

**Table 8.3** Russian Views on Political and Economic Systems

**Which type of political system seems to you to be better: the Soviet system, or democracy according to the model of Western countries?**

	Feb96	Nov97	Dec98	Mar00	Mar03	Mar04	Nov05	Dec06	Nov07	Feb08	Feb09	Feb10	Feb11
The Soviet one, which we had until the 1990s	45	38	43	42	48	41	42	35	35	24	38	34	33
The current system	10	11	5	11	18	19	23	26	17	36	25	28	19
Democracy of Western countries	26	28	32	26	22	24	20	16	19	15	18	20	23
Other	7	8	7	4	6	5	6	7	7	7	7	7	8
Hard to say	13	16	13	17	7	12	10	16	12	18	12	12	16

Source: Levada Center. 2011 data is from a survey of 1600 respondents 18 years of age and older, from 45 regions, January 21–24, 2011, and data reported is from earlier surveys, <http://www.levada.ru/press/2011020803.html> (accessed February 13, 2011).

In the USSR, just over 50 percent of the population was ethnically Russian. Since most of the major ethnic minorities now reside in other Soviet successor states, Russians now make up just under 80 percent of the population of the Russian Federation. The largest minority group is the Tatars, a traditionally Muslim group residing primarily in Tatarstan, a republic of Russia. Other significant minorities are the neighboring Bashkirs, various indigenous peoples of the Russian north, the many Muslim groups in the northern Caucasus region, and ethnic groups (such as Ukrainians and Armenians) of other former Soviet republics. Some 25 million ethnic Russians reside outside the Russian Federation in other former Soviet republics.

Because Russia is a multiethnic state, one important aspect of the state's search for identity relates to what it means to be Russian. The Russian language itself has two distinct words for Russian: *ruskii*, which refers to an ethnicity, and *rossiiskii*, a broader concept referring to people of various ethnic backgrounds who make up the Russian citizenry. Both anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim sentiments surface in everyday life. In recent years there have been increasing concerns about the rise of an exclusionary form of Russian nationalism among certain parts of the population. Official state policy, while explicitly opposing ethnic stereotypes, may, in some cases, have implicitly fed them. A somewhat controversial phenomenon is the youth group, Nashi (Ours), that was formed in 2005. While claiming to oppose fascism in Russia, some observers consider the group itself to nurture intolerance and extremist sentiments. Among Nashi's goals are to educate youth in Russian history and values, and to form volunteer groups to help maintain law and order. The group has been highly supportive of Putin, seeing him as a defender of Russia's national sovereignty.

Today, the Russian Orthodox Church appeals to many citizens who are looking for a replacement for the discredited values of the communist system. A controversial law, directed primarily at Western proselytizers, passed in 1997, made it harder for new religious groups to organize. Human rights advocates and foreign observers protested strongly, again raising questions about the depth of Russia's commitment to liberal democratic values.

Attitudes toward gender relations in Russia reflect traditional family values. It is generally assumed that women will carry the primary responsibility for child care and a certain standard of "femininity" is expected of women both inside and outside the workplace. Feminism is not popular in Russia, as many women consider it inconsistent with traditional notions of femininity or with accepted social roles for women. At the same time, a number of civil society organizations have sprung up to represent the interests of women; some of them advocate traditional policies to provide better social supports for mothers and families, while others challenge traditional gender roles and definitions.

Changing cultural norms affect gender relations in other ways as well. A permissive cultural environment, propagated in advertising and through the mass media, represents women more frequently as sex objects. Advertising also reinforces commercialized images of female beauty that may not correspond to cultural expectations or to healthy lifestyles. In the face of unemployment and the breakdown in traditional social linkages, increasing numbers of young women have turned to prostitution to make a living; HIV/AIDS rates are also increasing at a rapid rate, fueled by prostitution, low levels of information, and the rise of drug trafficking related to Russia's permeable eastern border.

