Goltz 2003). Since the start of the second Chechen War in 1999, between 3,000 and 5,000 Chechens have disappeared (Amnesty International 2010). In some cases the family will be contacted and required to pay a ransom in order to get their loved one back. Often, these ransoms are much higher than one Chechen family can afford, and so the family must get the whole community to contribute. Very rarely is there a Chechen who has not had a family member disappear. In many cases these family members are completely innocent. Often the families never receive closure. There have been fewer disappearances in Chechnya since Kadyrov was appointed, but they have not stopped (Amnesty International 2010). Many human rights advocates have disappeared in Chechnya and then been found dead a few days later (Amnesty International 2010). Disappearance is not something that is unique to Chechnya, as this also happens quite frequently in Dagestan (Ash 2011).

War in general is not anti-democratic, as many democracies are engaged in conflict but still manage to adhere to democratic principles. The problem with these wars in Chechnya stems from the blatant abuse of human rights on the part of both sides. The Chechen wars are brutal wars in which

innocent civilians are consistently killed, young women raped and hospitals blown up. Torture is also a common practice carried out by both the Russian military forces and the Chechen rebels. It seems that almost no one is safe in Chechnya today.

Under communism Chechnya and Russia still experienced some clashes but nothing compared to the conflict that has occurred since 1991. Russia and Chechnya have engaged in large scale hostilities against each other that have resulted in serious human rights violations. Similarly, Ramzan Kadyrov is far from a democrat. The situation in Chechnya is much worse than it was under communism. The conflict in Chechnya is a serious obstacle to Russian democratization and must be overcome before Russia can return to a democratic path.

The Media

State control of the Russian media is one of the obstacles standing in the way of Russian democratization. For decades, being a journalist in Russia has been life threatening if the journalist wants to report the truth and not just state approved material. This started under communist rule. The communists used the media as their personal mouthpiece, and nothing was printed without the consent of the state (Simon 2004, Oates 2006). Communism required extremely strict control of the media. Under Soviet rule there simply was no press freedom because the regime rested on the idea that the people believed the Communist Party was the best choice and if contrary evidence was reported then it could bring the whole structure of the regime crumbling down. If an individual was discovered distributing anti-Soviet propaganda he/she was arrested, forced to work in the labor camps or declared mentally ill and sent to a mental institution (Oates 2006). In fact, this did happen. With the implementation of glasnost and perestroika the press was much freer than it had been in many years. This opening of the press encouraged more truth in the stories that were being published, which exposed many practices such as corruption, unsafe environmental practices and human rights violations.

When the public found out about these occurrences they dissented (Simon 2004). This freedom persisted for a while after communism fell. Under Yeltsin the press enjoyed the most freedom since before World War II. Yeltsin continued the opening of the press that had been started by Gorbachev (Obydenkova 2007). Yeltsin and his government did not take actions to oppose media criticism and often encouraged political and social activism. Yeltsin implemented laws that guaranteed the press their newly found freedom (Obydenkova 2007). In fact, Article 3 of the 1993 Russian Constitution does guarantee the right to a free press in Russia. Another piece of legislation was The Soviet Law of Mass Media which was adopted as part of the Russian Legal Code in 1991. Article 1 states that the mass media can only be restricted under special circumstances such as the divulging of state secrets. Article 3 of the statute endeavors to ease the necessity of media outlets to register with the state. This law was not perfect and had many loopholes that allowed the government to have some control over the media (Oates 2006). But it was a considerable improvement over the Soviet era of censorship. Freedom of speech was not perfect under Yeltsin, but it was much better than it had been under communism. At the national level, Yeltsin and his government valued freedom of speech, but this is not a characteristic that the regime of his predecessor would share. The media was allowed a good deal of freedom.

