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Book Review and Author Interview: *The Consolidation of Dictatorship in Russia: An Inside View of the Demise of Democracy* by Joel Ostrow, Georgiy Satarov, and Irina Khakamada

by Barry Zellen

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Introduction

*An interview with the author and review of **The Consolidation of Dictatorship in Russia: An Inside View of the Demise of Democracy** by Joel M. Ostrow, Georgiy A. Satarov, and Irina M. Khakamada, with a foreword by Garry Kasparov (Praeger Security International, October 30, 2007), 184 pages.*

Much of the world was taken by surprise in August when Russia responded to Georgia's forceful but arguably ill-conceived effort to regain sovereignty over the breakaway region of South Ossetia with its own rapid, robust and militarily decisive counter attack, quickly regaining control of not only South Ossetia but the breakaway region of Abkhazia as well, and inflicting heavy damage on Georgia's U.S.-trained armed forces, extending its reach deeply into Georgian territory, and rattling the nerves of pro-western leaders throughout the former Soviet Union and empire.

U.S. presidential contender John McCain proclaimed in response to Moscow's assertive moves, "Today we are all Georgians." His sentiment was shared by the leaders of all the young democracies that have sprouted in the fertile yet vulnerable soils of Soviet demise who raced to Tbilisi to stand united with its democratic leadership, and beside its beleaguered president, Mikheil Saakashvili.

Upon formally recognizing the independence of the breakaway Georgian republics soon after its incursion, Russian president Dmitry Medvedev, the hand-picked successor to Vladimir Putin, proclaimed that "We're not afraid of anything [including] the prospect of a Cold War," adding that "Russia is a state which has to ensure its interests along the whole length of its border. This is absolutely clear."

What is also clear is that the "Bear" is back, intent on protecting Russia's national interests from the Caucasus to the Arctic and from Europe to Asia, and asserting increased influence over its former Soviet republics and satellite states. Moscow's renewed muscularity reflects a new Russian assertiveness, and a more confident and capable Russian military. Combined with Russia's long march away from democracy toward dictatorship, this new assertiveness worries diplomats and war planners alike, presenting NATO with a potentially existential challenge.

To understand this new and decidedly less democratic Russia, and the re-emergence of Russian authoritarianism after the collapse of the Soviet Union a generation ago, I spoke with professor Joel Ostrow, co-author of *The Consolidation of Dictatorship in Russia: An Inside View of the Demise of Democracy* (Praeger Security International, October 2007) and chairman of the Department of Political Science at Benedictine University, where he is an associate professor specializing in Russian politics.

Zellen: Some observers were surprised by Russia's military response to Georgia's effort to reclaim the breakaway region of South Ossetia—especially by its swiftness, its tactical success, and its overwhelming application of force (some say a 10:1 superiority over Georgian forces.) Were you surprised by Moscow's response?

Ostrow: I, in fact, expected some sort of "action" by Russia somewhere before the election. My co-authors were less inclined to think so and proved right. What surprised me most in this whole process was the relative obscurity of Medvedev. I thought perhaps it would be used to bolster him. In fact, it ended up cementing the reality of Putin as still in power, just from a slightly different "seat." There can be little doubt that he retains a solid hold over the military and decisions related to its use. As far as Russia's ability to overwhelm the Georgian forces, Russia showed in the second invasion of Chechnya that it retains this capacity to overwhelm.

Zellen: Do these recent events in Georgia indicate a return to a more aggressive Russia—and do they reflect an abandonment of its rapprochement with the democratic West?

Ostrow: Abandonment may be too strong a word. I think Russia would rather the West accept it and continue to deal with it as before, meaning, it would prefer the West welcome with open arms a more assertive and aggressive Russia. But if it has to choose, the current regime leans to the assertive/aggressive. This is by no means the first salvo. Russia has been increasingly independent in its foreign policy since Putin's rise.

