The Russian Federation:
An illiberal democracy

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Introduction
The Russian Federation ("Russia") has doubtless come a long way since the Wall crumbled, the Soviet Union devolved into a collection of autonomous entities, and statues of Lenin and Stalin were relegated to the scrap heap. But exactly how far has the country come? As far, perhaps, as to have the right to use the moniker "liberal democracy?"

The answer is a resounding no, Russia is not an example of a liberal democracy. While the country has, indeed, shed many vestiges of its Communist totalitarian past, it has held on to enough of them (and created others in the stead of those discarded) to question whether the country even has a legitimate claim to the label "democracy," let alone a claim to being a liberal one, fragile or otherwise.

Putin's Russia
The voluminous and overwhelming evidence confirming the thesis to this paper points to such areas of concern as:

- rapid and ever-expanding consolidation of power in the presidency;
- destruction of the checks and balances in the Russian federal system;
- establishment of new laws and decrees considered by international observers to be fundamentally undemocratic;
- existence of extensive government corruption;
- erosion of civil liberties;
- existence of weak political opposition;
- use of non-transparent voting practices and evidence of voting irregularities in Duma and presidential elections;
- placement of polling organizations under Kremlin control;
- interference in elections in other countries, such as Belarus, Georgia, and the Ukraine;
- control, manipulation and unfair use of media outlets by the Kremlin;
- use of abduction, murder or incarceration to silence opponents and dissenters, including corporate CEOs, journalists, scientists, environmentalists and heads of NGOs;
- exertion of pressure on, and sanctioning of, the press for unflattering coverage of the government;
- utilization of patronage in filling key government positions – including the Prime Ministership;
- exercise of executive control over the judiciary;
- selective use of law, normally to the detriment of those who criticize the Kremlin;
- denial of the right to effective legal counsel and open legal proceedings;
- proof of irregular court proceedings including disregard for the statute of limitations, use of inadmissible evidence by prosecutors, poor documentation and the like;
- encouragement of unbalanced (i.e. pro-Kremlin) media coverage of certain high-profile trials;
- application of rape and torture by law enforcement and security agencies;
- utilization of illegal searches, and seizure of private assets, including corporate assets;
- unfounded and dangerous accusations against NGOs;
• growing unease that the next presidential election will see widespread bloodshed as Vladimir Putin attempts to seek a third-term, contrary to the Russian constitution.

Concern for the state of Russian democracy is so great that legislation has been introduced by U.S. Congressmen Tom Lantos (D-CA) and Chris Cox (R-CA), and Senators John McCain (R-AZ) and Joseph Lieberman (D-CT), which urges the suspension of Russia from the Group of 8 until the country adheres to international standards of democracy.¹

McCain, in particular, has been described as among those astute enough to notice and be disturbed by developments in Russia, describing what is taking place under the Putin government as nothing less than “a creeping coup against the forces of democracy and market capitalism.”²

Vladimir Putin, himself, doesn’t seem to disagree with those who maintain that Russia is not moving fast enough with regard to democratization of the country. In a meeting with a group of western foreign policy experts just after the Beslan school terrorist attack in September 2004, Putin said that Russia would take its own approach to democratic reform. According to the president “We’ll do this at our own pace. Democracy can mean different things in difference countries. In Russia, democracy is who shouts the loudest. In the U.S., it’s who has the most money.”

Putin is right – democracy can mean different things in different countries. For Russia, it may best be described, as Putin has done, as “A single integrated organism with a clear structure of subordination.” Unfortunately, the “subordination” may have become so subordinated that, as one quite vocal opponent of the president put it: “Under the direction of Mr. Putin, Russia is well into its transition into an authoritarian state.”³

Many observers (detractors of Putin’s, officials of foreign governments and NGOs, and political scientists, among them) have labelled Russian democracy as being, variously, managed democracy, KGB democracy, authoritarian democracy, “…delegative democracy, guided democracy, electoral clanism,
One thing is certain – Russia is not a liberal democracy, and the facts clearly bear that out. Key pain-points exist in areas ranging from growing consolidation of power in the Kremlin and subsequent weakening of opposition power; moves to re-establish the power of the secret police; lack of a free press; abuse of the court system; and eroding basic civil liberties, to name but a few.

