Russians, Continental Europeans, and Americans approach differently the relationship between the strong state, democracy building, and an emergent civil society. Russians view the strong state as the essential prerequisite for the stability and development of both a functional democratic polity and a civil society. If traditional Russian political thought has drawn upon that of Continental Europe, notably Georg Hegel, it especially contrasts with that of the U.S. Yeltsin-Putin-Medvedev period thinking and developments, including qualified understandings of democracy (e.g., “sovereign democracy”) represent what Russians see as modernizing efforts to address Russia's late 20th century "failing state" and "quadruple revolution." While attentive to critical Western assessments of contemporary Russian thinking and institutional-political reforms, we analyze Russian judgments that Russia is constructing the state foundation for an emergent, “accountable,” democratic polity. We contend that an understanding of Putin period political thinking and actions is better achieved through the prism of institution building than through a narrow focus on Western style democratization.

Key words: Russia; state building; democracy; Putin; Medvedev; failing state

Russia's political thought and experience have varied considerably from those of Western countries, and this is no less true in the early 21st century than in the Tsarist and Soviet past.¹ When Putin protégé Vladislav Surkov spoke of "sovereign democracy" and pointed to Russia's unique experience along the road of democracy building, most Westerners were dismissive, while many Russians found his ruminations worthy of further reflection.² Now, with post-Soviet Russian system-building and democratizing efforts two decades in the making, a great divide in political perspective between Russia and the West is once again apparent. Meanwhile, the
complexities and uncertainties in fully understanding the democratic system and its root conditions lead to equally compelling divisions both among Russian politicians and observers and among their Western counterparts.\(^3\) Given this set of circumstances, it is little wonder that there have been such strongly expressed negative Western characterizations of the post-Soviet Russian polity.\(^4\) Contrasting mainstream Russian and Western perspectives on Vladimir Putin’s return to the Russian Presidency were yet another tangible sign of the profound gulf separating Russian and Western assessments.\(^5\)

Putin protégé and Russian President Dmitry Medvedev quickly set out after the provocative Surkov “sovereign democracy” declaration an alternative line of thinking, questioning the need for the term "sovereign" in qualifying the universal notion of democracy.\(^6\) Medvedev, in several public statements, appeared to challenge the Surkov arguments or to put accent on different points, casting an alternative light on the notion of Russian democratization. Meanwhile, Vladimir Putin used characterizations that appeared compatible with the Surkov arguments; arguments that Surkov had originally laid out before Putin's platform party, United Russia, and that were meant to fit with the Putin worldview and power-policy agenda.\(^7\) These presentations and the discussions that they initiated were important, constituting much more than the philosophically vacuous democratic window-dressing that many Western observers linked with a putatively early 21\(^{st}\) century Russian neo-authoritarianism.\(^8\) In fact, the nuanced – and not so nuanced – variances in arguments set out by Medvedev, Putin, Surkov, and others reflected contending perspectives by the very members of the Kremlin team that had been guiding Russia since the early 2000s.

We see the discussion of sovereign democracy, and of related ideas of democracy building, as important contemporary components of Russia's long-time grappling with the logic
of its democratic potential. Indeed, the ongoing Russian search for what is termed a national idea is fundamentally related to a Russian-style democratic form. Vladislav Surkov may be a Kremlin functionary, not a political theorist, and his and his fellow Kremlin team members' interests may be careerist and tied with the practicalities of accumulating, using, and safeguarding political power. But the ideas they and others have raised are reflective of profound issues that link both to (a) Russia's past thought and experience and (b) ongoing institutional and policy choices. Meanwhile, these discussions are not simply political posturing with no institutional-policy substance. Rather, they draw upon a Russian political philosophical tradition emphasizing statism, collectivism, and national sovereignty that has long differentiated the country's political outlook and experience from that of many Western countries. The dramatic developments surrounding the December 2011 parliamentary and March 2012 presidential elections attest to the continuing relevance of these formulations and discussions to Russia’s dynamic post-Soviet political-institutional evolution.

The 21st century discussion over Russia's democracy-building efforts comes as Russia has coped with its late 20th century "quadruple revolution" of political, economic, social change and struggle over a post-Soviet national identity. Meanwhile, the experience of over two decades of coping with a "failing state" has necessarily framed any Russian assessment of appropriate or necessary institutional-policy arrangements. Brought together, these transformational developments bolster Russian officials' and observers' inclinations both to emphasize order, stability, and normalcy and to look to the strong state as the primary vehicle for their realization. Moreover, past political thinking and recent experience reinforce a discernable Russian propensity to see the strong state as facilitating the civil society that is seen to be at the heart of a modern democratic polity. Thus, in contrast with much Western (and especially
American) thinking, most Russians perceive Yeltsin-Putin-Medvedev state building efforts as constituting a necessary foundation for the consolidation of a Russian democracy. And after more than a decade of state-consolidating efforts following the anarchic 1990’s, it is further argued that the rudimentary institutional-behavioral manifestations of an emerging civil society are evident.13

We analyze the apparently contradictory developments in Putin-Medvedev's Russia that we see as raising important questions about Russia's political evolution and its relevance to 21st century concepts of democracy. While situating post-Soviet Russian democratic institution building and policy making in light of past Russian thinking and experience, we juxtapose these developments and Russian thinking with Continental European and U.S. experience and perspectives. Of particular interest to us is the intersection between political theory's focus on ideas concerning democracy and the state and comparative politics' interest in institutional design and policy. Any analysis of Western and Russian thinking about democracy and the state necessarily brings us to the contributions of Georg Hegel. Meanwhile, in examining Western thinking and experience, we differentiate between Continental Europe and the U.S. While we see some relationship between Continental European thinking and experience and those of Russia, the U.S. perspective is quite varied from both. In emphasizing that the U.S. has rarely had an experience with, or interest in, developing state-centered theory or beliefs, we contend that there are echoes of notions such as sovereign democracy in the U.S.'s rise from state crisis in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The thinking and actions of U.S. Presidents Woodrow Wilson and Theodore Roosevelt offer suggestive experience as we recall the rise of the American administrative state and strengthened presidentialism. We contrast the U.S. and Russian cases to contextualize contemporary Russian democratic thinking. We also briefly
consider Russia's fledgling civil society as we evaluate the consequences of the Russian strong state.

