

The Paradox of the Putin Phenomenon: Democracy, Fairness, and Popular Support for  
President Vladimir Putin

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## **ABSTRACT**

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(Under the direction of Graeme Robertson)

If Putin demonstrated an anti-democratic leadership style, how could so many democratic supporters approve of him? This thesis examines what exactly Russians understand under the term democracy and how Vladimir Putin's agenda as president touched on some of the values Russians associate with democracy. Many of his policies, particularly those relating to the economy and the regulation of big business, tended to focus on restoring the principle of fairness in the everyday lives of ordinary Russians. Studies indicate Russians associate fairness with functional democracy. Evidence suggests Russians approved of Putin not so much for his illiberal actions, but because he paid their wages and pensions on time and visibly punished those who had sought to tear down fair democratic capitalism with criminal business activities. Due to the particularly unfair experience of democracy in the 1990s, Russians embraced Putin as a proponent of democratic practices rather than an enthusiast of authoritarianism.

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This thesis is dedicated to Arnaud Sponar.

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## **I. Introduction: Putin's Popularity Beyond the Managed Image**

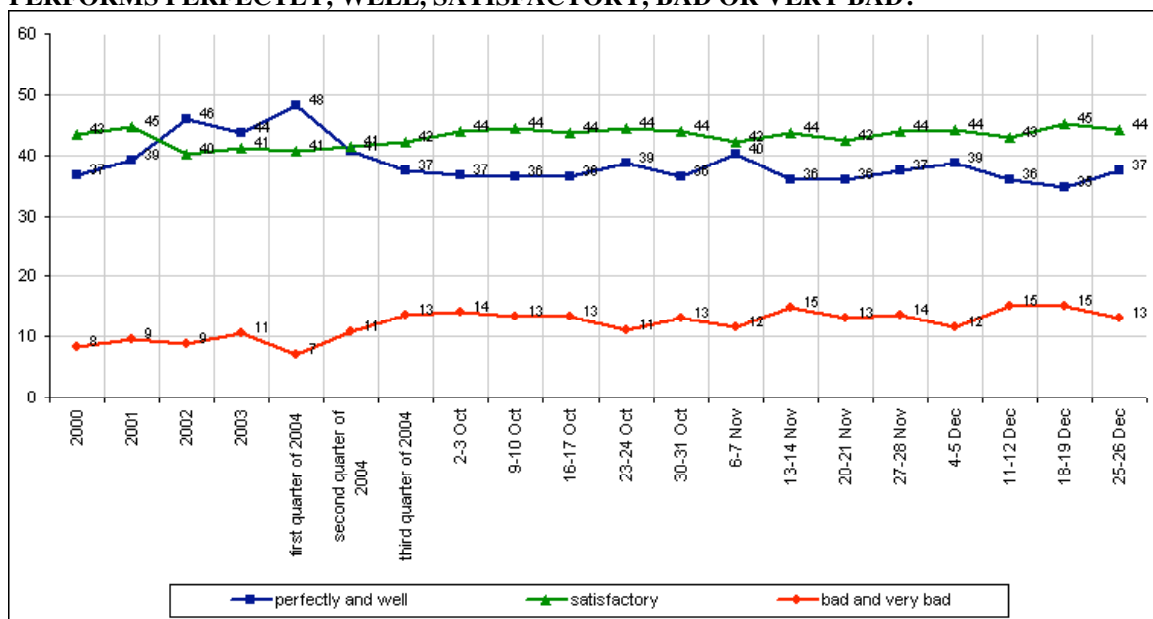
Despite potentially challenging obstacles, Vladimir Putin remains one of the most popular leaders in Russian history. Many characteristics and events of his presidency stand out as possible impediments to his popularity. Foreign critics have warned that the repression of press freedoms, free speech, civil society organizations and political pluralism during his presidency have worked to undermine or reverse Russia's democratic transition. Likewise, the seemingly endless conflict in Chechnya, massively fatal national tragedies in Moscow and Beslan, unpopular social reforms, and a cooling in relations with the West would appear to most outside observers as significant stains on Putin's image. Yet, none of these caused his popularity rating to sink significantly at any time during his presidency. Rather his approval loomed between 70 and 80 % throughout most of his career and continues to remain high even after his successor replaced his seat in office.

Numerous claims have been laid to explain the Putin phenomenon. Some blame the influence of state controlled media for coercing public approval by protecting and building up his image on television, which 85% of Russians use as their main and frequently only informational source. As liberal politician, Vladimir Ryshkov, reports, "day after day, hour



after hour, television was ... manipulated” for the image of the president.<sup>1</sup> Considering the manipulation of the media in Soviet Russia, however, coercive attempts to positively portray the image of the president on television were nothing new for Russians. These days, it would be difficult to win over the Russian population merely through image without providing visible evidence to support the image’s authenticity. While efforts to build up and protect his image through Kremlin controlled media outlets inarguably contributed to his positive reception, ample evidence suggests that other factors contributed just as much if not more to his impressive popularity among the Russian public.

**Figure 1:**  
**HOW WOULD YOU EVALUATE PUTIN'S PERFORMANCE AS PRESIDENT: DO YOU THINK HE PERFORMS PERFECTLY, WELL, SATISFACTORY, BAD OR VERY BAD?<sup>2</sup>**



(Source: FOM population poll from December 29, 2004)

There are many reasons to believe that public support for Putin runs deeper than his managed image. Some of those claims have their origins in the particular social, economic

<sup>1</sup>Margaret Mommsen and Angelika Nußberger, *Das System Putin: Gelenkte Demokratie und politische Justiz in Russland* (Munich: C.H.Beck oHG, 2007), 52-53.

<sup>2</sup>FOM Population Poll, “Evaluations of Putin's Performance,” 29 December 2004, <[http://bd.english.fom.ru/report/cat/policy/services/government2/government\\_putin/putin/appraisal\\_2004/ed045206](http://bd.english.fom.ru/report/cat/policy/services/government2/government_putin/putin/appraisal_2004/ed045206)> (20 October 2008).

and political setting of the late 1990s in Russia. Certainly, the chaotic mood of democratic transition and the bitter legacy of economic turmoil and government irresponsibility left behind by Yeltsin's presidency created an atmosphere in which Russians were looking for a very particular hero. As a commentator for RIA Novosti explained "Vladimir Putin's phenomenon is different: his actions coincide with Russia's dynamics and public moods."<sup>3</sup>

Some critics argue that the chaotic dynamic of the democratic transition manifested in a Russian desire for order, which welcomed illiberal attitudes and heavy-handed, authoritarian leadership. Yet, opinion polls confirm that Russians have consistently favored democracy over other governing forms. Much evidence suggests that Russians disapproved of Yeltsin's leadership not because they believed democracy, itself, was ineffective, but rather that Yeltsin's democracy lacked essential democratic qualities. His government handled public funds and industry irresponsibly, leaving ordinary Russians to suffer the economic repercussions. From this perspective, Yeltsin's attempt at democracy was, indeed, not democratic enough because it did not provide the environment in which its citizens could flourish in a free market system. The faults of his leadership prevented Russians from benefiting from democracy. Russians essentially disapproved of his government for denying them the experience of democracy.

If Putin demonstrated an anti-democratic leadership style, how, then, could so many democratic supporters approve of him? Certainly, this contrast points to an interesting paradox in opinion. Surveyed Russian opinion indicates that the dynamics and moods that provided support for Putin were, in reality, more complex than a simple longing for order or more authoritarian-styled leadership. As explained by Russian political expert, Michael

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<sup>3</sup>Pyotr Romanov, "Phenomenon of Vladimir Putin's Popularity," *CDI Russia Weekly*, 17 December 2004, < <http://www.cdi.org/russia/335-5.cfm> > (28 October 2008).

McFaul, in a media conference in 2007, “if you ask Russians do you want an autocratic system, they say no, and by like, 80 percent say no. They just don’t perceive the system that they live in today as being autocratic in the way that maybe (you)...or I do.”<sup>4</sup> This paradox points to the notion that Russians may not see Putin’s leadership as particularly undemocratic. Indeed, public opinion implies Russians approved of Putin because his policies, in enforcing a fairer and more just system for ordinary people, appeared *more* democratic, rather than less. The quality and objectives of Putin’s leadership provided enough evidence to give weight to and authenticate his projected image, particularly his economic reforms and selective attacks oligarchs.

The objective of this thesis is to examine what exactly Russians understand under the term democracy and how Putin’s agenda as president touched on some of the values Russians associate with democracy. In this way, Russians’ support for democracy is reflected in their approval of Putin. I will particularly investigate how the aspect of fairness as a component of democracy helped bolster support for Putin because many of his policies, particularly those related to the economy and the regulation of big business lawlessness, tended to focus on restoring the principle of fairness in the everyday lives of ordinary Russians. Previously under the influence of communist ideology, fairness represented equal distribution and state intervention based on the principle of paternalism. This idea of fairness reflects a more authoritarian leaning because it appears to support the intervention of the government in leveling economic divides, rewarding all people equally regardless of their efforts or hard

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<sup>4</sup>Michael McFaul, “Media Conference Call: ‘The Myth of the Authoritarian Model: How Putin's Crackdown Holds Russia Back’ [Rush Transcript; Federal News Service],” *Council on Foreign Relations*, 18 December 2007, <[http://www.cfr.org/publication/15118/media\\_conference\\_call.html?breadcrumb=%2Fbios%2F112%2Fgideon\\_rose](http://www.cfr.org/publication/15118/media_conference_call.html?breadcrumb=%2Fbios%2F112%2Fgideon_rose)> (18 October 2008).

work. However, new studies show that these old socialist values have been modified due to time and significant political modernization. Russian opinion has shifted towards a more-western style version of fairness based on desert, which very much resembles the values of fairness demanded by citizens in many firmly democratic societies, such as the United States.

Putin convincingly emphasized fairness in his policies, which most Russians, in turn, considered to be a characteristic of properly functioning democracy—that which the dysfunctional democracy of the 90s lacked—rather than heavy-handed authoritarianism. Thus, considering the previously mentioned paradox of opinion, I intend to determine how Russian approval of democracy and its associated quality of fairness helped secure popular support for Vladimir Putin. The fact that Russians continue to remain firmly committed to democratic principles does not contradict their overwhelmingly support for Putin because his policies fulfilled Russians' expectations of democracy to provide a fair environment for its citizens, in which success rested on the principle of desert rather than lawlessness and preferential treatment. Russians supported Vladimir Putin not because of his illiberal actions, but because he paid their wages and pensions on time and visibly punished those who had sought to tear down fair democratic capitalism with criminal business activities. Due to the particularly unfair experience of democracy in the 1990s, Russians firmly associated fairness as an essential element of democracy and thus, embraced Putin as a proponent of democratic practices rather than an enthusiast of authoritarianism.

## **Chapter II. Setting the Stage for Issues that Matter: Russian Dynamics and Public Moods**

How then did Putin's ability to address the Russia's dynamics and public moods contribute to his enormous popularity? Unmistakably, many of his policies impressively displayed his willingness and ability to address the actual concerns of the population and this is what many Russians considered missing from the democracy of the 90s. Many, in fact cited this lack as the source of dysfunction in Russia's early democracy. Considering the dramatic political and social changes that occurred in the democratic transition under Yeltsin, Russia's dynamic and public moods largely centered on the need for more effective government, social stability, and especially a restoration of Russia's global image. Regardless of the successes his regime contributed to the democratic transition in terms of institution building and pluralism, his presidency was overshadowed by the very real failures experienced by ordinary Russians. From the perspective of most ordinary Russians, "Yeltsin's administration set loose a wave of corruption and criminality, stumbled chaotically from one political crisis to another; presided over an unprecedented decline in living standards and collapse of life expectancy; humiliated the country by obeisance to foreign powers; destroyed the currency and ended in bankruptcy."<sup>5</sup> The Yeltsin period culminated

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<sup>5</sup>Perry Anderson, "Russia's Managed Democracy," *London Review of Books* 29, no. 2, 25 January 2007, < <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v29/n02/ande01.html> > (21 October 2008).

not only in dissatisfaction with his leadership, but also the devastating financial crisis of 1998 with the GDP falling close to 45 % and government revenues halved.<sup>6</sup> To many, instead of introducing them to the benefits of market economy and democracy, the 1990s more resoundingly represented a period of extreme disorder, unpaid wages, fatal alcoholism, and the near collapse of the nation, among other disasters. From the perspective of most Russians, this was not what democracy was supposed to look like.

While Yeltsin's approval ratings remained low throughout his presidency, sinking into ultimate decent towards the end, Putin enjoyed a positive public response straight from the beginning. Did this backdrop of ineffective and incomplete democratic transition somehow contribute to Putin's immediate surge in popularity? Analysis of the issue suggests that Vladimir Putin's massive approval resulted not merely from a manipulation of his image, but rather from his particular ability to address the very concerns, which were most prominent in the minds of most Russians in the late 90s. Many critics have logically assumed that his popularity, in part, originates from his foreign policy and its effectiveness in restoring Russia's prominence, after the humiliating collapse of prestige accompanied by the fall of the Soviet Union.