Regarding consolidation of power, Putin moved very quickly after his election in 2000 when he removed governors from the Federation Council, the upper chamber of parliament, and set up seven presidential envoys (sometimes called super-governors) to supervise them. Another move came in late 2001 when the Duma passed a Putin-supported law setting stringent requirements for political parties to participate in elections. Putin’s supporters claimed the law was needed to reduce Russia’s 200 parties to a manageable number, but critics said the measure limited opposing viewpoints. For the roughly five years Putin has been in power, he has “…taken over or closed all independent national television channels, established unrivaled dominance of both houses of parliament, reasserted control over the country's huge energy industry and jailed or driven into exile business tycoons who defied him.”

Putin has even facilitated the rise of a large and vibrant subculture of “siloviki,” former intelligence officials who have risen to take most major positions within the Russian government. Russian sociologist Olga Kryshtanovskaya puts the number of high-level governmental posts now occupied by ex-KGB at close to 60 per cent.” Additionally, in March 2003, Putin gave the Federal Security Service, the successor to the KGB, control over border guards and all government communications.

One of the most notable Putin reforms came in September 2004, in what Izvestiya billed as the “September Revolution.” Using the Beslan terrorist attack as his impetus, Putin announced a number of reforms, many of which had questionable connections to the incident. Among the measures included in his “anti-terrorism” legislation:
- Changes that would give the president the right to appoint regional governors, subject to confirmation by local legislatures, despite the fact that Russians in all 89 regions have independently elected their governors since 1995. The move, according to Putin, would allow for a “single chain of command.”;
- A “recommendation” to change elections to the Duma to a purely proportional system (before this change, half of the members of the Duma were elected by popular (single) mandate, and half by party list). The move would mean that the Duma would consist only of members elected from party lists, meaning that political parties such as Putin's United Russia would exercise exclusive control over everyone who runs for election.;
- The right for the president to dissolve local parliaments;
- Increased involvement of the president - and his allies in the upper house of parliament - over the appointment of judges. In the past there was a strong role for a collegium of judges to perform this task.;
- The right for federal authorities to impose a 60-day security clampdown in any part of the country solely on suspicion that a terror attack was being planned. It foresees the imposition of “a state of terrorist danger” if authorities receive information – even unconfirmed – that suggests an attack is being planned. During that period, even if no attack takes place, authorities could introduce emergency measures including banning public demonstrations, tapping phones, conducting spot street checks and restricting movements of people and traffic;
- Proposed curbs on press activity that could block photographs and television footage of graphic scenes of violence, and restrict journalists’ reporting at the scene of attacks such as that in Beslan in southern Russia.

Putin characterized the changes as enhancing national cohesion in the face of a terrorist threat, while critics called them “…another step toward restoring the tyranny of the state 13 years after the fall of the Soviet Union.” Many people in Moscow reportedly joke “Beslan is our Reichstag fire” – a reference to the burning of the German legislature in February 1933, which led to the Nazis securing near total control over civil rights.

But parallels between Putin’s Russia and Hitler’s Germany do not end there. Akhmed Zakayev put it well:

Mr. Putin came to power in what has been referred to as "Weimar Russia," a weak, humiliated ex-superpower that had lost its colonies, and was torn by chaos, corruption, social unrest and a lack of what the Russians called "the national idea." Losing the first Chechen war was adding insult to injury -- the 1997 peace treaty that gave Chechnya de facto independence being "Russia's Versailles." Mr. Putin seized on the feelings of national humiliation and promised to restore Russian imperial glory. Chechnya became his rallying cry, his Sudetenland. The hallmarks of his regime -- the Post-Weimar Russia - - are remarkably reminiscent of the early Hitler years: suppression of free media, destruction of parliamentary opposition, mysterious political murders, consolidation of federal power in the name of efficiency, expropriation of Jewish businesses, demonization and persecution of an ethnic minority who no one in the World cares about -- the Russian Chechens.