Zellen: Just as your book explored Russia's departure from the democratic path and its return to dictatorship, do its recent foreign policy and military actions indicate something of an international projection of its underlying dictatorial nature?

Ostrow: Absolutely. Indeed, one of the strategies in consolidating dictatorship at home has been to "isolate" and "undermine", to borrow from Tom Ambrosio, democratic regimes and movements at home and in the "near abroad." This has been Putin's consistent and unbending policy from the beginning.

Zellen: In your book, you explain that Russia has not evolved into a, or toward, democracy, but in fact went from "dictatorship to dictatorship." Was its military reaction to events in Georgia primarily indicative of a dictatorial system, and its desire to limit the spread of democracy inside the former Soviet republics? Or was there something more fraternal taking place (ie, a bona fide effort to stop ethnic cleansing of an ethnic minority it favored, and thus not so different the West's efforts in the former Yugoslavia?)

Ostrow: I'd say very much more the former and much less the latter, with one caveat. The caveat is that there was really little to fear regarding democracy in Georgia. Western politicians and journalists notwithstanding, there is little in Saakashvili's Georgia that bears much resemblance to democracy. However, Georgia was certainly more West-looking politically, seeking protection against Russia as the Georgian leadership pursued its own direction. So, perhaps we should say it was indicative more of Russia's reaction to the movement of former-Soviet republics into the NATO camp, as much as or even more than the spread of democracy. But it is both.

Zellen: Does the integration of today's global economy limit the degree to which Russia can face off against the West as compared to the old Cold War days, or does it actually give Moscow more levers to influence and potentially intimidate the West (ie, natural gas shutoffs, limiting access to its vast natural resource base?)

Ostrow: I think it is just different levers. But the levers are there, as the question itself indicates. Russia is always going to have non-Western options for exporting those resources, as long as the resources and the demand for them exists.

Zellen: Does Georgia's effort to reunify South Ossetia by force suggest a misreading of Russia's intentions and capabilities, or was it a sober assessment of the Russian threat to Georgia that precipitated the effort (cushioned by its expectation of military support from the West?)

Ostrow: Oddly enough, it was probably both. And Saakashvili may also have hoped it would play into his hands and enable him to further consolidate his own power at home and to crack down on internal dissent. He may have miscalculated there, only time will tell. There are certainly whispers of animosity to the venture emanating from the affected territories.

Zellen: Do you see a risk of escalation and the potential for an armed clash between NATO and Russia, or do you expect this conflict to remain largely contained? Is there a risk of things escalating, somewhat like World War I did, starting in a small ethnic conflict in a tiny state, with larger neighbors (entangled by alliances) being drawn in?

Ostrow: This conflict alone won't do that. But if you take a step back and look at the political map of the planet, and the various current conflicts, it does not look good. Whether these can or will merge into some larger conflict is hard to tell, and what "side" Russia will be on, if even there are distinct "sides", is also murky. The most disastrous future would be one of widespread war with multiple major powers, and no clear sides. It is even hard to describe with the language we currently have at our disposal. But it is something I can envision: multiple states and alliances simultaneously engaged in cross-cutting conflict. It is not at all a comforting thought. It may also be rather unlikely.

Zellen: Do you expect Russia will implement a more pro-active and far-reaching military and diplomatic strategy aimed at the FSU and former Warsaw Pact states that could result in future clashes such as over Black Sea ports in Ukraine, missile defense systems in Poland, and pro-Western regimes in the region?

Ostrow: This is absolutely a distinct possibility and is already in some respects unfolding. Putin's Russia has already acted aggressively against Ukraine, for example. Such clashes should be expected, and the next Administration absolutely must think carefully what its position in such circumstances will be. I do not envy those who will have to make such decisions. They will be far from obvious or easy.

Zellen: What does Russia's recent transition (post-Putin) tell us about Russia and its political system?

