

Opinion

A Destructive Combination: Why Democratic Institutions Can Destroy Democracy

By Petra Stykow, Munich

The Duma elections at the end of this year will return the results for a campaign in which there is hardly any political or substantial difference between the most promising candidates. Moreover, they certainly do not represent any real opposition to the president. This is a consequence of “Putin’s System”. However, Putin’s unchallenged position is only at a superficial level grounded in one individual, whose image is increasingly demonized in the West. Rather, it is the result of the institutional structure of the system.

It is revealing to compare the variations in Western democracies: In parliamentary systems, the government formally represents the “executive committee” of the parliamentary majority. Under such an arrangement, it is the competition *between the parties* that guarantees that the precarious link between a party (or coalition) and executive power remains temporary. It can be revised through elections. On the contrary, in democratic presidential systems, the key constraint on power stems from checks and balances between the executive and legislative branches. This creates an institutional competition *between the “powers”* themselves. Accordingly, the importance of political parties varies in these two arrangements: While a parliamentary system relies on strong and disciplined organizations with clearly defined profiles, in a presidential system, democracy is not jeopardized by weak parties that are vague in substance; indeed, this may even be a precondition for its functioning.

Russia’s (constitutionally fixed) “semi-presidential” and (de facto) “super-presidential” system combines elements of both of these arrangements. However, since the voting behavior of the Duma deputies can

be effectively controlled by the presidential administration (unlike in the US presidential system), the checks and balances are suspended. Thus, the executive branch has rid itself of the restrictions of the legislature. This effect is reinforced by the fact that – unlike in the European parliamentary democracies – the executive is not an institutionally extended arm of the parliamentary majority and there is no real competition between parties representing meaningful political alternatives.

While some elements of Russia’s institutional system at first glance resemble those of functioning democracies, this impression is dispelled as soon as one looks at the bigger picture: The pieces are rearranged in a way that undermines the overall architecture created by their original contexts. Single elements are derived from various institutional arrangements whose systemic logic depends on the interaction of all its building blocks, but is not inherent in each of the elements themselves. In the Russian Constitution, this interplay has been disrupted by the blending of disconnected components of parliamentary and presidential systems. The mixed institutional design then was implanted in a soil where the legacies of the highly centralized “Soviet democracy” with its informal power structures remained strong. The fragile democracy of the early 1990s did not survive due to the inconsistencies resulting from the “institution shopping” during constitution-making. They brought forth an overwhelmingly dominant presidential executive checked neither by an independent parliament nor by strong political parties.

Translated from German by Christopher Findlay