

Analysis

Understanding Recent Developments in Russia's Political System

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Abstract

Russia's political institutions have increasingly diverged from democratic standards in recent years. Observing these changes, political scientists have put forward a variety of analytical tools useful for describing Russia's current political system. After briefly summarizing the trends in Russia's recent political development and efforts to interpret them, this article argues that the best way to understand the system is as an authoritarian one defined by the lack of an opposition, difficulties recruiting new leaders, and an increasingly brittle information-gathering process.

Overall Decline in Democratic Institutions

Russia's democratic institutions have experienced an overall decline during the last 10 years, as measured by Freedom House's Nations in Transit Index. The drop is across the board, including electoral processes, national governance, civil society, media, local governance, the judiciary, and corruption. However, the most dramatic decline is in the country's electoral process. While elections are far from being the sole element in a democratic system, they play a central role in defining the nature of the regime and deserve special attention.

Federal Elections

After each successive round of parliamentary and presidential elections, the Russian leadership has fine tuned the electoral system to improve its ability to control electoral outcomes. In the first amendment to the constitution adopted in 1993, the leaders pushed through changes in December 2008 that extended the presidential term from four to six years and lengthened State Duma terms in office from four to five years. Presumably, this change was made to benefit Prime Minister Vladimir Putin. If he decides to return to the presidential office, the newly-amended constitution would allow him to remain in office for an additional 12 years, assuming he wins reelection.

In addition to amending the constitution, Russia's leaders have frequently rewritten the electoral law. Most importantly, reforms replaced the previous system of electing the lower house of the federal parliament through half party-list seats and half single-member districts with a system that now relies exclusively on party lists. Additionally, the authorities increased the threshold number of votes a party needs to enter the parliament from five percent to seven percent. Since Russia currently only has seven registered parties that are able to compete for these seats, the effect has been that four parties are currently represented in the legislature. In

addition to the official Kremlin party, United Russia, two of the other parties consistently support the authorities – Just Russia and Vladimir Zhirinovskiy's Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR). The Kremlin set up Just Russia as an officially-sponsored alternative to United Russia and the LDPR consistently votes with the authorities. The Communists are often critical of United Russia, but their appearance as heir to the defunct Communist Party of the Soviet Union dooms their future prospects. Accordingly, Communist criticism of the elites in power only "further legitimizes that elite by enabling it to appear tolerant of criticism," according to Sergei Peregudov, a historian at the Academy of Sciences' IMEMO.

Regional Elections

At the regional level, a key feature of the Putin-era reforms was to replace direct gubernatorial elections with presidential appointments. During the period 1996–2004, Russia elected its governors directly. Such elections were an anomaly in Russian history, throughout which central leaders appointed regional representatives.

The practical consequence of appointing the governors from 2005 onward was to make the federal authorities directly responsible for what happens at the regional level in Russia. So now when people express anger at what is taking place they are as likely to target the federal leadership, typically Putin, as the appointed governor. The January demonstration that brought approximately 10,000 protesters onto the street in Kaliningrad foreshadowed a number of similar events across the country, though none as large as what took place in Russia's northwestern exclave. In Moscow and other cities, the authorities used police force to control many of the street demonstrations. These demonstrators were angry about local price hikes, but often included calls for Putin's resignation among their demands.

While only a few are willing to participate in such protests, currently there is strong support for restoring gubernatorial elections. According to Levada Center public opinion polls, 57 percent support the return of such elections, 20 percent prefer the current practice, and 23 percent had no opinion.

Russia's recent regional and local elections have also proven controversial. After United Russia won an overwhelming 70 percent of the seats up for election in the October 2009 electoral cycle, the three other parties in the parliament staged a walkout. Although the protest did not result in any changes, it drew attention to the perceived illegitimate nature of the voting. Indeed, according to Central Electoral Commission statistics, the authorities removed from the ballot 54 percent of the Patriots of Russia candidates, 26 percent of the Right Cause candidates, and 33 percent of the Yabloko candidates while denying registration to only 0.5 percent of United Russia candidates.

The March 2010 regional and local elections gave the ruling party a similar 68 percent of the seats up for election, but perceptions about the elections differed greatly this time because United Russia won less than 50 percent of the vote in the proportional representation section of the ballot in four of the eight regional legislatures that were being contested. Ironically, the authorities sought to manipulate the ballot as much in March 2010 as they did in October 2009, but the usual techniques did not work as well against voters determined to signal a protest. For example, in the Irkutsk mayoral elections, when the United Russia-backed candidate Sergei Serebrennikov was trailing behind his opponent Anton Romanov (also a United Russia member, but running without official endorsement), the city's electoral committee removed Romanov 10 days before the vote, claiming that he had not collected enough valid signatures. The result was that most voters shifted their backing to Communist candidate Viktor Kondrashov, who won a surprising 63–27 percent victory.