*Foreign Policy: "To Become a Great State...", but What About Pensions and Paychecks?*

While I argue that Putin's social policies most positively contributed to his high standing among Russians, many believe Putin's strategic foreign policy caused Russia's great economic and political resurgence and unsurprisingly and thus, stands out as an obvious

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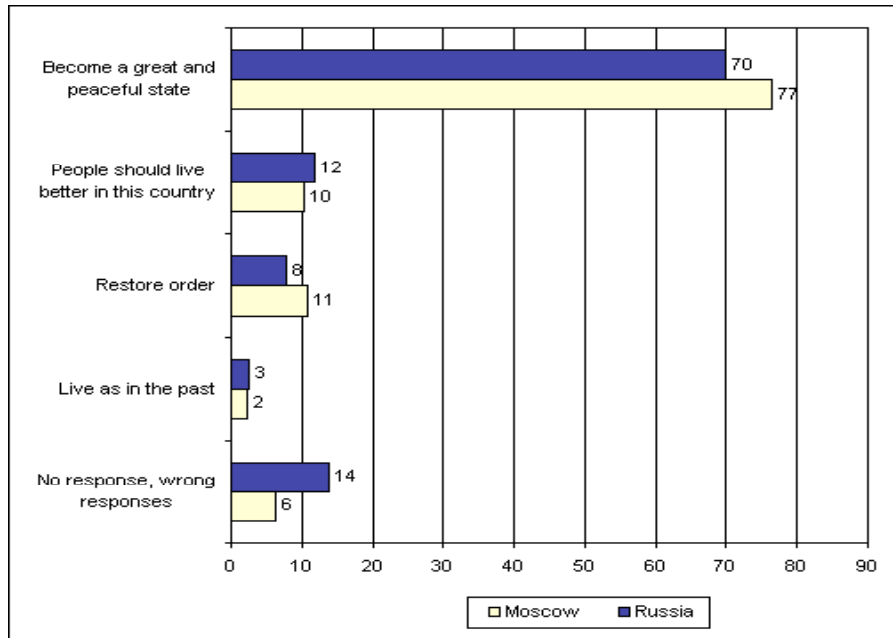
<sup>6</sup> Anderson, "Russia's Managed Democracy."

explanation for his broad approval. Although they were not the only important accessories in boosting Putin's public image, his foreign policies did undoubtedly attract popular support for his leadership and should notably be included when discussing the policies that responded to the Russian dynamics and moods of the late 90s and added to his popular success. For many Russians, the collapse of the Soviet Union and its aftermath created numerous disasters. Not only did Russia lose its influence on global affairs, but due to financial chaos, it lost much of its international economic significance. Public polling at the start of Putin's presidency reflects these concerns. In 2002, the strongest wish of an overwhelming majority of Russians (70 %) was for Russia to *become a great and peaceful state*. When asked what becoming a great and peaceful state meant, most respondents focused on the "great" aspect of this response, clarifying using these words: "revive"; "get up from our knees," "get out of the pit"; "rebound"; "Become strong and hold the world"; "be a powerful and respected nation," "be strong and respected, feared by the others"; "regain power"; "be a superpower, like the USA," "Get to the world market"; "be more powerful economically." Clearly, recovering from the humiliating collapse of the Soviet Union by restoring Russia's political and economic prestige appeared a clear concern for most Russians in the first years of Putin's presidency. Russians overwhelmingly expressed a desire to have influence over other nations, both in terms of the economy and exhibiting the political pull of a western-style super power.

By no accident, Putin's foreign policy addressed exactly these issues. According to analyst Kim R. Holmes, Putin's foreign policy always fulfilled two objectives, which according to the desires of the population, contributed to his popularity. She argues Putin used "foreign policy as a way not only to raise revenues for the state and his political allies

(through arms sales and special commercial relations with China, India and Iran) but also to increase respect for the state among the Russians themselves.”<sup>7</sup> Forming his foreign policies around four pillars, —restoring influence in the post-Soviet space, developing a strategic

**Figure 2:**  
**OPEN-ENDED QUESTION: PLEASE COMPLETE THE SENTENCE: "PRESENTLY, I WOULD VERY MUCH LIKE RUSSIA TO..."**<sup>8</sup>



(Source: FOM Population poll from July 25, 2002)

energy market in the European Union, establishing an arms market with the West’s outcasts, China, India and Iran, and reestablishing itself as an equal in a pragmatic relationship to the United States—Putin addressed the economic and political aspirations of post-Yeltsin

<sup>7</sup>Kim R. Holmes, “Understanding Putin's Foreign Policy,” *The Heritage Foundation: Leadership for America*, 12 July 2001, <http://www.heritage.org/Research/RussiaandEurasia/WM22.cfm> (25 October 2008), WebMemo #22.

<sup>8</sup>FOM Population Poll, “Open-ended Question: Please Complete the Sentence: ‘Presently, I Would Very Much Like Russia to...,’” 25 July 2002, [http://bd.english.fom.ru/report/cat/rus\\_im/Great\\_Power/ed022923](http://bd.english.fom.ru/report/cat/rus_im/Great_Power/ed022923) (29 October 2008).



Russia.<sup>9</sup> From 2001 to 2006, within just five years, the percentage of Russians who considered Russia to be a powerful country rose by nearly 10%.<sup>10</sup> Clearly the priorities that Putin set for his foreign policies closely matched the national goals desired by a large portion of the population. They boosted national pride and independence not seen since Soviet times. Considering the positive responses to Putin's foreign policies, many have pointed to these as reason for Putin's sustained popularity. Still, there were other deep concerns among Russians, which foreign policy reforms could not dispense. Even with an awe-inspiring foreign policy, Putin could not avoid addressing the personal economic plight of average, hard-working Russian citizens.

As in any country, the average person usually pays a greater amount of attention to their personal affairs than the more abstract goals of the nation, even if they are highly valued. From early on, more Russians hailed Putin's achievements in the social sphere as his greatest merits. In 2002, 23% of Russians valued accomplishments made in social sphere as his main achievements as opposed to only 5 % who considered his foreign policy to be of focal importance.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, respondents considered increased pensions and allowances (12%), prompt payment of pensions and salaries to state workers (11%), increasing living standards and control over homelessness (3% each) more important than contacts with foreigner leaders (6%), the strengthening of Russia's position in the world (3%), improving

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<sup>9</sup>Holmes, "Understanding Putin's Foreign Policy," WebMemo #22.

<sup>10</sup>Grigory Kertman, "Russia: Powerful or Weak?," *FOM*, 8 June 2008, <[http://bd.english.fom.ru/report/cat/rus\\_im/mesto\\_v\\_mire/ed062223](http://bd.english.fom.ru/report/cat/rus_im/mesto_v_mire/ed062223)> (29 October 2008).

<sup>11</sup>A. Petrova, "Putin's achievements: social and foreign policy," *FOM*, 21 March 2002, <[http://bd.english.fom.ru/report/cat/societas/Chechnya/putin\\_chechnya/eof021101](http://bd.english.fom.ru/report/cat/societas/Chechnya/putin_chechnya/eof021101)> (20 October 2008).

U.S.-Russia relations (1%), or payments on foreign credits (1%).<sup>12</sup> While Russia's standing in the world proved quite important to most Russians, particularly after the awkward loss of prestige at the end of the Soviet Union, the ineffectiveness of the new democratic system left many more demands of the public unfulfilled. Putin's policies targeted towards improving the everyday lives of ordinary Russians played a significant role in his mass approval because they actively sought to increase the fairness of the democratic system by improving the everyday, domestic realities of ordinary Russians. The next sections will examine Russian attitudes towards democracy and its associated values. Public opinion discloses that the fair image of Putin's policies appeared to right the gravest wrongs of Russia's dysfunctional democracy and thus, had a significantly positive effect on his approval ratings.

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<sup>12</sup>Petrova, "Putin's achievements: social and foreign policy."

### **Chapter III. Russian Attitudes Towards Democracy**

Many critics have suggested that the chaos that emerged out of the 1990s transition to democracy provoked a return to traditional and culturally specific illiberal sentiments among the Russian people. These assumptions are often confirmed by and used to explain the unrelenting popularity of Vladimir Putin's authoritarian style leadership.<sup>13</sup> Despite the claims that inherently Russians favor authoritarianism, in reality, they have surprisingly retained a generally positive attitude towards democracy since the fall of the Soviet Union regardless of difficult times. In opinion polls of the time period up to Putin's first term, most Russians still openly reject authoritarian dictatorship in favor of democratic leadership.<sup>14</sup> During extensive polling conducted before and after parliamentary and presidential elections in 1999-2000, McFaul discovered that 71.5% of Russians may be dissatisfied with how democracy works in Russia, but a clear majority with 58.4 % nevertheless still believed that a democratic system was an appropriate way of governing Russia.<sup>15</sup> Despite disapproval from

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<sup>13</sup> Ellen Carnaghan, *Out of order : Russian political values in an imperfect world*, (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007), 107.

<sup>14</sup> G. G. Diligensky, "Vladimir Putin and Russian Democracy (speculation on the 2000 survey results)," *FOM*, 18 January 2001, <[http://bd.english.fom.ru/report/cat/societas/society\\_power/democracy/ed010130](http://bd.english.fom.ru/report/cat/societas/society_power/democracy/ed010130)> (01 September 2008).

the public on the performance of the Duma and other elected bodies, public opinion polls regularly demonstrate that the majority of people consider the existing democratic institutions and rights and freedoms such as free elections, freedom of the press and the right to receive politically pluralistic information as irrevocable norms of social life.<sup>16</sup> Additionally, a significant number of Russians continued to be in favor of following the Western democratic model. Even after the failure of radical reforms in 1997, which culminated in the 1998 economic crisis, 47.1 % of respondents chose “Western style democracy” in the form of “a state with market economy, democratic institutions, and respect for human rights” as the best model for future Russia.<sup>17</sup> All of these attitudes suggest that, when Putin took power, most Russians clearly believed at least conceptually or ideally that democracy was the only appropriate game in town.

If democracy was, in the eyes of the people, the only appropriate governing system for post-communist Russia, how could an overwhelming majority—consistently 60-80%—continue to support Putin’s authoritarian leadership? Throughout his presidency Putin took on gradually increasing authoritarian measures including centralizing power, cutting the liberties of the media, and restraining civil society, and yet, his popularity did not falter. How could democratically minded people continue to staunchly support such an obviously authoritarian leader? One explanation is that they neither saw his actions as demonstrating

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<sup>15</sup>Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, “Russian Attitudes toward Democracy, Markets, and the West,” *Meeting report* 3, no. 10, 28 March 2001, <http://www.carnegieendowment.org/events/index.cfm?fa=eventDetail&id=300> (15 October 2008).

<sup>16</sup>Diligensky, “Vladimir Putin and Russian Democracy.”

<sup>17</sup>Guerman Diligensky and Sergei Chugrov, “‘The West’ in Russian Mentality,” *Office for Information and Press, Brussels and Institute of World Economy and International Relations, Moscow*, (2000), < [www.nato.int/acad/fellow/98-00/diliguenski.pdf](http://www.nato.int/acad/fellow/98-00/diliguenski.pdf)>, (15 October 2008), 25.

authoritarianism nor conflicting with their understanding of democracy. As with any country in massive transition, Russians have a very complex relationship with democracy. A more comprehensive understanding of this relationship helps to understand this paradox.

### *Problems with Opinion Polls*

Before further analyzing Russian perspectives using opinion poll data, it is important to address the limited nature of such polls. First of all, their frequent inability to offer appropriate comparisons to respondents in other countries can lead to misleading conclusions. For example, opinion polls may indicate, as I will show, that Russians are unable to meaningfully define democracy, which automatically raises eyebrows at their real understanding or appreciation for it. These same opinion polls, however, fail to compare Russians' inability to define democracy with citizens of other countries, which may have more experience with democracy. Such comparisons might very well demonstrate that Russians are no less able to meaningfully define democracy as Americans or the Swiss. Secondly, basing judgments on poll responses must take into account that much depends on the wording of questions and whether or not poll allows for alternative responses. This rings true especially in countries in democratic transition, whose citizens may express positive attitudes towards democracy, but not have much of an intimate understanding for its realization. For example, when asked if they favor multiparty systems, most Russians as well as citizens of other middle and eastern European countries will undoubtedly agree because they know from their one-party communist past that multi-party systems are an aspect of democracy. However, this sort of questioning does not allow the respondents to further extrapolate on how critically they understand the multiparty system. Are they able to

recognize when too many parties make the system ineffective, such as occurred in Yeltsin's presidency or when the system is subject to derisive manipulation, such as when "Fair Russian" emerged as an oppositional party to Putin's "United Russia," although it largely supported Putin and has been criticized as being oppositional only in name.

