Focus
This CBC News in Review story focuses on the new Russia under the rule of President Vladimir Putin. It analyzes the significant changes that have taken place since the fall of communism a decade and a half ago and reveals that Russia still has a long way to go before its system of government can truly be considered democratic.

Definition
Coup d’état is French and refers to an attack made upon the leadership of a political regime.

REPRESSION AND FEAR IN RUSSIA

Introduction
Since the fall of communism and the end of the Soviet Union in 1991, a new Russia has been emerging. It is a country full of contradictions and uncertainties, whose people hope for a freer, more prosperous life under a democratic political system and an economy liberated from the shackles of state control. For some in Russia’s rising new class of wealthy entrepreneurs, the changes have been liberating and enriching, as previously government-run enterprises fell into private hands, sometimes at bargain-basement prices. The members of this privileged new Russian jet set, many of whom enjoy close ties with the country’s political leadership, lead an enviable life, with access to luxurious international travel and all of the upscale consumer goods Western societies have to offer.

Yet for most ordinary Russians, the standard of living has actually deteriorated. Many elderly people eke out a meagre subsistence on vastly shrunken state pensions, and the country’s healthcare system, once the pride of communism, has practically collapsed. The average life expectancy for a Russian male has seriously declined—by almost a decade—since 1991. Rates of alcoholism and substance abuse have skyrocketed. For the vast majority of Russians, the promise of a more prosperous life under capitalism has so far proved to be an empty one.

In addition to Russia’s economic woes, there are also signs of a disturbing return to the rigid state control over people’s freedom of expression that marked the communist era. When a group of Soviet hard-liners staged their abortive coup d’état in August 1991 to turn back the reform program of Communist Party chief Mikhail Gorbachev, the Russian people united to stop them. Boris Yeltsin, then president of the Russian Federation and a strong proponent of change, was catapulted into the leadership. He soon overshadowed Gorbachev and orchestrated the formal dissolution of the Soviet Union and communist rule at the end of 1991.

Yeltsin went on to become the first president of post-communist Russia. He promised a multi-party political system and greater freedom under a new constitution. But when Yeltsin left office in 2000, his regime was largely discredited over corruption charges and economic mismanagement. A brutal civil conflict in Chechnya, a breakaway republic in the Caucasus, had led to thousands of deaths with no peaceful resolution.

Vladimir Putin, who assumed office as Russia’s second post-communist president, promised to crack down on corruption, end the war in Chechnya, and restore the country’s badly tarnished international image. A former KGB (secret police) intelligence officer in the Soviet regime, Putin had worked his way up through the old communist system and was well placed to assume control over the reins of government in the new Russia. To many Russians, his youthful image and aura of cool confidence are greatly reassuring and helped him win a landslide re-election victory in 2004. But Putin also has his critics, many of whom are journalists and broadcasters. They complain that his autocratic, intolerant style of leadership has stifled freedom of expression and criticism of the government in the country’s media.
Recently, Putin’s regime has been linked to the mysterious deaths of two prominent Russians, journalist Anna Politkovskaya and former-security-officer-turned-Putin-opponent Alexander Litvinenko. Known for her courageous reporting on the Chechen war and her sharp criticisms of Russia’s handling of it, Politkovskaya was shot dead in her Moscow apartment in October 2006. One month later, Litvinenko died of apparent radiation poisoning in a London hospital where he had gone to receive treatment. Both of these deaths remain unsolved, and there are strong suspicions that the Putin government was responsible for them.

Among many Russians today there is a great sense of nostalgia and longing for the stability and security that the former Soviet system once offered them. In return for a total lack of political freedom, most ordinary Russians could count on quality health care, education, basic but cheap housing, and subsidized food prices. In addition, they could feel proud of their country’s significant achievements in sports, culture, and the space program, and the fact that the Soviet Union was recognized as a great power.

Today, most of those assurances have vanished. The harsh realities of post-communist Russia seem to mock the dreams and promises of freedom and prosperity they so strongly hoped for in the heady days that followed the collapse of the communist system in 1991. Russia still has a very long road to travel before it can be regarded as a truly democratic country, one that is capable of providing its citizens with the freedom to criticize their government but also a decent standard of life and adequate systems of education, health care, and social welfare.