Although the media was relatively free under Yeltsin, this did not last. Just four days after taking office Putin was quick to launch an attack on the media (Daniels 2000). Putin was quick to rein in the press and limit their newfound freedom, making it extremely difficult to criticize him or his government. Putin has clamped down on media, business and civil society (Skillen 2007). The media is not completely controlled by Putin; for the most part they can print whatever they want, except in politics. Putin does not allow free media when it comes to the reporting of politics (Skillen 2007). Putin puts considerable pressure on the media to back the state and help to maintain its stability by supporting it (Obydenkova 2007). He exerts pressure by using the legal system to his advantage and through intimidation and fear. Putin often uses the media for his own gain, (Skillen 2007) something that is not difficult for him to do

since the majority of the oligarchs that own the media outlets are on the side of the Kremlin (Rodakova 2008, Skillen 2007). One of the reasons Putin has so many Oligarchs on his side is because he has allowed them to retain a lot of freedom. For the most part the state lets the media broadcast whatever it wants as long as they stay away from policies that are anti-Kremlin. The major media owners also align themselves with Putin because they have seen what happens if they do not. In the past Putin has not hesitated to prosecute media oligarchs who challenge him. This was the case with Berezovsky and Gusinskii, both media oligarchs who found themselves facing criminal charges when they refused to fall in line with Putin. In fact, since Putin has taken office more than one hundred rich individuals were forced to flee the country if they wished to avoid criminal charges (Kryshtanovskaya 2008). Putin does receive a lot of support from the oligarchs.

One of the foremost ways that Putin has managed to crack down on the media and its freedom is through the implementation of new legislation. One of the most hurtful pieces of legislation to the press was the Law on Counter-Extremist Activity. The way this law has been implemented has allowed the authorities to punish journalists with up to three years in jail if they criticize public officials (Skillen 2007). Media outlets are being charged and treated like terrorist organizations (Lally 2010). In 2010, 28 journalists were charged with violating this law; 10 of the alleged violations were not even remotely related to terrorism (Lally 2010). Many human rights organizations are against this law and have claimed that it is a serious violation of human rights and international conventions. In fact, many international organizations have written letters to Putin arguing that this law violates an individual's freedom of expression (Skillen 2007).

Another piece of legislation that has been passed is the recent amendment to Article 57, the Media Law of 1991. When passed, the Media Law of 1991 gave the press freedoms it had not previously enjoyed. However, the recent amendment limits those freedoms by making the media responsible for

reprinting or re-broadcasting flawed information during an election campaign. However, there is no specific definition of what is considered flawed information, and this law is used very selectively against people who dare to challenge political officials and their allies. This law targets small outlets more than large ones since they are more likely to be getting their stories from other outlets (Skillen 2007). This piece of legislation is not as bad as the Law on Counter Extremist Activity because it is not as restrictive, but it still poses a serious threat to media freedom.

If a journalist or reporter decides to disregard these laws or report on something he/she knows Putin would not approve, the consequences could be dire and possibly even life threatening. The Putin Administration does not take kindly to people who disobey. Russian journalists could face criminal charges, intimidation, beatings, or in some cases Russian journalists who have decided to challenge Putin have paid with their lives. In the first 8 years of Putin's rule, 14 journalists were murdered because of their publications (Skillen 2007). Since the fall of communism 53, journalists have been killed in Russia, and the motive for all these murders has been linked to their professional work (Committee to Protect Journalists 2011). Twenty-four journalists have been killed with no confirmed motive (Committee to Protect Journalists 2011). The majority of these murders have gone unsolved because there has been little to no investigation into them. Russia's harsh treatment of journalists has made it the 4th most dangerous country in the world for journalists to work in (Zirulnick 2010). Freedom House has ranked Russia 175th out of 196 countries in regards to press freedom (Freedom House 2011). Russia is not just a risky place for journalists to be; it is downright lethal.

Not all journalists that challenge the regime are killed; some are merely beaten so badly that they have to undergo multiple surgeries before they can return to any sort of normalcy. Mikhail Beketov wrote about political culture and accused public officials of creating political terror in Russia. Beletov was beaten so severely, that his leg and several fingers had to be amputated. To this day, he remains in

a wheelchair and has not regained speech (Economist 2010). As if this was not enough, one of the officials he wrote about sued him for libel. The official won. In Russia political officials will not hesitate to use the legal system to constrain dissenting journalists. They will press criminal charges, block the paper's sales and distribution, order police raids, or threaten the journalists just to get them to comply (Skillen 2007). In fact, the criminal code has been used against journalists in more than 300 cases (Skillen 2007). The Russian state has no respect for the rights of free press or the individual rights of the journalists. Russian officials have managed to instill fear in the journalists. They no longer have to threaten journalists because journalists know the risks if they cross the line. Journalists censor themselves.