Russia has a long way to go in the creation of a functioning democracy, but we contend Russian political thinking and experience to date merit serious attention. Medvedev’s expansive discussion of Russia’s contemporary political, institutional, and technological needs, set out in his “Go Russia” essay and elsewhere, constituted a suggestive elaboration on these themes. Several 2012 Putin campaign position papers issued in advance of his second presidency did likewise. The strong Russian statist imperatives of the Yeltsin-Putin presidencies should not obscure the democratic potential that continued into the Putin-Medvedev period. The Western tendency to dismiss contemporary Russian political discussions and institutional experience, especially those reflecting the thinking of the Kremlin and political establishment, obscures significant developments that portend progress in both the consolidation of a revived state and the potential long-term construction of a democratic polity.

**European and American Thought, the State, and Democracy**

There are many lenses through which observers view, analyze and ultimately judge political systems other than their own. While democracy has become almost universally accepted as the standard by which polities are measured, it remains a contested idea, especially when filtered through such lenses. We see an example of the revisiting of this contest with the assertions of an emergent Russian “sovereign” democracy by Vladislav Surkov and its subsequent critiques by Dmitry Medvedev and many in the West. Among newly developing democratic polities, the concept of the state is perhaps one of the greatest sources of friction when assessing the nature of democracy, its native conceptualization and practices.
Understanding the concept of the state – appreciating the pervasive web of state constructs, conceptions, and institutions – is a particularly troubling element for those ensconced in both the American tradition of politics and the discipline of political science. The U.S. has rarely had experience with or a keen interest in developing a theory of politics organized around the state as the political ideal.

The state expressed as an ideal, an analytic construct or tool, or object of study has been with us for quite some time although its definition, like democracy, remains subject to discussion and debate. Throughout the 19th and into the early 20th century the state received tremendous attention on both sides of the Atlantic. The long dominant view of the state, particularly from the European perspective, conceptualizes the state internally and externally as an autonomous unit of authority with power over a circumscribed population and geographical area. This definition reflects Weber’s definition of the state as a sovereign decision-making and acting unit that utilizes an authorized monopoly of force over and for the subjects of its rule. The functional power of this unit is seen then “in the independent organization and activation of cooperation in a territorially defined society founded on the fact that in accordance with historical circumstances, it is necessary for all the contrasting interests in a particular all encompassing territory to adhere to a common status vivendi.”19

The establishment and articulation of this status vivendi as a political ideal results from a nexus of discursive bases of power, constitutive of and endorsed by the functional power of the state. The constitution of the modern state may be seen as closely connected with the rise of secular rationality, the social sciences and the production of knowledge about a state’s population at the aggregate and individual level. States are thus seen as dependent on information concerning the physical condition of its territory, diplomatic and secret knowledge
about the strengths and weaknesses of foreign states, and other forms of knowledge that made objects of the state visible and “rendered them into a calculable and programmable form.” These reflexive “inscription devices” made it possible to define problems, specify areas of intervention, calculate resources, determine political goals,” and thus set out the ideological and functional foundation for a *status vivendi*.20

Theory and political science are often seen at the core of this discussion of that state that in turn affects the discourse of democracy. Ideas of the state have dominated European political discourse for quite some time, evolving from the state initially as a means of dealing with the discord sown by the demise of the feudal system and the rise of the religious wars of the 17th century to the apotheosis of the state in the 19th and 20th centuries. While lacking room here to discuss the complicated relationship between modernity and the rise of the nation-state and state theory, we may situate the rise of state-centered thinking within the matrix of modernity’s predilection for controlling nature through the universal Cartesian method of reduction, analysis and prediction at the behest of a newly conceptualized individuality posited by the likes of John Locke. The foundations of the state were laid in the gulf created between this matrix and feudalism’s core pillars of community, cosmic centeredness, and the divinely constituted relationships between and within the people. The state was often conceived as a means of articulating the Baconian, Cartesian and Lockean principles of order, prediction and control where the church and local powers and traditions had previously articulated feudal principles.21

A central figure in the theoretical transformation away from these traditions to the modern formulation of the state was Jacques Rousseau. Where Locke stressed the primacy of the individual prior to society, Rousseau could not conceive of individuals outside of their community; outside of the community’s morality, language, property, freedom, and happiness
there was no chance at a fully realized human life. In his *Social Contract* of 1762, Rousseau suggests a corporate persona for this community represented by the “general will,” to which active submission and participation become the “highest of all virtues and the source of all remaining ones … thus and only thus … would [the state] be able to represent the supreme ideal to its inhabitants who both drew their life from it and were supposed to lay down their lives on its behalf if necessary.”

This supreme ideal of the state was shared and promoted by another European Enlightenment figure, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, perhaps the leading figure in the development of the modern state theory. Hegel was at once a creature of the Enlightenment, given over to universal method and the development of the individual, but he was also at a loss early in his intellectual development to explain the process and logic through which these are obtained. The religious tradition in which he was raised failed him in its explanations of causation and reason. Hegel moved from a personal vision of religion to an impersonal religion of history. The movement and change in geist, or world spirit, moved and shaped humanity. Geist provided reason and thus shaped history but it resided, neither in humanity as a whole, nor in individuals generally. Hegel viewed humans as moving through stages of history and organizing in greater harmony with reason. Yet reason was frustrated at the level of civil society where individuals sought to secure those necessities demanded by the realm of nature, i.e., shelter, food, clothing, etc., and were concerned with little more than their own, individual economic advantage. However, at the level of the state, reason was seen as ordering society. Hegel envisioned the state as “world-historical,” moving beyond the mere particulars of life represented by his view of civil society and thus capable of synthesizing into itself universal good and virtue. The state was not just a system of government, but a perfect system of
government where its members acted in light of the historical pursuit of *geist*, or world spirit. In this, the sovereign nature of the state was not an end in itself but rather a means endowing laws and government with a higher ethical historical purpose. As van Creveld notes, “Acknowledging no superior, alone of all institutions on earth the [sovereign] state possessed the freedom to develop in accordance with its own nature, a freedom which it bestowed on its citizens and which provided it with its justification.”