**To Consider**

1. What major changes have occurred in Russia since 1991?

2. Despite these changes, what problems from the communist era is the new Russia still dealing with today?

3. Why is President Vladimir Putin so popular among many Russians? What are the main criticisms that his opponents make of his regime?

4. What are the main problems Russia faces as it enters the 21st century?

5. How should Canada deal with modern Russia?
REPRESSION AND FEAR IN RUSSIA
Video Review

Part I

1. a) In what year did the communist system end in Russia? _____________
   b) What was the country called before then?

2. What is the name of the current president of Russia?

3. a) Who was the first leader of the Soviet Union?
   b) What medium of communication did he believe was most important in
   promoting the beliefs and ideals of the communist system among Russia’s
   people? Why did he think this?

4. What two novels critical of the former communist system have recently
   been adapted for television in Russia?
   _______________ and _______________

5. What is the name of the host of a popular television political satire show
   that the Russian government ordered off the air?

6. a) How many Russian journalists have been murdered since President Putin
   took office? ______________
   b) Who is the most recent of these? __________________________

7. a) What is the average life expectancy of a Russian male today? ________
   b) What was it 20 years ago? ______________

8. Approximately what percentage of Russians are still waiting to reach
   middle-class economic status? ___________%

9. What is the name of the Russian filmmaker who is trying to restore a
   sense of faith and pride in Russia among the country’s people?
Part II
Discussion Activity
Form groups to read and respond to the following quotes from the video, stating whether or not you agree with them and how they help you to understand some of the problems Russia is currently facing in the post-communist era. For each of the quotes, be sure to identify the speaker from the video.

“I think Russia is falling back into totalitarianism. Everything that Russia had that would have made it a democracy has been systematically and very purposefully destroyed.”

Speaker ______________________________  Agree_________ Disagree _________

“I think it’s important to be able to laugh at your leadership, laugh at your government. I think it’s important to be not too overly respectful.”

Speaker ______________________________  Agree_________ Disagree _________

“Just within a few years after 1991, my country, Russia, lost everything. Plants stopped functioning. The army became helpless. All the ships from the northern fleet had been sold or turned into scrap. The harm done since 1991 cannot be compared to the losses inflicted by the Nazi occupiers. It is thousands of times greater.”

Speaker ______________________________  Agree_________ Disagree _________

“If people have to make a choice between bread and butter and freedom of speech, the majority are going to go for bread and butter anywhere in the world. This is certainly true in Russia, where freedom of speech has never really been part of the fabric of society, and people don’t really care all that much about it.”

Speaker ______________________________  Agree_________ Disagree _________

“There’s nothing new here. Putin is walking along the old beaten Soviet track, and we will get to the same place as we did with the Soviet Union. The gap between these movies and reality will get bigger and bigger, and everything will explode.”

Speaker ______________________________  Agree_________ Disagree _________
REPRESSION AND FEAR IN RUSSIA  
A Profile of the New Russia

Although much smaller than the former USSR, Russia stills dwarfs its neighbours in Europe.

Since the collapse of communism and the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, Russia has been trying to find a new direction in both its domestic affairs and its role in the world. The initial hopes for prosperity as a capitalist, free-market economy rapidly replaced the old system of state control were dashed when the international financial crisis of 1998 caused a major economic meltdown. Since then, Russia’s rate of economic growth has been impressive, mainly due to the development of the country’s vast natural resources, especially oil and gas. Gazprom (www.gazprom.com), the state-owned monopoly of natural gas, is the world’s largest producer and exporter of this product, supplying almost a quarter of Europe’s gas requirements. It also has plans to expand its operations into the growing Asian and American markets. In addition to gas, Russia is also a major global exporter of oil.

