

THE RISE AND DECLINE OF ELECTORAL AUTHORITARIANISM IN RUSSIA

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Abstract. Many scholars argue that the political regime in contemporary Russia exemplifies the global phenomenon of electoral authoritarianism. But, what are the major features of such a regime in the case of Russia? Why and how did it proceed through a life cycle of emergence, development, and decay? And how might it evolve in the foreseeable future? This article seeks answers to these questions.

By the 2010s, almost nobody used the term “democracy” when referring to Russia, and debates among experts were mostly focused on how far the country deviated from democratic standards.¹ While “pessimists” wrote of the consolidation of an authoritarian regime in Russia,² “optimists” avoided such firm claims, focusing instead on the low level of repression by Russia’s political regime³ or labeling it as a “hybrid” due to the presence of some democratic institutions.⁴ To some extent, these terminological controversies reflected conceptual problems in the study of regimes

¹ This article is a part of “Choices of Russian Modernization,” a research project funded by the Academy of Finland.

² Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way. 2010. *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes after the Cold War*. New York: Cambridge University Press; Grigori V. Golosov. 2011. Regional Roots of Electoral Authoritarianism in Russia. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 63 (4): 623-39.

³ Ivan Krastev and Stephen Holmes. 2012. “An Autopsy of Managed Democracy.” *Journal of Democracy*, 23 (3): 33-45.

⁴ Daniel Treisman. 2011. “Presidential Popularity in a Hybrid Regime: Russia under Yeltsin and Putin,” *American Journal of Political Science*, 55 (3): 590-609.

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globally.⁵ But, beyond that, most scholars agree that Russian politics under Vladimir Putin has been marked by such pathologies as outrageously unfair and fraudulent elections, the coexistence of weak and impotent political parties with a dominant “party of power,” a heavily censored (often self-censored) media, rubber-stamping legislatures at the national and sub-national levels, politically subordinated courts, arbitrary use of the economic powers of the state, and widespread corruption.

In this article, I attempt to explain the logic of the emergence and development of Russia’s current political regime, identify its major features and peculiarities, reconsider its institutional foundations and mechanisms of enforcement, analyze the trajectory of the regime’s “life cycle,” and reflect on possible trajectories for future evolution.

Electoral Authoritarianism: Why?

If one placed post-communist Russia on the world map of political regimes, it would fit into the category of “electoral” or “competitive” authoritarianism.⁶ These regimes, although authoritarian, incorporate elections that are meaningful, and stand in contrast to “classical” versions of authoritarianism, which are known for their “elections without choice.”⁷ However, in electoral or competitive authoritarianism, and in contrast to electoral democracies, elections are marked by an uneven playing field based on: formal and informal rules that construct prohibitively high barriers to participation; sharply unequal access of competitors to financial and media resources; abuses of power by the state apparatus for the sake of maximizing incumbent votes; and multiple instances of electoral fraud. The uneven playing field serves as a defining distinction between electoral authoritarianism and electoral democracy.

Recently, there has been a proliferation of electoral authoritarian regimes as a result of two different, although not mutually exclusive, forces. First, regular elections under tightly controlled party competition allows rulers of authoritarian regimes to effectively monitor their country’s elites, the state apparatus, and the citizenry, thus averting risks of the regime’s sudden collapse due to domestic political conflicts.⁸ Second, autocrats across the globe hold elections as a means of legitimizing the status

⁵ Matthijs Bogaards. 2009. “How to Classify Hybrid Regimes? Defective Democracy and Electoral Authoritarianism.” *Democratization*, 16 (2): 399-423.

⁶ Andreas Schedler, ed., 2006. *Electoral Authoritarianism: The Dynamics of Unfree Competition*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner; Levitsky and Way. *Competitive Authoritarianism*; Yonatan L. Morse. 2012. “The Era of Electoral Authoritarianism.” *World Politics*, 64 (1), 161-98.

⁷ Guy Hermet, Richard Rose, and Alain Rouquie (eds.). 1978. *Elections without Choice*. New York: Wiley.