On the issue of elections, international observers from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe said of the December 2003 parliamentary elections that the vote was “free, but not fair,” marked a
“regression in the democratization process" and lacked elements of a “genuine democratic contest.” The EU Council chimed in with concerns over opposition candidates' lack of fair access to the media.

With regard to the 2004 presidential elections, "With the result predetermined, the Putin administration is pressuring every group it can to increase the turnout among a resigned populace. The list of appointees preparing Mr. Putin's campaign includes more than 200 heads of state-run enterprises and institutions. There is evidence that universities and manufacturers, among others, are threatening to punish their members if they do not vote."

The system is seen by many as so hopelessly biased that a member of one of Russia’s prominent liberal parties said December 21, 2003 that his party would not field a candidate in the ‘04 presidential vote. The leader of the Yabloko party, Grigory Yavlinsky, maintained that “free, equitable and politically competitive elections are impossible" in Russia's current situation.

On the legal front, Russia’s justice system has been put under the microscope as of late, as regular headlines in most of the world’s foremost business papers inform of the arrests and subsequent court proceedings of several prominent Russian businessmen, notably Mikhail Khodorkovsky and Platon Lebedev, both connected to Russia’s old giant Yukos. Many believe the charges to be politically motivated. As one writer noted:

He [Putin] declared open season on Russia’s oligarchs, launching a brutal political and judicial campaign against billionaire mogul Mikhail Khodorkovsky and his Yukos conglomerate—one that, as of this writing, has left Russia’s richest man behind bars and its second-largest oil company on the verge of bankruptcy and/or nationalization, in an eloquent demonstration of the high cost of interference in Kremlin power politics. Through legislative fiat and hostile takeovers, Putin has similarly managed to muzzle the country’s independent media, which observers say now operate under a “Soviet model,” complete with state interference and a healthy dose of “self-censorship” by Russian journalists.

The Kremlin has unwaveringly maintained that the arrests of Khodorkovsky, Lebedev and four other Yukos billionaires, as well as other prominent businessmen, centre around such legitimate legal issues as fraud and tax evasion, and that the incarcerations are above board. However many observers maintain that the arrests and show trials (which some have likened to the infamous Stalin show trials of 1937) are
politically motivated. “No small part of their “crime” was utilizing their wealth to support freedom of speech and political dialogue, in pursuit of the vision of a democratic, free-enterprise Russia where the rule of law permits citizens and businesses a full opportunity to live and work freely. In doing so, these gentlemen defied a tacit understanding that they could keep their fortunes and stay in business if they stayed out of politics.”

As the Wall Street Journal noted in July 2004, “The prosecution of Mr. Khodorkovsky is the clearest symbol yet that the Russian state isn’t accountable to anyone save the man in the Kremlin.

It has already been established herein that the Kremlin holds almost complete control of Russia’s judiciary, including the appointment of judges. It is also believed that such influence also reaches to such bodies as the General Prosecutor’s Office, and that the whole judicial system is nothing more than an extension of the Kremlin. Indeed, “One judge has already been removed from a related Yukos tax case due to her failure to conduct the trial in a manner expected by her political superiors.”

Colin Powel, in a front-page article in Izvestia January 26, 2004, said “Russia’s democratic systems seems not yet to have found the essential balance among the executive, legislative and judicial branches of government. Political power is not yet fully tethered to law.”

If what detractors of the Kremlin maintain is true, not only is political power in Russia not fully tethered to the rule of law, but it is more realistically hanging by a frayed thread, with Putin pulling from one end, and liberal democratic ideals from the other.

