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RUSSIA AND THE CIS IN 2007

Putin's Final Year?

_____ Charles E. Ziegler
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Abstract

Russia in 2007 moved further away from a constitutional order governed by the rule of law as President Vladimir Putin's second term drew to a close and the country prepared for parliamentary and presidential elections. High oil and gas prices buoyed the economy, but little progress was made in addressing Russia's serious social problems. In foreign policy, confrontation with the West was balanced by excellent relations with most of Asia.

Keywords: Russia, Asia, succession, energy, state power

Domestic Politics: Leadership Succession

The question of leadership succession dominated Russian politics in 2007. Putin's second term drew to a close, and the central question was not whether but how the former KGB lieutenant colonel would continue to exert power after March 2008. Many within Russia urged the popular president to ignore the constitutional term limit and rule indefinitely, emulating Kazakhstan's President Nursultan Nazarbaev. But Putin preferred to maintain a democratic façade and opted for a subtle strategy of positioning a loyal follower to assume the presidency, while he would presumably control the levers of power from elsewhere in the government structure. First Deputy Prime Ministers Sergei Ivanov and Dmitrii Medvedev seemed to be the president's top choices to succeed him, until September, when Putin surprised everyone by dismissing Prime Minister Mikhail Fradkov and appointing in his stead the obscure director of the Federal Financial Monitoring Service, Viktor Zubkov. It was not clear that Mr. Zubkov, who had reached retirement age, was Putin's

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intended successor; Medvedev and Ivanov still seemed very much in contention. A week after the December 2 Duma elections, Putin announced he would back his loyal protégé Medvedev for the presidency.

In Russia's unique brand of party politics, the pro-Kremlin United Russia, chaired by Duma Speaker Boris Gryzlov, continued to strengthen its dominant position in the Duma and throughout the regions. For a Just Russia, which had formed in October 2006 with Kremlin support from three smaller parties, also supported the president, but the party's influence weakened through the year as United Russia became Putin's clear favorite. Putin, who had remained above parties to this point, formally threw his support behind United Russia, announcing at its October congress that he would head the party's list for the December elections, indicating that he might accept the post of prime minister. Putin later explained on the United Russia website that he was motivated by a desire to preserve order, stability, and the gains of recent years, and to ensure that the Duma functioned as a fully capable institution, not as it had in the early 1990s.

A new electoral law was in effect for the December 2007 elections, a pure proportional representation system in place of the mixed proportional representation and single-member district elections that existed in 2003. A 7% threshold provision replaced the earlier 5% cutoff, ensuring that smaller parties would be excluded. Most of the mass media in Russia is now under the control or influence of the government, guaranteeing United Russia the bulk of favorable news coverage and positioning the party for a landslide victory in the parliamentary elections. Putin's party enhanced its appeal by placing sports and cultural celebrities on the electoral list, while business executives "bought" spots on the list.¹ United Russia also benefits from the "administrative resources" available to the pro-presidential party, support exercised through the regional governors, virtually all of whom are now Putin loyalists.

As expected, the December 2007 elections resulted in an overwhelming victory for Putin's United Russia. The party garnered 64% of the vote and secured 70% of the Duma seats, virtually guaranteeing the legislature's subservience to the Kremlin. The Communist Party finished second with 11.6% of the vote, while the Liberal Democrats and For a Just Russia barely made it into the Parliament with 8.1% and 7.7%, respectively. Domestic opposition forces and Western observers criticized the elections as unfair and falling well below democratic standards.

In the run-up to the elections, rival members of the *siloviki* (clans) (those whose careers originated in power ministries such as the Federal Security

1. A place high on the list reportedly went for \$2–4 million. Being on the United Russia list was good advertising, helped protect executives from harassment by the police or mafias, and if they were elected, guaranteed them immunity from prosecution.