Russia remains the largest country in the world in land area, despite the territorial losses incurred by the break-up of the old Soviet Union and the independence of 14 of its former republics. It spans 10 time zones and covers over 17 million square kilometres of territory stretching across the vast Eurasian landmass from St. Petersburg on the Baltic Sea to Vladivostok on the Pacific. Its official name is the Russian Federation, and its population is 143.8 million people, according to a 2006 United Nations estimate. Moscow is the capital city, and the major language spoken is Russian. Most Russians practise Orthodox Christianity now that freedom of religion has been restored, but there is also a significant Muslim minority, concentrated mainly in the southern part of the country. Life expectancy for men is 59 and for women 72, a marked declined in the years following the end of communism. The monetary unit is the ruble, which is divided into 100 kopeks. In addition to oil and gas, Russia’s main exports are wood, metals, chemicals, weapons, and military equipment.

As Russia’s formerly state-run economy was turned over to private enterprises after the fall of communism, a few highly placed individuals were able to amass great wealth, sometimes by questionable if not completely illegal means. This new class of entrepreneur, nicknamed the oligarchs, gained control of key sectors of the economy, especially energy and the mass media. In addition they acquired considerable political influence in the government of President Boris Yeltsin, Russia’s first post-communist leader. As a result of...
their shady business dealings, some prominent oligarchs eventually served jail sentences. Others were forced to flee the country into exile to avoid legal action. The most famous of these individuals, Mikhail Khodorkovsky, who once directed the powerful Yukos oil firm, is now serving an eight-year prison term for fraud and tax evasion in a Siberian penal colony.

During his time as director of Yukos, Khodorkovsky used his economic influence to create his own political party to challenge President Putin’s hold on power. Many Russians believed his conviction on criminal charges was politically motivated by his rivals to remove him as a potential threat to their control over the government.

Perhaps the most serious problem that has faced Russia in the post-communist era is the ongoing violent conflict in Chechnya. A separatist rebellion in this mainly Muslim enclave in southern Russia has raged since 1994, when the Kremlin first dispatched troops to crush it. Despite a massive military presence in Chechnya, to date Russia has been unable to subdue the war, which the rebels and their supporters among the local population continue to wage. Initially, Russia’s heavy-handed repression in Chechnya aroused considerable international criticism, especially from the United States. But since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, Russia has sought to link its military operations in Chechnya with the global struggle against international terrorism. Russia’s leaders allege that the Chechen rebels are Islamic extremists in league with Al Qaeda, the terrorist group responsible for the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. While there have been some in the West who have challenged that claim, the administration of U.S. President George W. Bush has been mute on the Chechen question since 2001, giving Putin’s regime at least tacit support in what has been a brutal Russian occupation.

Russia’s strong support for the U.S.-led anti-terrorist struggle helped to improve its relations with the European Union and NATO. As a member of the group of eight of the world’s most important economic powers, Russia has been able to raise its international profile in the post-communist era. But it has not always supported U.S. foreign-policy initiatives such as the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and economic sanctions against Iran over its development of a nuclear program. While Russia was able to negotiate an agreement in 2002 giving it an equal role with NATO countries in making decisions on international terrorism and other security threats, it views the expansion of the NATO military alliance to include some of its former Soviet-bloc allies with considerable suspicion and concern. Throughout its history, Russia has long been worried about the threat of being surrounded by potentially hostile states. It has not forgotten the fact that the original purpose of NATO when it was founded in 1949 was to combat the Soviet Union and the spread of communism to other countries.

Under the rule of President Vladimir Putin, the Kremlin has sought to gain greater control over Russia’s mass media, especially television. The government initiated criminal prosecutions against two of Russia’s most prominent media tycoons, Boris Berezovsky and Vladimir Businsky, eventually taking over their respective media giants, NTV and TV-6, in 2002. Although there are many state-owned and private radio stations, there are only a few television channels, most of which reflect a pro-government bias in their news and

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Quote

“If Putin wrinkles his brow, the majority begin to shake in their boots.” — Alexander Podrabinek, editor, Reader’s Digest, February 2007
public-events coverage. There are over 400 daily newspapers, representing a wide range of political opinion. Internet access is increasing dramatically, although Russia continues to lag behind both the United States and Western Europe in its use of this technology.