Journalists in Russia know the limits. There is not a single journalist in Russia who is not aware of the possible consequences of printing or broadcasting anti-Kremlin material. Because Putin has done such a good job of intimidating the media, self-censorship is present and used by many journalists. They know what they can and cannot print (Oates 2000). They realize that if they toe the line that they could end up facing dire consequences (Oates 2000) so instead of printing controversial material, they stick to printing what the state wants them too.

The Russian regime has the most control over television since the three national television stations in Russia are all primarily owned by the state. These are channel 1 (ORT), channel 2 (RTR) and channel 4 (NTV). These are the only channels that reach all of Russia and not just specific regions. News on every national TV channel has continued to become more biased since 1991 (Oates 2006). This is especially dangerous because television is becoming more and more popular in Russia. Thirty-percent of Russians turn the television on as soon as they get home, and 80 million city viewers age 15 and older claim to watch television every day, especially news programs (Kolomiets 2011). For the over 50 age group, television is the primary form of entertainment (Kolomiets 2011). This means that the state

control of television has a huge impact on how people view the state since they get the majority of the information from the television. There is no worthy challenger to the state owned media (Oates 2006). The regime also has some control of the print media through intimidation and regulations (Skillen 2007, Kolomiets 2011). However, the control over the print media is much less than the control over television. This is because very few newspapers have a large audience. Izvestia, the largest newspaper in Russia, is only read by 2% of Russians (Lipman 2005). The state has even started to censor the radio (Skillen 2007). Overall, people in Russia are hard-pressed to find any mass media sources that present them with the truth and not just the Putin approved story.

There is one type of media outlet that Putin has not managed to gain control over – the internet. For all the effort he has put into controlling the other media outlets, Putin has put very little effort into controlling the internet (Simon 2004, Kolomiets 2011). This is probably because it is very difficult to regulate the internet, and most of the time internet regulation is blatantly obvious (Skillen 2007). Although the internet is not censored, the news on the internet often comes from newspapers of television stations that are. So although the internet is not censored, the news in the internet is not completely free from any state influence (Ognyanova 2010). Whatever the reason, the fact that the internet is not being censored is a very good sign. If the internet continues to remain uncensored it will allow Russian citizens to have at least one source of information free from state censorship. Especially with the advent of social media, an unregulated internet can mean an opportunity for the Russian public to organize and engage in civic dialogue (Ognyanova 2010).

There are multiple reasons that a lack of a free press impedes democracy. The first, and most obvious reason, is that freedom of press and individual freedoms are necessary for a country to be considered a democracy. The second reason is because the mass media acts as a mediator between the state and the people (Obydenkova 2007). The press provides vertical accountability. If this link is

missing it means it is harder for the people to get their voice heard and to hold the state accountable. Another reason a free press is important is because it helps to monitor elections and make sure they are free and fair (Skillen 2007). Russia lacks a free press and therefore is a long ways away from having a political system that is anything close to democracy.

The press experienced a great deal of freedom under Yeltsin. The press under Yeltsin provided accountability and openness, something that had not been allowed under communism. This openness and accountability helped Russia to move towards democratization. However, under Putin the country has experienced a backslide and the progress that was made has been minimalized. Freedom of the press is slightly better than it was under communism but it still has a long way to go before it can help democracy to prevail.