Social class identity was a major theme in the Soviet period. The Bolshevik revolution was justified in the name of the working class, and the Communist Party of the Soviet Union claimed to be a working-class party. However, many dissidents and average citizens perceived an "us-them" relationship with the political elite in Soviet

times, which some dissident intellectuals conceptualized in terms of class conflict between the party leadership and the mass of the Soviet population. Because social class was a major part of the discredited Soviet ideology, in the postcommunist period many Russians remain skeptical of claims made by politicians to represent the working class, and trade unions are weakly supported. Even the Communist Party of the Russian Federation does not explicitly identify itself as a working-class party.

## Interests, Social Movements, and Protest

Since the collapse of the USSR, numerous political and social organizations have sprung up in every region of Russia, representing the interests of groups such as children, veterans, women, environmental advocates, pensioners, and the disabled. Many observers saw such blossoming activism as the foundation for a fledgling civil society that would nurture the new democratic institutions established since 1991. Despite limited resources and small staffs, these nongovernment organizations (NGOs) provided a potential source of independent political activity. However, there have been many obstacles to realizing this potential. In the past, many groups relied on Western aid to support their activities, potentially diverting them from concerns of their constituents toward priorities of their foreign sponsors. Others depend on support from local governments or commercial activities.

In January 2006 Putin signed legislation amending laws on public associations and noncommercial organizations. These controversial changes, protested widely by Western governments, placed new grounds for denying registration to such organizations, established new reporting requirements (particularly for organizations receiving funds from foreign sources), and increased government supervisory functions. Particular requirements are placed on foreign noncommercial nongovernmental organizations operating in Russia. The new measures were justified as necessary to respond to external terrorist threats, but many commentators saw them as an effort to reduce the likelihood that civil society activists with external contacts might foment a colored revolution in Russia similar to what happened in Ukraine in 2004 or in Georgia in 2005.

The government has attempted to channel public activism through official forums. These have included the Civic Forum, organized with government support in 2001, and more recently, the Public Chamber, created in 2005 by legislation proposed by the president.<sup>32</sup> Based on voluntary participation by presidential appointees and representatives recommended by national and regional societal organizations, the organization is presented as a mechanism for public consultation and input, as well as a vehicle for creating public support for government policy. It likely involves an effort to co-opt public activists from more disruptive forms of self-expression, but also to mobilize the assistance of citizens' groups in delivering social services.

A variety of mass-based political organizations protest the current political direction of the government, but since 2007 the authorities have tried to restrict use of public demonstrations and protests. An alternative political grouping, The Other Russia, unites a wide range of opposition figures from both the left and right end of the political spectrum. On July 31, 2009, leaders of The Other Russia initiated a series of monthly protests, each held on the 31st of months with 31 days, to affirm the right to free assembly provided for in Article 31 of the Constitution. On December 31, 2010, dozens of protesters were arrested, including prominent liberal figure Boris Nemtsov, who was held in detention for fifteen days. Gary Kasparov, the world chess champion, is another figure active in such opposition demonstrations. In 2010 the level of public protests of one sort or another seemed to show a marked increase.<sup>33</sup>



Alexander Weinstein/Kommersant

Boris Nemstov, an opposition leader (second left), shown during a protest action “Waiting for Justice” in Moscow on December 27, 2010, the day of Mikhail Khodorkovsky’s second sentencing.

Source: <http://kommersant.ru/photo/photo.aspx?y=2011&m=1>.

The official trade unions established under Soviet rule have survived under the title of the Federation of Independent Trade Unions (FITU). However, FITU has lost the confidence of large parts of the workforce. In some sectors, such as the coal industry, new independent trade unions have formed, mainly at the local level. Labor actions have, at various times, included spontaneous strikes, transport blockages, and even hunger strikes. Immediate concessions are often offered in response to such protests, but the underlying problems are rarely addressed. According to data from the Federal Statistical Service of the Russian government, strikes showed a radical decline after 2005–2006,<sup>34</sup> suggesting that working-class organizations are only weakly oriented toward or able to support sustained collective action.