Alternatively, open-ended questions often result in a myriad of personal opinions, which may not offer much in collective weight and convolute attempts to group majority opinions, but on the other hand, allow for free expression. Likewise, while intensive interviews may not provide insight into opinions massively distributed across the population, they allow respondents to speak at length and explain what they mean. Such interviews often provide insights not immediately apparent in mass surveys or opinion polls and reveal conflicting views on issues that survey questions might overlook. My attempt to examine the source of Putin's popularity seeks to delve further into Russians' understanding of democracy. For this reason, I have consulted a collection of mass opinion polls, expert analysis, and Ellen Carnaghan's study of intensive interviews compiled in her work *Out of Order: Russian Political Values in an Imperfect World* in order to consider both majority and individual opinions as well as the values behind them. Limitations of both of these methods, however, must be accounted for in making any conclusion on Russian political culture. The following sections will examine values attributed to democracy as determined by Russian interpretation, either in comprehensive studies or individual interviews.

#### **IV. “Good” Democracy, Fairness, and the Role of Government**

In a first step to determine how Russians could simultaneously support democracy and Vladimir Putin’s seemingly undemocratic leadership style, close attention must be paid to Russians’ understanding of democracy and its guarantees. Then, we will examine how well Putin lived up to these expectations and how this potentially contributed to his unrelenting popularity. Not surprisingly, opinion polls suggest that a large section of the population is not able to give any meaningful definition of democracy.<sup>18</sup> While Russians may not be alone in being unable to define democracy, nevertheless critics point out that the inability to define democracy at the very least brings into question the substance behind Russian support for democracy and whether or not support for an undefined democracy could actually mislead them into supporting undemocratic movements. Diligensky warns against taking Russians’ positive reception of democracy at face value arguing that, while support for democracy may have been high, further questioning about its meaning reveal “the concrete contents of the democratic ideal are too vague for the majority. As surveys show, a mere 9%-12% of those surveyed say they have a clear notion of democracy...Many believe that ‘democracy is a good thing, but impossible in Russia.’ While few are able to specifically define what democracy is, the majority thinks positively about it. On the one hand, this

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<sup>18</sup>Bertelsmann Stiftung: BTI 2008, “Russia Country Report,” 2007, <<http://www.bertelsmann-transformation-index.de/159.0.html>> (16 May 2008).

could present a rather precarious relationship to the term, but on the other hand, one could argue that there are plenty of citizens of firmly democratic countries, who might have problems as well coming up with an exact definition for the term. In any case, it raises the questions as to what Russians associate with democracy, if they cannot name traditional definitions, and what they value as the most necessary tenants for democracy in Russia. What do they consider to be “good” about it?

*Democracy is Good Because it is Fair*

Several analyses indicate that what Russians consider “good” about democracy is the enforcement of laws and principles, which promote fair procedures for all citizens. While opinion polls, of course, indicate that Russians recognize such elements as multi-party systems and free elections as characteristic of democracy, they do not tend to emphasize these as the most sought after or valued of elements. Instead of exalting the benefits of “well-developed party systems, vibrant civil societies, ...independent media, and mature liberal norms embedded in society,” Russian responses often, in fact, emphasize “fairness” as a distinguishing quality of democracy.<sup>19</sup> Diligensky concludes that, during the 1999-2000 period, democracy meant something abstractly positive that was,

“little more than a negation of the “unfairness” of the existing political order—whether Soviet or post-Soviet—and a wish to transform it in accordance with the needs and interests of ordinary people. Democracy is an imagined ‘good’ society, counterpoised to a real and undemocratic one.”<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup>Michael McFaul, “Russian Democracy: Still Not a Lost Cause,” *The Washington Quarterly* 23:1, (2000): 162.

<sup>20</sup>Diligensky, “Vladimir Putin and Russian Democracy.”

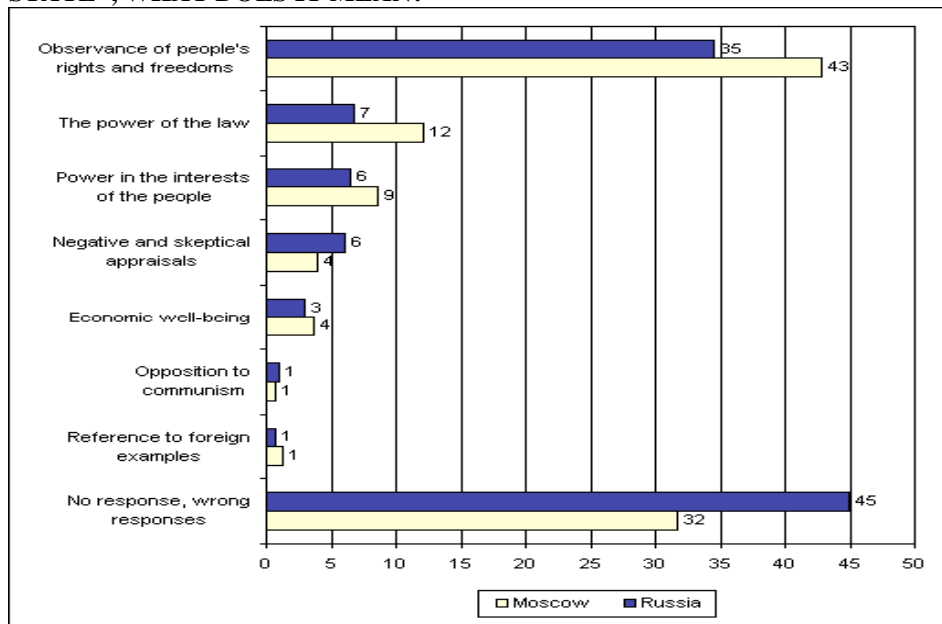


Diligensky's findings reveal several interesting points. For Russians, democracy is an ideal, which neither the Soviet regime nor the post-communist regime under Yeltsin embodied. They consider these regimes to have been undemocratic because of their lack of fairness and inability to adequately address the needs and interests of the people. The qualities that Russians tended to emphasize as most important for democracy naturally happen to be the qualities missing from their current and past systems. This response points to two main issues: Russians are, however vaguely, at least conceptually committed to democracy and secondly, they disapproved of democracy under Yeltsin not because they disliked democracy itself, but because they believed it lacked the guarantees of fairness that a properly functioning democracy ensured.

These issues emerge again in a survey where people are asked the open-ended question, "How do you understand the term 'a democratic state,' what does it mean?" Of the Russians polled in November 2000, only 55% were even able to answer the question, with nearly half of respondents giving either no or wrong responses. A remarkable 35% of those who gave answers to this question stated that the "Observance of people's rights and freedoms" defined democracy, but when asked open endedly what rights and freedoms they meant, responses included: *"In a democratic state, attention should be paid to everyone; we've been robbed and there is no attention paid to that, nobody is looking for the thieves – this means there is no democracy";* and *"the defense of every person in society."* Here, respondents indicate the observance of people's rights and freedoms as the responsibilities of the government to look out for fairness in society, in which no one is left behind, that criminals be punished for their crimes, and that the average person receives appropriate attention. Essentially, they emphasize the need of a democratic government to act

**Figure 3:**

**OPEN-ENDED QUESTION: HOW DO YOU UNDERSTAND THE TERM "A DEMOCRATIC STATE", WHAT DOES IT MEAN?**



(Source: FOM population poll from November 29, 2000)

appropriately with its citizens in order to defend them from injustices. Those polled clearly express their concerns that the state neglects its responsibility to care for and protect procedures of fairness for the average person. Interestingly, a number of participants who chose the observance of rights and freedoms as characteristic also responded negatively by stating a democratic state is *"a state where everything is permitted for some people, and the others cannot realize themselves"*; *"democracy exists only for some, not for everyone"*; *"democrats, after taking power, have everything, while the people have nothing"*.<sup>21</sup> These clearly negative responses describe democracy as a system in which only some people are granted the ability to succeed. This ability appears, in the opinions of these respondents, to have been distributed unfairly. Previous studies have shown that when individuals are

<sup>21</sup>FOM Population Poll, "Term: 'A Democratic State,'" 29 November 2000, <[http://bd.english.fom.ru/report/cat/societas/society\\_power/democracy/ed003210](http://bd.english.fom.ru/report/cat/societas/society_power/democracy/ed003210)> (7 September 2008).

evaluating democracy, they often pull from their own experiences of it and not democracy as an ideal.<sup>22</sup> These responses clearly reflect the negative experiences that ordinary Russians endured under the dysfunctional, unfair democracy of the 90s. They recall unfairness in terms of the reckless privatization and government corruption, which emptied government coffers, delayed wages and pensions, and led to the largely unjustified rise in economic inequality. In the dysfunctional version of democracy prior to Putin, only the few benefited. According to Russian respondents, a correctly functioning democracy is based on principles of fairness, which the authorities should uphold in order for average people to enjoy the benefits of democracy.

#### *Responsibility of Democratic Government to Ensure a Fair System*

In these responses, the *active* rights of democracy, such as those related to political participation in free elections or freedom of expression, appear less pronounced. When Russians consider the ideal “good” democracy, which they had not yet experienced in the 1990s, the elements that the regime lacked first came to mind. Yeltsin’s Russia provided for many institutional freedoms, including the tolerance of oppositional voices. Nevertheless, his government failed to enforce laws and principles, which ensured fair practices and treatment of ordinary Russians. The respondents in Diligensky’s analysis tend to focus on the lack of their previous leadership to pay attention to the “*passive* social and economic rights: guarantees of personal safety and social protection, employment and material level, retirement allowances, free health-care, and so on.”<sup>23</sup> While Russians appeared convinced

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<sup>22</sup>Carnaghan, *Out of Order*.

<sup>23</sup>Diligensky, “Vladimir Putin and Russian Democracy.”

that “democracy” should continue to reign as the only game on town, the people recognized what democracy in post-communist Russia lacked: leadership did not fulfill its responsibility to guarantee people basic essentials, which they deserved and needed in order to flourish in democracy. Without actions against criminal activities, without receiving just wages, due pensions, basic health care and job opportunities, the leadership failed to create a fair environment for Russia’s citizens to thrive in a democratic system. Even Yeltsin’s leadership recognized how the severe discontent of Russia’s average citizens threatened his political legitimacy. Yeltsin’s pre-election pledge in 1996 to make overdue wage payments and raise pensions makes clear his understanding that the overwhelming burdens, which average people faced, threatened their belief in the new political system.<sup>24</sup> Analyst Conrad Namiesniowski maintains that towards the end of the 90s, “a priority issue for the next Russian government (would) be the economic burden being carried by the Russian population.”<sup>25</sup> The defense of fairness, while not traditionally used to define democracy, remained clearly an essential element to the success of Russian democracy towards the end of the 90s. Not only the people, but the also the government recognized how the lack of fairness jeopardized the legitimacy of early Russian democracy.

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<sup>24</sup>Conrad Namiesniowski, “Commentary No. 69: Russia: What Kind of Future?,” *Canadian Security Intelligence Service*, 1996, <<http://www.csis-scrs.gc.ca/pblctns/cmmntr/cm69-eng.asp>> (10 October 2008).

<sup>25</sup>Namiesniowski, “Commentary No. 69”

## **V. Fairness: Values and the Communist Legacy**

The concepts of social justice and fairness certainly have their roots in the Communist past. The origins of these concepts as well as their transformation caused by political transition sheds significant light on the connection of fairness and democracy in the minds of most Russians. By the end of the 1990s, most Russians essentially blamed Yeltsin for not upholding social justice by ensuring fair procedures and this caused a great amount of disappointment in his leadership as well as early Russian democracy. A sense of social justice grew for many decades in the rhetoric of most Communist societies, even if paradoxically. In exchange for citizens “‘offer(ing)’ work and politically loyal behavior, ... (they) ‘received’ social security, ideological guardianship and the authoritarian-paternalistic ‘caring rule’ of party and state.”<sup>26</sup> Years of deception and denunciation, however, spread distrust in elites claiming to practice ‘good governance’ for the people’s social wellbeing. This distrust, particularly towards officials, carried over into many societies during the democratic revolutions of the late 80s and early 90s. Although political leadership across Eastern Europe endorsed new optimism, economic revival, and responsiveness to the needs of the ordinary people, many of those Regimes, especially Yeltsin’s Russia, quickly revealed

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<sup>26</sup>Gerd Meyer, “Values, Small Life Worlds and Communitarian Orientations: Ambivalent Legacies and Democratic Potentials in Post-Communist Political Cultures,” in *Political Culture in Post Communist Europe*, ed. Detlef Pollack (Aldershot : Ashgate, 2003), 174.

their true intentions. In “Values, Small Life Worlds and Communitarian Orientations: Ambivalent Legacies and Democratic Potentials in Post-Communist Political Cultures,” Gerd Meyer explains that while many believed democracy could correct the warped social justice of the Communist era, heightened expectations plummeted as “privileges, propaganda and personalization seemed to dominate politics (once again), and this helped to nourish popular, mistrust, old and new.”<sup>27</sup> Hopes of genuine social justice governed by fairness lifted the people’s expectations of democracy, but these hopes quickly came crashing down because of the irresponsible behavior of early transitional leadership, whose corrupt maneuvers too closely resembled those of past unfair regimes. Old mistrust magnified new distrust, making citizens of post-communist countries, particularly in Russia, wary of the intentions of even democratic elites.