The Middle Class

During Soviet times, there were supposed to be no such thing as classes. The Soviet ideology rested on the ideal that everyone was equal and received the same share regardless of his/her job or history. Communism rested on the ideal of a classless society, and the Soviet Union claimed to adhere to this ideal. However, the talk of a classless society did not lead to results. Under Soviet rule there were still significant class divisions. The majorities were poor and barely had enough to get by. If they did have enough it was hard for them to find goods because the stores were so barren and goods were very expensive. However, this was not true for the well-connected elite. In many cases the Party members and nomenklatura had access to many more goods than the average person. There were even special stores that were only accessible to the elites; these stores did not suffer the same shortages as the more common state stores. In the Soviet Union there were two distinct classes; those who were associated with the Party and had access to luxury goods, and everyone else who at times faced difficulty with finding even the most basic goods. Although the Soviet Union claimed to be a classless

society, this was clearly not the case. There was an upper class and a lower class, and the Soviet Union lacked a true middle class. To this day, Russia still lacks a middle class that is substantial and politically active; this is because Russian citizens still face numerous struggles that make it hard to organize. However, recent protests in Russia might be evidence that the Russian middle class is not as passive as it has been in the past.

Before the Russian middle class can be examined, it must first be defined. Class structure around the world is very complicated and Russia is no exception (Cole 1950). There is not a single unified middle class in Russia, instead there are various middle classes (Avraamova 2002). The Russian middle class is very elusive. Whether or not someone belongs to the middle class is not just a matter of income (Cole 1950). There is some consensus about what the Russian middle class is not, but very little consensus regarding what the Russian middle class is. One of the biggest problems with defining the middle class and deciphering its size is the requirement of self-identification. The large majority (80%) of Russians see themselves as middle class (Remington 2011). Definitions of the middle class usually focus on income and investment, education, self-identification and political action. Anurin (2008) defines the middle class quite simply as the middle strata. The middle class consists of those who occupy the space between the lower class working orders and the upper class elite (Anurin 2008). This definition of middle class is very broad and assumes that the other classes are well defined. It also lacks any descriptor that would unify the middle class. Another definition of the middle class looks at socioeconomic conditions, education, occupation, income and self-identification (Avraamova 2002). 80% of people have at least one attribute that puts them in the middle class but very few have multiple. This definition is just too specific for the purposes of this paper. One way to define middle class is to use the level of income and material well-being, occupational and educational status and self-identification (Remington 2011). This is how the Independent Institute for Social Policy in Moscow looks at the middle class. If this definition is used only 5% of the Russian population meets all three criteria and 15% share 2 or more of the criteria (Remington

2011). Although this definition is not perfect, it is still a strong definition. It considers many dimensions that influence socioeconomic status and has data that is current. For the purposes of this paper, anyone who meets at least two of the criteria included in this definition will be considered as part of the middle class.

The fall of the Soviet Union did not do away with all daily difficulties faced by Russian citizens. Since 1991, Russians have faced many problems including economic crisis, health crisis and the rise of elite who seems focused to maintain the current state in Russia and maintain the stark class division in Russia (Kryshtanovskaya and White 2005; Cockerham 2007; Beliaeva 2000). These problems have made it hard for a middle class to develop, and the small middle class that has developed appears to have been more concerned with their own well-being than Russia's political system. This poses serious difficulties for the development of democracy, as a key part of a democracy is an active political class that helps to strengthen accountability and freedom. Since 1991, this is something the Russian middle class has not been able to do because of the other struggles they have faced.

There is a middle class in Russia, it is just small and preoccupied. The middle class only includes 15% of the population in Russia (Remington 2011). Some estimates argue the middle class is 25% of the population (Avraamova 2003) and other argue that it is as low as 9% of the population (Anurin 2008). Although this number seems low, the middle class in Russia has seen growth recently (Anurin 2008). The middle class in Russia is also passive when it comes to politics. Most middle class people are concerned with economic and social inequality (Cole 1950), but this is not true for the Russian middle class (Anurin 2008, Remington 2011). This is a problem because democracies require a strong middle class for accountability (Shankina 2003). This passiveness is unlikely to be overcome in just a generation or two (Shankina 2003). The middle class in Russia does not act like the traditional middle class (Remington 2011).