Ostrow: Well, it tells us that there isn't anything post-Putin about Russia. That is first. The second is the main message of our book – we need to think of Russia as a dictatorship, because that most accurately describes its political system. It is a dictatorship with many interests that directly conflict with our own, and we have to be oriented towards Russia with this in mind. Not necessarily as an enemy, but also not as one of those many dictatorships that the U.S. counts among its friends.

Zellen: Should we take Medvedev's recent comments on a new Cold War literally, or would this be a more limited conflict over Russia's border security, the aspirations of Russian minorities in border states, and the cultivation of secessionist movements loyal to Moscow inside its more democratic neighbors, but geographically limited to the FSU?

Ostrow: Frankly, I'm not sure I see the difference. There is a lot there that offers up lots of conflict and will cause a great deal of angst for NATO. It won't be like before, of course. Russia doesn't give a hoot about, say, a country like Mozambique today. Unless a country like Mozambique is or becomes a major importer of Russian petroleum. Putin's Russia lacks the universalist ideology of Marxism-Leninism. In that sense, militant movements usurping and bastardizing Islam are far more global in their aspirations than Russia, ideologically speaking, and as such are more of a threat to the U.S. universalist ideology that seeks to spread liberalism around the globe. Note I write to the universalist ideology. In fact, though, Russia poses more of a practical threat, though the aspirations are less global ideologically.

Zellen: If we do enter a new Cold War, what are its likely fault lines?

Ostrow: For reasons expressed above, I don't think it is productive to think in terms of a new Cold War. A bi-polar world is not emerging. Or, at least, it isn't visible as such at this point. If half a dozen or more Irans emerge that encompass a sizeable percentage of the world's economy and population, then we could be talking in these terms. But where is that? I don't see it. The competition with Russia is different than that, by a long shot.

Zellen: What can the West do to prevent a new Cold War?

Ostrow: The Bush Administration squandered that opportunity that existed after 9/11 and Afghanistan, and left a mess that is not likely fixable. Nor is a return of that opportunity very likely, even if Obama wins in November. Had the Administration in fact pursued a war against terrorist organizations and pursued Al-Qaeda, while building and securing an alliance of countries with large Islamic populations behind this effort, the threat could have been challenged. It is not clear that the militant Islamists in any case can forge a large movement that would be a major political threat. But it is more possible today than it ever needed to be.

Zellen: Early in the Georgia conflict, Russia espoused a goal of regime change and a desire to oust Saakashvili (or at least to isolate him.) Do you expect Moscow will pursue a strategy to rollback democracy from the FSU and former Warsaw Pact states and to impose an authoritarian order, or will it be content to intimidate and influence without necessarily adjusting the political structures in these neighboring states?

Ostrow: It will certainly attempt to isolate. Putin banned the display of the color orange in large cities in Russia after the Orange Revolution in Ukraine, and he tried to off Yushchenko as well. It will fight any new spread of liberal ideals in the ring of authoritarian regimes in the FSU. But it is not going to directly try to take out, say, Poland's democracy either. The likely approach is to continue to bemoan but do nothing about the West-leaning orientation of the Baltic States and the Visegrad states, while vigorously assisting dictatorships in the other former-Soviet Republics into a new alliance with Russia and combating any rise of liberalism in those states. And in relations with the EU/NATO states, we are seeing already what its approach is going to be.

Zellen: Some observers have noted the "Bear" is back—but did the "Bear" ever truly go away or was it only hibernating until its economic and military capabilities had recovered from the Soviet collapse?

Ostrow: I do not believe at all that Boris Yeltsin ever wanted Russia to look like this. Certainly most of his team after the Soviet collapse did not want this. To suggest this was part of some plan

from the start would be grossly unfair. There were people truly devoted to liberal ideals of freedom, of limited government, of accountability, of government by the people. But they did not have the resources to realize these goals and the U.S., in particular, failed to extend to Russia the criteria for support that it insisted upon in Poland and elsewhere in Eastern Europe as conditions for loans, etc. The West bears some of the responsibility for the rampant corruption and failure to consolidate democratic transformation in Russia.