History gave the state purpose and the purpose of the state developed through history, culminating in the development of Hegel’s ideal, perfect political organization. In this Hegel marks a sharp distinction between the Enlightenment thought of Locke as well as the American “founders.” “Hegel considered that true freedom for the individual was possible *only* within the state. Take the state way and man was reduced to nothing at all, a puny biological creature whose life was divorced from the world-spirit and, in this sense, devoid of ethical significance.” Thus the state in the European tradition is not only a material structure and a mode of thinking, but also a lived and embodied experience, a mode of existence whose roots reach back to the likes of Rousseau and Hegel.

Despite what often appears as a natural historically deep-seated antipathy between the two countries, Russians of the 19th century were deeply impressed with German culture and philosophy, becoming fascinated with the works of Schilling, Herder, and particularly Hegel and his theorizing of history and the state. Hegel’s was a profound re-visioning of the role of various countries and peoples and their chances at secular salvation through the state, and Russians, like many of their European counterparts, converted to his mode of thinking. But this conversion presented a potential problem for Russians who chose to utilize a Hegelian world-view. Hegel was clear that not all polities were capable of developing into states. Only some were chosen as “world-historical” nations and thus destined to experience true progress as
represented by *geist* and achieve “statehood” where others were left to live a false history. While not a perfect division between the two, Hegel’s separation of nations into those destined for greatness and those not fell roughly between West and East. The East, represented best by China and India, was stunted by authoritarianism, despotism, and lived a pre-modern stage of existence where family, religion, and politics were indistinguishable from one another. Despotism and authoritarianism left individuals morally stunted, unable to make ethical decision for themselves due to a lack of subjective development. Many who adhered to Hegel desperately wanted to believe that Russia figured into being part of the West, and thus free from being cast into historical oblivion. Those who opposed this privileging of the West (i.e., Slavophiles) suggested that Russia represented a positive and unique blending of the two modes. What is clear from the debate over Russia’s inclusion or exclusion from world-historical nations is that both sides felt that Russia could not escape Hegel’s conceptualization of history. They ultimately relied not only upon Hegel’s understanding of civil society depending upon the state for its existence due to the instability and egoism found in civil society, but upon his depiction of the state as the highest form of political development; a development that would come to affect Russian and European thought deep into the 20th century.

While Hegel’s ideal state came to dominate the intellectual cornerstone of the *status vivendi* of modern political discourse in Europe, Hegel and the state have not enjoyed a similar privileged status in American political thought or politics. This is not to say that Hegelian ideals were wholly ignored in the American setting. However, the nature of modernity as experienced in the U.S. may be understood as having taken a different course than that of Continental Europe and as such failed to experience the concomitant rise of state-centered thinking. The advance of modernity played out very differently in the early American experience when compared to that
of Europe. As recent scholarship has revealed, the progress of modernity was not smooth or linear. Nor was it singular. Modernity’s development, and state development along with it, can be characterized as having multiple dimensions or “modernities.” As Jeremy Smith points out, states did not rule over perfectly contained and delimited imperial centers and colonized peripheries. “They oversaw cultural, economic and political syntheses that result[ed] from inter-societal and inter-civilizational contact and flow. The forces at play [were] not entirely under their control, however, indeed, they transcend[ed] the empires that took possession of the Americas in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.” Atlantic imperial forces (England, France, and Spain) had to confront state building in the context of oceanic empires. Their colonial subjects were treated to a different form of state formation than those experiencing it directly on the European continent. The colonial experience of the early English colonies in America must be understood in the context of limited imperial power. England did not possess the infrastructure or power projection to effect outright domination of its American holdings. As such, Americans, while subjects of a rapidly modernizing European state, had a critical physical and intellectual buffer that allowed them to experiment and reconsider the theoretic nature of their status vivendi.

Much of what motivates American political views and discourse with regard to the ideal role of the state is seen in the Federalist Papers. Here we see divergence between Continental interpretations of sovereignty and the state and those of the Federalists that come to mirror the general division between positive and negative interpretations of freedom. John Gunnell argues that there does not exist a perfectly coherent theory or philosophy behind the Federalist Papers. Instead he suggests a constant theme that contrasts democracy with republicanism, noting that in the latter the “people do not ‘exercise’ the role of government, … Governance is by government,
that is by representatives and representative institutions.” As opposed to the Continental European (and British) systems of government that divided and shared sovereignty in the matrix of the state, the Federalist, according to Gunnell, conceived of a government whose institutions were mixed vertically and horizontally but whose form was wholly popular and unmixed. “The People” was a separate entity from government and did not share sovereignty with it. Government was then a thing set opposite the people and designed with internal controls to keep it from falling into the pattern of other states: tyranny and anarchy. “While the maintenance of liberty and the protection of ‘the diversity of faculties from which property rights originate’ were presented by the authors as the ‘first object of government,’ the characteristic downside of republican liberty was the ‘disease’ of factions, which was … ultimately destructive of liberty,” notes Gunnell. The answer to this downside was a different type of representation by government. Government would represent the people in that it would be constructed of factions itself, reflective of the people’s penchant to fall into faction, yet these factions would be insulated from popular ones, counteract one another, and not be a part of the people themselves. Unlike Continental European unified state systems, government in this sense did not embody the people, and the people were not constituted by the government; government was but reflective of them and their factiousness. Thus, while government fulfilled essential functions of sovereignty such as providing order and security, it was not sovereign and thus did not represent in any manner fitting with traditional Continental notions of representation, sovereignty, or freedom.

Continental European theory does not tend toward such governmental-popular separation. Rather, individual freedom tends to be bound within a nexus of positive freedoms and the state. For Continental thinkers, liberty is not conceived of in the negative sense of the freedom to do whatever the people want; such freedom allows that if the people have the freedom to harm
others, they share the same to be harmed by those others, undermining any chance of their desire for safety. Liberty involves the confidence that if the people obey the law, as provided by the state, the state will protect the people from harm, leaving them feeling as free as possible to do that which they wish. While those like Montesquieu rely upon checks and balances of government’s separate branches, Montesquieu relies, too, upon the connection of the people and government through the sovereignty of the state, prefiguring the arguments of Rousseau and Hegel. 31

What is clear in the divisions between positive and negative liberty, between unified and non-unified sovereignties, and between Continental European and American visions of divided government, is that in the American case government is something separate from the people. In this case, justice is served when government is limited to control over itself and to the security of its sovereign people. Active or positive roles for government ultimately are seen as a threat to justice since the time of the founding. This arrangement has come to inform American notions of justice and the proper function of government and the failure to desire a strong state presence. American republicanism eschews the “love” of the state. As the American federal government came to reflect the factions of its people, its factions were left intact, free to counter each other and their access to government as much as the other factions would allow. Justice between them was understood not as equality of station but as equality of opportunity to pursue justice (i.e., pluralism). Here again, American thinking stands quite apart from that of Continental Europe and, as we will see, Russia.