Reform Proposals

In recent months, there have been several proposals to reform Russia's political system, but little sign that they will be enacted soon. In January, the Institute of Contemporary Development (INSOR) issued a report that proposed restoring many of the democratic institutions that had been changed during the Putin era. For example, these proposals included reducing the presidential term to five years, restoring the single-member districts used in State Duma elections, moving the barrier for political parties to enter the State Duma down

to 4 percent, and allowing the residents of regions to directly elect their governors and senators. While this report was widely discussed shortly after it was released, its proposals have not been taken up as a basis for reform.

Similarly the State Council held an unprecedented session on January 22, 2010, to discuss political reform. The meeting had been convened by Medvedev, but unexpectedly was joined by Putin at the last minute. Putin evidently sought to slow the reform process by stressing the need for "healthy conservatism" and a desire to avoid "Ukrainization" of Russian politics.

While Medvedev and Putin often seem to express different ideas, they are united in both words and deeds when it comes to political reform. So far, the only reforms that they have accepted do not address the central features of the current system. For example, both Putin and Medvedev have rejected the idea of restoring direct gubernatorial elections.

Analyses of the Current Political System

Russian and Western observers of the Russia political system have put forward a variety of interpretations of the current Russian political system. These analyses each provide unique insights into understanding how the current Russian political system functions today. The following section provides an overview of the existing literature and then proposes a framework for understanding the events described above.

The first set of explanations falls within the hybrid regimes approach. This approach describes Russia's political system as highly centralized and replacing gutted democratic institutions with substitutions that serve the function of democratic institutions but do not challenge the incumbents' hold on power. Within this framework, Nikolay Petrov, Maria Lipman, and Henry Hale describe Russia as an "overmanaged democracy" in which leaders have to exert manual control in order to ensure the regime's survival. This system is more likely to achieve the population's social ideals than one that relies on repression, they argue. A *Slavic Review* article by Timothy Colton and Hale argues that Putin wins votes because voters essentially agree with his policies, respect his leadership qualities, and admire his ability to project competence. Ultimately, the authors argue, Putin and Medvedev must appeal to the electorate to beat their opponents at the polls.

A second approach, developed by Vladimir Gel'man, refers to the existing system as one of "non-democratic consolidation." According to this form of analysis, Russia has elections that are free but not fair. There is limited electoral competition, but not enough to re-

place the existing elite. In contrast to the hybrid regimes approach, which sees the current system as unstable, this approach focuses more on the longevity of the status quo.

A third perspective emphasizes “authoritarian state building.” This approach focuses on applying repressive tools, ensuring elite unity, and maintaining a ruling party that shapes the political environment as keys to building non-democratic governments. By emphasizing these factors, this approach serves to correct other analyses that instead stress components like civil society and democratic institution building.

A fourth approach focuses on the importance of “virtual politics.” With a largely passive electorate, the elite can control information flows in a way to manipulate how voters perceive current events. Manipulating information makes it possible for the elites to maintain their hold on power.

A fifth approach claims that Russian elections are largely the product of fraud. In their book *The Forensics of Election Fraud*, Mikhail Myagkov, Peter C. Ordeshook, and Dimitri Shakin, for example, claim to have identified 10 million suspect votes in the 2004 presidential and 2007 State Duma elections and assert that the 2008 presidential election was so fraudulent as to not even merit analysis as an election. Their investigation, in particular, points to the implausibly high turnouts in the North Caucasus republics, Tatarstan, and Bashkortostan as indicating vote rigging. The Russian authorities lent credibility to assertions of fraud when they imposed such strict conditions on OSCE monitors that the organization ultimately refused to send observers to the 2007 State Duma and 2008 presidential elections.

Finally, in stark contrast to the other approaches, the Russian authorities claim that the existing system is democratic. In a book examining the winners and losers of the controversial October 11, 2009, regional elections Igor Borisov, a member of the Central Electoral Commission, wrote “With the adoption of the 12 December 1993 Constitution, the Russian Federation began to form a contemporary democratic electoral system. During recent years, the institution of elections was built organically in the Russian social-political system as a real acting mechanism for the realization of popular power at all levels – from local self-government to the federal organs of state power.”