In recent years there has been a disturbing pattern of violent attacks on journalists, many of whom have presented critical reports on the ongoing war in Chechnya. The media rights organization Reporters without Borders (www.rsf.org) has criticized this trend. It has accused the Putin government of instigating a violent crackdown on journalists who question government policy in Chechnya, with a view to restricting freedom of information in Russia.

Source: BBC Country Profile: Russia

Activities
1. In what ways can Russia still be considered an important country today, despite the fact that it has lost power and influence in the world since the fall of the Soviet Union?

2. How has the new Russia been able to turn international developments to its advantage, especially after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001?

3. What evidence is there to support the view that Russia has not yet totally abandoned the totalitarianism and repression that prevailed during the Soviet period?

4. Should other nations such as Canada condemn Russia for its lack of freedom? Explain.
REPRESSION AND FEAR IN RUSSIA
A Timeline of Post-Communist Russia

1991 Russia becomes a separate state as the old Soviet Union, formed in 1922, collapses along with its one-party communist system. Fourteen other former Soviet republics proclaim their independence, including Ukraine, Belarus, the Baltic States, and the Central Asian states. Most of the former Soviet republics rejoin a loose federation known as the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). At the same time, the “union republic” of Chechnya, once part of Russia, declares its own unilateral independence from Moscow. Boris Yeltsin becomes Russia’s first president.

1992 Russia assumes the seat formerly held by the Soviet Union at the United Nations Security Council. The old communist economic system is dismantled, price controls are lifted, and many formerly state-run enterprises are privatized and sold to the highest bidders.

1993 Yeltsin suspends the Russian parliament and calls for new elections after a group of dissident politicians take over the building. Yeltsin finally orders troops to retake the building. A new constitution is approved, giving the president sweeping political powers. In elections for the new state Duma, or parliament, the once-powerful communists on the left and ultra-nationalist parties on the right both make strong gains at Yeltsin’s party’s expense.

1994 The hard-line communist leaders who organized the failed coup against Mikhail Gorbachev in 1991 are pardoned. Russia joins NATO’s Partnership for Peace program. Yeltsin orders troops into Chechnya to crush the separatist rebellion there.

1995 The Communist Party stages a remarkable comeback, winning a third of the seats in the Duma.

1996 Yeltsin wins re-election as president. Russia is admitted to the G7 group of industrialized countries. Russia and the Chechen government negotiate the terms of a peace agreement to end the fighting there.

1997 Russia and the Baltic republic of Lithuania sign a border agreement.

1998 Yeltsin dismisses Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin and appoints Sergei Kiriyenko as his replacement. A major economic crisis strikes Russia, causing the collapse of the ruble and raising the possibility that Russia may have to default on its foreign debts. Yeltsin fires Kiriyenko but fails to gain parliamentary approval to restore Chernomyrdin. Instead, Yevgeny Primakov is chosen as a compromise prime minister, along with two members of the Communist Party as cabinet ministers.

1999 Chechen rebels invade the neighbouring republic of Dagestan. Vladimir Putin is named prime minister, replacing Sergei Stepashin, who had in turn replaced Primakov. A wave of bomb attacks in Moscow and elsewhere is blamed on Chechen extremists. Russian troops are sent back into Chechnya. Yeltsin’s popularity soars as a result of his hard line on the Chechen crisis. However, his poor health, largely
brought on by excessive drinking, forces him to step down and name Putin acting president.

2000 Putin wins election as president of Russia. The Russian nuclear submarine Kursk sinks in the Barents Sea, resulting in the loss of its entire crew of 118. Putin restores the old Soviet national anthem, with new words.

2001 Russia and China sign a friendship treaty during a state visit of Chinese President Jiang Zemin to Moscow. Following the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington on September 11, Putin pledges support to U.S. President George W. Bush’s war on terrorism.

2002 Russian and NATO foreign ministers agree to establish the NATO-Russia Council in order to deal with terrorism and other security threats. Chechen rebels stage a series of violent acts, including the downing of a military aircraft, a mass hostage taking at a Moscow theatre, and suicide bombings in Grozny, the Chechen capital.

