**Is President Vladimir Putin's increasingly autocratic behavior a threat to Russia's fragile democracy?** By *Patricia Smith*

**Introduction**

The story seemed to be ripped from the pages of a spy novel: A former Soviet K.G.B. agent with a lifetime of enemies is poisoned to death, setting off a round of international accusations and intrigue.

But that's exactly what happened to Alexander Litvinenko in London last year. Litvinenko was poisoned by polonium 210, a highly toxic radioactive substance. Shortly before his agonizing death in November, Litvinenko said he was sure the Russian government, and President Vladimir V. Putin, a former K.G.B. agent himself, were to blame.

Just the idea that Litvinenko would make such an accusation and that anyone would take it seriously—the British government has been investigating—speaks volumes about the extent to which democracy seems to be faltering in Putin's Russia.

Over the course of his seven years in office, Putin has steadily concentrated power in his hands. With elections on the horizon—for the Duma, or parliament, in December and the presidency next March—there is increasing concern about the future of Russia's fragile democracy.

"It's a political system that has democratic trappings, but a strong authoritarian core," says Rajan Menon, a Russia expert at the Council on Foreign Relations in Washington. "That said, it's not a state that's involved with repressing people on a daily basis. It's provided stability and a strong economy, which is why Putin has approval ratings above 70 percent."

**Oil-Fueled Growth**   
During Putin's presidency, Russia's economy has thrived. The stock market has soared, and a wide variety of consumer goods are available—unimaginable in the former Soviet Union. What's more, many more Russians, part of a growing middle class, are able to afford them. (There are, however, still a huge number of poor people, especially outside the cities, who have not benefited from the economic boom.)

Underlying much of Russia's economic success is the high price of oil. Russia is the world's second-largest crude-oil exporter (after Saudi Arabia), and oil earnings have spurred growth across the economy and benefited many Russians.

But some experts are concerned that Russia's oil wealth may actually be weakening its democracy: Regimes strengthened by oil money (be it Russia or Saudi Arabia, Venezuela or Nigeria) often use that wealth to pacify people who might otherwise be critics, silence opposition, and put off necessary economic reforms and investment.

"When oil prices became higher, the reforms became slower," says Vladimir Ryzhkov, a liberal member of the Duma. "Last year we saw record oil prices and not one reform. . . . When will prices go down? It is the only hope for us Russian democrats."

Litvinenko's poisoning death is part of a pattern over the past few years of government critics being killed under mysterious circumstances, or otherwise silenced. In 2004, the American editor of the Russian edition of *Forbes* magazine was shot to death outside his Moscow office. In October, Anna Politkovskaya, another journalist who had been critical of Putin, was also killed.

In 2005, Mikhail Khodorkovsky, the billionaire head of one of Russia's largest oil companies, was sentenced to nine years in a Siberian penal colony on charges of tax evasion and fraud. Critics say Khodorkovsky's trial and the charges against him were a sham trumped up by the government because of his political challenges to Putin. For foreigners considering investing in Russia, Khodorkovsky's imprisonment was a discouraging setback.

**Silencing the Media**   
Last year, Putin signed a bill into law that designates slander or libel of government officials as "extremism." Journalism and civil rights groups fear the law will further restrict people's freedoms of expression. He has shut down independent TV stations that once criticized him. Putin also approved a law that allows police to monitor nongovernmental groups and shut them down if their activities are deemed a threat.

When President Bush visited Russia last summer, he made a point of meeting with pro-democracy critics of Putin's government. After the meeting, Bush told reporters he had assured those he met with "that the United States of America cares about the form of government in Russia, that we believe in the universal values embedded in democracy."

Russia has a long history of autocratic rule, so Western-style democracy is not necessarily a natural fit. *(See* [*Times Past*](http://teacher.scholastic.com/scholasticnews/indepth/upfront/features/index.asp?article=f031207_russia)*.)* For hundreds of years, Russia was ruled by powerful czars, and for most of the 20th century, the Soviet Union was a Communist dictatorship—and the primary adversary of the U.S. and it allies during the Cold War.

The years that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 were marked by general chaos and economic collapse. When Putin took over from President Boris Yeltsin in 1999, most Russians were relieved to have a strong President who took charge.

"In Russia, people are willing to forgo human rights and freedom of speech more readily in the name of national security and national stability," says James Wertsch, director of international studies at Washington University in St. Louis. "Russia's had a long history of extreme security problems—being invaded and having to fight off external enemies. Putin is appealing to a longstanding Russian worldview."

At a press conference in February, Putin vowed that he would step down next year in accordance with the Russian constitution, which permits Presidents to serve only two terms, and promised that the upcoming elections would be free and fair.

Putin's promise to step aside for the elections sets an important precedent, says Sergei Khrushchev, a professor of international studies at Brown University and the son of former Soviet President Nikita Khrushchev. "I think it will be his huge contribution to the future of Russian democracy, because it will make it difficult for his successors to violate the Constitution."

**Russia & the U.S.**   
Still, many experts are convinced that whichever candidate Putin decides to support will win the presidential election easily. And then there's the question of whether Putin will continue to wield influence once out of office. "He'll find some behind-the-scenes way to play a role," predicts Menon of the Council on Foreign Relations. "I don't see him just fading into the sunset like Yeltsin."

In addition to clamping down on freedoms domestically, Russia has taken foreign-policy steps that irk the West. Putin has used Russia's vast energy resources as a foreign-policy tool, threatening to cut off natural-gas supplies to some of its neighbors if they follow policies he doesn't like.

In February, Putin said Russia would consider cooperating with Iran on natural-gas sales—a move that would undercut U.S. and U.N. efforts to force Iran to give up its nuclear weapons program. Later in the month, Putin complained in a speech that the U.S. was trying to dominate the world.

Russia's shift away from democracy and toward asserting itself internationally has important consequences for its relationship with the U.S. As Menon notes, "One of the key questions is, Will there be a true U.S.-Russian partnership, or will there be a latter-day version of a Cold War?"