A Brief Exception: An American Muscular State-Centered Ideology

There is a period in American political thought, following the Civil War, when there was an attempt to get at a sense of nation-stateness. The U.S. in essence sought to reinvent itself after
that bloody war and looked to Europe as providing a model. The European administrative state appeared appealing to a young nation pushing west while also trying to rebuild. It was into this mix that Woodrow Wilson poured forth his works on the need for a science of administration that eschewed politics as such. “The idea of the state is the conscience of administration,” writes Wilson, “this is why there should be a science of administration which shall seek to straighten the paths of government, to make its business less unbusinesslike, to strengthen and purify its organization, and to crown its duties with dutifulness.” Moreover, the American citizenry needed to understand themselves in light of their historical inheritance of “stateness” with a new self-awareness, both as individuals and as a society needing administrative professionalism as organized and expressed by the state.

If Wilson helped to provide the intellectual underpinnings of the administrative state in his academic work, Theodore Roosevelt provided a relentless "state building" in his political practices. The financial crises of the late 19th century, European colonial expansionism, the rise of the American industrial economy, and the attempts to knit the nation back together following the Civil War all set the stage for a strong charismatic leader to step into the fray and set the American people onto the world historical stage. Roosevelt oversaw the remaking of the American presidency into the dominant administrative juggernaut embodied by modern presidentialism. Much of this was predicated on Roosevelt's view toward the modern world. America had a unique position in that it had been settled by Europeans but given free rein to march west. The old politics and economy could be reinvented and controlled by a new administrative state populated with newly educated men forged in new university programs. Only the state had the resources to help the American citizenry find themselves through grand and glorious acts: the breaking of monopolies, the creation of a park system to preserve
American's unique natural treasures, the building of the Panama Canal and the Great White Fleet. Americans would meet the crises of the late 19th and early 20th centuries with a muscular state-centered ideology best exemplified in the presidency of Theodore "Rex."34

That U.S. muscular state-centered ideology, however, was not long-lived. World War I and the rise of the Soviet state and communism undermined its support while the rise of pluralist views on American politics began to take hold in the academy. Yet this American experience provides an interesting view into the nature of the lenses through which we perceive and judge "alien" political systems. The U.S.'s own "challenged," if not "failing," state of the 19th-early 20th century necessitated new ideological thinking and state building that were tied with addressing the country's own "quadruple revolution" of sorts. In the U.S. case, if such developments were contrary to long-term American thinking and tradition, they were compatible with American democracy building. In the contrasting contemporary Russian case, such a muscular state-centered ideology and related state-building efforts, developed in both the Yeltsin and Putin periods and continuing under Medvedev, are in fact compatible with the country's longer-term thinking and tradition. There is no reason to assume a priori that such an ideology and state-building efforts must be inconsistent with any democracy-building efforts.35

**Summing Up**

What can be seen, then, in the gulf between European and mainstream U.S. responses to the notion of the state is the separation of government from the people and sovereignty from the government. The Russian experience with the state and society is much more informed by its Hegelian tradition, which saw history as the long slow march to the full development of the state (the overcoming of issues of despotic sovereignty) where the separation of the people and government are synthesized into the modern state. Even granting that the extent and the
particularities vary, such a synthesis into the modern state is the mainstream Continental European experience. Meanwhile, American history had neither the early development of the state nor the intellectual forces supporting such a development until much later and, even granting the Woodrow Wilson-Teddy Roosevelt thinking and efforts, it never really caught on. Democracy in the U.S. grew out of a status vivendi of the people’s sovereignty defended against government, where in Russia democracy grows out of a context of people strongly identifying with both the government and its sovereign, national perspective. For Americans, the concept of democracy is a check on the behavior of government against the people; in Russia, the concept is meant to legitimize the activity of the sovereign nation state as guided by its elected leaders and as relevant to the state’s safeguarding of the people’s interest.

**Russian Conditions, Thinking, and Democracy Building**

Attention to the state – the strong state – has been central to Russian political thinking and experience throughout Russia's history and across all its political systems. Moreover, the strong state has been viewed as essential to Russian modernization. Meanwhile, for more than a century, and certainly transcending the era of Soviet power and the 20 post-Soviet years, Russian officials have advanced the notion of a modernizing Russia that was said to be moving into a stage of modern political development, legality, and even democratization. Putatively democratic constitutions, combined with suggestive institutional arrangements and considerable suggestive oratory, pointed to a maturing polity. Yet in fact, background realities of the Russian setting revealed, and continue to reveal today, that Russia was not a modern society in a contemporary 20th-21st century sense. Evident even in the 21st century are powerful elements of a traditional society, including (1) low levels of geographic mobility, (2) underdeveloped
infrastructure, and (3) low levels of individualism. Since 1991, in the era of Yeltsin-Putin-Medvedev, there have undoubtedly been significant changes underlying a society and polity in transformation: changes that have suggested at least the rudimentary institutional and political foundations for a democratic polity. But the background context is still one reflecting conditions and values that are decidedly traditional, and in many regards nondemocratic, in thrust. This is a critical constraint on any progress in democratization, and it reinforces the centrality of state building to Russia's long-term transformation.

We contend that any appreciation of the political-economic-social conditions within which the post-Soviet Russian polity evolves requires reference to at least three sets of values that inform ongoing state and policy construction. Those three sets of values, interconnected, are derived from the past yet are still influential in the 2000s: (1) the state-centric *obshchina*, (2) positive liberty, and (3) Marxism-Leninism. A consideration of Russia's political evolution, state building, and prospects for a civil society necessitates brief reflection over each.