A Framework for Analysis

Each of these approaches points to different elements of the regime which, to a greater or lesser extent, define its

main characteristics. They provide a useful set of concepts to explain the political evolution described above.

In developing a framework for analysis, it makes sense to start with the observation that the current regime is authoritarian in nature since it seeks to control all of the key political institutions. It has concentrated power in the national executive, particularly in the prime minister’s office. Most crucially, the leadership works hard to eliminate any form of uncertainty during the conduct of Russian elections.

A second defining feature is the lack of a viable opposition with access to the political system through which people can articulate and consolidate their policy desires. The lack of an effective opposition makes it difficult for the population to conceive of a realistic alternative to the current authorities. In the absence of an opposition, voters can only lodge a protest vote by supporting whomever happens to be running against the United Russia candidate.

A third feature emphasizes the current regime’s difficulties in renewing itself. Elections serve the purpose of helping to identify and promote new leaders. By running for office and proposing new solutions to society’s problems, young people can bring themselves to the attention of the wider public while gaining useful governing experience at the local and regional levels. Ultimately such leaders are able to seek federal office and present themselves as an alternative to the existing leaders. However, in the absence of free and fair elections, the Russian authorities have to rely on other forms of leadership recruitment, such as the creation of a presidential cadre reserve, similar to the Soviet-era Nomenklatura system, as a way of identifying and promoting new leaders. Such a system is not likely to promote *politicians* who can articulate and integrate various interests. More likely, it will advance *bureaucratic managers* who have support from existing leaders. While Medvedev has lately revived the use of the reserve, an analysis of similar practices during Putin’s first term as president concluded that they served to consolidate authoritarian rather than democratic systems.

Finally, the regime is defined by its need to gather information. Russia’s federal leadership must have accurate data on the preferences of the population in order to ensure that its policies and performance in delivering public services are sufficient to prevent an outbreak of unrest. Given the controlled nature of Russian elections and the limited nature of political discussion in the broadcast and print media, the authorities have to look to other sources for information about what is happening in the country. In the absence of a free me-

dia, this information typically comes from the special services and bureaucratic organizations, though today the lively discussions on the Internet are also a useful source. Additionally, the authorities have access to sophisticated public opinion polling provided by a variety of agencies, including some who work directly for

the state and at least one that is independent. To date, the authorities have been relatively effective at addressing popular concerns while also deploying police forces against any street protesters that appear, preventing unmet demands from boiling over into regime-threatening instability.

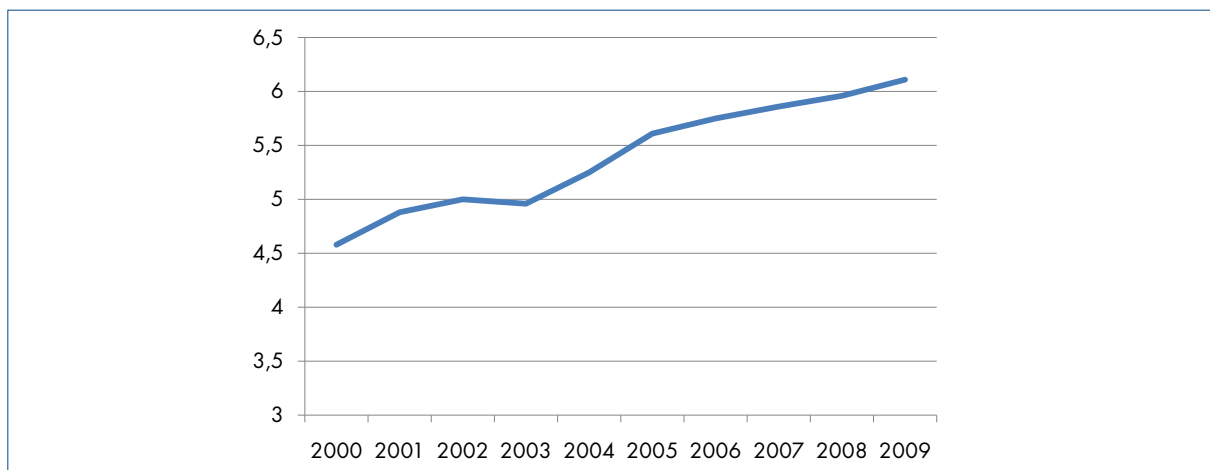
About the Author

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Suggested Readings

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Freedom House Democracy Scores for Russia 2000–2009



NB.: lower scores = more democratic; see overleaf for detailed scores
 Source: Freedom House, www.freedomhouse.org