⁸ Barbara Geddes. 2005. *Why Elections and Parties in Authoritarian Regimes?* Paper presented at the APSA annual meeting, Washington, DC.

quo in the eyes of both domestic and international actors.⁹ However, such elections have become a crucial test of survival for electoral authoritarian regimes: rulers must not only defeat their challengers in unfair elections, but also persuade both domestic and foreign audiences to acknowledge such victories and to mute criticisms about electoral unfairness. Although many electoral authoritarian regimes resolved these tasks more or less successfully, post-electoral protests following unfair elections could often become challenges to regime survival, as the experience of the “color revolutions” in post-communist states and the “Arab Spring” demonstrates.

The variation in longevity among electoral authoritarian regimes raises an important question: Why do some electoral authoritarian regimes persist for decades in some countries (as in Mexico under the Institutional Revolutionary Party or in Egypt until the Arab Spring), while in other states electoral authoritarianism proved either to be a temporary developmental stage in the wake of democratization (e.g., Serbia), or to result in the replacement of one electoral authoritarian regime with another (as in Ukraine before and after the “Orange Revolution”)? The evolution of post-communist Russia may shed light on the sources of strength and weakness among electoral authoritarian regimes.

Observers differ in their explanations for the failure of electoral authoritarian regimes. Some experts highlight the success of anti-system mobilization by opposition elites in countries ranging from Serbia to Ukraine.¹⁰ Others stress the vulnerability of authoritarian regimes themselves due to their lack of insulation from Western influences, the weakness of their coercive capacities, and their inability to establish strong, dominant parties.¹¹ But the discussion of “who is to be blamed” for the failure of electoral authoritarianism – the regime or the opposition¹² – is limited by the lesser attention paid to “success stories” among such regimes, of which Russia, at least until the protests of 2011-2012, appears to be one.

Russia’s rulers invested heavily in building their political monopoly, by placing both the state apparatus and the dominant political party, United Russia (UR), under hierarchical subordination to central authority, and by effectively insulating domestic politics from direct Western influence. To the regime’s advantage, moreover, popular demand for political changes long remained only latent.¹³ The regime averted possible challenges to the

⁹ Beatriz Magaloni. 2010. “The Game of Electoral Fraud and the Ousting of Authoritarian Rule.” *American Journal of Political Science*, 54 (3): 751-65.

¹⁰ Joshua Tucker. 2007. “Enough! Electoral Fraud, Collective Action Problems, and Post-Communist Colored Revolutions.” *Perspectives on Politics*, 5 (3): 535-51.

¹¹ Levitsky and Way. *Competitive Authoritarianism*.

¹² Lucan Way. 2008. “The Real Causes of the Color Revolutions.” *Journal of Democracy*, 19 (3): 55-69; Valerie Bunce and Sharon Wolchik. 2009. “Getting Real about ‘Real Causes.’” *Journal of Democracy*, 20, (1), 69-73.

¹³ Richard Rose, William Mishler, and Neil Munro. 2011. *Popular Support for an Undemo-*

status quo by building prohibitively high barriers to entry to the political market, skillfully implementing divide-and-conquer tactics, coopting loyal “fellow travelers” of the regime, and coercing “non-systemic” actors, which pushed them into a narrow, anti-establishment “ghetto.”¹⁴ Even though the rise of protest activism in 2011-2012 did somewhat shake the previous equilibrium, there is no basis to predictions anticipating the near-term collapse of electoral authoritarianism in Russia.

Why and how has the electoral authoritarian regime been consolidated in Russia? What are the causes of its emergence, mechanisms of its maintenance, and possible trajectories of change? In search of answers to these questions, I analyze the institutional and political factors, then specify the developmental stages of Russian electoral authoritarianism, and, finally, discuss the prospects for its political evolution.