**Russia and Democracy 101**

In order to properly determine where Russia currently stands on the “democracy meter,” if you will, it is necessary to understand what, exactly, democracy is, and isn’t. The undertaking may not be as easy as it seems. David Hannigan: “Democracy is a highly contested term. A cursory examination of the
democracies of the world will highlight that there are significant differences between each example. Therein lies the crux of the problem of definition - what criteria are used in forming a definition?²⁰

That being said, Hannigan makes an attempt by turning to political scientist Andreas Schedler, and his idea of a four-fold classification of democracy. Schedler's ranking, as synthesized by Hannigan:

The first step and the lowest point on the scale is that of an authoritarian regime in which there are no democratic principles in existence. The second step of the democratisation ladder is to that of the electoral democracy in which the procedural mechanisms of democracy are in place and practised, but the freedoms associated with liberal democracy are not present. The third type of political system on Schedler's ladder is that of liberal democracy. Liberal democracy has all the characteristics of electoral democracy but also an adherence to all of the political and civil freedoms associated with it. The final type of democracy that exists is that of an advanced democracy. Schedler does not fully explain what an advanced democracy is but warns that there is a risk of 'idealising and reifying the wealthy Western democracies' as advanced democracies.²¹

Taking Schedler's quartet and applying it against the 22 bullet points of "evidence" at the beginning of this paper, it would appear that Russia soundly falls under the category of electoral democracy, which, although seems impressive, is listed by Schedler as "...only one type of borderline democracy among many others."²² He also notes that "...while 'advanced democracy' must be considered a genuine subtype of liberal democracy, one could plausibly classify 'electoral democracy' as a subtype of authoritarianism."

For another view on the concept of democracy, one may consider the seminal work of political theorist Robert Dahl, again, as synthesized by Hannigan:

Perhaps one of the most highly cited definitions of democracy - and it is argued perhaps the best theory that has been posited - is that put forward by Robert Dahl in his book *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition*. In his text, Dahl puts forward the idea of a minimum of eight 'institutional guarantees' for a democracy - or as Dahl terms it 'polyarchy'. 1) There must be freedom of association - that is freedom to form and join political parties. 2) Citizens must be afforded the right to freedom of expressing their own views. 3) The right to vote for all - or in other terminology universal suffrage. 4) Every citizen is eligible to stand for public office. 5) The right of political leaders to compete for both support and for votes - but with little in the way of coercion of the public. 6) There must exist a press free from coercion and also alternate sources of information for the public. 7) Free and fair elections must exist in order to elect representatives who 8) create policy, aware of differing levels of public support. The crux behind these eight minimum requirements is that there are certain mechanisms that must be in place that safeguard the rights and political freedoms of citizens in the run-up to, and during the election process.²³
Let us now look very briefly at Dahl’s eight “institutional guarantees,” and, based on the discussion which opened this paper, determine how the situation in Russia compares:

1) **There must be freedom of association - that is freedom to form and join political parties:** While these rights exist in Russia in theory, they are extraordinarily shaky in practice, particularly when an individual or party takes an anti-Kremlin stance.

2) **Citizens must be afforded the right to freedom of expressing their own views:** Again, the right exists on paper, but not necessarily in the real world, and depends greatly on one’s views.

3) **The right to vote for all - or in other terminology universal suffrage:** In recent years, the right to vote has been withheld from, among others, enemies of the Kremlin, such as Chechens, and from minorities, such as northern indigenous peoples, and the Meskhetians, a largely Muslim group living in Krasnodar in the southwest part of the country.

4) **Every citizen is eligible to stand for public office:** Another case of strong in theory, weak in practice, again, depending on how one’s views jibe with the Kremlin.

5) **The right of political leaders to compete for both support and for votes - but with little in the way of coercion of the public:** With a high proportion of government posts, including elected positions, being held by ex-KGB; candidates being approved by the Kremlin; and consolidation of power by pro-Putin parties in the Duma, any competition for civic support and votes is no doubt overshadowed by the existence of fear and inherent unfairness.

6) **There must exist a press free from coercion and also alternate sources of information for the public:** As already noted, the press in Russia is not free as it is encumbered by state ownership, influence and control. Also commonplace are abductions and murders of journalists who speak out against the Kremlin.

