

# CERES NEWS



Spring 2006

## What is Russia?



Photo courtesy of Joy von Tiedemann

The crowning event of Russia's 2006 presidency of the G8 will occur in St. Petersburg on July 15–17, where President Vladimir Putin will be host to heads of government and state from Canada, France, Germany, Great Britain, Italy, Japan, and the United States. The G8 is not an international organization.

Its meetings are not governed by treaty, there is no secretariat, and its resolutions are non-binding. The G8 is a club of industrial democracies.

What is Russia doing in this club? When it was admitted in 1997, one could still reasonably argue that Russia was in “transition” to democracy. Today Russia remains “industrial,” certainly, but a “democracy?” However you choose to define the term, backsliding on democracy has been pervasive. Take your pick: electoral fraud, state control of the media, political abuse of the judiciary, and the suppression of civic organizations. All of these are simply too common in Russia to use the word democracy in any meaningful way.

But that leaves us with the question: what is Russia? How should we classify its political regime? Even if Russia is not a democracy, it is clearly no longer a communist one-party dictatorship. Vote rigging occurs, but opposition parties do receive a good number of votes and retain a public voice. The media, especially broadcast media, leans heavily toward the Kremlin, but its newscasts are not completely devoid of content as in the Soviet days, and the print and electronic media can still be highly informative (for those of us who are old enough, compare *Izvestia* today with the

dreary reportage of, say, 1983). Civic organizations confront state pressure, but many push on and even thrive in a way that would have been unthinkable under communism. Most Russians cannot afford to travel abroad, but many of them do and they no longer need permission to do so. Russian journalists and academics critical of Putin regularly deliver lectures at our centre and do not hesitate to return home.

So, where does that leave us? A state with elections that are not really competitive, a media heavily biased toward the state, a harassed civil society, and a population with limited means either to mobilize against the state or to leave the country. Some scholars suggest that this merely makes Russia a “normal” middle-income country, such as Brazil or Mexico. Others, such as one of CERES's newest members, political scientist Lucan Way, argue that Russia is a “hybrid” regime type, one that he terms “competitive authoritarian.”

If political scientists look for conceptual leverage, historians are tempted to draw on historical analogies. In the 1990s, it was fashionable to compare Russia with the Weimar Republic, a humiliated, post-imperial democracy with too few democrats and too much chaos to survive. But the analogy breaks down on any number of levels, especially at the end of the story. For whatever his faults, Putin is no Hitler. Instead, if we want to remain in the interwar era, the soft statist dictators of Central Europe such as Poland's Marshall Josef Pilsudski seem more appropriate. Like Pilsudski, Putin draws on tropes of order, authority, and administrative rectitude (and mostly eschews ethnic appeals) in legitimating his rule. And like the interwar Polish

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**CENTRE FOR  
EUROPEAN  
RUSSIAN AND  
EURASIAN  
STUDIES**

Munk Centre for  
International Studies  
University of Toronto  
1 Devonshire Place  
Toronto, Ontario  
M5S 3K7  
Canada

Jeffrey Kopstein  
Director

Tel.: 416-946-8938  
Fax: 416-946-8939  
ceres@utoronto.ca  
www.utoronto.ca/ceres/

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## Library News

I am delighted to announce the appointment of **Ksenya Kiebusinski** to the position of Slavic Resources Coordinator/Head of Petro Jacyk Central & East European Resource Centre, University of Toronto Libraries, effective July 1, 2006. Dr. Kiebusinski currently holds a dual position at Harvard University as the Petro Jacyk Bibliographer for Ukrainian Collections for the Slavic Division, Widener Library, and the Reference Library, Ukrainian Research Institute. She brings with her an expertise in the development and management of special collections as well as significant experience in the delivery of information and instructional services. Her academic background includes a BA from the University of Vermont, an MLS from the State University of New York at Albany, and an MA and PhD from Brandeis University. She has been active in professional societies in Slavic studies, comparative literature, and archival studies.

*Carole Moore, Chief Librarian*

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strongman, he is unwilling to break all moorings with liberal democracy, even as he subverts its procedural regularities for the sake of national development and state building.

Historical analogies may help us understand the nature of Russia, but like their conceptual counterparts from political science, they are of limited value in providing guidance on how the democratic states of the world should think about and deal with post-communist Russia. Which brings us back to the question of whether Russia should be in the G8. Does regime type matter? U.S. Vice President Dick Cheney raised this issue indirectly in Vilnius in May 2006, when he criticized Russia's record on democracy and its meddling in the affairs of its democratic neighbours. Of course, Cheney's appeal to democracy was more than slightly undercut by the next leg of his international tour, Kazakhstan, where he proceeded to praise the region's dictators. Even so, the speech placed the question of non-democratic Russia's leadership of the G8 squarely on the table. As president of the G8, Russia defines the club's agenda and we should not be surprised to learn that democracy is really nowhere to be found. Instead President Putin has focused on energy security, infectious diseases, and professional training. Nothing is wrong with these issues. The G8, after all, began primarily as an economic discussion forum. But the absence of "politics" from the agenda only serves to highlight the difference in Russia's regime type from that of its fellow members. Whether this difference matters is something we shall see in the years ahead.

*Jeffrey Kopstein, Director*