Service [Federalnaya Sluzhba Bezopasnosti, FSB], the Interior, and Defense Ministries) began a ruthless jockeying for position. Warfare between major clans burst into public view in October when Viktor Cherkesov, head of the Federal Service for Narcotics Control, published an article in *Kommersant* warning that infighting among the security services could jeopardize the gains in social order realized under Putin. Cherkesov's clan reportedly included Sergei Ivanov, along with Prosecutor General Yurii Chaika and Viktor Zolotov, head of Putin's personal security service. Their rivals were Igor Sechin (Putin's deputy chief of staff), FSB Director Nikolai Patrushev, and his deputy Aleksandr Bortnikov, together with Putin's aide Viktor Ivanov and the head of the new Investigative Committee, Aleksandr Bastrykin. While clashes between the services were overtly about corruption, the real issue was uncertainty over the clans' ability to control their lucrative business interests once Putin stepped down.² High-level Russian politics is more a struggle for power and money than a dispute over policies.

Olga Kryshtanovskaya, head of the Center for Elite Studies at the Russian Academy of Sciences, Institute of Sociology, estimates that 26% of the top elites were members of the security services and up to three-fourths are in some way affiliated with the *siloviki*. Putin has kept the various clans in check by balancing them off against each other, but as his term comes to an end the factional infighting has intensified. Russian political forces across the spectrum approve of Putin's record in restoring order and enhancing Russia's position as a great power. However, it is not clear that loyalty to the state will be able to overcome the self-interest of the different powerful clans. The outcome, as Cherkesov warned in his article, could be a "descent into the abyss" of disorder. Conversely, it could discredit the *siloviki* and strengthen the more liberal St. Petersburg-technocrat clan.

Putin's goal of restoring state power domestically has focused on strengthening the "power vertical," shifting Russia farther away from federalism and closer to a unitary state. One consequence of this has been the massive growth of bureaucracy. In addition, the president has used his power to appoint or dismiss governors, granted by the Duma after the Beslan massacre, to convince regional executives to follow the Kremlin line. In 2007, Putin dismissed the governors of the Amur, Sakhalin, Novgorod, Kamchatka, Samara, and Tuva regions, among others.³ Many of the dismissed governors subsequently received appointments on the Presidential Staff, an indication of Putin's predilection for rotating executives among offices to keep them in check. United Russia also played a major role in Putin's control of the provinces: the party dominated

2. Francesca Mereu, "Security Infighting All About Money," *Moscow Times*, October 29, 2007.

3. These regional leaders were, in order, Leonid Korotkov, Ivan Malakhov, Mikhail Prusak, Mikhail Mashkovtsev, Konstantin Titov, and Sherig-Ool Oorzhak.

many regional parliaments, and the assemblies in turn ratify Putin's appointments. In 2007, Putin began requiring governors to submit annual reports on their regions, giving him the ammunition to dismiss executives who were not performing or who were not loyal to the center's agenda. The result of all this has been stronger personal power but continued weak political institutions.

Modernizing and strengthening the Russian military became a priority in Putin's last year. Defense Minister Sergey Ivanov, a close ally of Putin, projected that defense expenditures would reach \$31.6 billion in 2007, four times the 2002 budget. Ivanov outlined an ambitious plan to procure new Topol-M ballistic missiles, strategic bombers, air defense systems, and tanks. Commander-in-Chief of the Navy Admiral Vladimir Masorin announced plans to develop two aircraft carrier battle groups for the North and the Far East, with construction to begin after 2015. At present, Russia has only one small carrier, the *Admiral Kuznetsov*, which Russian experts claim is inadequate to protect sea routes and the country's continental shelf, home to rich hydrocarbon deposits and fishing grounds. Masorin was sacked in September 2007, reportedly for accepting the Legion of Merit award from the United States without first clearing it with the Kremlin. Masorin received the medal for his role in promoting cooperation with the West, which was at odds with Putin's confrontational strategy. Defense Minister Ivanov fared better—Putin promoted him to First Deputy Prime Minister in February, appointing in his place Anatoly Serdyukov, a former furniture salesman and head of the Federal Tax Service.

Improvements in the Russian military are constrained by the demographic, health, and education problems that plague Russian society, because military recruits tend to be less healthy than the general population. Alcoholism, drug addiction, accidents, violent crime, HIV/AIDS, high rates of smoking, and pollution combined to produce an average Russian life expectancy of 65.3 years (73 for women, 59 for men), on a par with many developing nations in Africa. Overall, the Russian population continued to decline at a rate of about 700,000 per year. To combat these trends, First Deputy Prime Minister Medvedev was tasked with the "national projects," improving Russia's health, education, housing, and agriculture. He promised that in time total expenditures allocated to these priority areas would reach some 9% of gross domestic product (GDP).