Institutional Foundations and Political Pillars of Russia’s Authoritarianism

In order to build and maintain a durable authoritarian regime, autocratic leaders must simultaneously resolve four interrelated tasks. First, they must avoid potent challenges from the citizenry or organized political opposition. Second, they have to minimize risks of being overthrown by a part of the ruling group, either by a *coup d’état* or by these elites joining the ranks of the opposition. These tasks require the smart use of both “sticks” and “carrots,” repression and cooptation. Third, the sustainability of an authoritarian regime in the long run is nearly impossible without its remaining in control of the bureaucracy, the coercive apparatus, and the dominant party (if there is one). Fourth, authoritarian regimes must wrestle with the “dilemma of performance”: demands for political change if they perform poorly, but rising expectations of economic progress and political inclusion if they perform well in attaining high economic growth rates.¹⁵

The post-Communist authoritarian regime in Russia is, in many ways, different from “classical” dictatorships and the regimes established in some of Russia’s post-Soviet neighbors. This regime not only preserved the façade of democratic institutions that emerged in the early 1990s, such as parliament and multi-party elections, but notoriously and vigorously increased their visibility while emasculating and perverting their substance. This practice of building a “democratic Potemkin village” is not

cratic Regime: The Changing Views of Russians. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Treisman. Presidential Popularity.

¹⁴ Andrew Wilson. 2005. *Virtual Politics: Faking Democracy in the Post-Soviet World.* New Haven: Yale University Press; Vladimir Gel'man. 2008. “Party Politics in Russia: From Competition to Hierarchy.” *Europe-Asia Studies*, 60, (6): 913-30.

¹⁵ Samuel P. Huntington. 1991. *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century.* Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 55.

unique among electoral authoritarianisms. Like other authoritarian regimes they must mimic democratic institutions, while also coopting various segments of the ruling class, the real or potential opposition, and society as a whole.¹⁶ Although such a strategy minimized the risks of domestic political conflicts, its side effect was the rising cost of possible repressions, which increased over time. The other feature of Russia's regime was the lack of incentives for improving government performance, which declined over time. Thus, for the ruling group, the maintenance of the status quo became a goal in itself.

Although the troubled birth of electoral authoritarianism in Russia was a by-product of resolving post-Soviet intra-elite conflicts on a "winner take all" basis,¹⁷ a power monopoly cannot last long just by default, as the experience of the "color revolutions" suggests. Russia's rulers have had to invest tremendous efforts into consolidating their electoral authoritarian regime to ensure its sustainability over time. For this purpose, they rely upon three major institutional sources, which provided the basis for the status quo regime, namely: (1) superpresidentialism; (2) subnational authoritarianism; and (3) a dominant party.

Superpresidentialism serves not only as the result of political monopolies operating in post-Soviet countries,¹⁸ but also helps to create such monopolies.¹⁹ Given their zero-sum nature,²⁰ presidential elections dramatically increased the cost for an incumbent to lose, since the political, and often physical, survival of the rulers and their entourage were at stake. Therefore, for rulers of electoral authoritarian regimes, superpresidentialism creates additional incentives to hold power at any cost. It also poses new challenges. Such leaders are faced with the temptation to eliminate electoral competition as such and impose a classical version of authoritarianism (such as in Kazakhstan under President Nursultan Nazarbayev). Similarly, they must address the risk of destabilizing the status quo in the case of a leadership succession due to the almost inevitable reconfiguration of patronage ties, which help to maintain the loyalty of elites (as happened in Ukraine and Georgia before the color revolutions).²¹ The Russian regime, however, avoided both traps in its evolutionary trajectory, although each of these outcomes was possible in the 1990s.

¹⁶ Jennifer Gandhi. 2008. *Political Institutions under Dictatorship*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

¹⁷ Vladimir Gel'man. 2008. "Out of the Frying Pan, Into the Fire? Post-Soviet Regime Changes in Comparative Perspective." *International Political Science Review*, 29 (2): 157-80.

¹⁸ Timothy Frye. 1997. "A Politics of Institutional Choice: Post-Communist Presidencies." *Comparative Political Studies*, 30 (5): 523-52.

¹⁹ M. Steven Fish. 2005. *Democracy Derailed in Russia: The Failure of Open Politics*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

²⁰ Juan J. Linz. 1990. "The Perils of Presidentialism," *Journal of Democracy*, 1 (1): 51-69.