### *Link Between Democracy and Fairness*

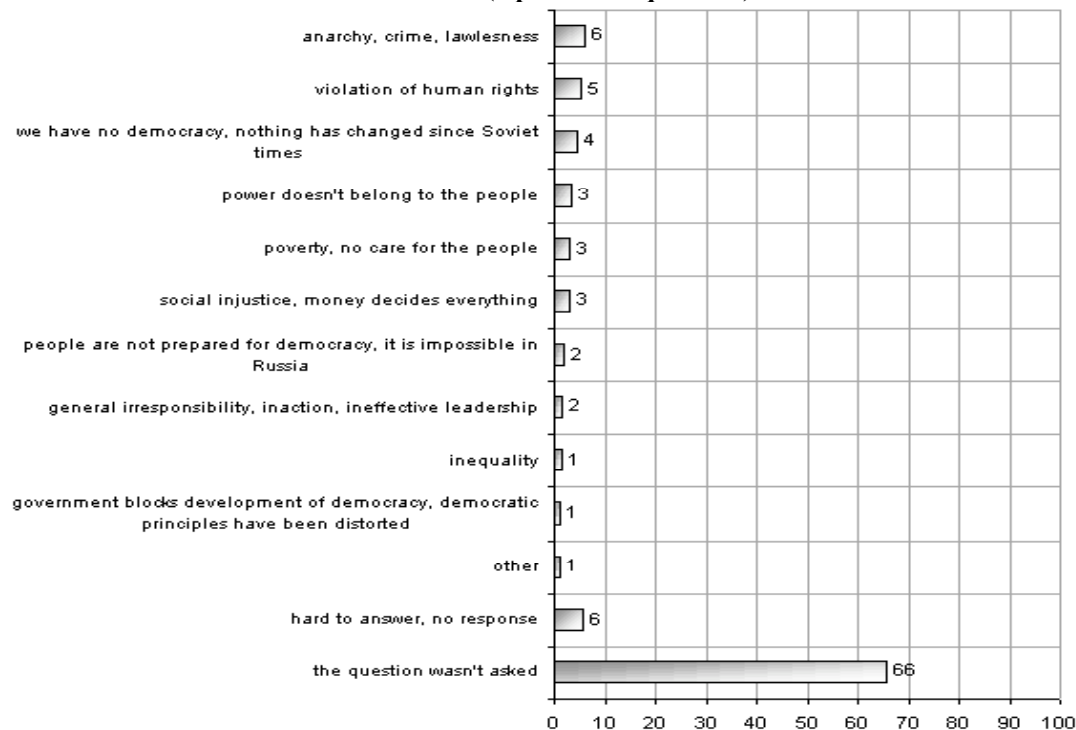
For many who lived through brutally oppressive Communist regimes, Democracy promised to be the guarder of individual and, in general, human rights through the promotion of fairness. David Mason asserts that for many Russians the element of fairness fits into the category of basic “human rights” that should be guaranteed in a democracy. In most post-communist states, fairness “is not just a matter of due process, but of social justice more broadly considered. Most see social and economic inequality as a violation of basic human rights. It should not be surprising then, that over half of all Russians think that their

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<sup>27</sup>Meyer, “Values,” 174.

government has no respect for human rights at all.”<sup>28</sup> In the eyes of Russians, fairness is a particular value protected under the umbrella of human rights and should, thus, be protected by a democratic government. In open-ended questioning, Russians more frequently name the lack of human rights as a result of too little democracy or the manifestation of the lack of democracy.<sup>29</sup> The dysfunctional democracy that occurred in Russia in the 1990s lacked this

**Figure 4:**  
**WHY DO YOU THINK THERE IS TOO LITTLE DEMOCRACY IN RUSSIA AND IN WHAT THINGS DOES IT MANIFEST ITSELF? (Open-ended question.)**<sup>30</sup>



(Source: FOM population poll from December 21, 2005)

elemental value. This might suggest that at the end of Yeltsin's presidency the Russian

<sup>28</sup>David S. Mason, "Fairness Matters: Equity and the Transition to Democracy," *World Policy Journal* 20, no. 4, 2003/2004, <<http://worldpolicy.org/journal/articles/wpj03-4/mason.html>> (23 October 2008).

<sup>29</sup>FOM Population Poll, "Democracy in Russia," 31 December 2005, <[http://bd.english.fom.ru/report/cat/societas/society\\_power/democracy/ed051316](http://bd.english.fom.ru/report/cat/societas/society_power/democracy/ed051316)> (15 October 2008).

<sup>30</sup>FOM Population Poll, "Democracy in Russia."

people were looking for a leader who would grant attention to the value of fairness and hold his leadership accountable for ensuring it. A desire for pronounced fairness may reflect the chaotically unfair experiences that Russians endured in the 1990s. But even if they desired a strong-handed leader to enforce this fairness, their idea of fairness remains linked to democracy and by no means suggests that Russians craved authoritarianism or rejected democratic leadership. They wanted leadership that was committed to democracy's most important virtues; leadership that would protect the fairness of the democratic system, which Russia's previous experience of democracy lacked and personally affected the everyday lives of ordinary Russians.

*Socialist Values Modified: Government Responsibility and the Principle of Desert*

Russians considered "too little democracy" to be the cause for the inadequately functioning political system of the 1990s. Too little democracy left the government lacking the initiative or authority to ensure a fair environment for its citizens to flourish in the free markets of democratic capitalism. Fairness, thus, began to embody a different meaning in the minds of most Russians rather than merely an act of state paternalism. As mentioned previously, many traditional values of fairness have their roots in the socialist period, but time and political transition have caused the understanding of fairness to develop in a new direction. Gerd Meyer argues that while "inherited value orientations are still effective in paternalist expectations from the state, in the demand for social justice and equality, for more social responsiveness of the power elite by state interventionist policies," these have been modified by equally appreciated democratic liberties, not to mention a younger, better



educated generation with new possibilities and perspectives.<sup>31</sup> Public opinion suggests that younger, more educated Russians did not throw out socialist values of government responsibility. Rather they mixed these values with more economically liberal notions of fairness based on desert. Often these modified values embraced government responsibility not to plan the economy, but to protect it from predatory agents. Meyer suggests that these modified values most likely emerged to counteract the radical neo-liberalism of the early 90s, which many feared gave too much preference and opportunity to small groups of entrepreneurs or in the eyes of many Russians, burglars of the nations wealth. The following sections investigate Russian opinion on the role of the democratic government in intervening in the economy to ensure fair conditions for ordinary Russians to prosper. Intensive interviews allow for these “modified” values to surface and naturally conflicting views on fairness and government responsibility emerge.

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<sup>31</sup>Meyer, “Values,” 176.

## **VI. Modified Values: Is fairness Compatible with Democracy?**

Skeptics questioning Russians' commitment to democracy argue that a longing for fairness is not compatible with democracy. They suspect desires for government-ensured fairness, particularly in the economy, are a mere resurfacing of traditional socialist values. These claims, however, ignore the dynamic of "modified" socialist values as discussed previously. How has the longing for a fairer system changed due to Russians experience with democracy and new realities? And moreover, how has their understanding of how democracy and markets should function influenced their support for Putin's economic policies? The latter question will be addressed after we take a look at Russian attitudes towards the functioning of free markets in their experience with democracy. In *Out of Order: Russian Political Values in an Imperfect World*, Ellen Carnaghan investigates to what extent Russians believe the government should play a role in the economy. From intensive interviews conducted between 1998-2003 with individuals ranging from those who highly support democracy to extreme skeptics, she concludes that while indeed most of the Russians, who participated in the study, believed that government should play significant role in the economy, they also quite distinctly rejected a return to the paternalistic protection of the planned economy.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup>Carnaghan, *Out of Order*, 107-153

In most interviews discussing democracy, markets and government responsibility, both democracy and market proponents as well as skeptics responded in remarkably similar ways, emphasizing the government's responsibility to ensure the competitiveness of markets and workers, care for basic survival, and pay salaries and pensions in a timely fashion. Strong supporters of democracy commented "it seems to me that the government should play a direct role in efforts to improve the material situation of the people...quite a bit depends on the resolution of the problems they are obligated to solve: like the payment of pensions, salaries, and so on."<sup>33</sup> Clarifying the government's role in the economy, this respondent believes the government is responsible for the economic situation of its citizens not especially through state paternalism, but rather the simple task of paying what they are obligated to pay. Another respondent in the high support for markets category echoed this claim with "the government should take care of its people. It should create new jobs, consistently increase the level of pay and the immediate survival minimum."<sup>34</sup> The government should take care of its people not by providing handouts, but promoting employment and guaranteeing living wages. Essentially, they are asking for the government to hold up its end of the bargain within the democratic capitalist system. The participants in Carnaghan's study clearly identify the government's role in ensuring fairness in the economy as providing the right conditions in which people may, not only survive, but flourish in democratic capitalism. Far from expressing allegiances to hard-line socialist principles, Russians simply want an economic system that functions fairly by giving just payments for work and retirement and a guarantee of basic survival. Reflecting on the frequent failure of

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<sup>33</sup>Carnaghan, *Out of Order*, 145.

<sup>34</sup>Carnaghan, *Out of Order*, 145.

Yeltsin's presidency to guarantee payment of salaries and pensions on time, these respondents complain about the irresponsibility of previous governments to support fair economic conditions for ordinary Russians, allowing them to participate in properly functioning a free-market, democratic society. Through their expressions of disappointment, they clearly appear to desire the properly functioning elements of free-market democracy over any return to a state-controlled, planned economy

Even market skeptics in the group described the government's role in the economy as an encourager rather than as an equal redistributor of wealth. One of the skeptics in the study suggested, "the government should create the conditions by which the country can move ahead, improve. As a consequence, the government should support precisely those people who create this development and movement ahead. More than anything else, stimulate their activities."<sup>35</sup> Even if this respondent came from the market-skeptical group, he clearly believes that the government should help the economy function not by encouraging everyone to have the same, but rather helping those that work the hardest and accomplish the most. This attitude emphasizes the responsibility of the individual to work towards his own improvement. The government should help by ensuring conditions, not necessarily success. Individuals should be responsible and also rewarded for their own ambitions, if they are a product of hard work. This striking individualism strongly contradicts claims that Russians seek out a government, which will act paternally toward its citizens and provide for a more socialist based welfare. On the contrary, even democracy and market skeptics appear to embrace the basic, individualistic tenets of democratic capitalism.

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<sup>35</sup>Carnaghan, *Out of Order*, 145.

### *Supportive of Markets, but Critical of Unfair Markets*

Most complaints about free-market democracy revolved around their dysfunction and the unfair repercussions that resulted for ordinary Russians. Particularly those who were in strong support of markets and democracy emphasized the limits with which the markets functioned during the late 90s, creating an unfair economic situation even for those willing and able to work hard. While principally supportive of markets, they criticized government irresponsibility in maintaining market principles, allowing markets to fall prey to corruption and criminality at the cost of ordinary Russians salaries and pensions. Respondents believed that Russian markets lacked the lawful discipline required to function properly as a democratic system. It was the government's role to develop the market responsibly and their disregard to for this resulted in unfair circumstances for ordinary Russians. Participants consistently focus on market fairness—not necessarily market paternalism—as one of the missing elements that caused dysfunction.

A focal dysfunction of Russian markets in the 1990s was the lack of correspondence between the quality of work and just compensation. This opinion could perhaps exemplify Meyer's point relating to modified socialist values. On the one hand, the individual's contribution to society should make him deserving of higher compensation, but on the other hand, the difficulty and the zealousness of one's work is also a factor in the amount he deserves. I think, however, this trend of thinking could be found in any number of societies without a socialist past and has more to do with a more general adherence to the rather democratic principle of desert rather than constructed socialist ideologies. For instance, most Russians felt that those employed in professions, which require harder work and contribute greatly to society, should be rewarded more than those professions that require less

consuming work—whether physically or intellectually—or have less meaning for society. One such participant complained that, “doctors are poor no matter how hard they work. Well, that’s the government budget sphere.”<sup>36</sup> The government determines the salaries for doctors, for example, who contribute to public health, and yet regardless of whether they work well, it chooses to pay them poorly. This responded distinctly criticizes the values of the government. Is it fair to pay doctors poorly, if they work hard for the good of society? Or alternatively, is it fair to pay people poorly whether they do honest work or not? The government lacks the values that work towards creating the right conditions in which people will be motivated to contribute to the economy and society, thus enabling them to add their part to living in a democracy.