The media itself has an important impact on how interests are expressed. While much of the television coverage is subject to more or less direct influence by the government, some newspapers and independent journalists, as well as Internet sources, do offer a critical perspective on political developments. An estimated fifty-two journalists have been murdered since 1992, making Russia the third-most-dangerous country for journalists in the world.<sup>35</sup> Many cases involve reporting in war-torn Chechnya; others are contract murders or assassinations. One reason journalists are at risk is the incapacity of the state to enforce law and order, but they also face other obstacles. Article 29 of the Russian constitution guarantees “freedom of the mass media” and prohibits censorship. However, Russia ranked 140th out of 178 countries in 2010 in terms of press freedom, according to *Reporters without Borders*.<sup>36</sup> The organization also noted increasing control of major media outlets by industrial groups close to Putin. While Russians have access to a wide range of independent newspapers, readership has declined radically, and the most visible source of news coverage, television, is often openly biased.

At the time of this writing, one cannot say that civil society has truly formed in Russia. Whatever forms of collective identity have emerged, social forces do not easily find avenues to exert constructive and organized influence on state activity.

### Summary

The bicameral legislature of the Russian parliament has played a relatively ineffective role in policy-making, despite its legal power to approve legislation. In the 1990s the legislature lacked the necessary unity to act decisively; more recently the legislature tends to carry out the wishes of the executive branch. Despite the introduction of competitive elections, political parties have had a hard time establishing themselves as credible vehicles of popular influence; most political parties have weak linkages to society, are strongly marked by the image of their leaders, and have not played a significant role in forming the government. High levels of political party fragmentation characterized Russian politics until 2003, when United Russia, a party of the political establishment, projected itself as the dominant political force in the country, enjoying a rapid rise in electoral success and popular support. This was in part due to its close association with Vladimir Putin and partly due to a bandwagon effect in which regional politicians and other important political figures have rushed to join the “party of power.” While elections in the 1990s were considered by most international observers to be relatively fair, observers now have greater doubts about whether there is a level playing field, as opposition forces have been subject to various types of political controls that limit their ability to gain support or even compete in elections, or to exercise other forms of political power.

## SECTION 5

## RUSSIAN POLITICS IN TRANSITION

### Focus Questions

Describe three of the most important political challenges now facing the Russian state. For each one, outline how you think Russia might meet these challenges.

In what ways might terrorism affect Russia's democratization processes?

What kind of international role is Russia seeking for itself, and how have Russia's leaders tried to establish this role?

On April 10, 2010, a tragic plane crash in Russia shook Europe. When approaching its destination of Smolensk, Russia, a Polish-piloted plane carrying the Polish president (Lech Kaczynski), his wife, and dozens of other members of the Polish political elite attempted to land in thick fog, defying the repeated warnings of Russian air traffic controllers. The ensuing crash left 97 people dead. The ill-fated trip was intended to mark the beginning of an historic reconciliation between Poland and Russia; the previous week Prime Minister Putin became the first Russian leader to officially acknowledge Soviet responsibility for the 1940 massacre of thousands of Polish military officers in the Katyn Woods near Smolensk. It was at Katyn that the commemorative events were to be held. Putin's gesture was intended to begin a healing process between the two countries, whose history left many Poles resentful of Russia.

News of the plane crash evoked immediate apprehension that the reconciliation efforts would be derailed, as Poland dealt with a monumental national tragedy. However, quite the opposite occurred. Outpourings of sympathy from the Russian leadership and a statement passed by the Russian State Duma condemning Stalin's actions in relation to Katyn ushered in a period of new political dialogue between the two countries. In early December 2010 Medvedev visited the Polish capital, Warsaw, and declared: “The spirit of our relations is changing, . . .” indicating Russia's

willingness “to discuss the most difficult, the darkest and most weighing pages in our mutual history.”<sup>37</sup> This moment was one of several that seemed to offer new hope for a period of warmer relations between Russia and the West.

## Political Challenges and Changing Agendas

Russia's future path continues to remain unclear. Will the country move in a “two steps forward, one step backward” progression to a more democratic political system? Or does the free-wheeling atmosphere and political relaxation that occurred in the 1990s more likely recall the temporary liberalization that occurred in the 1920s or the short-lived thaw of the Khrushchev period? Will Russia be able to reestablish a respected role as a regional and global power, to bring corruption under control, to establish trust in political institutions, and to diversify the economy? These are some of the key challenges facing the Russian Federation.