Russia has faced severe economic complications and the middle and lower classes have suffered exceedingly. The transformation from a centrally planned economy to a market economy was not a smooth one. The transition from a command economy to a market economy plunged the country into poverty. Russia faced economic difficulties for the next six years, and in 1997 there was slight improvement in the economy (APEC Study Center 2010). However, this did not last long and a financial crisis in 1998 destroyed the economic progress that had been made. In August 1998 Russia was forced to devalue the ruble and default on its debt. This caused many Russians to take a dramatic cut in their living standards; the middle class was no exception and suffered dramatic changes in living standards (APEC Study Center 2010). Between 1991 and 1998, Russia's GDP fell about 39% (Shleifer and Treisman 2005). The economy did manage to rebound in 1999-2000 and remained relatively stable and strong until 2008, mostly due to the rise in world oil and gas prices. The economic recession of 2008 managed to lessen some of the progress the Russian economy had made since the 1998 financial crisis. Russia is also highly dependent on a few resources making its economy volatile and unstable. The instability of the Russian economy before Putin came into office made it difficult to establish a full-fledged, contemporary middle class necessary for a strong civil society to hold the state accountable and ensure democracy (Beliaeva 2000). However, Putin has managed to stabilize the economy, which has expanded the middle class as a result of increased incomes (Remington 2011). The middle class in Russia is improving, but it is not quite strong enough to fight Putin.

Probably the biggest struggle the Russian middle class is facing revolves around the allure of consumption (Remington 2011). The Russian middle class earns more than it has in the past. Many members of the middle class have financial stability, but they do not save. The middle class (when defined by income alone) has grown by more than 43% since 2003 (Remington 2011). Only 30% of the middle class saves any money and only 2.6% hold any investment assets (Remington 2011). Instead, they spend more on goods like cars and vacations (Remington 2011). The vast amount of money being

spent on goods shows that the public is more concerned with what they own than politics. So, although, based on income the middle class has grown, it has not grown according to economic independence and investment (Remington 2011). This group does not provide a base for democracy, so it lacks one of the fundamental characteristics associated with the middle class (Remington 2011).

The Russian middle class has recently undergone a transformation that has the whole world holding its breath. Previously, Russian civil society was inactive but in 2011 parts of the middle class woke up and found its voice. Fraudulent election results are not uncommon in Russia, so it was no surprise to the international community that the December 4, 2011 elections seemed to lack legitimacy. What was surprising was the public response to the elections. The public expressed its unhappiness with the election results by partaking in the largest protests since the fall of the Soviet Union. Days after the election, protests were held in Moscow and St. Petersburg. In Moscow the protestors numbered over 50,000 (Clover 2011). There have been multiple protests since, including ones on February 4, 2011. The surprising thing about these protests is that the middle class is starting to wake up and push for political rights. Most of the protestors had been passive their entire lives, focused more on the economic situation than the political one (Whitmore 2011). The protestors want to be involved in politics and want their voices to be heard. This has continued and Russians are still protesting and demanding legitimacy in the elections. The protests have continued. On March 18, 2012, 1,000 protestors gathered outside a pro-Kremlin TV station to express their discontent with Putin's return to power (Associated Press 2012).

The middle class has grown since the fall of communism. This is not surprising considering the middle class under communism was supposed to be non-existent. The creation of a middle class in Russia is very promising, even if the middle class is small and relatively weak in comparison to the middle classes in Western countries. The middle class in Russia shows the most promise and

improvement of any of the three factors that have been addressed in this paper. The middle class is growing and the recent protests may be the start of a middle class that is more politically active and aware than it has been in the past. Overall, the middle class in Russia is improving any paving the way for democracy.

The Explanation

Chechnya is worse, the media is only slightly better and the middle class has shown an improvement and has the potential for much more. But why is this? Why have there been only minimal improvements in the democracy in Russia and why has it experienced a backslide since Putin took office at the end of 1999? As was demonstrated in the last section of this paper, these problems in democracy are rooted in the post-soviet period. Communism lasted for seventy years. This is an extremely long period of time and the majority of Russians who were alive during the collapse of communism had never experienced anything but communism. When communism fell, all the ideas and notions behind communism did not just fade away. People's ideas do not just change in an instant. Many of the soviet ideas still remain and influence the politics today. This is why these problems still exist. Although communism is gone, the ideas behind it are still present. Russians still believe in a strong central state and this allows many of the undemocratic principles to continue. Likewise the middle class did not instantly form after the fall of Communism because there had been no need for a middle class in a very long time. These three factors, coupled with the rise of Vladimir Putin, have allowed undemocratic practices to continue in Russia. These Soviet legacies did not just go away after the fall of communism, instead they have persisted and contributed to the lack of progress towards democracy since communism fell in 1991.