7) **Free and fair elections must exist in order to elect representatives:** Recent Duma and presidential contests have been described by watchdog organizations as “free but not fair.” Significant irregularities, such as voter list manipulation, ballot shortages and
accusations of ballot-box stuffing, plus physical threats against election observers, have been cited by organizations observing elections throughout the country.

8) **Elected representatives create policy, aware of differing levels of public support:** With great power being consolidated within the Kremlin, total control being exerted by the Kremlin over both houses, and massive voter support, the president is currently not obligated to craft policy with broad public good in mind.

**The case against consolidated democracy**

It is now clear that Russia is not even particularly close to being able to hold the title of ‘liberal democracy’ (or even ‘democracy’ for that matter). Thus, it could be considered fruitless to discuss the country’s democratic status in terms of whether it can be considered a consolidated democracy (tight definitions of which do not appear to readily exist, though two leading thinkers of democratization theory, Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan, claim that a consolidated democracy is a situation where the principles of democracy and the complex institutions associated with it have become institutionalised and thus democracy is considered ‘the only game in town.”24)

However a quick look at the concept of **consolidating democracy** as it applies to the current status of the Federation will prove to solidify the thesis that with regards to democracy, Russia is “not quite there.”

Linz and Stepan propose three preconditions that a state must meet before the idea of consolidating democracy can be met. The first and most important of these preconditions is that a state must exist. The rights of citizens cannot be upheld, free and fair elections cannot be held, and election winners cannot exercise executive authority in an undefined territory - ‘No State, no democracy.’ The second precondition that is put forward is that the transitional phase from a previous form of government must be complete. A democracy cannot be consolidated if there are remnants of a previous regime in place - that is Dahl's conditions of a polyarchy must be well and truly established…The third, and final, precondition for democratic consolidation is that all elected government officials must have full respect for the law - 'no matter what the magnitude of their majority is’ - constitutional arrangements must be upheld and rights must not be violated.25

Let us now look at these three preconditions in the context of contemporary Russia.

- **A state must exist.** The rights of citizens cannot be upheld, free and fair elections cannot be held, and election winners cannot exercise executive authority in an undefined territory - 'No State, no democracy.” It can be argued, and Hannigan makes an admirable attempt, that since the declared independence of Chechnya, and the subsequent two wars of succession, Russia is not
complete and, therefore, is not a defined territory. And while Chechens voted overwhelmingly in a March 2003 referendum for a new constitution to replace a secessionist constitution approved in 1992, rebels have claimed the vote was rigged and continued their fight for secession.

- **The second precondition that is put forward is that the transitional phase from a previous form of government must be complete. A democracy cannot be consolidated if there are remnants of a previous regime in place.** Hannigan, Bendersky\(^{26}\) and others argue that the transition from totalitarian Communist state in Russia came from the top down, rather than from the grassroots up, meaning that many current officials in the Putin government are holdouts from the Soviet Union. Says Hannigan: “Russia cannot be seen to have been completed. Many members of the previous elite are still clinging to power within the Russian government.”\(^{27}\)

- **The third, and final, precondition for democratic consolidation is that all elected government officials must have full respect for the law - ‘no matter what the magnitude of their majority is’ - constitutional arrangements must be upheld and rights must not be violated.**\(^ {28}\): One of the foundation blocks of democracy is that the rule of law – constitutional, statute and common - must be fully respected and adhered to. However, there are countless examples indicating that this is just not happening in the new Russia (again, as can be evidenced by the 22 bullets at the beginning of this paper). But while many examples can be cited, and many sources revealed, the main origin of the problem has been noted by Robinson:

> Most analysts have argued that the chief culprit [in the degradation of democracy and its preconditions] is the Russian presidency...The destructive effects of the Russian presidency are generally viewed as a result of 'superpresidentialism', rather than its legal form... superpresidentialism is not defined by the constitutional powers of the presidential institution, although these supported it in the long term. Instead superpresidentialism’s hallmark is the dominance of personal rule over impersonal institutionalized administration and the existence of a large presidential apparatus, which dominates the state bureaucracy and legislature...At most, the new constitutional powers of the presidency could be said to have stabilized the polity because they resolved some of the ambiguities that existed in the relationship between president and parliament, and which led to the October 1993 crisis (Moser, 2001). However, they achieved this effect at the cost of parliament being unable to develop as a representative institution, one that could place some checks on the executive and channel popular concerns into the policy process.”\(^{29}\)

While by no means exhaustive, the evidence countering Linz and Stepan’s three conditions clearly indicate that Russia is not a liberal democracy and, therefore, cannot possibly be a consolidated (or even a consolidating) democracy, a higher “lifeform” which generally shows that a country’s democratic institutions are heading towards maturation.

As proof has been established early, it is hardly necessary to delve into Linz and Stepan’s five interacting criteria a government must have before it can be considered a consolidated democracy: a flourishing civil society; political society; the rule of law; a strong state apparatus; and, a strong stable economic society.\(^ {30}\) As Linz and Stepan put forward, each of the five arenas act in conjunction with the others, meaning the game is zero-sum; only one criteria has to be missing or incomplete in order to establish that
a country is not a consolidated democracy. In the case of Russia, it is deficient in meeting most, if not all, five criteria.

**The case against democracy - period**

A U.S. Department of State primer on democracy offers a brief introduction and overview of the subject before going into more detail via ten brief pieces, with main headings ranging from “Majority Rule, Minority Rights” to “Government Accountability.”

The ten points contained in State’s overview entitled “What is Democracy?” are:

1) Democracy is government in which power and civic responsibility are exercised by all citizens, directly or through their freely elected representatives;
2) Democracy is a set of principles and practices that protect human freedom; it is the institutionalization of freedom;
3) Democracy rests upon the principles of majority rule, coupled with individual and minority rights. All democracies, while respecting the will of the majority, zealously protect the fundamental rights of individuals and minority groups;
4) Democracies guard against all-powerful central governments and decentralize government to regional and local levels, understanding that local government must be as accessible and responsive to the people as possible;
5) Democracies understand that one of their prime functions is to protect such basic human rights as freedom of speech and religion; the right to equal protection under law; and the opportunity to organize and participate fully in the political, economic, and cultural life of society;
6) Democracies conduct regular free and fair elections open to all citizens. Elections in a democracy cannot be facades that dictators or a single party hide behind, but authentic competitions for the support of the people;
7) Democracy subjects governments to the rule of law and ensures that all citizens receive equal protection under the law and that their rights are protected by the legal system;
8) Democracies are diverse, reflecting each nation's unique political, social, and cultural life. Democracies rest upon fundamental principles, not uniform practices;
9) Citizens in a democracy not only have rights, they have the responsibility to participate in the political system that, in turn, protects their rights and freedoms; and,
10) Democratic societies are committed to the values of tolerance, cooperation, and compromise. Democracies recognize that reaching consensus requires compromise and that it may not always be attainable.  

As with Linz and Stepan’s five interacting criteria for consolidated democracy, it has been established early-on in this paper that Russia is deficient in meeting virtually all ten Department of State criteria.
The case for illiberal democracy

Fareed Zakaria notes in his influential work *The Rise of Illiberal Democracy*:

Democratically elected regimes, often ones that have been reelected or reaffirmed through referenda, are routinely ignoring constitutional limits on their power and depriving their citizens of basic rights and freedoms. From Peru to the Palestinian Authority, from Sierra Leone to Slovakia, from Pakistan to the Philippines, we see the rise of a disturbing phenomenon in international life -- illiberal democracy.