When the first edition of this book was published in 1996, five possible scenarios for Russia's future were presented:

1. A stable progression toward marketization and democratization
2. The gradual introduction of “soft authoritarianism”
3. A return to a more extreme authoritarianism of a quasifascist or communist variety
4. The disintegration of Russia into regional fiefdoms or de facto individual states
5. Economic decline, civil war, and military expansionism

At the time of this writing, the “soft authoritarian” scenario seems most likely; however, there are still significant forces that may move Russia back to a more democratic trajectory.

### Russia in the World of States

In the international sphere, Russia's flirtation with Westernization in the early 1990s produced ambiguous results, leading to a severe transitional recession and placing Russia in the position of a supplicant state requesting international credits and assistance from the West. Russia's protests against unpalatable international developments, such as NATO enlargement, and NATO's bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999, revealed Moscow's underlying resentment against Western dominance, as well as the country's relative powerlessness in affecting global developments. The events of September 11, 2001, however, provided an impetus for cooperative efforts in the battle against international terrorism. Evidence of warmer relations included the formation of a NATO-Russia Council in May 2002, but new tensions arose around American withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty in 2002, Russian objections to the American incursion into Iraq in March 2003, American proposals to erect a missile defense system in Central Europe, and the 2008 Russian incursion into Georgia.

One of Russia's main challenges has been to reestablish itself as a respected regional leader in neighboring countries, particularly those that were formerly part of the Soviet Union. The relationship to Ukraine has been wrought with particular difficulties. Ukraine's own internal political divisions have provided Russia with an opportunity to exert political leverage, building on business interests and sympathies for closer Russian ties among a significant portion of the Ukrainian population, despite the country's declared aspiration for eventual membership in the European Union.

## TERRORISM



### The Russian Case

The threat of terrorism has become a reality for Russians, with a growing list of disturbing tragedies resulting in hundreds of casualties: a series of apartment bombings in Moscow and two other cities in 1999; a hostage-taking in a popular Moscow theatre in 2002; a school hostage-taking in the southern town of Beslan in 2004; an attack on the popular Nevskiy express train that links Moscow and St. Petersburg in 2009; bombings in and outside the Moscow subway in 2010; and an attack at an important Moscow airport (Domodedovo) in January 2011.

Attacks in Russia initially had indigenous roots in the separatist region of Chechnya. Terrorism became a tool of Chechen militants to counter Russian military efforts to defeat separatist forces. In several terrorist incidents, female suicide bombers, the so-called black widows of fallen Chechen militants, have played a visible role.

Because Russia includes several Muslim population groups, authorities have been careful not to give antiterrorist rhetoric an anti-Muslim tone. As President Putin noted in 2004, "to vent anger towards terrorists against people of different beliefs . . . in a country with such a diversity of religions and ethnicities . . . is completely destructive." He emphasized that the terrorists themselves want to undermine Russian unity not only by pushing for Chechen separatism, but also by driving a wedge of distrust and hostility between diverse ethnic and religious groups. According to Putin, the battle against terrorism is "truly a fight for the unity of the country."<sup>37</sup> Over time, linkages between Russian

terrorist groups and international Islamic fundamentalist organizations have become increasingly important.

Russian authorities have found it difficult to isolate terrorist elements because of the indigenous roots of Chechen grievances. Ethnic profiling has tainted both government actions and popular sentiments. Individuals with a south Caucasian appearance have felt themselves subject to various forms of harassment, including complaints of arbitrary identity checks, planting of drugs and weapons, and obstruction of registration for residence permits. In 2003 the Russian government adopted a partial amnesty for former rebels in an attempt to undermine the terrorist appeal in Chechnya and surrounding areas. In terms of policy, recent amendments to a 1998 antiterrorism law restrict the media from disseminating information that might hinder or prevent counter-terrorist measures; some critics view these measures as potentially placing restrictions on freedom of speech. The Beslan tragedy also led to a broadened legal definition of terrorism that critics felt could be used to ban antigovernment meetings or demonstrations; in 2008 jury trials were limited in cases involving terrorism. There has been only minimal domestic opposition to most of these measures.