Under communism, a strong central state was necessary. The state was responsible for many different functions within the country from providing salaries and homes for the people to running the

factories and creating the production schedules for these factories. The state had complete control over everything from freedom of expression to what goods could be bought in the store. This came to be part of the soviet ideology and system. People got used to this strong central state and even began to rely on it.

In the United States and in many other Western countries there is this idea of freedom from the state. In the west people often talk about the state being overbearing and controlling too much. Many believe the state should remain small and only get involved when necessary. There is the notion that a strong central state could threaten individual freedom and liberty. This is not true of Russia. In Russia there is no such positive notion of freedom and liberty. Instead it is translated into the word “stikhiya” which means anarchy or random disorder (Lynch 2005). A strong central state is seen to protect against this anarchy and random disorder. There is not this negative notion of a strong central state in Russia that there seems to be in the Western countries. Instead, the Russians value a strong central state and even attribute their past success to it (Lynch 2005).

Without a strong central state, Russia would not be the massive country that it is today. The strong militarized state propelled the expansion of Russia throughout central Eurasia (Lynch 2005). Russia would not control one-sixth of the earth’s surface if it was not for this strong central state. Similarly, the strong state allowed the Russians to incorporate, by force, new populations when they conquered a new land (Lynch 2005). The fusing of the empire and the state further strengthened the state and meant that if anyone challenged the empire they also challenged the state. This made it even harder for anyone to challenge Russia and made the country even more successful militarily. Because the empire and state were so closely entwined, dismantling the state meant dismantling the empire and Russia’s position of power in the world. The strong central state has also allowed it to defend western attacks and threats (Lynch 2005). The state has been a major constant for Russia politically,

economically, and developmentally for more than 500 years. The strength of a strong central government is still very central for Russian civilizations today. Many still call for a strong central state to run the country (Lynch 2006). The strong central state is still very important in Russia and is not just going to disappear.

This strong central state is constantly impeding democracy and contributes to all three of the factors that were previously discussed in this paper. A strong central state is great for stability but not so great for democracy. The strong central has allowed the censorship of the media to increase. The power the central state possess has allowed it to gain control of all the regional television outlets and use them as their own personal mouthpiece. The media has little opportunity to print on anything political that is contrary to the state because if they do they face a serious threat.

The state is so strong that it can easily go after anyone or thing that disagrees with it. A key example of this is Mikhail Khodorkovsky. Khodorkovsky was the former head of Yukos which is the biggest oil company in Russia. He was the richest man in Russia before he was arrested in 2003 for fraud. In Russia fraud is a very common occurrence and there are very few oligarchs who are not guilty of some sort of fraud. On paper Khodorkovsky was arrested for fraud, but in reality he was arrested because he dared to challenge Putin and accuse Putin and the government of corruption. In a television interview in February of 2003, Khodorkovsky had argued with Putin on national television and implied that the state was guilty of accepting millions in bribes. Putin, the head of the strong central state, was not pleased with Khodorkovsky and easily managed to take down the giant. If the state can manage to take down the richest man in Russia (16th richest in the world), then they can certainly manages to take down a few media oligarchs and journalists without anybody challenging them.

It is not surprising that the Russian government has been able to rein in the press and gain almost complete control over television media. If they can scare a multi-billionaire into hiding and then

put him in jail then there is no limit to what they can do. A state this strong can easily control the media and remove any journalists who dare to challenge the regime. Not only can they dispose of controversial journalists, they can also make it look like they had nothing to do with it. Although Russia is not communist, there is still some sense. The fact that there is self-censorship in Russia demonstrates this. The strong central state has done such a good job of exerting its power that it has intimidated many challengers. Controlling the media has allowed the state to remain relatively powerful while also avoiding scandals. By allowing radio and newspapers more freedom they are allowing some discontent but they are censoring the media outlet that matters the most. The strong central state in Russia is very meticulous with its actions. The strong state control of the media is just one of many ways that Russia has managed to halt democracy. By controlling the television media they have eliminated alternative sources of information and accountability.