Moscow engaged in a series of confrontations with the West during the year. Russia hosted the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) military exercises in August near Chelyabinsk in the southern Urals, shortly after the Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, summit. The central message of "Peace Mission 2007" and the summit meeting was that member states, particularly Russia and China,⁴ not Washington, were responsible for security in Central Asia. The exercises were also notable as the first time that Chinese troops had conducted major maneuvers

4. The other member states are Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan.

abroad. In his statements to the participants, Putin expressed criticism of American unilateralism and announced the resumption of regular long-range patrols of nuclear bombers over the North Atlantic and Pacific. Tellingly, this display of security cooperation between Russia, China, and the Central Asian SCO members followed close on Putin's decision to suspend Russia's participation in the Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) treaty.

The president's more assertive posture toward the West fed Russian nationalism at home. Patriotism and xenophobia increased, with attacks on foreigners becoming more common. The Kremlin-sponsored youth group Nashi (Ours) held rallies in support of Putin and harassed the British ambassador over his willingness to meet with opposition groups. British-Russian relations reached a low point over the radiation poisoning of Putin critic Alexander Litvinenko, as London pressed to have his suspected murderer, Andrei Lugavoi, extradited to face trial. Moscow refused, citing London's failure to return the oligarch Boris Berezovsky and Chechen resistance leader Akhmed Zakayev. Lugavoi became something of a nationalist hero, and the Liberal Democratic Party of extreme nationalist Vladimir Zhirinovskiy placed his name on its list for the December parliamentary elections.

The Russian Orthodox Church continued to play a prominent role in Russian political life. Most ethnic Russians view the Orthodox Church as integral to Russia's national identity, though few actually attend services regularly. The church itself has become more active politically, lobbying for religious education in the schools and condemning Washington's plans to install missile defense shields in Eastern Europe. Each of the power ministries now has an Orthodox patron saint,⁵ and a number of prominent *siloviki*, such as Minister of Railways Vladimir Yakunin, have promoted a larger cultural and political role for the church, earning themselves the sobriquet of "Orthodox Chekists."⁶ Another notable development in 2007 was the Russia Orthodox Church's historic reconciliation with the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia, which had long criticized the former for collaborating with the Communists. Mending the rift strengthened ties to the Russian diaspora community, and the move received Putin's strong support.

Focusing Russian national identity around Russian Orthodoxy risks alienating at least 20% of the population that is non-Russian, a large proportion of which is Muslim. Intolerance of foreigners was reflected in skinhead attacks on immigrants from the Caucasus and foreigners, anti-American statements,

5. The FSB's patron saint is Aleksandr Nevsky, the Ministry of the Interior has Saint Vladimir, the Border Guards Saint Ilya Muromets, and the Strategic Rocket Forces chose Saint Barbara as their spiritual defender, according to Peter Finn, *Washington Post*, April 20, 2007.

6. "Cheka" is from the Russian initials for the Extraordinary Commission (Chrezvychainaya Komissiya), the original Soviet secret police established by Vladimir Lenin in 1917, and headed by Feliks Dzerzhinsky.

and increasingly xenophobic and anti-Semitic rhetoric among politicians. The director of the Federal Migration Service estimated that in 2007 there were ten million illegal immigrants in Russia. A law passed early in the year restricted foreign immigration, imposed controls on foreign traders who dominate Russia's markets, and established quotas on Central Asian, Caucasian, and Chinese migrants.

Putin's Popularity: It's the Economy

Putin's continued high popularity ratings (between 70%–80% approval) can be attributed in large part to Russia's strong economic performance. In 2007, Russia posted its ninth straight year of expansion, with GDP growth estimated at about 7%. The dynamic economy was fueled largely by high prices for oil and natural gas, the country's major export earners, as well as growing domestic consumer demand, a construction boom, and strong business investment. Per capita income in the year topped \$9,900. Unemployment dropped to 5.7%, poverty rates declined, and the government amassed some \$430 billion in foreign currency reserves. But higher than expected inflation caused concern, and the ruble's appreciation, together with weak investment in the crucial oil and gas sectors, threatened a drag on future growth.