*Obshchina* connotes the understanding of a broader community, the notion of interconnected societal responsibility, and intimate relationship among (1) the state as societal protector, (2) the broader society as constituting the national whole, and (3) the individual citizen with social and group responsibilities that transcend his/her own parochial interests. A strong and vital state undergirds the *obshchina*. Joined with *obshchina* is the strongly held value system of positive liberty, wherein the state is viewed as both the provider and guarantor of individual rights and liberty. Russian ideas of positive liberty reinforce the desirability of a strong state, a state bolstered in its ability to structure and influence society and economy, a state that is the impartial, dispassionate actor safeguarding and even extending individual rights and liberty. Finally, Marxism-Leninism, even if rejected in the post-1991 era, continues to influence public
policies that might be termed welfare statist and that stress notions of socioeconomic equality. In a related vein, the Leninist experience reinforces the centrality of the strong state as the ultimate guarantor for such desired social welfare and equality. Brought together, these three powerful sets of values reinforce one another and continue to assume a seminal role in the structuring of contemporary post-Soviet political thinking, state building, and practice.

Combined, they encourage what might be termed "socialist democracy," where Russians desire direct rather than representative democracy and where they expect a welfarist programmatic thrust distinguishing Russia from the American democratic perspective and placing it closer to Continental European democratic expectations.

Overall, we contend that contemporary Russian thinking, grounded in these three sets of values, entails a unifying of popular interests with those of the government into the notion of a broader sociopolitical whole: a synthesis standing as the foundation for a desired modern democratic polity. Thus, where in the past the population was linked with the Russian Orthodox Church and the Tsar-batyushka ("Tsar-kind father"), or was guided by the Communist Party as the people's "vanguard," a legitimate regime grew out of the context of the people identifying with the state and its chief executive, and with that state and strong chief executive setting out the sovereign, national perspective. Accordingly, any Russian understanding of a seemingly organic relationship between the people (narod) and the state (and its chief executive) must be joined with a related preoccupation with the country's national sovereignty as at the heart of the state's legitimacy and viability. That Vladimir Putin and other Russian officials would invoke statist thinkers, including anti-Marxist and anti-leftist thinkers such as Ivan Il'in, is no surprise. Il'in emphasized the need for late 19th/early 20th century Russia to overcome its "weak, damaged self-respect," arisen in the wake of a backward and weak state. A student of Hegelian
philosophy, Il'in stressed the need to overcome the suspicion and distrust between the people and the state, the governing elite bearing primary responsibility to accomplish this end. Critical to restoring Russian self-respect, so Russia could realize its historical "civilizing" mission, was the notion of a compact of sorts between citizens and the state, with that state facilitating collectivism and social responsibility. Moreover, the state would be guided by a chief executive serving as a national pater familias, the symbolic articulator for a "conscience of law." That conscience, grounded in morality, religiosity, and obedience to the law, would be set out and administered by the just state. If the monarchist II'in's arguments were critical of leftist-socialist-communist thinking, they were equally critical of mainstream Western liberal democratic thought, which he saw as contradicting core Russian values (e.g., collectivism, paternalism, strong state). For thinkers such as II'in, the political system's moral legitimacy was inextricably joined with its institutional political legitimacy: it was the presumed absence of such moral legitimacy in Western liberal experience that signified that Russia would have to pursue a democratic path at variance from that found in the West.

The discernable early 21st century Russian proclivity to operate out of a traditional sociopolitical perspective in constructing a new institutional-political form has only been reinforced by the realities of the late 20th century Russian "failing state" and need to cope with the massive challenges coming from the country's "quadruple revolution." The last decades of Soviet power had entailed a rapidly diminishing ability of the Soviet state to deliver the basic services and commitments set out by the governing regime. Economic collapse, societal disruption, and the decline of the legitimacy of all Party/state institutions (the Russian Orthodox Church being the exception) were powerful indicators of the failing state. Meanwhile, the "quadruple revolution" of political, economic, and social change, combined with the seeking of a
new post-Soviet national identity, constituted a profound challenge that would necessarily entail root-and-branch institutional-policy change and the need for a new political-ideological calculus. Notions of "streamlined decisionmaking" of the Putin period, building on the strengthened executive and the "hegemonic presidency" of the 1993 post-Soviet Constitution and Yeltsin years, were the predictable and – in the political elite's and broader society's perspective – desirable consequence.⁴⁶

Yeltsin, Putin, and the Re-emergent Russian State

Mikhail Gorbachev's ultimately unsuccessful glasnost', perestroika, and demokratizatsiya efforts constituted a final last gasp effort to salvage the Soviet failing state.⁴⁷ Yet these efforts contained preferences and measures that were consonant with traditional Russian state-building and state-maintaining proclivities and that are organically linked with efforts associated with Gorbachev's successors, Yeltsin, Putin, and Medvedev. In particular, Gorbachevian policies entailed an attempted revitalization of the state, an effort to bolster productivity through renewed citizen inputs and efficacious action, and the construction of a late 20th century form of obshchina, albeit guided by the Communist Party. Indeed, Gorbachev's glasnost' led to the emergence of the first grassroots groups that would be critical to the emergence of a fledgling Russian civil society. In the wake of Gorbachev's reform failure, Boris Yeltsin and allies put in place the rudiments of a new, putatively democratic system, while also dismantling the Soviet command economy and overseeing the emergence of a post-Soviet state capitalist economic system. While inspired by the experience of more mature democracies, the turmoil and trauma of the Yeltsin 1990s provided Russians a rocky exposure to Western liberalism and democratic norms. A weak state with confused and anarchic decisionmaking, open and mounting corruption, and growing inequality left most Russians distant from an emerging democratic
system that seemed to strongly favor the "liberal empire" of the oligarch Mikhail Khodorkovsky and others who had benefited from the actions of the Yeltsin team. Russia's new "representative democracy," fast-developing capitalist system, and increasingly pervasive consumerism set in place conditions and values that contradicted the obshchina-positive liberty-equality imperatives of the historical past. Perhaps most damning was the "failing state," which was unable to fulfill even the most rudimentary responsibilities or provide the most basic services set out by the regime itself and expected by the populace.  

It is little wonder that both elites and citizens were so disdainful of the Yeltsin record and so anxious to support an assertive Vladimir Putin advancing a state-centric political formula.

Put summarily, it was the Putin team that reversed the momentum toward the Russian state's demise: this is certainly the conclusion of the Russian public. The Putin regime realigned the conditions that yielded a functioning political system. In assessing Putin’s first presidency, core values that informed the rebuilding of a strong Russian state involved a number of interconnected concepts and institutional goals. First, and highly essential, was the reconstruction of a stable political infrastructure utilizing the federal system: an infrastructure that would be more flexible and that would be characterized as more "democratic." It is important to note here that, from a Russian perspective, being flexible and “democratic” signified streamlining of decisionmaking, bolstering accountability (but top-down), building accepted procedures, and drawing more perspectives into the decision-making process.