The strong central state not only hinders the free media, it also poses an obstacle for the regions throughout the country that wish to gain independence from Russia. The strong central state is what allowed Russia to gain power over the different regions (Lynch 2005) so it is unlikely that the strong central state would be willing to let more regions go than it has to. This is where Chechnya comes into the picture. Chechnya is a very important region to Russia. Not only is it located right next to the Caucasus mountain range but it also has substantial oil reserves. There is also a major oil pipeline that runs through Chechnya, although it has fallen into disrepair since the Chechen Wars started. During the Soviet period Chechnya had very advanced oil refineries. This included 54 facilities and a special university program (Vatchagaev 2008). The promise of oil is alluring to the state but it is not the only reason that the Chechen Wars have continued.

The Chechen Wars have been very brutal. The situation in Chechnya has been worse since the fall of communism than it was under communism. The conflict started because Russia did not want to

lose one of its more valuable regions and it knew that if it allowed autonomy to Chechnya that the other Northern Caucasuses would attempt to follow. The First Chechen War, as previously stated, was clearly a war of succession. The Second Chechen War is much more complicated. The Russian state has painted this war as part of the Global War on Terror and has painted the Chechens as militant Islamists who want to create havoc and destroy order. While some of the Chechen rebels may fit this description, most of them do not. Yes, it is true that Chechnya is an Islamic region but it is not full of terrorists who are engaging in destruction for a cause. The majority of Chechens are not Whabbists even though they have been painted as such.

The strong central state with its control over the media and borders of Chechnya have made it nearly impossible for someone outside of Chechnya to get a feel of what this war is really about. The state is very invested in Chechnya and keeps a close eye on the situation. They do not want the situation to reflect badly on them so they make sure that the stories that come out are only the stories they tell. This means that the stories of the poor Chechens who have rebuilt their homes multiple times and lost family members who were completely innocent will never be told. The stories of Russians who are targeting innocent people who just want to go about their daily lives will be ignored. Instead the stories that are told are the ones of the Islamist militants who take over schools and theaters and kill innocent victims. These stories should be told but so should the stories of the innocent Chechens who do not deserve to have their lives turned upside down. The state is only allowing one side of the story to be told and the conflict is continuing because they are unwilling to negotiate. To solve a problem both sides of the story must be understood. The state is not allowing the story to be told and has no interest in solving the problem.

The state is so strong and overbearing that the situation is just getting worse. Although the fighting has stopped there are still serious human right violations occurring in Chechnya. The conflict is

far from over and the Russian state is unwilling to negotiate with the Chechens. This is not a problem that will simply go away if ignored. Both sides of the conflict need to understand the real problem and address it. By covering up the problem the conflict is just being prolonged. The strength of the state has caused this problem to last longer and be more brutal than necessary. The strong central state in Russia is used to doing whatever it wants and having absolute power over all its regions. The strong central state is just making the problem in Chechnya worse.

The strong central state is also making it extremely difficult for a strong and politically active middle class to develop. A very strong middle class is needed to combat such a strong state. A middle class does not just appear as soon as an oppressive government falls; this is something that will be discussed in more depth later. The strong central state has made it even harder for a middle class that is politically active to develop. For a politically active middle class to develop it must be able to organize and express its discontent with the government. It is extremely difficult for a middle class to grow if it is constantly being targeted by the state. This is what is occurring in Russia. There was a small amount of political mobilization in Russia as the Soviet Union fell but once communism was gone so was the factor that united the mobilization (Lynch 2005). The post-soviet societies have proved to be extraordinarily weak in regards to civil action and political participation (Lynch 2005). A strong middle class could have the potential to combat the strong Russian state but as has already been addressed, the middle class in Russia is still very weak. It takes time for a middle class to build and the right conditions for a middle class to expand. It also does not help that for the most part the Russian economy is doing really well right now. There is not a uniting factor that has caused the middle class to challenge the state. The recent protests have shown some potential but probably not enough to bring the semi-authoritarian regime in Russia down. If the middle class shows the potential to hurt the state then the state could always just use its power to silence the middle class. Elections are already fraudulent, the state is already tempering with political participation and there is no indication that they plan on stopping. Once

again, the strong central state that is present in Russia has managed to flex its muscles and stop the progression of democracy.