2003 Chechen voters approve a new constitution stating that the area is part of the Russian Federation, but international observers question the fairness of the referendum. A wave of suicide bombings follows, striking government buildings, military headquarters, a rock festival near Moscow, and a hospital on the Chechen border with Russia. The former Soviet republic of Kyrgyzstan grants Russia the right to establish a military base on its territory as part of the anti-terrorist struggle. Ukraine protests Russia’s plans to build a causeway between its coast and the Ukrainian island of Tuzla. Mikhail Khodorkovsky, the billionaire owner of the Yukos oil firm, is charged with fraud and tax evasion. Khodorkovsky once headed a liberal opposition political party critical of Putin’s government. He is later convicted and sentenced to eight years in a Siberian prison. Putin’s United Russia party wins a sweeping victory in parliamentary elections. Russia and Ukraine resolve their dispute.

2004 Putin wins a landslide re-election victory as president. The Chechen situation deteriorates markedly with the assassination of pro-Russian president Akhmad Kadyrov and attacks in the neighbouring republic of Ingushetia. Further violent acts include the explosion of two Russian aircraft and the bombing of the Moscow subway. But the most dramatic act is the siege at an elementary school in Beslan, North Ossetia, after Chechen rebels seize the building and take students and teachers hostage. Over 300 are killed during the fighting between the rebels and Russian troops who storm the school.

2005 Russia steps up its military crackdown on Chechen rebels, expanding operations to include strikes against Chechen guerrilla bases in neighbouring republics. The Chechen separatist leader, Aslan Maskhadov, is killed during one of these actions. Shamil Basayev replaces him as Chechen military chief, and the conflict continues, spreading into nearby Dagestan, Ossetia, and Kabardino-Balkaria.

2006 Russia temporarily cuts off natural gas supplies to Ukraine in a quarrel over prices. Basayev is killed in a special Russian military operation. The ruble becomes a convertible currency on international financial markets. Tensions flare between Russia and the former Soviet republic of Georgia when the latter detains four Russian
army officers on espionage charges. Alexander Litvinenko, a critic of Putin living in exile in London, dies from radiation poisoning. Journalist Anna Politkovskaya is gunned down in her Moscow apartment after writing a series of articles critical of Russian policy in Chechnya. Russia and Belarus resolve a serious dispute over gas prices.

Source: BBC country profile: Russia

Activities

1. Based on your study of the timeline above, what do you think have been the most serious problems Russia has faced since the fall of communism in 1991? Give reasons to support your answers.

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2. What are the roots of the ongoing conflict between Russian forces and separatist guerrillas in Chechnya? Why has Russia’s hard-line military approach to dealing with this problem resulted in failure so far?

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Vladimir Putin is the youthful new face of post-communist Russia. Still in his mid-fifties, he has held the country’s highest office, that of president, since replacing the ailing Boris Yeltsin in late 1999. He has won election twice, with his second term ending in 2008. Before becoming president, Putin served as prime minister in Yeltsin’s cabinet and also held a number of other important political positions in the post-communist era. Putin was born in St. Petersburg, then known as Leningrad, in 1952. His family was not wealthy, and as a child Putin recalled sharing an apartment with other families. His mother, Maria, was a factory worker, while his father, Vladimir, served in the Soviet navy during the Second World War. Putin’s grandfather on his father’s side was a renowned chef who prepared meals for Soviet leaders, including Lenin and Stalin. An ambitious and eager student, Putin graduated from Leningrad State University in 1975 with a law degree and was quickly recruited into the KGB, the powerful and much-feared Soviet intelligence agency. As a youth, Putin had been fascinated with books and films about KGB intelligence officers, whose careers he desired to follow.

After a few years of training in foreign intelligence, Putin was posted to the KGB based in Dresden, in East Germany, where he remained from 1985 to the collapse of that communist regime in 1990. Returning to Russia, he took a position in the International Affairs section of Leningrad State University, where he established a close relationship with Anatoly Sobchak, the mayor of Leningrad and a powerful local Communist Party official. As an aide to Sobchak, Putin was responsible for promoting business and foreign investment. There are allegations, to date unproven, that he used this position to enrich himself by questionable means, including the issuing of export licenses to foreign companies and dealings with a German real-estate firm accused of money laundering.