²¹ Henry E. Hale. 2005. "Regime Cycles: Democracy, Autocracy, and Revolution in Post-Soviet Eurasia." *World Politics*, 58 (1): 133-65.

After Putin's victory in the post-Yeltsin succession in 1999-2000, he not only had to maintain the status quo regime, but strengthen its institutional foundations. After all, he aimed to reduce various segments of Russia's elites to unequivocal submission and to subordinate them with a sustainable and effective combination of positive and negative incentives, which would, in turn, facilitate the long-term loyalty of all stakeholders. This combination was based upon two major interconnected reforms, implemented by the regime in the 2000s: (1) cooptation of the local political machines controlled by regional governors and city mayors into a nation-wide Kremlin-driven echelon; and (2) reformatting the party system into a highly controlled hierarchy under the dominance of United Russia (UR). Key institutional changes, such as the elimination of popular gubernatorial elections and the reframing of electoral and party legislation, played a major role in this process.

Decentralized subnational authoritarianism, which emerged in many of Russia's regions in the 1990s and was strengthened in the early 2000s,²² was a dubious Kremlin ally in the implementation of its strategy. First, it left regional elites wide room for maneuver and could not prevent the risk of them organizing to oppose the federal government, as they did on the eve of the 1999 parliamentary elections.²³ Second, the Kremlin had to pay a high price in order to conclude informal contracts with regional leaders during the 1990s, which were based on the principle of "loyalty for non-intervention." However, starting in 2004, when the president de facto took the right to appoint regional chief executives instead of letting them stand in regional elections, the federal government was able to more easily control the governors, because the institutional changes gave the regional elites new incentives to obey Moscow.²⁴ The Kremlin agreed to the power monopoly of regional leaders in their own regions if they produced the necessary votes for presidential and parliamentary elections and demonstrated the ability to control local politics for the sake of preserving the status quo regime. Thus, a new informal contract with subnational leaders, based on the principle of a "power monopoly for the 'correct' voting results,"²⁵ became a major element of Russian electoral authoritarianism.

Finally, UR became a major Kremlin tool, which allowed the ruling group to acquire an unchallenged monopoly in both parliamentary²⁶ and

²² Vladimir Gel'man and Cameron Ross (eds.). 2010. *The Politics of Sub-National Authoritarianism in Russia*, Burlington, VT: Ashgate; Golosov. The Regional Roots of Electoral Authoritarianism.

²³ Henry E. Hale. 2006. *Why Not Parties in Russia? Democracy, Federalism, and the State*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

²⁴ Ora John Reuter and Thomas F. Remington. 2009. "Dominant Party Regimes and the Commitment Problem: the Case of United Russia." *Comparative Political Studies*, 42 (4): 501-26.

²⁵ Golosov. The Regional Roots of Electoral Authoritarianism.

²⁶ Thomas F. Remington. 2006. "Presidential Support in the Russian State Duma." *Legislative*

electoral²⁷ politics. This monopoly had been reached after a series of institutional changes, including toughening rules on registration of political parties, increasing the threshold on parliamentary elections, shifting from a mixed to a proportional electoral system, and the like. After gaining a monopoly, UR became the only available choice for all significant national and subnational political actors. Despite its monopoly, however, UR was merely the legislative and electoral arm of the top officials, and served purely as an instrument, with no autonomy from the Kremlin. Still, several other parties were present on the periphery of the Russian electoral arena without posing a serious danger to the regime, decreasing the risk that a disloyal opposition would arise, and to a certain extent also supporting the status quo regime.²⁸