Big business in Russia remains closely linked to the government, with top Kremlin officials routinely serving as executives of major corporations. Putin's strategy of intimidating the oligarchs was highly successful; those who did not flee the country or were sitting in jail have been eager to demonstrate their loyalty to the president. Some oligarchs were forced to sell part of their holdings to the state; others were encouraged to pursue business deals abroad that were deemed beneficial to Russia. Putin kept several liberal economists in the government—most notably Finance Minister Alexei Kudrin (promoted to deputy prime minister), new Economics and Trade Minister Elvira Nabiullina (former Minister German Gref's deputy), and Regional Development Minister Dmitrii Kozak. However, Putin's commitment to market forces was balanced with moves to reassert state control over the strategic sectors of the economy and by an October price freeze on basic foods.

The Russian state continued to tighten its control over oil and gas production and other sectors of the economy, using political pressure to acquire new holdings. Repeated threats of tax investigations and environmental penalties forced Shell and its Japanese partners Mitsui and Mitsubishi to sell half their shares in the Sakhalin II project to Gazprom, the state-controlled gas monopoly. In June, British Petroleum was pressured into selling Gazprom a controlling stake in RUSIA Petroleum, giving the Russian company the license to the huge East Siberian Kovykta gas field. In each case foreign companies were allowed to continue participation in these major projects, but government machinations chilled the climate for international investment.

Corruption and crime posed major problems for the Russian economy and society. The huge influx of oil wealth exacerbated an already serious corruption problem—Transparency International ranked Russia 143rd in its Corruption Perception Index for 2007, tied with Gambia and Indonesia, and just shy of notoriously corrupt Nigeria.⁷ Putin pledged to fight corruption, but his preferred solution consisted of remaking the culture so that bribe taking would no longer be tolerated, hardly an effective approach. Russia's weak political institutions, suppression of civil society and the mass media, and the cozy relationship between big business and government all contribute to a climate of graft. Ordinary crime also continued to flourish—murder, robbery, racist attacks, drug trafficking, and organized criminal activity challenged Russia's state, society, and economy.

Restoring Russia in Asia and the World

Russia's economic success, together with Putin's skilled leadership, made for a more confident and aggressive Russia in world affairs. Russian leaders contend that their country is European, but in terms of political interests and international positions they are more likely to agree with authoritarian China than with democratic Britain. Russia in 2007 found itself at odds with Europe and the United States on a number of issues—the possible interruption of oil and gas supplies, Washington's plans to install missile defense facilities in Poland and the Czech Republic, the status of Kosovo, the continuing conflict in Iraq, the poisoning of Aleksandr Litvinenko, possible NATO membership for Georgia and Ukraine, and Western criticism of Russia's growing authoritarianism. By contrast, Russia in 2007 had excellent relations with Asia, with only a few minor problems.

In the last full year of Vladimir Putin's presidency, Russian analysts and politicians exulted in their country's return to great-power status, based on revenues from high energy prices and an assertive foreign policy. China is the key to Russia's claim to a reinvigorated presence in Asia, as a vital strategic partner and long-term competitor. For Russia, China is a useful counterweight to the United States, NATO, and the European Union, which are perceived as aggressively encroaching on Moscow's regional sphere of interest and its domestic sovereignty. Beijing and Moscow routinely condemn American unilateralism, pointing to the disaster in Iraq as evidence that multilateralist approaches and respect for international law not only accord with norms of national sovereignty but are also more effective in dealing with contemporary international issues.

In his February speech to the Munich security conference, President Putin vigorously condemned Washington's disdain of international law and the cavalier

7. The Corruption Perception Index can be accessed at <http://www.transparency.org/policy_research/surveys_indices/cpi/2007>.

use of military force by NATO and the United States, saying they destabilized the international situation. He noted that the combined GDP of India and China surpassed that of the United States, while the GDP of the BRIC countries (Brazil, Russia, India, and China) was greater than the European Union's. Putin's point, shared by his Asian colleagues, was that the global alignment of forces is shifting power away from Europe and the United States and will force these countries to take into account the interests of Russia and the major Asian powers. The future promises a more multipolar, less Eurocentric, world.