Most respondents felt dysfunctional markets rewarded the undeserving, while at the same time, disadvantaged the meritorious. When asked if hard work could improve a person’s material situation, another market-supporting respondent replied, “well, theoretically yes, of course. Theoretically. But at the same time, the majority of people who don’t know how to work well may earn more than this person.”<sup>37</sup> Russians from different levels of society seemed to understand their unfair plights during the late 90s as well as those of the others, claiming that no matter what kind of job you have, hard work is seldom rewarded appropriately: “Even the intelligentsia, people like me, work well but in principle it is not possible to improve our material situation. And the same is true for workers, I know. I have some acquaintances, ordinary workers. The haven’t been paid for months.”<sup>38</sup> Here, a

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<sup>36</sup>Carnaghan, *Out of Order*, 142.

<sup>37</sup>Carnaghan, *Out of Order*, 142.

<sup>38</sup>Carnaghan, *Out of Order*, 143.

member of the intelligentsia, a portion of society whose work was devalued by socialism, also complains that markets function unfairly. Clearly, someone disadvantaged by socialist values would not earn for their return. She sees herself in the same situation as ordinary workers; the effects of dysfunctional Russian markets go beyond social class or employment sector and seem to disadvantage everyone involved in legitimate work. Instead of emphasizing the government's responsibility to improve the situation for society, she stresses the individual's inability to improve his own situation on account of his own merits because workers are simply not paid. Empty budgets caused by government irresponsibility deny ordinary Russians the proper conditions to improve their personal situations. There is little faith that individuals can improve their material situations based on personal initiative and this strikes a negative chord with many Russians, who would rather prefer democratic capitalism to a return to a state controlled economy. Individuals are responsible for themselves, but government is responsible for providing a democratic system in which markets allow for individuals to provide for themselves. Poorly functioning markets inhibit the democratic experience for most Russians. Russian respondents blame this unfair situation on the government and its lack of attentiveness to basic democratic conditions and values.

## **VII. Government Negligence: Unfair Privatization and Oligarchs**

The second most often mentioned injustice of Russia's early free market democracy was the controversial liberalization of natural resources and industrial enterprises in the 1990s, which made billionaires out of a short list of Russia's most influential oligarchs. In Carnaghan's study, many Russians from all levels of support for democracy singled out privatization as representing a major government failure in defending the fairness of the new, vulnerable economy. Other studies, such as the International Social Justice Project, also confirm that privatization was a sore point for Russians. Most believed the government had irresponsibly allowed criminals to steal the nation's wealth, which they considered to be a common good, and get away with it without punishment. In the previous chapter, Russians complained that hard work often goes unrewarded and by working hard, one cannot necessarily count on improving their personal situation. From this perspective, the fact that a select number of oligarchs enjoyed a vast amount of wealth by doing no work at all understandably appeared very unfair to most ordinary Russians.

Research shows Russians often look upon the rich with particular suspicion. More often than respondents in other countries, Russians consider wealth to be a product of



dishonesty rather than hard work and ambition.<sup>39</sup> While this skepticism could have some origins in socialist ideology, this opinion more likely results from the way in which privatization of Russian national industry made a few individuals, who happened have the right connections, enormously rich at the same time that most Russians struggled for basic subsistence. Many consider the privatization of the 90s unfair not because assets were unequally distributed, but because those who benefited got rich from, as many Russians see it, deceitful, criminal actions rather than their honest, ingenuity or intelligence. Polls also indicate that 77.5 % of Russians view the process of privatization negatively, considering it to have not only been unfair, but also largely criminal.<sup>40</sup> Participants in Carnaghan's study support these figures: respondents from the entire spectrum of support for markets and democracy consistently reiterated the words "theft, plundering, grabbing, usurpation, (and) deception" when describing privatization.<sup>41</sup> One respondent, a market and democracy supporter, criticized:

"From the beginning, privatization was conducted unjustly" and "on the national wealth, they (oligarchs) receive dividends. You could say, they don't grow with the nation, but live by themselves. I consider this unjust...the government lacks something...to change this, even though everyone thinks it is unjust."<sup>42</sup>

In his own words, he express the injustice of accumulating wealth through activities, which impede national development rather than cultivate it, especially when beneficiaries do not

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<sup>39</sup>James Kluegel et al. "Accounting for the Rich and the Poor: Existential Justice in Comparative Perspective," in *Social Justice and Political Change: Public Opinion in Capitalistic and Post-Communist States*, ed. James Kluegel et al. (Hawthorne, NY: AldineDe Gruyter, 1995), 190.

<sup>40</sup>Carnaghan, *Out of Order*, 116.

<sup>41</sup>Carnaghan, *Out of Order*, 135.

<sup>42</sup>Carnaghan, *Out of Order*, 136.

actually do any work to acquire it. This behavior preys on Russia's strides towards full political transition and robs the nation of its resources. Additionally, they complain that the previous leadership lacked the willingness or ability to correct this injustice. As we will see in the next section, many Russians concluded that the crimes of privatization, more than just being unfair, prevented the economy from developing properly and ultimately hindered Russia's democratic transition.

### *Criminal Privatization Disadvantaged Market Economy*

Is disapproval of privatization really just a manifestation of anti-market sentiment or nostalgia for a controlled economy? Studies say no. Although Russians exhibit bitterness over the 1990s liberalization, this does not indicate that they whole-heartedly reject the initiation of private enterprise or the free market. Rather, interviews and population polls show that Russians appear quite supportive of privatization as a necessary aspect of democratic capitalism and advantageous for Russia's democratic development. McFaul's data suggests that despite grievances over the way in which markets were opened in Russia, the majority (63.5%) maintain that competition among "various enterprises, organizations, and firms is beneficial to society."<sup>43</sup> Rather than rejecting privatization altogether, they disagree with the way in which privatization occurred in Russia in the 1990s and think that the political leadership was negligent in doing more to control it. As Carnaghan's interviewees confirm, Russians exhibit animosity towards the privatization of national

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<sup>43</sup>Michael McFaul, "Russian Attitudes toward Democracy, Markets, and the West," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, Meeting Report 3, no.10, 2 April 2001, <<http://www.carnegieendowment.org/events/index.cfm?fa=eventDetail&id=300>> (18 October 2008).

industry not because they reject free market principles, but rather because they believe the irresponsible way in which industry was liberalized significantly damaged the democratic development of the economy and created unfair circumstances for ordinary Russians. As one respondent explained, “Where people break the law, it is cataclysmic for the economy. Well, for example, the case of the oligarchs, of Berezovsky. People, having broken the law, created—that is, knocked together, let’s say it like that—a big fortune. It’s illegal. It must be stopped. But the course of reforms themselves, toward a market economy, I of course support.”<sup>44</sup> The complaint here is clearly not directed at economic reforms or market economy in general, but rather at the lawlessness of this particular privatization, which allowed for the massive accumulation of wealth through criminal means. Respondents make a distinction between free market reforms, which are good for the economy, and illegal partitioning of Russian national industry into the hands of a select group of criminals, which turned the economy upside down. In the minds of these respondents, the political leadership had the obligation to stop this national crime and its failure to do so stunted the economic development of Russia’s democratic transition.

Responses reveal that Russians believe privatization’s crimes handicapped the economy, particularly in its ineffectiveness to provide opportunities for ordinary, hard-working people. Participants assert that privatization produced economic chaos by unfairly rewarding individuals the nation’s wealth without having earned it and punishing those, who worked honestly for late wages and unpaid pensions. Many of Carnaghan’s respondents show a firm commitment to markets and democracy in general, but criticize them for not

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<sup>44</sup>Carnaghan, *Out of Order*, 149.

functioning properly. They mostly hold the political leadership responsible for failing to make democracy work better for the Russian people. As one woman explained,

“It seems to me that our apparatus, our institutions, are sufficient. It is simply necessary to try to instill new meaning in them, that is, ...to make the government work better, to create associations so that (it) can better reflect the interests of the people, to demand from ...the government the best solutions to problems.”<sup>45</sup>

Thus, in light of the chaos of privatization and the dysfunction of Russian markets, this respondent looks towards the leadership for solutions. The democratic system, itself, is not the problem. She believes the leadership needs to work better and take responsibility for running the country, punishing those who commit crimes, and making sure that those who work receive their pay. With regards to privatization, many Russians were looking for leadership that would crack down on the illegal gains of the very rich, return law and order to the economy, creating a situation in which reforms could successfully provide opportunities for those who deserve them. Consequently, those who supported actions against oligarchs prove not to be anti-market or anti-democracy at all, even if these actions, in themselves, may have appeared rather authoritarian. On the contrary, they support economic reforms. They merely want an economy governed by fair laws that would allow ordinary citizens to benefit from free market democracy. Government intervention was seen, at this point as a means of cleaning up the system of dysfunctional elements. Carnaghan concludes that to many of her respondents agreed that “containing the oligarchs was a step towards reducing the role of predatory interests in the Russian state.”<sup>46</sup> Thus, the desire for government involvement in the economy is separated in the minds of most Russians from a desire for a paternalistic, controlled economy. Rather the government has the responsibility

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<sup>45</sup>Carnaghan, *Out of Order*, 247.

<sup>46</sup>Carnaghan, *Out of Order*, 152.

to interfere in order to ensure fairness of opportunities to those who work hard. It has the obligation to protect the economy from predators, who seek to take advantage of it for their own interests.

### **VIII. Desire for Fairness: Old Socialist Leaning or Typical Democratic Value?**

Considering these sentiments, we will examine how Putin successfully fulfilled many of the expectations that Russians had about the government's role in protecting the economy in the interest of the people. It will be demonstrated how this success subsequently contributed a great deal to his astounding popularity among democracy's supporters in Russia. Before this can be discussed further, however, the issue of fairness, with respect to its socialist origins, must be adequately addressed in order to distinguish between old and new, or Soviet and post-Soviet (respectively), value orientations. Likewise, it is necessary to look at how Russians' concern for fairness compares with citizens from other firmly democratic countries. Is fairness particularly a Russian concern or is it a rather basic principle apparent in most societies regardless of past ideological influences?

While Russians do tend to favor government involvement in economic affairs, the type of role the government ought to play has transformed. Many Russians envision the role of the government in a democracy, as opposed to the old paternalistic role of the communist government, as centered on the need for fair governance rather than intrusive control, especially with regards to the economy. Old socialistic desires for state paternalism appear to have been modified by more individualist ideologies in that most Russians want the government to play an active role, but only to ensure the proper conditions for individual's to

prosper according to their accomplishments. Essentially, they desire for the government to ensure that the markets reward people according to the principle of desert rather than equal distribution. Although Carnaghan's study did find evidence that those with high support for the markets and democracy were more likely to think that economic fairness should be governed by a principle of desert and than extreme market and democracy skeptics, even skeptics "tended to think that an equal society was a practical impossibility, and they were ready to reward deserving individuals with greater wealth."<sup>47</sup> Understandably, skeptics were more willing to accept inequality at the upper echelons of society than graver inequalities in poorer sections of society. As one skeptic admitted,

"let there be rich people. Let them be—those who can do something and improve our lives. But so that there would not be poor people. Very rich and very poor, far from each other in their views and in their lives, do not understand each other. I want to say, let the intelligent person—well, he invented something, like rockets—be wealthy. He's intelligent. Let him live well. But he lives on the improvement of our country. He produces something. He doesn't just grab is like so many."<sup>48</sup>

Even those skeptical of democracy and markets, who perhaps idealistically wished for more economic equality, accepted that clever and ambitious individuals, who contributed to society, should be, based on their ingenuity, rewarded more than those who do not. Even to the staunchest skeptics, this approach appears acceptably fair enough. They, of course, distinguish between wealth gained through purposeful work and wealth gained by stealing, such as during privatization, considering only the former to be an expression of fairness. In terms of their concerns for equality, these manifest themselves largely in the worry that the poor and the needy receive the basic necessities to live, rather than equality to all with no restriction. As will be demonstrated in the next section, however, providing subsistence

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<sup>47</sup>Carnaghan, *Out of Order*, 132.

<sup>48</sup>Carnaghan, *Out of Order*, 153.

minimums to the very needed and appropriately rewarding those who work hard proves less an element of leftover socialist ideology than a human concern prevalent in even the most economically liberal of modern societies.