It has been difficult to recognize this problem because for almost a century in the West, democracy has meant liberal democracy -- a political system marked not only by free and fair elections, but also by the rule of law, a separation of powers, and the protection of basic liberties of speech, assembly, religion, and property…

… Today [1997], 118 of the world’s 193 countries are democratic, encompassing a majority of its people (54.8 percent, to be exact), a vast increase from even a decade ago. In this season of victory, one might have expected Western statesmen and intellectuals to go one further than E. M. Forster and give a rousing three cheers for democracy. Instead there is a growing unease at the rapid spread of multiparty elections across south-central Europe, Asia, Africa, and Latin America, perhaps because of what happens after the elections. Popular leaders like Russia’s Boris Yeltsin and Argentina’s Carlos Menem bypass their parliaments and rule by presidential decree, eroding basic constitutional practices…

… Naturally there is a spectrum of illiberal democracy, ranging from modest offenders like Argentina to near-tyrannies like Kazakhstan and Belarus, with countries like Romania and Bangladesh in between… Of the countries that lie between confirmed dictatorship and consolidated democracy, 50 percent do better on political liberties than on civil ones. In other words, half of the "democratizing" countries in the world today are illiberal democracies…

… Illiberal democracy is a growth industry. Seven years ago only 22 percent of democratizing countries could have been so categorized; five years ago that figure had risen to 35 percent. And to date few illiberal democracies have matured into liberal democracies; if anything, they are moving toward heightened illiberalism. Far from being a temporary or transitional stage, it appears that many countries are settling into a form of government that mixes a substantial degree of democracy with a substantial degree of illiberalism.

Zakaria’s theory is as relevant today as it was almost eight years ago – so much so, that it could almost have been drafted with Russia solely in mind. Indeed, his theorem could have easily been dated 2005, and his reference to Boris Yeltsin been one of Vladimir Putin instead.

Conclusion

When faced with the question “Is Russia an example of a fragile liberal democracy?” one may tend to concentrate more on the first part tranche of the query (i.e. the fragility question); without first properly addressing the fundamentality of whether Russia is, in fact, even a democracy, let alone a fragile liberal
one. Indeed, if the answer to the quite elemental question lies in the negative; there would be no need to respond to the tertiary portion regarding the democracy’s robustness, as the effort would be wasted, mooted by the rejoinder to the primary question.

The fact is Russia is not a democracy, at least not a liberal one. And while it doubtless has some attributes of one, maintaining that these few traits make it a full member of the club is akin to the uncommitted woman being a little bit pregnant.

Through the examples cited in this paper, it is clear that political rights and civil liberties have become very restricted in Russia. Indeed, the country was downgraded to “Not free” by Freedom House in a major survey of global freedom released December 20, 2004. According to a Freedom House release:

Russia’s step backwards into the Not Free category is the culmination of a growing trend under President Vladimir Putin to concentrate political authority, harass and intimidate the media, and politicize the country’s law-enforcement system...Russia’s status fell from Partly Free to Not Free because of the flawed nature of the country’s parliamentary elections in December 2003 and presidential elections in 2004, the further consolidation of state control of the media, and the imposition of official curbs on opposition political parties and groups. Russia’s retreat from freedom marks a low point not registered since 1989, when the country was part of the Soviet Union.33

Democracy always has enemies and always has critics. If democratic states become too tolerant, they leave themselves open to attack and overthrow (like Weimar Germany). If, on the other hand, they become too self-protecting, too anxious to suppress anti-democratic threats...they may run the risk of losing their democratic ‘essence’ by adopting censorship, repression of opposition and internal espionage systems: in the name of ‘combative democracy’.34 It is clear that the latter is happening in Russia.

Fareed Zakaria notes: “In 1993 Boris Yeltsin famously (and literally) attacked the Russian parliament, prompted by parliament’s own unconstitutional acts. He then suspended the constitutional court, dismantled the system of local governments, and fired several provincial governors. From the war in Chechnya to his economic programs, Yeltsin has displayed a routine lack of concern for constitutional procedures and limits. He may well be a liberal democrat at heart, but Yeltsin's actions have created a Russian super-presidency. We can only hope his successor will not abuse it.”35
Little did he know.

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