These institutional sources of Russian electoral authoritarianism, as such, cannot make the status quo regime more attractive to the elites and the population at large. But they severely diminished the attractiveness and availability of all possible alternatives to the existing political order, thus maintaining a suboptimal political regime as “the only game in town.” Based upon these institutional foundations, Russia’s electoral authoritarianism in the 2000s achieved consolidation and established a political equilibrium. Following Przeworski’s argument that “authoritarian equilibrium rests mainly on lies, fear, or economic prosperity,”²⁹ one might argue that these three pillars played an important role in the case of Russia’s electoral authoritarianism, even though in reverse order. The impressive economic growth of the 2000s greatly contributed to an unusually high level of popular support for Russia’s rulers and the regime as a whole;³⁰ thus, the Kremlin’s costs for buying the loyalty of its citizens remained relatively low while the time horizon of the status quo regime lengthened. But the nature of the regime’s popular support was merely specific rather than diffuse;³¹ Russian citizens endorsed electoral authoritarianism only as long as it provided them with material benefits, but not because of a mass belief in its legitimacy as such. Therefore, it is not surprising that even though the deep, but short-term recession during the global economic crisis of 2008-2009 did not lead to a crucial decline of mass support for the status quo regime, it did provoke risks of political disequilibrium,³² which became

Studies Quarterly, 31 (1): 5-32.

²⁷ Hale. *Why Not Parties in Russia*; Gel’man. “Party Politics in Russia.”

²⁸ Gandhi. *Political Institutions under Dictatorship*.

²⁹ Adam Przeworski. 1991. *Democracy and the Market: Political and Economic Reforms in Eastern Europe and Latin America*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 58.

³⁰ Rose, Mishler, and Munro. *Popular Support for an Undemocratic Regime*; Treisman. *Presidential Popularity*.

³¹ David Easton. 1975. “A Re-Assessment of the Concept of Political Support.” *British Journal of Political Science*, 5 (4): 435-57.

³² Sergey Belanovsky and Mikhail Dmitriev. 2011. *Politicheskii krizis v Rossii i vozmozhnye*

visible in the wake of the protest mobilization that took place in 2011-2012.

The economic growth of the 2000s also allowed Russia's rulers to rely upon carrots rather than sticks as the major tools of their dominance; systematic repressions of their opposition rivals were not necessary. Rather than cracking down, Russia's regime guaranteed its subjects (at least, on paper) a wide array of individual and, to some extent, civil freedoms, although they severely constrained their political rights. Even political repressions of the regime's opponents were limited: the list of political prisoners in Russia compiled by human rights activists after the Kremlin-induced "tightening of the screws" in November 2013 included just seventy names, an incredibly low number on the world map of authoritarian regimes. The fear that the regime would repress an individual due to political disloyalty, quite probably, was overestimated. But in a broader sense, the fear felt among various social groups that implementing political change would be costly (especially after the traumatic experience of turbulent reforms during the 1990s) contributed to the preservation of the status quo. In other words, fear of potentially losing existing benefits and the population's inherent risk aversion contributed to the fact that among those Russians who complained about the status quo regime, its continuity seemed like a lesser evil vis-à-vis any other alternatives.³³

Finally, the third pillar of authoritarian equilibrium – lies – became the most visible element of Russia's regime. Thanks to its monopolist control over Russia's major information channels, the Kremlin had ample opportunities to deploy a wide range of propagandist techniques, and successfully maintained an authoritarian equilibrium. A noisy independent media milieu was driven into the ghetto of the Internet and a handful of other outlets with small audiences, but beyond these narrow circles, the Kremlin and its loyalists enjoyed full-fledged dominance over political news. The monopolist information supply also met low demand for alternative sources among many Russians. Therefore, an unsurprisingly large share of respondents evaluated the 2007-2008 national elections in Russia as "fair"³⁴ despite widespread fraud and manipulations.

To summarize, the loyalty of the elites and masses for the status quo regime and their voluntary or involuntary support of the Kremlin-imposed "rules of the game" became the major indicators measuring the consolidation of Russia's electoral authoritarianism. This consolidation had two major consequences. First, on the political supply side, Putin as a dominant

mekhanizmy ego razvitiya. Moscow: Center for Strategic Research; Paul Chaisty and Stephen Whitefield. 2012. "The Effects of the Global Economic Crisis on Russian Political Attitudes." *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 28 (2): 187-208.

³³ Rose, Mishler, and Munro. *Popular Support for an Undemocratic Regime*.