Not only did the Putin approach not include the realization of a representative democracy; it assumed institutional measures that would in fact undercut Western notions of representative democracy (e.g., limiting a strong legislative check on the executive and exhibiting a decided preference for appointment over popular election of executives). Especially suggestive was the consolidation
of the Putin platform party, United Russia, which became a critical bargaining arena for contending elite interests. Most Russians did not draw the conclusion, articulated by Western observers, that United Russia’s electoral dominance contributed to a “hybrid regime” that signified “electoral authoritarianism.”

Second, in the wake of a nearly 20-year economic depression and Russian power contraction, Putin and his allies promoted what might be seen as a historically and geographically determined defensive mentality that required a strong state acting as national protector and not acting as national oppressor. A foreign policy of “assertive pragmatism” promoted by the Putin regime was grounded in an ever-stronger Russian state alternatively confronting and engaging Western partners. The Yeltsin period experience with Western-style liberal democracy, including power deconcentration among federal executive and legislative actors and federal and regional bodies, had entailed significant decision-making confusion and endless institutional struggles. A strong elite and popular consensus emerged that national preservation and advancement could only be accomplished with a strong (federal) state led by an assertive unified executive (“power vertical”).

Third, Russia's national revival, as guaranteed by the revived federal state, necessitated the country continuing its unfinished modernization and developing the institutional capabilities to compete in the global market. In the face of these daunting challenges, what was needed was a "coherent" public discussion among increasingly confident state actors, guided by the federal executive but including the legislature, and spanning federal authorities, the regions and the locales. That coherent public discussion would require “socially responsible” media highly influenced by the state, with those media privileging the interests of society as more collectivist values were reinforced.
While the record of the Putin presidency is multifaceted and complex – and in the West highly controversial – we note three achievements that are critical to the institutional-policy evolution of the post-Soviet Russian polity and to the foundation for a future “Russian-style democratic system”; three achievements inextricably linked with the bolstering of the Russian state. First, as public survey results consistently revealed, Putin regime policies brought back considerable Russian self respect after a generation of decline.\(^5\) In a related vein, second, Russia rediscovered its national interest; by the late 2000s there was no longer uncertainty about Russia’s revived foreign and security policy assertiveness. Third, state building in the 2000s entailed institutional experimentation and mimicry, a tendency toward trial and error processes of decision making with institutions and rules (e.g., assessing the value of majorities versus appointment in selection of personnel). If there was widespread disillusionment with Western liberalism given the experience of the 1990s, there was a continuing belief that democracy is better than other forms of government and should be pursued. As the Putin presidency wound down, questions remained as to the kind of democracy. Should it be managed? To what extent would it be constitutional? Meanwhile, if the central, federal state was considerably stronger, the acknowledged pervasiveness of corruption – involving both the state and the broader society – indicated profound work remained for modern political development to progress.\(^5\)

*The Enigma of Sovereign Democracy*

Nearly two decades into Russia's post-Soviet odyssey, the concept of "sovereign democracy" arose as a label for the governing team's thinking about Russia's path of political modernization. If a Putin protégé originally coined the term in early 2006 to justify the regime's institutional arrangements and policy line, its underlying logic and numerous component concepts had been articulated by Putin and others throughout the 2000s. Putin himself had
clearly voiced the importance of Russia developing its own approach to institutional change and democratization, commenting that "Russia will decide itself how it can implement the principles of freedom and democracy, taking into account its historical, geopolitical, and other specificities. As a sovereign state, Russia can and will independently establish for itself the timeframe and conditions for moving along this [the democratic] path." Aspects of sovereign democracy were more fully developed by Surkov and other Kremlin officials in the succeeding years, but uncertainties surrounding it were revealed by the fact that Medvedev and others almost simultaneously questioned the term and set out qualifying perspectives. Yet if the concept fell under controversy – not only from inside the Kremlin but without – essential components were not renounced by Medvedev and other officials. Indeed, serious engagement of the concept continued in Medvedev's presidency.

Looking beyond the superficial profiling that has characterized the statements of both proponents and opponents of sovereign democracy, what are its key assumptions and arguments? We contend, first, that the theory springs from the assumed need for a strong and independent state, a sovereign state, that both safeguards the polity vis-à-vis outside forces and that ensures domestic stability, political order, and socioeconomic progress. These concerns were made all the more acute by the Soviet collapse and the rush of foreign political, socioeconomic, and even cultural influences into the fledgling Russian polity. Meanwhile, second, sovereign democracy is associated with the state's promotion of material growth and welfare, equality and social justice, and individual freedom. These goals were set out in the 1993 Constitution, but state weakness – including a lack of resources and an inability to enforce governmental preferences and directives – precluded their realization in the early post-Soviet period; a period referred to by Russians as "the time of troubles" (smutnoye vremya). Third, sovereign democracy assumes
the citizenry's sociopolitical consciousness in stressing the collective good over that of the
individual, with an implied compact of sorts between the socially responsible state and the
socially responsible citizen. Overall, inclusion of the qualifying term sovereignty connotes the
necessity of the strong state for internal system building and maintenance, but, fourth, with an
emphasis on collective popular autonomy rather than on individual autonomy. Meanwhile, the
evolving discussion of sovereign democracy has moved publicly articulated thinking
increasingly toward the notion of "social democracy" as officials and observers seek to
distinguish the Russian democratic variant from that which they term as "vulgar liberalism."66

