



## **Russia: A longing for stability**

*Luncheon talk by Joan DeBardeleben, May 2000.*

The mood in Russia after the March presidential election was one of "uncertain anticipation", Professor Joan DeBardeleben said in a talk to the G78 at the end of May.

"Anticipation comes from the fact that for the first time in over five years, there is actually a living, breathing government in Moscow from which one can expect action," she said. "The uncertainty comes from the ambiguity of actions and explanations coming from the government itself."

Dr. DeBardeleben, who is director of the Institute of European and Russian Studies at Carleton University, has written a number of books on Russia and Eastern Europe, including *Russian Politics in Transition* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1997). Since her talk, a number of trends she mentioned have firmed up, notably curbs on media freedom, adding a certain air of foreboding to the political outlook in Russia.

President Vladimir Putin has demonstrated "an odd kind of charisma", responding well to the Russian longing for stability after years under the erratic Yeltsin, and to the traditional Russian preference for strong central government. But will he be too strong? "Some things Putin has done suggest he is far less tolerant of a free press than Yeltsin was."

Dr. DeBardeleben noted that almost all of the 89 regional governors have expressed at least measured support for Putin's proposed legislation setting up an overlording seven-region structure of regional administration and giving the president power to remove governors and dissolve legislatures. Further, under the proposals, the governors will no longer sit in the central parliament. Winning acceptance for such moves indicated Putin's skills as a deal-maker behind the scenes.

The old Communist administrative structure, which overlay the constitutional federal structure of the Soviet Union, had always made Russia centralist. Putin denies a return to this.

"It's all being done in the name of controlling corruption and asserting political authority," said Professor DeBardeleben, "but the oligarchs have not been removed."

Putin's clout as a centrist power broker has also been illustrated in his ability to win Communist Party backing for nuclear weapons reduction and the comprehensive test ban in the Duma, and indeed to win broad support in the Duma for other measures as well, she said. The parliamentary elections in December, in which his centrist-establishment Unity party, founded only the previous August, won a surprising 20 percent of the vote, had laid the foundations for his presidential win and his accommodations with the oligarchs, and with nationalists and Communists. His personal popularity steadily mounted through the parliamentary elections and on into the presidential elections.

But Putin had had no economic platform in either the parliamentary or the presidential campaigns: "He was even more evasive than the usual politician in explaining what he would do. Other than winning the Chechnya war, and parading in his jogging suit with karate poses, it was not too clear what his program was."

Enjoying a honeymoon period after the election, Putin has had one set of policies for domestic consumption, another for the West, said Dr. DeBardleben. For home consumption he has been skeptical about the West, critical of Kosovo, assertive about the failure of the western economic model, and firm on building the military capability of Russia. But he has shown a friendly face to Europe, calling Russia basically a western country favourable to the market economy, supporting international institutions, and ready to join in arms control and disarmament. "It is still a very outward-looking Russia."