³⁴ Richard Rose and William Mishler. 2009. "How Do Electors Respond to an 'Unfair' Election? The Experience of Russians," *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 25 (2): 118-36.

actor was able to maintain a delicate balance between sticks and carrots, which left potential political actors no choice other than subordination or, at least, non-participation. This coordination mechanism can be regarded as an “imposed consensus,”³⁵ or, in terms of *The Godfather* movie, “an offer he can’t refuse.” Although, according to a 2008 survey of Russian elites, many endorsed democratic institutions and practices,³⁶ in practice, they did not put up much resistance to authoritarian rule. Second, on the political demand side, the low level of mass activism during the 1990s (similar to that of other post-Communist states),³⁷ was replaced in the 2000s by an increasing alienation of citizens from politics; even the occasional small-scale local “rebellions” did not change the landscape of political silence. As Robertson convincingly demonstrated, the mass protests of the 1990s by and large reflected intra-elite conflicts,³⁸ and the shrinking of the political opportunity structure³⁹ in the 2000s further contributed to mass apathy. In terms of Hirschman’s famous typology of reactions to crises, when Russian citizens were faced with the regime, they preferred “exit” in various forms to any instances of “voice,”⁴⁰ thus contributing to the preservation of the status quo.

Thus, the electoral nature of authoritarianism, the low level of repressiveness, the efficient use of institutional foundations (superpresidentialism, centralized subnational authoritarianism, and the dominant party), the winning combination of major political pillars (economic well-being, fear of political disequilibrium, and the lies of virtual politics) and a changing supply-demand balance on the political market became major features of Russia’s political regime. These features contributed to the rise of electoral authoritarianism, but also played a major role in its subsequent decline.

Electoral Authoritarianism: Stages of the Life Cycle

It would be no wild exaggeration to argue that the politics of late-Soviet democratization in 1989-1991 became one of the preconditions for the rise of electoral authoritarianism in Russia as well as in some other post-Soviet states. The politics of this period established elections as the

³⁵ Gel’man. “Out of the Frying Pan, Into the Fire?”

³⁶ Mikhail Afanasyev. 2009. *Rossiiskiy elity razvitiya: zapros na novyi kurs*. Moscow: Liberal’naya Missiya.

³⁷ Marc Morje Howard. 2003. *The Weakness of Civil Society in Post-Communist Europe*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

³⁸ Graeme Robertson. 2007. “Strikes and Labor Organizations in Hybrid Regimes.” *American Political Science Review* 101 (4): 781-98.

³⁹ Sidney Tarrow. 1994. *Power in Movement: Collective Action, Social Movements, and Politics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

⁴⁰ Albert O. Hirschman. 1970. *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty: Response to Decline in Firms, Organizations, and States*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press

major institution conferring political legitimacy, thereby not completely foreclosing a path to classical authoritarianism, but placing a major bump on this road. Even though the emergence of electoral democracy in Russia was short-lived and abrupt, the very fact that any claims of political power without elections were considered illegitimate⁴¹ became the major lesson learned from this period. In fact, the 1992-1993 conflict between Yeltsin and the parliament was a typical instance of “dual legitimacy,”⁴² but both sides rejected the use of electoral mechanisms for its resolution in favor of a plebiscite, which, to some degree, defined the outcome as a zero-sum result.⁴³ Even so, the mass support for the winners of the 1993 conflict (even if this support was rather dubious) forced them to use elections as a major political tool that supported their own interests. While the pro-Yeltsin parties performed relatively poorly during the 1993 State Duma elections, and some advisors even proposed renouncing the “wrong” results, Yeltsin himself was mostly concerned with the simultaneous constitutional referendum, which ensured his broad powers, and rejected the idea of nullifying the elections. As a result, electoral institutions survived and secured their political meaning in post-soviet Russia. Although the troubled birth of electoral authoritarianism in Russia occurred by chance and was driven by the changing political circumstances, the very logic of regime formation reflects the failure of the emergence of electoral democracy in Russia in the early 1990s.