*What's Fair About Democracy?: Similarities Between Russians and Americans*

The conflict between fairness and the inherent inequalities present in most free market democracies is, of course, a long debated theme. That Russians regard economic fairness in terms of desert and appropriate consideration for the basic needs of the very poor does not vary widely from people living in more established capitalist democracies. In fact, disregarding any influence of past Soviet ideologies, most democratic societies inherently demand a certain level of fairness in order to accept their democracies as properly functioning. Fairness, once again, does not automatically denote equality. For example, Russian opinions on fairness, such as the just distributions of wealth based on achievement and desert and emergency aide to the very needy, resemble very closely the opinions of very liberally democratic Americans, who certainly understand and accept dramatic social inequalities. Carnaghan finds a strong similarity between Russian and American respondents, who were questioned on the same issues. Americans expressed correspondingly similar attitudes towards the principle of desert, with distinct consideration for the very poor and unfortunate segments of society. One woman explained,

“I guess I would rather see a society where everybody has somewhat of a comfortable life, to a degree. I think you should only get it, though, if you deserve it. I don’t believe in getting things for nothing, so I think you should have to work for what you get...”<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>49</sup>Carnaghan, *Out of Order*, 134.



and yet, another emphasized,

“all people deserve the necessities of life. Oh, well, I don’t think that we can any longer tolerate a society where people don’t have the necessities of life. I mean, yes, individual initiative has to be rewarded, but it’s scandalous that we have homeless people and undernourished children and things of that sort.”<sup>50</sup>

Even Americans, who are thought to more strongly support markets than socialized redistribution, often expressed similar concerns as market skeptical Russians. While generally success should be a matter of desert, even market liberal Americans conceded that certain allowances should be made to the less fortunate to ensure that they receive at least the basic necessities. Thus, Americans appear to seek the same level of fairness in their markets as most Russians regardless of their differing political pasts.

More broadly speaking, concepts of fairness and order appear in every country regardless of the political affiliation and have more to do with basic justice than ideology. Russian attitudes towards fairness appear quite normal when compared to those of more stable democratic countries. In this context, the Russian desire for the government to do more about enforcing fairness appears less likely to be a longing for state paternalism present in more authoritarian regimes and more a typical expectation of just, democratic systems and competent leadership. The next chapter will examine some of Putin’s policies and how they pulled upon democratic rather than authoritarian expectations, convincing Russians that he sought to govern Russia’s democracy by fairer principles than the previous leadership.

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<sup>50</sup>Carnaghan, *Out of Order*, 134.

## **IX. Fairness and Putin's Popularity**

After an extensive discussion of Russian attitudes towards democracy and fairness, we can now relate these to the phenomenon of Putin's popularity. How does the Russian longing for fairness influence attitudes towards Putin's political trajectory? Could Putin's authoritarian actions appear to reverse the most troubling offenses to fairness that the Russian people suffered during the Yeltsin years? Evidence shows that in the eyes of ordinary Russians, Putin seemed to create the very conditions necessary to encourage fairness in the economic system and in doing so, managed to fix many of the blatant dysfunctions of Russian democracy. Carnaghan attests that her respondents, both those strongly in support of democracy as well as skeptics, saw Putin as someone who "felt their pain. And they thought he might be leading the way to a less painful economic reality, without abandoning the markets, but also without abandoning citizens to dysfunctional markets."<sup>51</sup> For example, one of her respondents from the intelligentsia, who, because of her education, ought to be more aware of Putin's creeping authoritarianism, stated that before Putin, state institutions,

"were in decline. We received miserly pay. We didn't have anything. For a year, they didn't pay us.... With the arrival of Putin, these questions began to receive attention. Resources began to be allocated for science, for the army. My sister is a teacher. She doesn't live badly now. My mom—she's already elderly—she was a doctor before she retired...after leaving work, she also started to live better...Well,

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<sup>51</sup>Carnaghan, *Out of Order*, 150.

and in general I like that Putin is modest in life, I feel that he doesn't steal, that he is honest. I like how he talks. I understand all his views, positions. That's what appeals to me. A serious consideration for our country has begun."<sup>52</sup>

With his visible attention to guaranteeing salaries, pensions, investments in education and science, Putin won over members of society, who otherwise would be expected to criticize his restriction of freedoms. He appeared to concentrate on improving compensation to better match deserving professions and reward those working the hardest in Russia's economy. These actions represented immediate change from the previous leadership, which seemed to ignore these issues and left many Russians to feel the brunt of a lawless economy.

Additionally, this respondent raises another factor of Putin's popularity: he not only appeals to the people for what he has accomplished, but simply because of the way he is. Because of his modest image, he gives many, the impression that he is willing to address the immediate concerns of the people. As this respondent puts it, he shows consideration for the country, again presenting him in contrast to the previous leadership. In the hearts and minds of many Russians, fairness and transparency were the values needed in order to reform democracy to provide appropriate opportunities for the people. While to outside observers Putin appeared to crack down on personal liberties and convoluted transparent democratic practices with manipulative rhetoric, many Russians were convinced both by his actions and his personality that he intended to perfect Russian democracy rather than dismantle it.

Traditional elements of democracy such as personal liberties and freedoms may not have been a priority for Russians at the start of Putin's first term, but they certainly were not opposed to them. Instead Russians prioritized other conditions from his leadership, which

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<sup>52</sup>Carnaghan, *Out of Order*, 150.

they considered as belonging to democracy: increased government responsibility to restore fairness and a crack down on predatory and dysfunctional elements in the economy.

*Fairness and “Functional” Democracy: How Do Russians Receive Putin’s Policies?*

With the backdrop of the political inefficiency of the Yeltsin years, Putin's policies repeatedly “allowed people to find in him the desired qualities they sought: reflection, will, commitment, and purposefulness,” shaping their hope in him less by his democratic merits, “as by the intensive need for positive changes.”<sup>53</sup> Most importantly, Russians believed that Putin would finally set Russia, socially, economically and politically on a track to normalcy. Because of the many mis-developments of Russian democracy in the 1990s, a remarkable 72% of Russians believed that Russia was either “*only a little*” normal or “*not at all*.”<sup>54</sup> Most Russians considered a “normal society” to adhere to the principles of fairness, which Yeltsin’s leadership failed to endorse. Russians polled in 2004 stated that “normal society” has the following qualities: *government officials treat ordinary people fairly* (74%), *if things go wrong public welfare services will help* (72%), *it is safe to go about the streets without being afraid of crime* (85%), and *there are opportunities for you or your children to improve your living conditions* (85%). Again, when discussing the concept of a “normal society” the same issues arise as when discussing a democratic society: government responsibility for fairness, dependable welfare services in cases of emergency, decreased crime, and opportunities for individuals to improve their present and future conditions. By 2004, a

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<sup>53</sup>Diligensky, “Vladimir Putin and Russian Democracy.”

<sup>54</sup>New Russia Barometer XIII, “What is a 'normal life' to a Russian?,” *The Levada Center*, 18-23 March 2004, <[http://www.russiavotes.org/welfare/welfare\\_social.php](http://www.russiavotes.org/welfare/welfare_social.php)> (01 September 2008).

majority of Russians believed that Putin had made significant successes in addressing these top issues. Even if there was not a “normal society” in Russia at that time, 57% believed Russia was being steered on its way to being “normal” and will definitely become normal within 10 years.<sup>5556</sup> This confidence in the direction in which Putin was leading the country demonstrates that most Russians believe his policies transformed Russia into a country more resembling that of other democratic nations. Russian opinion, in these samples, by no means indicates that people thought his leadership was leading Russia in a new political direction away from democratic consolidation.

In the eyes of the Russians interviewed in previous sections, a properly functioning democracy would have to provide and defend fair conditions for its citizens in the form of the timely payment of wages and pensions, increased pay for purposeful work, and consideration for the poor and general living standards as well as prevent criminals from unfairly exploiting the economy for their individual enrichment. Russian political leadership before Putin secured none of these conditions, thus leaving many Russians unable to take advantage of the opportunities that a just democracy ideally presented. The next sections will examine how Putin gave the public the impression that he addressed the very concerns they voiced in regard to fairness. I intend to demonstrate that his outspoken economic policy and treatment of oligarchs contributed to his popularity not merely for the material results they yielded, but

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<sup>55</sup>New Russia Barometer XIII, “Do you think that within a year our life will become somewhat better, or that no improvement will happen?” *The Levada Center*, 1-22 June 2008, <[http://www.russiavotes.org/welfare/welfare\\_social.php](http://www.russiavotes.org/welfare/welfare_social.php)> (01 September 2008).

<sup>56</sup>New Russia Barometer XIII, “If not definitely normal: How long do you think it will be before Russia becomes a normal society?” *The Levada Center*, 18-23 March 2004, <[http://www.russiavotes.org/welfare/welfare\\_social.php](http://www.russiavotes.org/welfare/welfare_social.php)> (01 September 2008).

rather because they specifically addressed the values of fairness, which Russians considered greatly important for Russia's democratic consolidation.

## **X. Putin's Fair Policies: Economic Policy**

In Carnaghan's study, many participants complained that the government did not do enough to ensure fairness in the system. Specifically, they wanted wages and pensions paid on time, decent pay for professional workers, like doctors, scientists and teachers, who contributed to society with purposeful work, the possibility to improve one's situation with hard work, opportunities to find employment, and economic consideration for the extremely poor. Essentially, they wanted the economy to adhere more closely to the principle of desert. The positive economic times that arrived with Putin's presidency gave a large portion of the population a clearly understandable reason to believe that life had become fairer for average Russians. Russia experienced consistent growth as well as increases in productivity and real wages every year of his presidency.<sup>57</sup> Household living standards alone rose by close to 50%, when 2003 is compared with 1995.<sup>58</sup> The strengthening of the ruble caused it to increasingly replace the dollar as the currency of choice and encouraged the increased purchasing of

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<sup>57</sup>Cole Harvey, "Putin in Perspective: Russia's Democratic Authoritarian," *Pitt Political Review*, 5 March 2008, < <http://www.pittpoliticalreview.org/?p=36>> (22 October 2008).

<sup>58</sup>Stephen Whitefield, "Putin's popularity and its implications for democracy in Russia," in *Leading Russia-Putin in Perspective : Essays in Honour of Archie Brown*, ed. by Alex Pravda, (New York: Oxford UP, 2005), 146. Mean evaluations on a scale from 1 (negative) to 5 (positive) of household living standards over the last five years increased from 1.97 in 1995 to 2.87 in 2003.

imported goods. Moreover, the country's real disposable income doubled between 1999 and 2006 increasing consumer spending and consumer confidence in the system.<sup>59</sup> Almost immediately Russians saw more money circulating to greater segments of the population.

Throughout his presidency, Putin appeared eager to convince the public that, "as the economy grows, it also "precipitates down to the material situation of the individual."<sup>60</sup> In his annual address in 2004, he stated "Our goals are absolutely clear—high living standards in the country, lives that are safe, free and comfortable, a mature democracy and ...most importantly, I'll repeat, a substantial increase in society's well- being."<sup>61</sup> In the 47-minute address, he devoted most of speech to the resurgence of the economy and its intended impact on society. He pledged poverty reduction and urged the government's responsibility to guarantee affordable housing, education, and healthcare for more of the population.<sup>62</sup> Again, the same issues arise, which Russians identified as essentially missing elements of Russian democracy in the 1990s: improved living standards, reduced crime, increased opportunities for everyone's well-being. Notably, his agenda does not exclude the

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<sup>59</sup>Katya Malofeeva and Tim Brenton, "Putin's Economy: Eight Years On," *Russia Profile*, 15 August 2007, <<http://www.russiaprofile.org/page.php?pageid=Business&articleid=a1187177738>> (16 October 2008).

<sup>60</sup>Hans Henning-Schroeder, "Akzeptanz, Protest, Legitimität? Die russische Gesellschaft und das System Putin" *Russland-Analysen*, no. 84, 09 December 2005, [www.laender-analysen.de/dlcounter/dlcounter.php?url=./russland/pdf/Russlandanalysen084.pdf](http://www.laender-analysen.de/dlcounter/dlcounter.php?url=./russland/pdf/Russlandanalysen084.pdf) (01 July 2008).

<sup>61</sup>RFE/RL, "Russia: Putin Pledges To Boost Economy, Cut Poverty in State of Union Address," 26 May 2004, <http://www.rferl.org/articleprintview/1052974.html> (15 October 2008).

<sup>62</sup>RFERL, "Russia: Putin Pledges To Boost Economy."



cultivation of democracy from his program, but rather quite obviously aggregates democratic principles in his economic aspirations.

Instead of letting national revenues disappear into the pockets of the authorities, Putin actually used the surpluses to pay back late wage and pension payments, resolving a miserable situation, which had plagued the population in the 1990s. Russia's economic recovery, which began around the same time Putin took office, allowed for his government to avoid future late payments of wages and pensions. By August 2007, the average wage had increased to \$540 per month, which while still far below European standards, marked an impressive increase from \$65 a month in August 1999.<sup>63</sup> In terms of poverty and social reform, the percentage of people living below the subsistence level lowered in 2007, 17 % from 30 % in 1999.<sup>64</sup> Accordingly, Dr. Hans Henning-Schroeder comments that actual incomes rose every year around 10%, and the number of people with incomes under the subsistence level sunk from 40 million to 25 million.<sup>65</sup> Certainly, the regular receipt of wages, increased salaries and living standards as well as poverty reduction all produced signs of restored fairness to the Russian system. It is possible to imagine how these visible results made Russians believe that democracy was beginning to function properly and this was due to the consideration that Putin's fairer policies had for the lives of average Russians.