Dmitry Medvedev’s concerns about qualifying the concept democracy with reference to
sovereignty revealed a concern shared by others (e.g., former Soviet President Mikhail
Gorbachev, and reformers Mikhail Kasyanov and Boris Nemtsov) that the concept unnecessarily
emphasizes one aspect of the Russian democratic experience while serving to separate that
Russian experience from the global democratic mainstream. As Medvedev remarked, "If you
take the word 'democracy' and start attaching qualifiers to it, that would seem a little odd. It
would lead one to think that we're talking about some other, non-traditional, type of
democracy."67 Given his educational and professional background, it is not surprising that
Medvedev would accent different points in conceptualizing democracy. He arose in the
politically liberal environment of Leningrad/St. Petersburg State University where the
intellectual core of contemporary Russian liberal thought was formed, while he was politically
socialized in the Anatoly Sobchak era of heady liberal reformism. Conceptually, Medvedev
stressed the importance of bolstering a society of "good" individuals as a counter to the powerful
state, while many other associates of Putin (and Putin himself) emphasized the state as protector
of the emerging freedoms of those "good" citizens of that emergent society. However,
throughout his public posturing Medvedev has described the importance of the strong state and other conditions of sovereign democracy even as he has emphasized the problems of what he terms "legal nihilism" and the need for Russia to bolster the respect for law. Medvedev's seeming critique of the concept of sovereign democracy is directly tied with an expressed desire for what he has termed a "full democracy." Such a democracy would require a further strengthening of the Putin era "dictatorship of the law," further development and strengthening of the court system, and a reining in of what Putin himself described as the greatest failure of his (first) presidency, the country's widespread corruption. All of these tasks would be major foci of Medvedev's public discourse during his presidency. Overall, the Putin-Surkov-Medvedev discussion reflects an evolving diversity of perspectives within the Kremlin and a continuing evolution of official thinking about Russia's path of democratization.

In tying together the institution building and political discourse of the Yeltsin-Putin-Medvedev regimes and relating them to an emergent democratic polity, we end up with a set of assumed conditions that, by whatever label, accent the position of the federal system, its safeguarding of the fledgling restored state, its primacy in law construction, and the presumed deference of the population with a collectivist mindset. In the midst of the anarchic conditions of the late 1980s and 1990s, followed by the more state-driven imperatives of the 2000s, initial manifestations of a civil society were evident; a civil society crudely functioning as the product of a compact between the powerful state and a deferential citizenry. Russians believe the revitalized state undergirds and facilitates an expanding civil society, with the tens of thousands of recently arisen nongovernmental-nonprofit organizations but one illustrative manifestation in the 2000s. Moreover, from the Russian perspective – in contradistinction from Western views – governmental limitations on the operations of highly politicized nongovernmental-nonprofit
organizations (e.g., dealing with human rights issues) should not obscure the fact of the emergence of many such organizations that address important environmental, family, healthcare, and other domestic issues. If there is no Russian tradition of nonprofit-nongovernmental associations serving as a constraint on state, such organizations can partner with state agencies, provide assistance, impact social discourse, and even bridge society to the polity.71

Our analysis of contemporary Russian state-building efforts necessitates mention of the concept of civil society, but we understand that such conceptualization is difficult and often fraught with ideological-polemical undertones.72 Consideration of a nascent Russian civil society entails a wide array of important sociopolitical phenomena that cannot be summarily addressed in this article.73 We agree with Cohen and Arato that a precise definition of civil society is lacking, and we further agree with Setianto that an appropriate definition should include the assumptions that (a) a civil society operates under the rule of law, (b) the civil society lies between the state and the market where state interests and market interests are contested, and (c) voluntary associative relations dominate in the civil society.74 Our argument proceeds from the further assumption, drawing on Arato, that a civil society must be securely institutionalized before becoming a key, long-term terrain of participatory politics.75 Meanwhile, we understand that the “logic” and dynamic of a civil society vary across national settings, with some mature democracies such as France exhibiting conditions (e.g., far fewer associational groups and a strong central state) that better approximate those to which the Russian political establishment aspires. With these understandings, we see the rudiments of a Russian civil society that, while modest, are culturally specific. If Russian citizens can now be said to enjoy more individual maneuverability in their political and socioeconomic lives than at any time in Russian history, likewise they have more meaningful ways by which to aggregate and to express group interests.
The emergence of nonprofit-nongovernmental associations reflects different calculations and arrangements from those in Western democracies, but these are significant developments that are essential for post-Soviet Russia’s long-term democratic evolution.

The Strong Sovereign State and “Democratization”

The Russia of Putin-Medvedev has in place a functioning state that is better able than at any point in the past three decades to implement the policies and provide the services to which it is ostensibly dedicated. The era of the failing state is over; the major challenges of the quadruple revolution have been addressed. Dilemmas of widespread corruption notwithstanding, polity, economy, and society all are now characterized by a stability and mounting normalcy that should be conducive to long-term growth and modernization.

But Russia is approaching a crossroads, a fork in the road, as its system building continues. If the institutional, resource, and policy conditions are emerging for a democratic system and civil society to function, it is also true that those same conditions can be conducive to the reemergence of an elite-driven authoritarian, corporatist state. Serious questions remain whether, in the era of the “rule of law,” the resurrected strong state stands above the law. There is little doubt that the 1980s and 1990s “time of troubles” is over. But the longer-term consequences of the muscular state-building ideology and consequent institutional-policy developments are unclear, and will require decades to sort out. Indeed, the ongoing search for and domestic discussion of a Russian “national idea” are profoundly tied to that ideology and its resultant institutional-policy products.

Meanwhile, the second Putin presidency and likelihood of the Putin-led Kremlin team governing Russia for more than two decades raise important questions as to the meaning of a
“Russian style democracy,” with a continued strong state, powerful presidency and dominating federal executive. Increasingly officially tolerated and open manifestations of popular opposition to government policies, blunt, pointed criticisms of the paramount leader, Putin, himself, and the domestic media’s (including electronic) ability to report these dynamic developments, are profound signs of a society in transition. Meanwhile, candidate Putin’s own public distancing from his unpopular platform party, United Russia, and his very detailed discussion of continuing institutional changes (including the return of directly elected regional governors and some decentralization of budgetary decision making to the regions) portend a period of unpredictable policy change.76

Accordingly, judgments about Russia's evolving polity and discussion of democratization must be cautious and circumspect. Much depends upon the interests and calculations of Russia’s governing elite. In this regard, plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose. Serious observers can draw very different expectations. Many Western observers are overwhelmingly decided that authoritarianism has already set in: the choice of direction at the crossroads already taken.77 Some Russian observers might agree, but most are uncertain, and many reserve final judgment.78

While we judge, we again must remain aware of our own ideological preferences and history and the impact these have for our understanding of democracy and its development. History has made it clear that there has not been one clear definitive path to developing democratic practices and polities. American democratic development places an extreme premium on individual liberty, a premium that is very much at odds with the original Greek conceptualization of democracy that focused on the health and well-being of the city-state as a whole, not just on the individual within. The ancients understood individuals as only able to fully develop as individuals within the communal context of the polis, a context that informs
Hegel’s and European and Russian perspectives on freedom. It is a context that diverges from the U.S. view of democracy as filtered through American demands for individual liberty.