After his mentor Sobchak lost the election for governor of St. Petersburg in 1996, Putin went to Moscow to further his political career. In 1997, Russian President Boris Yeltsin appointed him deputy chief of staff. One year later, he was named head of the FSB, the intelligence agency that had replaced the KGB following the collapse of communism. Scandal continued to follow Putin, however. After defending his doctoral dissertation in economics at the St. Petersburg Mining Institute in 1997, he was accused of having plagiarized much of it from a management study authored by two U.S. professors.

Putin has never hesitated to employ ruthless means in his quest for power and political advancement. In 1999, he staged a joint television press conference with Interior minister Sergei Stepashin. The two men discussed a secretly taped video allegedly depicting the Russian Prosecutor General, Yuri Skuratov, in a compromising position with two women. The broadcasting of this scandalous video not only destroyed Skuratov’s career, but it also paved the way for Putin’s own move up the political ladder. Yeltsin had distrusted Shuratov, and shortly afterward appointed Putin prime minister, virtually assuring him the presidency after Yeltsin suddenly stepped down at the end of 1999.
Yeltsin had praised Putin as “the man who will unite around himself those who will revive great Russia.” In presidential elections held in March 2000, Putin won a solid victory. Previously a relatively unknown figure among the Russian *nomenklatura*, or political class, Putin rapidly attracted public support for his strong campaign against corruption in government and his hard line against the Chechen rebels. As a gesture to the wave of nostalgia for the Soviet past that was sweeping the country, he ordered that the former communist national anthem “Hymn to the Soviet Union” be restored, albeit with new words.

Four years later Putin won another landslide presidential election victory and proceeded to consolidate his control over all levels of government in Russia. In response to the bloody Beslan school siege of September 2004, Putin replaced directly elected local governors with his own hand-picked appointees. This move met with some domestic and foreign criticism. Figures such as former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, former Russian president Boris Yeltsin, and U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell warned that it appeared to be a throwback to the rigid central control of the Soviet era. But Putin was unmoved, claiming that the threat the Chechen terrorists posed to national security justified harsh measures. In this he won the tacit support of U.S. President George W. Bush, who was also conducting his own war against terrorism at the time.

Putin’s second term has focused on some of the serious domestic problems Russia currently faces, including a declining birth rate, the emigration of highly trained professionals from the country, poverty, poor housing and health care, and alcoholism. He has tried to lead by example in portraying himself as a healthy, fit individual who does not drink and is active in sports. His passion is judo, and he holds a black belt, sixth dan, in the sport, making him the most qualified practitioner of this Japanese martial art among the world’s leaders today. On a state visit to Japan, he impressed local judo aficionados with his skill and knowledge of the sport.

While Putin’s critics inside and outside Russia have accused him of becoming a “new czar,” with autocratic tendencies and an intolerance of dissent, most Russians continue to regard their president favourably. It is important to realize that Russia has practically no democratic tradition, and that strong leaders have traditionally been looked to for stability and security. Whether they were czars or Soviet dictators such as Vladimir Lenin or Joseph Stalin, such rulers have been able to command the loyalty of many Russians to whom democracy has appeared synonymous with anarchy. Thus Putin’s opponents in the media who decry his stifling of freedom of expression and public criticism of his regime have not been able to win much public support for their position. For his part, Putin shamelessly employs his control over much of the mass media to present his regime in the most favourable light possible. During the 2004 presidential election campaign, for example, foreign observers covering the vote were sharply critical of the fact that the vast majority of television coverage was supportive of Putin, with very little attention paid to his opponents.