Zellen: Russia has made bold territorial claims, including last year's undersea Arctic claim at the North Pole, and its later resumption of strategic bomber flights and naval patrols in its northern seas—combined with the recent military action in Georgia, is Russia re-asserting an imperial impulse, or merely asserting the final limits of its post-Soviet territorial reduction?

Ostrow: It appears to me to be more of the latter than the former. For now, anyway.

Zellen: Since the new Russia first sought to use force to keep Chechnya in the Russian Federation it appears its military capabilities have evolved from blunt force to more precise, calibrated applications of military power, and a more nuanced synthesis with other components of national power (such as information operations, whether media relations or cyber warfare.) What does this tell us about the new Russia?

Ostrow: As we relay in our book, when the Beslan school tragedy began, the Kremlin instructed all media outlets around the country that Putin's name was not to be mentioned in reports on the hostage crisis. The consequences for violating this instruction were extreme, and every editor and journalist knew what those consequences were. It all tells us that the phrase "the New Russia" was misunderstood from the beginning as synonymous with "the New Democratic Russia." It is a new Russia, but it is certainly not democratic.

Zellen: Did western encouragement of Kosovo's independence give Moscow a greenlight to promote the independence of breakaway regions such as South Ossetia, and are western efforts to thwart Moscow's effort hypocritical given its willingness to carve up Serbia?

Ostrow: If Albania had been behind the Kosovo independence movement, perhaps this would be a valid analogy. But it is not. Kosovars sought independence to escape a genocidal movement that was clearly and powerfully evident. I am not saying that promoting Kosovo's independence was a wise move. But the circumstances in South Ossetia and Abkhazia are vastly different. To the extent these are "breakaway" lands, they are Russian-inspired. It would just be flat-out wrong to say that NATO planted the seeds of Kosovar independence.

Book Review

The Consolidation of Dictatorship in Russia: An Inside View of the Demise of Democracy is co-authored by Ostrow and Russian political veterans, Georgiy A. Satarov, and Irina M. Khakamada, with a foreword by well known Russian democratic activist (and chess champion) Garry Kasparov.

The authors combine a wealth of first-hand knowledge of this period in Russian history, having either closely watched or directly participated in the events recounted and the decisions made. Joel Ostrow is chairman of the Political Science Department at Benedictine University in Lisle, Illinois and a tenured Associate Professor of Political Science specializing in Russian politics. He served as Moscow Correspondent for Crain's Communications and lived in the region for over five years during the post-Soviet period. His first book was *Comparing Post-Soviet Legislatures: A Theory of Institutional Design and Political Conflict* (Ohio State University Press, 2000).

Georgiy Satarov, from 1993 through 1998, “served in a variety of positions under President Boris Yeltsin, including as a member of the President’s Council, as chief political advisor, as legislative liaison, and as liaison to political parties and interest groups.” He is cofounder and president of the INDEM, the Information for Democracy Foundation, a Moscow think tank, and from 1991 to 1993 he served on Yeltsin’s advisory President’s Council, and from 1993 to 1998 he was senior Political Advisor to Yeltsin with duties as President’s Liaison to the Russian State Duma. He currently heads up a project on corruption in government (www.anti-corr.ru) and is co-president of the All Russian Civic Congress.

Irina Khakamada served three terms as a People’s Deputy to the Russian State Duma between 1993 and 2003, serving on the Committee on the Economy, the Budget Committee, and as a member of the Russian delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. In 1997, she served as the Director of the State Committee for the Development of Small Enterprise and member of the Government Committee on Economic Reform. In 1999, she headed the State Committee on Entrepreneurship, and served as Deputy Speaker of the Duma from 2000 to 2003. As described in the book, Khakamada “was and remains a leader of the liberal, democratic wing of the Russian political elite, having founded and organized several factions in the Duma and election coalitions,” and “[s]he stood against Putin as his main democratic challenger in the 2004 presidential elections.”