Respondents in Carnaghan's interviews also complained that the inability to find meaningful work was a substantially unfair aspect of Russian democracy before Putin. In response, Putin additionally oversaw a significant drop in unemployment levels from 1999.

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<sup>63</sup>Malofeeva and Brenton, "Putin's Economy: Eight Years On."

<sup>64</sup>Malofeeva and Brenton, "Putin's Economy: Eight Years On."

<sup>65</sup>Henning-Schroeder, "Akzeptanz, Protest, Legitimität?"

By the end of 2006, unemployment had shrunk by 3.6 million to just 5 million, improving the unemployment rate from 13.2 % in 1999, to less than 8 %.<sup>66</sup> Lowered unemployment reflects that more people were able to find job opportunities, a condition many respondents of Carnaghan's study considered to be responsibility of the government. Putin's leadership also openly used budget surpluses to fund national projects to target segments of the population, which Carnaghan's respondents would consider deserving of government encouragement. In 2007, \$8.7 billion dollars were officially set aside for national projects including: provisions "of financial assistance to the mothers of newborn children, increased spending on healthcare, the construction of new hospitals, increased pay for a wide range of doctors and nurses, the issuance of mortgage loans, construction of new housing financed by the budget, investment in the upgrade of mortgage loans, construction of two new universities and scholarships for the best students."<sup>67</sup> These projects tapped into the same groups, which the respondents of Carnaghan's study identified as receiving unfair treatment. They consistently thought that more money should go to pay medical professionals and facilities, invest in education, and help families and children. As one respondent echoed, "it is necessary (for the government) to create those conditions," which create opportunities, and "limit the opportunities for economic parasitism...the state gives nothing to the family."<sup>68</sup> By accomplishing these gains on fairness, Putin clearly appeared to create the conditions, which most Russians expected a properly functioning democracy to possess.

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<sup>66</sup>Malofeeva and Brenton, "Putin's Economy: Eight Years On."

<sup>67</sup>Malofeeva and Brenton, "Putin's Economy: Eight Years On."

<sup>68</sup>Carnaghan, *Out of Order*, 145

*Putin's Image Survives Less Discussed Shortcomings*

Still critics argue that the way in which Putin presented his economic policy touched much more on the issue of fairness than the outcome of his economic policies actually produced. There is good reason to believe that Russia's economic upturn after 1999 had less to do with Putin's restructuring of the economy than on rising oil prices and export revenues.<sup>69</sup> And when more negatively scrutinized, Putin's economic policies, particularly in regard to funding education, actually appear less fair. According to other reports, Russia spends less of a percentage of its GDP on education than Paraguay.<sup>70</sup> In 2002, university professors were still forced to have night jobs because their salaries remained at around \$100 per month. Even in 2007, average wages in education were "only two-thirds of the national rate."<sup>71</sup> While officially the Putin regime committed its spending to increasing wages for those whose good work contributed to the betterment of society, teachers and university professors continued to live below national averages and even subsistence minimums. In these areas, Putin neglected to create the kind of environments that the people demanded in the Carnaghan study. For example, even by the Ministry of Education's standards, 80-90 % of Russia's institutions of higher learning in 2007 ranked below Soviet standards of quality and since the state provides less funding, passing examinations with bribes has become commonplace.<sup>72</sup> These conditions hardly provide opportunities for fairness to succeed over

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<sup>69</sup>Vladimir Shlapentokh, "Putin's First Year in Office: the New Regime's Uniqueness in Russian History," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 34 (2001): 391.

<sup>70</sup>Anderson, "Russia's Managed Democracy."

<sup>71</sup>Anderson, "Russia's Managed Democracy."

<sup>72</sup>Anderson, "Russia's Managed Democracy."

individuals who sought get ahead by dishonest means. Considering these contradictory facts, one could also very convincingly argue that much of what Putin claimed to value served more to embellish his popular image than bring any real improvements to the lives of ordinary Russians, making his popular base, at times, appear quite at odds with his political agenda and anti-democratic policies<sup>73</sup>. Nevertheless, despite selective shortcomings in his actual policies, Putin's positive image largely prevailed. Whether it was his main focus or not, his policies actually yielded many real results for ordinary Russians and public opinion consistently confirms his success in convincing a vast majority of the public that his leadership put the people first and sought to correct Russian democracy's most unfair imperfections.

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<sup>73</sup>Whitefield, "Putin's Popularity and its Implications for Democracy in Russia,"157.

## **XI. Putin's Fair Policies: Attack on Oligarchs**

Putin's selective persecution of the oligarchs, who voiced themselves oppositionally, suggests another source from which the regime bolstered its support among the general population. As respondents in Carnaghan's study indicate, the wild privatization of the 1990s that made billionaires out of Russia's short list of oligarchs was broadly viewed among Russians—from all levels of support for democracy and markets—as illegal, unfair, and parasitic upon real democracy. While Putin's attack on oligarchs was widely praised by the Russian public as a long overdue governmental measure to enforce the law, western critics mostly accused Putin's actions of being authoritarian in nature, having political motivations, and seeking to hush disagreeable outlets of free speech. This accusation sprung from the fact that actions against oligarchs appeared very selectively, lashing out particularly at Putin's most politically outspoken adversaries.

Oligarchs openly meddled in politics way before Putin arrived on the scene. Both their vocal support and opposition was tolerated by the political leadership, but not particularly seen as a purely democratic demonstration of free speech by the Russian population. Whether they benefited from their influence on politics or not, most Russians firmly believed that the agendas of the oligarchs were primarily motivated by self interest rather than any defense of freedoms or plurality of opinion. Indeed, most of the oligarchs'

initiatives unabashedly concentrated on pursuing their own interests. Most notably, oligarchs, like Boris Berezovsky and Vladimir Gusinsky, used their own media to spread their personal political views. At times, however, their actions inadvertently benefited the Russian people and certain aspects of Russia's democratic transition. For example, they also used their influence for lobbying business initiatives in the Russian Union of Industrial and Entrepreneurs (RSPP), which coincidentally benefited the whole country by pushing "low and transparent taxes, competent judiciary, reform of bureaucracy, reform of natural monopolies, Russia's accession to the World Trade Organization, development of small business and even pragmatic foreign policy."<sup>74</sup> Their business demands sometimes acted to encourage transparency, reforms and improved international relations, which actually somewhat helped forward Russia's democratic transition. Self-interest, of course, remained at the heart of their aims and, objectively speaking, their lobbying activities from 2000-2003 suggest that, while pressing hard to make business practices easier, did little to help new entrepreneurs gain access to a better business environment.<sup>75</sup> Regardless of the fortuitous contributions oligarchs made towards the development of Russia's market, admittedly few of their changes impacted the lives of ordinary Russians in noticeable ways. Russians remained largely suspicious of their actions and therefore, generally open to restrictions on their power and influence.

Putin, himself, was never explicitly anti-oligarch in principle. In his first meeting with oligarchs after his election in 2000, Putin negotiated a pact with them in which he agreed to respect their property rights and avoid dragging up the issue of privatization against

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<sup>74</sup>Sergei Guriev and Andrei Rachinsky, "The Role of Oligarchs in Russian Capitalism," *The Journal of Economic Perspectives* 19, no. 1 (2005): 145.

<sup>75</sup>Guriev and Rachinsky, "The Role of Oligarchs," 145.

them as long as they paid taxes and refrained from using their political clout, at least against him.<sup>76</sup> Thus, he made the conditions under which he was willing to tolerate them clear from the beginning. Surprisingly, evidence shows that most Russians were also aware of this pact, with 57 % claiming that they knew of it.<sup>77</sup> This did not appear to conflict with their image of Putin as a democratic leader because this pact forced many oligarchs to adhere to the rules, which the public considered not only acceptable, but better for society as a whole. From the perspective of many ordinary Russians, oligarchs did not flout the benefits of freedom of expression. Instead they used their money to influence the government in their favor. Thus, reducing political influence of Oligarchs would reduce an influence of their self-interests in Russian politics and had little to do with restricting personal or political freedoms.

#### *NTV Affair and Putin's "Non-Involvement"*

The NTV affair demonstrates an interesting example of Putin's unrelenting popularity prevailing over his intended image. Although the official Kremlin story held that Putin was not involved in the seizure of NTV, his reputation as the defender of fairness, coupled with the negative reputation of oligarchs for being unfair to the economic development of Russia as a whole, led many Russians to willingly and positively associate him with the attack on Gusinsky's media emporium anyway. Because Gusinsky had made a name for himself as an outspoken critic of Putin's leadership, western media and those within Russia, who already politically opposed Putin, naturally interpreted the NTV affair to have political

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<sup>76</sup>Guriev and Rachinsky, "The Role of Oligarchs," 146.

<sup>77</sup>Guriev and Rachinsky, "The Role of Oligarchs," 146.

implications.<sup>78</sup> In the international media, state seizure of NTV was a blatant gesture of Putin's increased authoritarian control of the media. Domestically, however, this action gave a different impression.

Due to the fact that most Russians actually supported Putin and believed him to be strengthening Russia's democracy rather than weakening it, the majority of the population obviously rejected the insinuation that the NTV seizure was another example of Putin's increasingly authoritarian policies. FOM surveys indicate the "Putin factor" prevented many Russians from suspecting political motives, since many who trusted the president's values could not believe he would manipulate the event for undemocratic purposes.<sup>79</sup> Understandably, from the perspective of many Russians, Gusinsky had simply broken the pact and overstepped the justifiable restrictions, which Putin had placed on the influence of oligarchs. The fact that Putin's pact with the oligarchs was not a secret probably contributed to Putin's initial unwillingness to use the "protector of fairness" approach in his attack on Vladimir Gusinsky's NTV network. The managers of Putin's image must have known that the public would pay attention to the NTV affair. Since 85 % of Russians report television as their primary informational source and the channel enjoyed enormous popularity, the action required special attention not to conflict with the Putin's public image.<sup>80</sup> Therefore, the official version, propagated by the Kremlin, state run television, newspapers, and supposedly neutral journalists, insisted that the seizure of NTV was merely an economic conflict between

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<sup>78</sup>G. Diligensky, "The Landscape After the Battle: 'The NTV Action' and Russian Society," *FOM*, 17 May 2001, <http://bd.english.fom.ru/report/map/diligensky/ed011735> (15 October 2008).

<sup>79</sup>Diligensky, "The Landscape After the Battle."

<sup>80</sup>Mommsen, *Das System Putins*, 52-53.



two major corporations, one of which was accused of owing a fortune in unpaid taxes. According to this version of events, the takeover was “not a defeat of the freedom of the press, but a triumph of the no less democratic principle of private property.”<sup>81</sup> Thus, the Kremlin attempted to maintain that the seizure was in the defense of other democratic rights and had nothing to do with the infringement of free speech. Clearly, the regime believed that this type of diversion would direct the public’s attention on the leadership’s defense of democracy and discount arguments that it intended the opposite. Kremlin spin-doctors, however, did not account for the already distinctly powerful image of the president as a guarder of fairness and how this would impact the public’s interpretation of state enforced actions against a group, which most considered to be predatory upon national interests.

Russians tended to positively associate Putin with the actions against the oligarchs because of his popular reputation and many rhetorical commitments to defending democracy through the restoration of fair procedures. Although many Russians refused to believe that Putin would use the attacks on oligarchs in order to strengthen authoritarian control on the media, some did, for this reason, believe that he was nevertheless involved in the attacks for other reasons. Many (about one third) could not believe in the complete non-involvement of the president. Furthermore, a relative majority stated that, in situations where the integrity of justice is at stake, Putin had the obligation to interfere. They believed many of the events leading up to the closure of NTV (i.e. tax evasion, illegitimate acquisition of industry) occurred without concern for the interest of the public.<sup>82</sup> While the government seemed wary of involving Putin’s image in an affair that might actually contradict his performance (after

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<sup>81</sup>Diligensky, “The Landscape After the Battle.”

<sup>82</sup>Diligensky, “The Landscape After the Battle.”

all, he did condone the wealth gained through privatization by most), the public appeared to trust so deeply that Putin possessed the values to defend their interests that many remained convinced of his involvement as a matter of justice, even at the regimes preference for keeping Putin out of it. The regime insisted on the political neutrality of the takeover, but Putin's reputation and image as a defender of fairness automatically forced his association with the takeover in the minds of most Russians.