Putin’s personal life is relatively conventional. In 1983 he married Lyudmila Shkrebeva, a former flight attendant who was studying Spanish at Leningrad State University. They have two daughters—Maria, born in 1985 and Yekatrina, born in 1986—who both
attend the German School in Moscow. Putin himself is fluent in German, a language he learned during his stint with the KGB in the former East Germany. He owns a dacha, or summerhouse, near Leningrad and was also given a villa in Sardinia by his American friend, Bill Gates of Microsoft. He enjoys close relationships with many of his fellow world leaders, including President Bush and British Prime Minister Tony Blair. Putin is known for both his sense of humour and his sharp intellect. Unlike previous Soviet leaders, Putin is a practising member of the Russian Orthodox Church, experiencing a religious conversion following a serious fire that broke out at his dacha in 1996. He regularly meets with high-level clerics and enjoys the solid support of the Church, which is still a powerful opinion-shaping institution in Russia.

After almost two terms as president of Russia, Vladimir Putin has certainly put his stamp on the country he leads. A pragmatist and reformer who realizes that much must change if Russia is to advance, at the same time, he is aware of the fact that to many Russians the post-communist era has been a major disappointment so far. He has his own views of what Russian democracy should look like, stating at a G8 summit meeting in 2006 that “we would not want to have the same kind of democracy in Russia as you have in Iraq.” Putin regards Western criticism of the trend away from democracy in Russia as a form of meddling in his country’s domestic affairs. In this view he is widely supported by most citizens of Russia.

The mysterious deaths of two prominent Russians, both of them known for their public opposition to Putin, in late 2006, cast a dark shadow of suspicion over his regime. In October, the crusading journalist Anna Politkovskaya, whose devastating criticisms of Russian brutality in Chechnya in the liberal newspaper Novaya Gazeta had won her international attention, was shot dead in her Moscow apartment. In addition to her reporting on the Chechen conflict, Politkovskaya had also written a book entitled Putin’s Russia: Life in a Failing Democracy, which condemned the Putin regime for its consistent pattern of human rights violations.

One month later, Alexander Litvinenko, a former KGB spy who had been investigating allegations of corruption in the ranks of its successor intelligence agency the FSB, died of apparent radiation poisoning in a London hospital. Shortly before his death, Litvinenko publicly accused Putin of being responsible for poisoning him, alleging that the Russian leader wanted to stop his efforts to expose links between high government officials and the Russian mafia. To date, officials in Putin’s administration have strongly denied any complicity in either of these deaths, but both remain unexplained.

Sources: Wikipedia free encyclopedia, BBC Country Profile: Russia

Activities

1. What qualities of leadership have helped Vladimir Putin rise to the heights of political power in Russia? Why does he continue to enjoy high levels of support among many ordinary Russians, despite the criticisms that have been directed against him and his regime?

2. Do you think it is accurate to characterize Vladimir Putin as a “new czar”? What aspects of the Russian political tradition and culture do his career and actions so far help to reveal to outside observers?
REPRESSION AND FEAR IN RUSSIA

Activities

1. Can Democracy Survive in Russia?
Students can debate this topic, preparing a pro and con chart illustrating:
a) the advances toward democracy that have been made in Russia since the fall
of communism in 1991, and b) the ways in which Russia today still falls short of
being considered a truly democratic country. After preparing their chart and
completing their research, students can debate the question, stating whether or
not they think Russia will be able to move in a democratic direction after the
completion of President Vladimir Putin’s term in office in 2008.

Sources:
CBC News In Depth: Russia
www.cbc.ca

BBC News: Russia Country Profile
www.bbc.co.uk

Russia Today: A news source for global professionals
www.einnews.com/russia

Russia World Factbook
www.cia.gov

U.S. Library of Congress Country Study: Russia
http://lcweb2.loc.gov

Russia’s Potemkin Democracy: Newsweek International Edition
www.msnbe.msn.com

2. Letter to Foreign Affairs Minister Peter MacKay
Students can write an e-mail to Canadian Foreign Affairs Minister Peter
MacKay, (mackap1@parl.gc.ca) expressing their views on how Canada should
respond to issues of human rights abuses and political repression in Russia.
Canada’s trade with Russia has increased since the fall of communism. Should
trade be linked to human rights, or should Canada refrain from commenting on
how another country deals with its own domestic affairs?

Notes:

Further Research
If you wish to write to Vladimir Putin
go to
www.kremlin.ru/eng and click on
the “e-mail the president” link.