The experiences of the authors, and their participation in and close observation of the political evolution of post-Soviet Russia, provide for a unique front row seat on Russia’s tumultuous and fascinating post-Communist period. The authors shared high hopes for Russia after the dissolution of the Soviet Union and its empire. As they explain in their book, “the three coauthors shared a hope for democracy and share a disappointment with the political path Russia has instead taken.” They add that “two of the coauthors . . . were firsthand observers and participants in the decisions and processes analyzed in this work.” The authors note that they “decided to write this book to explain why and how democratization in Russia failed, in particular to explain why and how the decisions critical to that failure were made and the alternatives that were available in each case.” In the course of their analysis of Russia’s recent history, the authors “lay out the case for categorizing Russia’s political system as a dictatorship, and present our expectation of its future development,” which they believe will remain outside the democratic camp, despite the hopes of so many in the West of bringing Russia in from the cold. As they authors explain, “this book tells the story of why and how those hopes for a democratic Russia turned out to be merely dreams.”

They recount in captivating detail the political events of the 1990s, looking behind the headlines at the decisions made that resulted in Russia departing from the democratic path so many hoped for in the early days of the post-Communist period. They paint a chilling portrait of the “New Russia,” describing it as follows:

Journalists and politicians critical of the government are murdered, and no arrests are made, nobody is brought to justice. Businessmen who take an interest in politics are arrested, exiled or sentenced to hard labor, and have their assets seized by the state. The Kremlin controls the media, which operates under conditions of direct and indirect censorship. Political officials are appointed, or, where elections are held, the outcomes are predetermined. The parliament is a mechanical rubber stamp filled with secret security agents. Corruption and bribery are institutionalized throughout government, at all levels. In the one-party regime, all substantial decision-making is centralized in the hands of the leader in the Kremlin. Serious, organized opposition has been eliminated. The old Soviet Union? No, this is the ‘new Russia.’

The authors explain, through their observations and analysis, “why and how those hopes for a democratic Russia turned out to be merely dreams,” and note while Russia “has been, is, and will continue to be a vital player in European and global security and stability,” that “what happens there matters, and because it matters it needs to be understood.” They argue that “calling Russia

a democracy simply because we want it to be one is not just wrong, it is potentially dangerous.” The authors’ prescience became crystal clear to Russia’s democratic neighbor Georgia, which has long aspired to join NATO and win the protection of the West, during its recent armed conflict and humiliating defeat and partial occupation. As the authors observe, “at each critical juncture, Russia’s post-communist leaders have consistently made choices that have undermined rather than furthered the prospects for democracy, and in some cases those choices have been unambiguously antidemocratic in nature.”

The authors pull no punches, and lay blame for Russia’s failure to evolve into a constitutional democracy with its early post-Soviet leadership, including president Boris Yeltsin, who had perhaps the greatest opportunity to reshape the new Russia in a democratic mold, but who instead preserved old institutions, former Communist bureaucrats, and when it came time to step aside, rejected the example set by George Washington who let the young republic that he led to independence select its own leaders without hand picking his successor or influencing the selection process—choosing instead to place the fate of the country into the hands of an old KGB hand, Vladimir Putin. According to the authors, “It is no exaggeration to say that the demise of democratization itself was the long-term consequence of defaulting on the opportunity to shape a new political system at the start. The hesitation by those who called themselves democrats did immeasurable damage to the idea of democracy in Russia. By throwing the term around without resolute action to help bring about a democratic political system, Yeltsin and his advisors caused the very word ‘democracy’ in Russia to become associated with political disorder and corruption.” The authors describe the results of this missed opportunity:

The seeds of this system were sown in the prior decade, when the opportunity to create democratic institutions was lost, and then squandered again after an unlikely second chance. The door was opened with the creation of a severely unbalanced constitution that vested supreme powers in an unchecked presidency. An example was set with executive branch meddling in elections and undermining the principle of political competition. The fate of democracy was sealed with a noncompetitive hand over of power to an individual schooled in the harshest institution ever created for the suppression of freedom of political expression, the KGB. We should not be surprised that this individual has used this constitution to create a strong authoritarian system.