*Values Shape Opinion: Putin's Image vs. the Oligarchs*

As it turns out, regardless of what anti-Putin and pro-regime sources intended to get across to the people, the largest percentage of Russians (about 60 %) believed neither the West's version of the story, which criticized Putin's authoritarian actions, nor the Kremlin-backed version, which claimed his non-involvement. In open-ended questions, many cited oligarchs as responsible for this lawless, unprincipled struggle for personal power and property.<sup>83</sup> Some go as far as to make anti-Semitic or anti-western remarks ("Jews sharing money" or "they want to sell NTV to foreigners"), but most respondents unwillingly specified whose interests were behind the affair and sufficed to vaguely negative conclusions that the incident had neither to do with freedom of speech nor private property, but simple lawlessness that needed to be contained.<sup>84</sup> Russians seemed disinterested in explaining the takeover in terms of more generic democratic principles like freedom of speech or private property. Instead, they appeared overwhelmingly concerned with the unfairness and lawlessness with which most oligarchs, lumped into one group, had acquired and maintained

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<sup>83</sup>Diligensky, "The Landscape After the Battle."

<sup>84</sup>Diligensky, ""The Landscape After the Battle."

their businesses and welcomed any action to correct this as a reestablishment of fairness. Because they felt that Russia's fledgling economy, including their personal economic situations, as well as Russia's democratic development had been compromised by the actions of oligarchs, the correction of their lawlessness resounded as the most important result of the takeover. It must have come as a surprise to Kremlin spin-doctors in their first attempt at taming the oligarchs that neither effort to influence the public's attitude had much success. In the end, Russians retained their original prejudices of big business and criminals, who make money off of nothing. In the end, they believed their own version of the story, which reflected their attitudes towards the many problems of Russia's dysfunctional free market democracy. Even though Putin claimed non-involvement, his policies and his image as a supporter of fairness and democracy made his influence on punishing these criminals logical from the perspective of most Russians. The takeover of NTV was more of a response to criminality rather than any political action of his own agenda. This response was a sign to the public that Putin fulfilled his image as president ready to strengthen Russian democracy by restoring the principle of fairness. What the oligarchs had done to the Russian economy was criminal and unfair, culminating in economic chaos and the weakening of Russian democracy. Through his image, Putin was automatically associated with this attack and it contributed positively to his public reception because it touched on the bitter injustices of Russia's dysfunctional democratic transition.

This perspective supports the conclusions Carnaghan came to with her respondents who believed that the containment of oligarchs "was a step towards reducing the role of predatory interests" in Russian democracy, regardless of the official story (usually tax evasion) surrounding their apprehensions. Carnaghan asserts that, to her respondents, the

crack down on oligarchs consistently represented a “pushing for capitalism that benefits the population broadly as well as for a political system that protects individual rights and provides security from criminals, from business unbounded by law, and from arbitrary authorities.”<sup>85</sup> Many of the practices that Putin carried out during his presidency, particularly centralizing the economy and attacking press freedoms via oligarchs, may have been interpreted by the West as authoritarian, but Russian reactions to these actions suggest that they actually saw them as restoring the fairness that a stable democracy needed to provide the opportunities which its hard working citizens deserved. Because Putin’s actions tended to touch on these sore spots of unfairness, the public often saw his interference in these situations to be an exhibition of Putin sharing their democratic values. Thus, his economic reforms as well as his selective, though highly visible attacks on the oligarchs contributed to Putin’s sustained popularity and the belief that he was actually steering Russia closer to democracy rather than further away.

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<sup>85</sup>Carnaghan, *Out of Order*, 153.

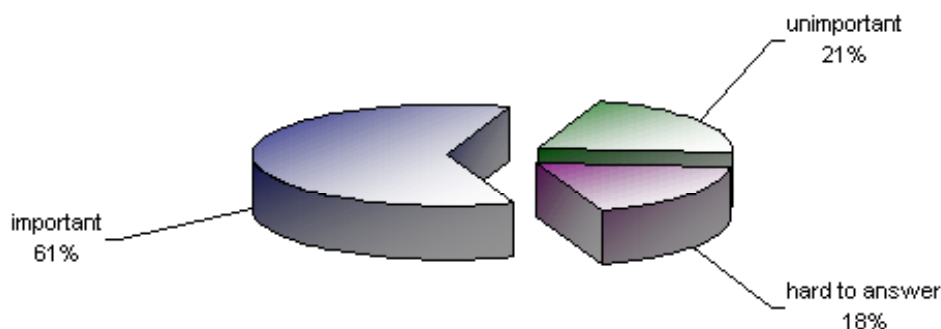
## **XII. Conclusion: Putin's Democracy?**

Russian attitudes towards democracy clearly indicate that they neither craved heavy-handed authoritarianism nor a paternalistic state. They merely craved the elements of democracy which Russian democracy lacked in the 1990s: a fair system ensured by the government to function properly and reward hard working citizens on the principle of desert. While Russians may have been looking for stronger government intervention, this hardly conflicted with democracy because what prevented democracy from functioning properly in Russia, was the lack of government enforced rules to protect fair opportunities for ordinary Russians. In the eyes of Russians, fair opportunities were essential elements of properly functioning democracies.

Although some critics argue that Vladimir Putin's consistently high approval ratings reflect latent illiberal tendencies amidst the Russian people, significant evidence suggests that while Russians may have been looking for fairness and perhaps have tolerated a firm governmental hand to reinforce it, most Russians remain undeniably committed at least to their own definition of democracy. Stephen Whitefield's findings attest that the percentage of respondents who agree that Russia needs a government with a "strong hand" to resolve its economic problems increased during Putin's presidency with a clear majority in favor. However, when asked "Would it be worthwhile to support a leader who could solve the main

problems facing Russia today even if he overthrew democracy?” the percentage of those in favor only increases slightly with less than a majority in agreement as well as an increase in those who “strongly disagree”.<sup>86</sup> Other data, measuring the distribution of norms and attitudes over the period, lead Whitefield and colleagues to conclude “there is absolutely no evidence that democracy in Russia is more positively evaluated because of a growing association with anti-democratic outlooks” and results “suggest that Russians do not appear to approve of Putin because he delivers to them desired delegative leadership or anti-democratic and illiberal policies.”<sup>87</sup> If Whitefield’s analysis proves true, than Putin’s popularity cannot lie in growing illiberal tendencies among the Russian public.

**Figure 5:**  
**DO YOU THINK IT IS IMPORTANT FOR MOST RUSSIANS THAT RUSSIA IS A DEMOCRATIC COUNTRY?**<sup>88</sup>



(Source: FOM Population poll from December 31, 2005)

In fact, a paradox exists between popular support for democracy and high public approval for Vladimir Putin. A strong majority of Russians favor democracy and think it is

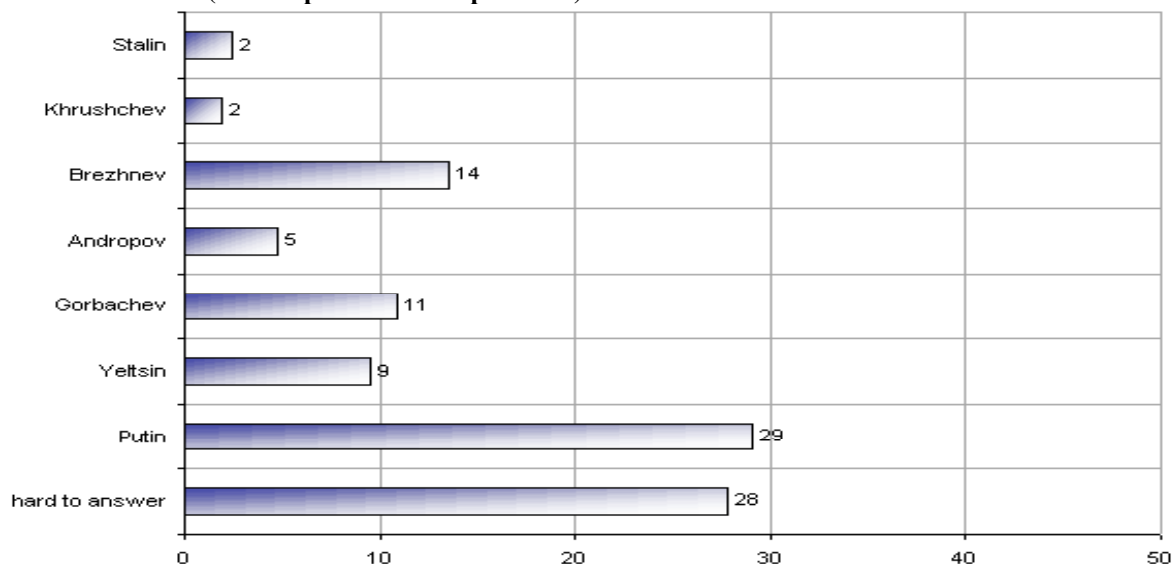
<sup>86</sup>Whitefield, “Putin's Popularity and its Implications for Democracy in Russia,”144.

<sup>87</sup>Whitefield, “Putin's Popularity and its Implications for Democracy in Russia,”151, 148.

<sup>88</sup>FOM Population Poll, “Democracy in Russia.”

important to most Russians that Russia remain a democratic country. Accordingly they consider the enforcement of fair procedures an essential element of defending the integrity of Russian democracy. Putin won tremendous appeal by targeting the spheres of society where Russians felt things functioned the least fairly. By shaping his policies to meet the Russians' expectations of democracy, Putin managed to convince the people that his leadership was particularly democratic. For this reason, public opinion indicates that Russians reject the idea that Putin's leadership threatens democratic consolidation in Russia. Even with his strongly criticized moved to centralize the state and attack civil liberties, on the contrary, Russians view Putin as the most democratic Russian leader in history.<sup>89</sup> Carnaghan supports this peculiarity by noting that, regardless of the economic

**Figure 6:**  
**UNDER WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING LEADERS, IN YOUR VIEW, WAS RUSSIA THE MOST DEMOCRATIC? (One response allowed per card.)<sup>90</sup>**



(Source: FOM population poll from December 31, 2005)

<sup>89</sup>FOM Population Poll, "Democracy in Russia."

<sup>90</sup>FOM Population Poll, "Democracy in Russia."

situation of her participants, they were overwhelmingly confident that Russia was on the right track and the Putin's leadership "had the interests of the majority at heart."<sup>91</sup> Some were unemployed and some were the victims of wage cuts, but instead of seeing themselves as victims of democracy, they continued to staunchly support it, criticizing the way in which democracy functioned in Russia instead of its validity as a governing system. Carnaghan testifies that the "respondents' assessments of government performance were influenced by what they expected government to do," and not merely on the actual outputs of that performance and the effect it had on their lives.<sup>92</sup> Essentially, values and procedures played a significant role in their evaluation of the Putin's performance, even if subtly or indirectly. Russians clearly could not recognize the contradiction of support for Putin and support for democracy. To most, he embodied the essential values of democracy more than any other Russian leader.

Putin's regime attempted to transmit the image that he reordered the chaos of the 90s into a democratic system that functioned fairly and prioritized its citizens. Several critics agree that Putin's popularity largely survived his leadership's shortcomings due to his powerfully resistant image, which was manipulated through many means. As discussed in the introduction, Henning-Schroeder confirms that the media, which gradually over the Putin era became almost entirely state controlled, pushed his image as the president who cares for the "little guy."<sup>93</sup> Both his economic policies and his regime's attack on the oligarchs also purposefully appeared to target and bring justice to the democratic experience of the average

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<sup>91</sup>Carnaghan, *Out of Order*, 243.

<sup>92</sup>Carnaghan, *Out of Order*, 244.

<sup>93</sup>Henning-Schroeder, "Akzeptanz, Protest, Legitimität?"



Russian. Opinion polls indicate that despite the fact that the regime failed to live up to its image in all circumstances, Russians generally believed that Putin, himself, remained committed to the interests of the people. A similar percentage of people who approved of Putin in general, also believed that Putin was adequately informed about the public's mood (average 60 %) and almost half the respondents believed that, in the instances where the regime failed, Putin, himself was not satisfied with the result of his work.<sup>94</sup> Thus, it seems clear that most of the Russian public was able to overlook certain failures of Putin's regime because Putin portrayed himself as a man who embodied the value of fairness and even when his performance fell short of their expectations, their support for him remained in the values he claimed to possess.

Certainly, many factors, including control of the media and his favored foreign policy, contributed to Vladimir Putin's sustained popularity, but his image as the defender of fair policies for ordinary Russians impacted the public's approval of him substantially. Both opinion polls and intensive interviews confirm that Vladimir Putin's policies in the social sphere and those pertaining to the oligarchs struck a personal chord with many Russians, making his actions in these areas highly contributory to his high approval rating. They linked his pledge to uphold fairness with a commitment to democracy. Clearly, Putin's ability to project an image of a democratic leader, according to the expectations of the public, contributed to the spectacular contradiction between his popularity--amidst a democratically enthusiastic population—and his obviously authoritarian leadership style. Success in shaping

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<sup>94</sup>A. Petrova, "President Putin: Achievements and Failures," *FOM*, 11 October 2004, <<http://bd.english.fom.ru/report/map/projects/finfo/efinfo2004/eof0439/eof043905>> (20 October 2008).

his policies to appear fair significantly effected his warm public reception and offers another convincing explanation for the phenomenon of his popularity.

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