<sup>37</sup>Speech at a meeting of the Presidential Council for Coordination with Religious Organisations, September 29, 2004, website of the Embassy of the Russian Federation to the Republic of South Africa, <http://russianembassy.org.za/statements/text/oct04/dputin290904.html>.

Ukraine's role as a transit country for gas pipelines between Russia and Western Europe has led to repeated conflicts, most notably in 2009, when Russian gas supplies to Western Europe were temporarily interrupted.

The massive popular protests in Ukraine that followed the contested presidential election in 2004 (the Orange Revolution) elicited apprehension in Moscow, with Russia's leaders claiming they were nurtured by Western organizations. In February 2010 relations with Ukraine improved, as presidential elections in Ukraine saw the victory of the more pro-Russian candidate, Viktor Yanukovich, who subsequently concluded an agreement with Russia providing a twenty-five-year lease on a naval base in Ukraine's Crimea for use by Russia's Black Sea fleet in exchange for lower natural gas prices.

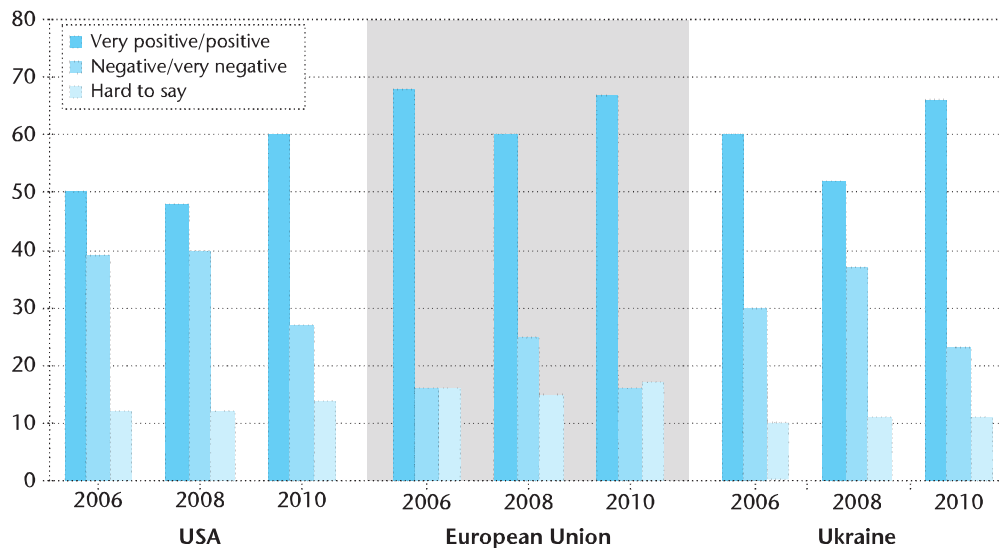
Relations with some other neighboring post-Soviet countries (e.g., Georgia) have been equally fraught with difficulties, as Russia has struggled to establish itself as a positive role model in the region. Efforts to form regional organizations to strengthen ties between these countries and Russia have taken a variety of forms. The largely ineffective Commonwealth of Independent States, formed in 1991 when the Soviet Union collapsed, was joined later by the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), the Eurasian Economic Forum, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO, including China and the post-Soviet Central Asian states).<sup>38</sup> Each has a subset of countries from the former Soviet space as members, but neither Ukraine nor Georgia

is in any of the three newer groupings. None of these efforts has brought the type of regional unity under Russia's leadership that Moscow has aspired to.

Another challenge has been Russia's efforts to establish itself as an equal partner with the United States and Europe. Following U.S. Secretary of State Clinton's effort to reset U.S.-Russian relations in March 2009, progress was made on key issues of conflict at a NATO-Russia Summit in Lisbon in November 2010. In the face of the expiration of the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty in December 2009, a new agreement was signed in Prague between the United States and Russia in April 2010 and ratified by both the Russian State Duma and the U.S. Congress to go into effect in January 2011. All of these developments suggest the possibility of a more positive trajectory for Russia's relations with the West in the next decade.