Looking to the future, and writing during the final days of Putin’s rule but before the handover to his hand-picked successor Medvedev, the authors consider three evolutionary paths for the new Russia: the path of “velvet revolution” as seen with the “Orange revolution” in Ukraine, the “Rose revolution” in Georgia, and the “Tulip revolution” in Kyrgyzstan; the emergence of a “soft successor” to continue along the current authoritarian path; or the potential emergence of a “strong dictator.” The authors do not believe the foundation yet exists for a people-powered movement to overthrow the current system, and up through the end of Putin’s reign, found that there were “simply no rumblings of widespread dissent or disaffection with the regime or its leader, making velvet revolution highly unlikely.” A “soft successor” seems more likely, and “would represent the maintenance of the status quo, and is likely the outcome that Putin hopes to guarantee.” The authors point out that their use of the term “soft” in this case “does not mean liberalizing or opening up, and does not necessarily mean weak” but instead “signifies merely that it represents the smoothest, least wrenching sequence of events.” As for the emergence of a “strong dictator,” the authors caution that this “is the most dangerous of the likely futures and in some forms even takes on an almost apocalyptic feel. Unfortunately, the authors consider that this scenario may ultimately be the most likely for Russia’s political future.” Whichever path Russia does take, however, the authors are sure of one thing – that “Russia has no short-term or medium-term prospects for democracy.”

With Russian tanks, artillery and short-range rockets within striking distance of the Georgian capital of Tbilisi, and Russian boots still on the ground; with Moscow now recognizing the independence of the break-away regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia; with democratic leaders

from the Baltics to Central Asia both defiant and nonetheless rattled; and with NATO facing a new and troubling challenge in Europe, and talk of a new “Cold War” becoming ever more frequent, this study in Russia’s political evolution, its missed opportunity to rejoin the democratic community, and its steady movement back toward dictatorship, is an especially useful resource to help us navigate the newly troubled European security landscape. As Ostrow explains in a memo to readers:

What happens in Russia is extremely important, for Europe, for the United States, and for the world. For too long, scholars, journalists and politicians who have wanted people to believe or who themselves desperately wished to believe that Russia was a democracy have dominated the conventional wisdom. Russia was not and certainly is not a democracy. This book explains not only how but why the transition has been from dictatorship to dictatorship, and not to democracy. This is not your typical academic book, yet it is not a typical trade book either. We wrote the book intending it to be easily read by anyone. No pre-existing knowledge of Russia or Russian politics is at all expected. Most of the text is in plain language and lively story-telling style. Yet, at the same time, we do present and tell the story within a framework that should be relevant for students and scholars of Russia and comparative politics.

Whether a student or scholar of Russian history and politics, a member of the diplomatic or strategic community grappling with the new Russian military challenge, or a layperson fascinated by Russian politics and history, this book will make an important contribution to your understanding of the roots of Russia’s authoritarian resurgence, and a healthy dose of realism on the nature of the new Russia, and why we may be at the beginnings of a new and challenging era.

About the Book

The Consolidation of Dictatorship in Russia: An Inside View of the Demise of Democracy by Joel M. Ostrow, Georgiy A. Satarov, and Irina M. Khakamada, with a foreword by Garry Kasparov.

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TOC

- Foreword by Garry Kasparov vii
- 1 - Critical Junctures and the Demise of Democracy in Russia
- 2 - After the Fall: The Decision to Ignore Politics
- 3 - Corrupting the Constitution: The Decision to Hedge Against Democracy
- 4 - Corrupting the Elections: Enter the Oligarchs
- 5 - Abandoning Democracy: Anointing a Successor
- 6 - Dictatorship Becomes the Only Game in Town
- 7 - Looking Back and Looking Forward
- Endnotes, select bibliography, and index.

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