Russia-China relations, based now on pragmatic economic ties and shared strategic concerns, are the best in years. This year was the "Year of China in Russia"; 2006 was the "Year of Russia in China." Moscow and Beijing agree that a multipolar world order should supplant American unilateralism, they suspect that Washington is seeking to suppress their legitimate interests as great powers, and they oppose Western democracy-promotion strategies as destabilizing. Russia firmly supports China on Taiwan, Xinjiang, and Tibet, as Moscow has its own separatist fears in the Caucasus. Beyond warm bilateral ties, Russia and China cooperated through such multilateral forums as the SCO, Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), and the U.N., where they frustrated American and European initiatives to resolve the Iranian nuclear problem by the threat of a Security Council veto. On the Six Party Talks to resolve the North Korean nuclear issue, Moscow and Beijing agree that diplomacy is the only legitimate approach, rejecting the possibility of a military option.

Evolving security arrangements in the Pacific are pushing Russia and China closer together. Both countries took advantage of U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's absence at the Association for Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Regional Forum to criticize Washington's missile defense plans for Asia and Europe. While U.S. officials argue that a ballistic missile defense shield is needed to defend against missile launches by rogue states such as Iran and North Korea, Russia and China claim that a missile defense shield will neutralize their nuclear capabilities, conferring military superiority on the United States. Australia has indicated it might be interested in partnering with Japan and the United States on the Pacific missile defense shield, and in March 2007, Japan and Australia concluded a landmark military agreement, with Washington's support. Japan and Australia also conducted naval exercises with Indian, American, and Singaporean forces in September in the Bay of Bengal near the vital Malacca Strait.

The Russo-Chinese relationship was not entirely devoid of tensions. As part of its muscular energy diplomacy, Moscow seeks to monopolize oil and gas export routes from Central Asia. Beijing, however, has been negotiating with Central Asian states for direct access to energy resources. The first stage of the Atasu-Alanshaku pipeline began delivering oil in 2006, with Kazakhstan and China making plans for a second line to the Caspian Sea. Chinese President

Hu Jintao had also signed an agreement for construction of a 30 billion cubic meter natural gas pipeline with Turkmenistan's President Saparmurat Niyazov just prior to the latter's death in December 2006. Niyazov's successor, Gurbanguly Berdimukhammedov, reaffirmed his intent to honor the agreement, but the May 2007 deal to route a comparable amount of Turkmen gas through Kazakhstan and Russia appeared to be a setback for the energy-hungry Chinese.

Russian relations with Japan were cordial, but there was still no progress on the territorial issue or conclusion of a peace treaty. Trade has expanded steadily, reaching nearly \$14 billion in 2006. Although that figure is less than 1% of Japan's total turnover, it constitutes 3% of Russia's and marks a substantial increase over the \$4 billion exchanged in 2002. Japanese-Russian relations could best be described as businesslike and pragmatic, with representatives of government and business consulting regularly at various levels. Energy is a key motivator for both sides. As construction of the East Siberian pipeline moves forward, Japan anticipates opening a new source of supply, reducing its unhealthy reliance on Middle Eastern oil. Russia is no longer as desperate for Japanese investment and technology as it was in the late 1980s and through the 1990s, but Russian companies welcome Japanese participation in Siberian energy projects, particularly in the investment-poor Russian Far East.

In 2007 Putin sought to energize relations with India, in part to restore the ties of the Soviet era and in part to compete with the United States. Russia recognizes India's growing economic and political weight, and India seems determined not to let its new relationship with Washington restrict its independent foreign policy. Putin visited India in late January (his fourth trip as president) and signed a joint statement on cooperation in the peaceful uses of nuclear energy. In February the foreign ministers of Russia, China, and India met in New Delhi to try to develop a common approach to international problems, a strategy promoted by former Prime Minister Yevgenii Primakov in the 1990s. Energy and weapons are the key components of Russian-Indian trade relations: Russia exported \$3 billion worth of goods to India in 2006 and imported \$1 billion. India's state-owned Oil and Natural Gas Company holds a \$1 billion stake in the Sakhalin I project, the country's single largest foreign investment, and Delhi is eager to explore additional energy projects with Russia. Indian airborne troops participated with Russian forces in biennial military exercises in the Pskov region in northwestern Russia, and the two sides share expertise about combating insurgencies (Russia in Chechnya and Afghanistan, India in Kashmir and the Indian Northeast).