One area where such cooperation with the West will be particularly important is in the economic arena, where Russia's longer-term prospects remain marred by an unbalanced economic structure and widespread corruption. Russia has resisted opening natural gas transit pipes to European firms, while itself seeking access to retail markets in Europe. At the same time, experts believe that without increased Western investment and technological know-how, Russia will not be able to develop untapped deposits quickly enough to meet both domestic demands and export commitments. In 2010 Medvedev reached out to foreign partners (including the European Union and Germany) to help push forward Russia's modernization effort, including support for Russia's WTO (World Trade Organization) accession and limits on protectionist measures. In November 2010, Putin used an article in a leading German newspaper to call for the creation of an economic community that would extend "from Lisbon to Vladivostok," while soon thereafter chastising the EU for energy legislation that adversely affects Russian companies.<sup>39</sup>

The backdrop for these overtures to the West was the impact of the 2008–2009 global financial-economic crisis on Russia; a sharp drop in gas and oil prices temporarily undercut the foundation of Russia's economic motor. The crisis had wide-ranging



**FIGURE 8.5 Attitudes of the Russian Population toward Foreign Countries\***

"Overall, how do you feel about the following at the current time?"

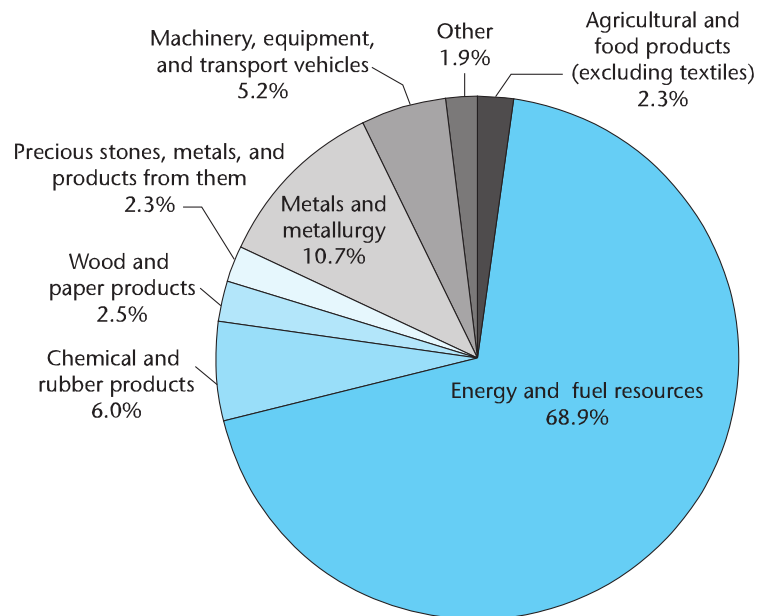
\*The 2010 data is based on a survey carried out between May 1 and May 25, 2010, by the Levada Center, among 1800 respondents from 46 regions of Russia, 3.4% margin of error; other data is from earlier surveys. <http://www.levada.ru/press/2010062301.html>, accessed 28 January 2011.



effects, including devaluation of the ruble, a decline in the inflow of money from abroad, a plummeting stock market, reduced state revenues, higher unemployment, reduced work hours, and wage arrears. From positive growth rates in the previous ten years, Russia moved to a dramatic fall by the first quarter of 2009. Because energy prices recovered fairly quickly and Russia had reserve funds to fall back on, the crisis did not push Russia back to the disastrous economic situation of the 1990s, but the dramatic shift in economic performance may have reminded both the Russian public and its leaders of the potential fragility of the economic recovery.

In November 2009 President Medvedev published a much-discussed article entitled “Go Russia” in which he called for a modernization program, primarily through the development of high-technology sectors.<sup>40</sup> Perhaps the greatest economic challenge facing the president elected in 2012 will be to establish policies to ensure a greater diversity of Russia’s economic base, while limiting the influence of powerful economic forces without undermining legitimate political pluralism.