We are uncomfortable in drawing definitive conclusions, we believe that even with the second Putin presidency, the “fork in the road” to Russia’s continued democratization is yet ahead, and we are most comfortable in taking the long view that it will require another generation or two to sort out Russia’s long-term institutional and system potential. However, we believe that the ideas and developments discussed here are suggestive that such a potential still exists. We further contend that Russia's ongoing discussion about its system building, democratization, and the prospects for a civil society merit continued serious consideration.

The American experience with Teddy Roosevelt’s muscular state-centrism and Wilson’s writings on the administrative state reveals societies are unpredictable and subject to change, and those societies may countenance institutional arrangements and policy means that are at variance with long-held values and traditions. However, the broader truth is that societies do have strongly-held values and traditions, that preferences regarding the organization of the state, construction of state-society relations, and potential for a civil society are deeply rooted and generally transcend individual regimes or focused time periods. We see in Continental Europe, and most especially in Russia, state-centric preferences that greatly structure political elites’ judgments and institutional-policy preferences, and most especially as related to state-society relations. We conclude that any assessment of contemporary Russian efforts at democracy building or civil society construction must be judged through the prism of Russia’s own history, values, and experience. We further conclude that a fair reading of that history, those values, and that experience, combined with a dispassionate assessment of the myriad of ongoing developments in contemporary Russia, will yield a more mixed assessment of achievements to
date and prospects for future advance than is generally offered by most Western and especially American observers. Indeed, judgments by such institutions as Freedom House that Russia’s level of freedom is comparable with those of South Sudan, Yemen, and Zimbabwe raise serious questions about how these influential Western organizations operate and develop their measures.

We hypothesize that state reconstruction can be conducive to democracy building in Yeltsin-Putin-Medvedev’s Russia, with reinforced sovereignty and a revitalized state potentially able to facilitate the further development of a still-fledgling Russian civil society. Constructive discussions around such arguments as "sovereign democracy" and related political constructs are useful to this end. Indeed, Putin’s and Medvedev’s own detailed commentaries – often critical of Russia’s contemporary institutional functioning and policies – are but high-level suggestive contributions to these ongoing, dynamic discussions.

1 Paper presented at the meeting of the International Congress of Central and East European Studies, Stockholm, Sweden, July 25-31, 2010. We thank Mikhail Beznosov, Lan Chu, Alexander Domrin, Megan Hauser, William Reisinger, and Michael Slobodchikoff for their comments on earlier drafts of this paper.
5 Many voters’ support for Putin in the March 2012 presidential election reflected Putin’s ability to associate himself with the strong state while distinguishing himself from his unpopular platform party, United Russia, even granting he was on the ballot as United Russia’s candidate.
7 E.g., Putin's April 25, 2005 state of Russia address to the federal legislature; see Vitaly Ivanov, "Why Does Putin Need the Sovereign Democracy Discussion?," Izvestiya (October 11, 2006).

Surkov’s transfer to be deputy prime minister for economic modernization, an important personnel decision in anticipation of the second Putin presidency, revealed the controversial protégé would continue to influence critical policies, albeit from a lower-profile position. See Vladimir Stepanov, “The gray cardinal leaves the Kremlin,” Russia Beyond the Headlines, 28 December 2011, http://rbth.ru/articles/2011/12/28/.


E.g., see Vladimir Putin, “Russia muscles up – the challenges we must rise to face,” Izvestiya, 16 January 2012, as found at the website of the Prime Minister of the Russian Federation, http://premier.gov/ru; “Being Strong,” Rossiiskaya gazeta, 20 February 2012, as found at the website of the Prime Minister of the Russian Federation, http://premier.gov/ru.


Ibid, 196.

Ibid, 196; his emphasis, as well as ours.


For example, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, in his 1944 State of the Union Address, spoke of America’s need to establish an “economic bill of rights” that would provide all citizens “a new basis of security and prosperity.” Arguing that American political rights had “proved inadequate to assure equality in the pursuit of happiness,” Roosevelt pointed to such economic rights as a useful and remunerative job, adequate food and clothing, a decent home, adequate medical care, and the right to adequate protection from the economic fears of old age, sickness, accident, and unemployment. In this we can understand FDR as seeking to alter the US’s status vivendi replacing traditional negative rights with strong positive rights and thus a new, expansive role and identity for the American state.


See Geroid Robinson, Rural Russia Under the Old Regime (London: Macmillan), 1957, p. 120.


While there has been a discernable Putin-Medvedev period tendency to vilify the Yeltsin 1990s, there is little doubt this is a near-universal Russian elite and public judgment that highly structures contemporary thinking about the political-institutional reforms of that decade.


The development of the Public Chambers (Obshchestvennaya palata) during the Putin presidency was a significant, but often-ignored in the West, institutional mechanism to permit consultation with non-governmental actors and bottom-up inputs. Suggestive information is available at the official website for the federal-level Public Chamber, http://www.oprf.ru/ru.


See the monthly publication of the Levada Institute, *Monitoring*, with ongoing survey results, 1995-2008.


See the roundtable discussion of officials evaluating sovereign democracy and its utility, in Georgy Il'ichev, "The nation should know where we're going and why," and "Wednesday the political elite agreed to talk the same language," *Izvestiya* (August 31, 2006);
http://www.izvestia.ru/politic/article2096139/?print; and Mikhail Fishman, "President Putin confuses western political analysts," Kommersant (September 11, 2006).

62 See Oleg Romaniko, "Russian democracy shows what appears as a steady system," Center for Investigation of Problems of Sovereign Democracy (March 24, 2008); http://www.sd.csu.ru/.


64 Use of this term is highly significant as it was long applied to the period of anarchy and conflict in the pre-Romanov early 17th century.


75 A. Arato, Civil Society, Constitution and Legitimation (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000).


78 For a contrasting perspective to ours, see Shevtsova, who contends Russia cannot reform and liberalize; Lilia Shevtsova, Russia – Lost in Transition: The Yeltsin and Putin Legacies (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2007).

79 On the record of past American experts, see David C. Engerman, Know Your Enemy: The Rise and Fall of America’s Soviet Experts (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).