Central Asia and the Caucasus

Russian foreign and energy policies in Central Asia and the Caucasus focused on containing security threats and restoring influence lost during the 1990s. The situation in Chechnya stabilized somewhat under Ramzan Kadyrov, a brutal

former boxer whom Putin appointed president of the republic (Kadyrov was also rumored to be behind the death of journalist Anna Politkovskaya).⁸ Kadyrov, who served as prime minister of Chechnya until he reached the presidency-eligible age of 30, earned Putin's support by ruthlessly suppressing the rebels. While Chechnya is quieter, other parts of the Caucasus, such as Ingushetia and Dagestan, have seen a spike in violence by radical Islamists.

Moscow approached Central Asia and the Caucasus bilaterally and through several multilateral organizations, the most important being the SCO and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (Russia, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Armenia, and Belarus). The broader Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) continued to flounder despite Moscow's efforts at resuscitation. At the October summit in Dushanbe, Tajikistan, member states concluded agreements on immigration and trade, but members criticized the group's failure to implement past decisions and tensions with Moscow were apparent. Ukraine's President Viktor Yushchenko opted not to attend, Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili refused to sign the final document, and Kazakhstan's Nursultan Nazarbayev proposed formation of a common market for Central Asia, excluding Russia.

The SCO, by contrast, demonstrated greater unity. During the August SCO summit in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan members criticized unilateral efforts to counteract threats (a thinly veiled reference to U.S. actions in Iraq and Central Asia) and pledged cooperation on creating an "anti-narcotics belt" around Afghanistan. Narcotics trafficking, terrorism, and religious extremism from Afghanistan pose serious threats to Central Asians, and to their larger neighbors. SCO members fear the sort of "color revolutions" experienced by Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan, and are united in their opposition to Western democracy-promotion efforts. Iran, Afghanistan, India, Pakistan, and Mongolia attended the 2007 summit as observers, and Turkmenistan was represented for the first time, an indication of Berdymukhammedov's readiness to end his country's isolation. Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad lobbied intensely for his country to be admitted as a full participant, but members' reservations about provoking the United States stymied his efforts.

8. The evidence is circumstantial. Politkovskaya, who followed events in Chechnya closely, interviewed Kadyrov at his headquarters in Tsentoroy in 2004. She subsequently characterized him as a deranged and brutal coward, accusing him of widespread torture. Politkovskaya, who had told colleagues she was being threatened by Kadyrov and his people, was working on a story on torture in Chechen prisons when she was gunned down in her apartment building. See C. J. Chivers, "Journalist Critical of Chechen War Is Shot Dead," *New York Times*, October 8, 2006; Claire Bigg, "Russia: Politkovskaya Investigating Chechen Torture at Time of Death," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, October 9, 2006, <<http://www.rferl.org/featuresarticle/2006/10/0fe50696-438e-453e-9f74-401bde7a9bb0.html>>.

Conclusion

On the surface, Putin appears to have strengthened Russia's economy, brought order out of chaos, and restored the country's great-power status in world affairs. The reality is Russian politics has become increasingly authoritarian and centralized. Moscow is more comfortable in Asia than with its democratic Western neighbors. Much of the country's economic success rests precariously on volatile energy prices. Perhaps most important, Russia has moved away from a constitutional order governed by the rule of law, in favor of a strong tsar. In terms of delivering economic well-being to their people, authoritarian systems perform no better than democracies. Their great weakness is the inability to provide for a regularized means of succession. Regardless of the outcome of Russia's parliamentary and presidential elections, Putin's consolidation of power, and his marginalization of opposition forces, will delay indefinitely Russia's transition to a normally functioning democratic system.