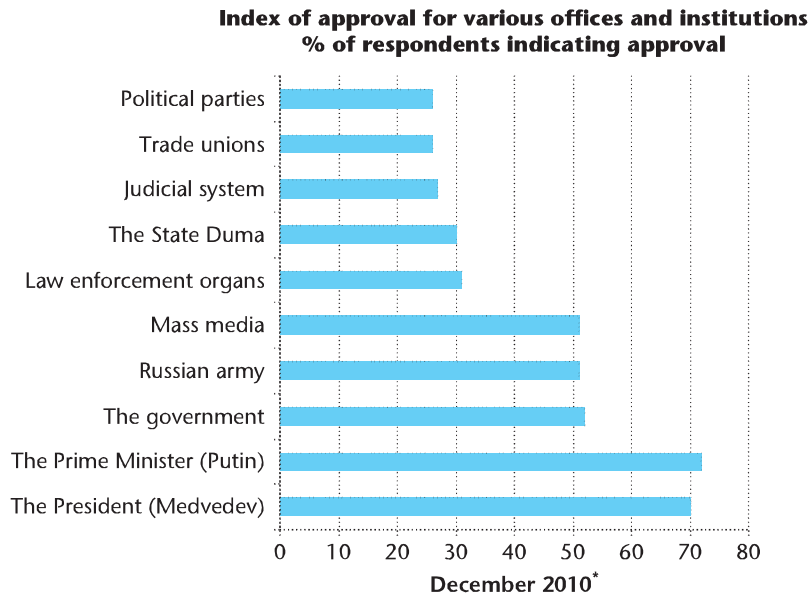
Whether Medvedev’s modernization program includes a concept of political liberalization remains unclear. Russia’s move toward a more authoritarian political path remains a continued irritant in the country’s relationship with both the United States and Europe, and also has the potential to trigger internal political instability. The continuing disjuncture between high personal support for Putin and Medvedev alongside a continuing lack of confidence in the ability of political institutions to address the country’s problems effectively suggests that the legitimacy of the system is still on thin ice. The more positive working relationship between the executive and legislative branches that emerged under Putin’s leadership and continued into the Medvedev presidency has been at the cost of permitting a real parliamentary opposition to function. Efforts to regularize relations between the center and regions provide prospects for improved institutional performance, but the reduction of vehicles for popular input and heavy-handed efforts to keep regional elites



**FIGURE 8.6** Structure of Russian Exports, Jan–Oct 2010

Source: Adapted from Russian State Statistical Service website, <http://www.customs.ru/ru/stats/arhiv-stats-new/trfgoods/popup.php?id286=731>.

Note: The percentages do not add up to 100% due to rounding.



\*Figures for the President, Prime Minister, government, Council of the Federation, and State Duma are from December 25. Exact date in December for other institutions not specified.

**FIGURE 8.7 Approval Ratings of Leaders and Institutions**

Sources: Data from the website of the Russian Public Opinion Research Center (VTsIOM), reports on weekly and monthly surveys or approval ratings of public institution, <http://wciom.ru/index.php?id=172>; <http://wciom.ru/index.php?id=173> (accessed Jan. 31, 2011).

in line and to control political opposition already show signs of producing poor policy choices that in 2010 elicited more widespread public protests and reinforced public cynicism about the motives of politicians and the trustworthiness of institutions. Underlying all of these problems is the key issue of widespread corruption that pervades every walk of life.

Despite changes in social consciousness, the formation of new political identities also remains unfinished business. Many people are still preoccupied by challenges of everyday life, with little time or energy to forge new forms of collective action to address underlying problems. Under such circumstances, the appeal to nationalism and other basic sentiments can be powerful. The weakness of Russian intermediary organizations (interest groups, political parties, or associations) means that politicians can more easily appeal directly to emotions because people are not members of groups that help them evaluate the political claims. These conditions reduce safeguards against authoritarian outcomes.

Nevertheless, the high level of education and increasing exposure to international media and the Internet may work in the opposite direction. Many Russians identify their country as part of Europe and its culture, an attitude echoed by the government. Exposure to alternative political systems and cultures may make people more critical of their own political system and seek opportunities to change it.

Russia remains in what seems to be an extended period of transition. In the early 1990s, Russians frequently hoped for “normal conditions,” that is, an escape from the shortages, insecurity, and political controls of the past. Now, “normality” has been redefined in less glowing terms than those conceived in the late 1980s. Russians seem to have a capability to adapt to change and uncertainty that North Americans find at once alluring, puzzling, and disturbing.