Democracy depends on a state that is controlled by the people and their representatives so it is not surprising that the strong central state in Russia has impeded democracy. This state has managed to control the flow of information by restricting freedom of the press and gaining control of all the national television outlets. This strong central state has created a narrative of the conflict in Chechnya that will make it hard to solve the problem. In some cases a strong middle class might be able to combat a state that is as strong as the one in Russia but the middle class in Russia is relatively weak. If the middle class were to show much dissent it would not be a challenge for the state to crush this dissent. The strong central state is the primary factor that is thwarting democratic progress in Russia. The idea that a strong central state is necessary is an idea that is rooted deep in the minds of many Russians and stems from before the soviet period. The strength of the state hurts many more aspects of democracy than just the ones that have been explored here. The state has rigged elections in Russia for many years so that it will stay in power. Corruption is rampant in Russia and the strength of the state prevents anyone outside the government from addressing this problem. The Russian state is very powerful and prevents the biggest obstacle to democracy.

To attribute these problems completely to the strong central state would be faulty. This strong central state has been around for decades but there still managed to be some progress towards democracy from 1991-2000. The recent backslide can be attributed to Vladimir Putin. Putin is a very interesting and influential character who has been a political force to be reckoned with since just before 2000. Putin was prime minister under Yeltsin, then he was president from 2000-2008. Currently he is the prime minister under Medvedev and he was just recently elected to another term as president. Many have argued that he still calls all the shots in Russia even though he is not the current president of

Russia. Putin is a very powerful and has played a key role in the way the strong central state has been acting. As head of a semi-authoritarian state he has a great deal of power. He has been the driving force behind much of the legislation that restricts the media. He has painted the conflict in Chechnya as an Islamist movement and is quick to blame any terrorist attacks on Chechnya. He has also managed to get the middle class on his side until recently. Overall, Putin is a very powerful leader and as long as he is in power democracy barely stands a fighting chance.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Russia is not the country it was under communism. The conflict in Chechnya has escalated and become worse. Hundreds have lost their lives and even more have disappeared. The region has been destroyed and many live in horrible conditions. On top of this, the conflict has been painted as an Islamist movement even though most Chechens are not extremists. Kadyrov has managed to stabilize the region but he violates human rights all the time. The situation in Chechnya is just getting worse and worse, and very little progress is being made to solve the problem. Chechnya is not improving, but the media has seen a bit of improvement. The freedom of the media is better than it was under communism but worse than it was under Yeltsin. All the national television stations are under state control and legislation has been passed to restrict the other media outlets. Journalism is also becoming increasingly dangerous. The media is better, but only slightly. Of the three factors, the middle class has shown the most potential for change. The middle class has been constructed from nothing and although it is very weak it is better than what it was under communism. However, it has shown some great potential for change. The recent protests give some indication that the middle class is not as apathetic as it has been in the past. There is some hope. The situation in Russia is only slightly better than it was under communism. It is still far from democracy and will remain so as long as certain problems are allowed to persist.

The strong central state coupled with Vladimir Putin have made it extremely difficult for democracy to prevail. It has made control of the media possible. It has prolonged the conflict and Chechnya and spread false ideas about it. The strong state control has also managed to curtail and substantial growth to the middle class. Vladimir Putin has taken advantage of this strong central state and used it to increase his power. As long as the state continues to be so strong and Vladimir Putin continues to stay in power democracy will be no more than a distant dream for Russians. For Russia to democratize two things must happen; the state must be weakened considerably, and Putin must be removed from office. The most likely way for this to happen is for a popular uprising that will bring down Putin and his strong central state. Unfortunately, this will probably not happen because the majority of Russian's support the strong central state. If something dramatic were to happen and Russian's were to lose faith in the strong central state then they might revolt against it. Overall, it does not look like Russia will be racing towards democracy anytime soon. It destined to hover somewhere between communism and democracy.

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