A similar dilemma of “electoral” vs. “classical” authoritarianism arose again for Russia’s rulers during a new critical juncture of the regime’s political evolution – namely, on the eve of presidential elections in March 1996. At that moment, popular approval for Yeltsin as the incumbent was extremely low (his electoral rating was about 5 percent), and, against the background of protracted recession and the Chechen war, prospects for a reelection bid looked gloomy. The possible electoral defeat posed major threats not only to Yeltsin’s political survival, but his physical survival as well: the cost of losing the presidential election was too high for taking this risk. It is no wonder that the option of nullifying the results in the case of failure *ex post facto* was widely discussed within the ruling group; moreover, Yeltsin’s entourage even dissolved the parliament with a plan for prohibiting the Communist opposition and postponing the elections.⁴⁴ But the cost of tossing out the imperfect rules of the game and basing the ruling group’s survival on repressing the opposition and eliminating electoral

⁴¹ Henry E. Hale. 2011. “The Myth of Mass Russian Support for Autocracy: The Public Opinion Foundations of a Hybrid Regime.” *Europe-Asia Studies*, 63, (8): 1357-75.

⁴² Linz. “The Perils of Presidentialism.”

⁴³ Lilia Shevtsova. 1999. *Yeltsin’s Russia: Myths and Reality*. Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

⁴⁴ *Epokha Yeltsina: Ocherki Politicheskoi Istorii*, 2001, Moscow: Vagrius.

institutions was even higher. Such a political move could have produced a major breakdown among Russia's elites and provoked the loss of federal control over many provinces and possibly the country as a whole. In the worst case, such a coup d'état could have delegitimized Yeltsin and the political regime as such. Under these conditions, holding elections became an inevitable choice even though their conduct was unfair.⁴⁵ Electoral authoritarianism in Russia resulted in a path-dependent evolution: once it emerged, it continued over several electoral cycles, thereby increasing the cost of possible major revisions in these rules of the game over time for both elites and the masses.⁴⁶

The "war of the Yeltsin Succession" in the 1999 parliamentary elections became a turning point for the electoral authoritarian regime in Russia. Since Yeltsin was no longer able to retain his presidential post and could not automatically transfer power to a loyal successor (like Heydar Aliyev handing the presidency to his son in Azerbaijan), the leadership succession crisis provoked the threat of a major intra-elite conflict.⁴⁷ The newly emerged Fatherland – All Russia (OVR) coalition of regional leaders and oligarchs aspired to seize the position of dominant actor through an electoral victory, while the Kremlin exerted extensive force to prevent alternative elites from coordinating,⁴⁸ thereby opening the way for the relative success of the Kremlin-backed Unity coalition, which ultimately defeated the OVR in a tough competition. The skyrocketing popularity of Yeltsin's chosen successor, Vladimir Putin, against the background of the beginning of the post-crisis economic growth and the Kremlin's media control, which ensured its victory in the "information wars,"⁴⁹ contributed to this outcome. Even before the elections, numerous OVR loyalists deserted to the camp of the prospective winners. The outcome of this conflict was Unity's hostile takeover of OVR, with the resultant party becoming UR, and the subsequent cooptation of its founding fathers into a new "winning coalition" around Putin. Even though this conflict had a major electoral dimension, with a relative balance of forces between Unity and OVR, and offered the possibility for a turn from electoral authoritarianism to electoral democracy,⁵⁰ in fact, electoral means did not resolve this conflict and its outcome should be regarded in zero-sum terms.

⁴⁵ Shevtsova. *Yeltsin's Russia*.

⁴⁶ Rose, Mishler, and Munro. *Popular Support for an Undemocratic Regime*.

⁴⁷ Hale. *Why Not Parties in Russia?*

⁴⁸ Olga Shvetsova. 2003. "Resolving the Problem of Preelection Coordination: The 1999 Parliamentary Elections as an Elite Presidential 'Primary.'" in: Vicki Hesli and William Reisinger (eds.), *The 1999-2000 Elections in Russia: Their Impact and Legacy*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 213-231.

⁴⁹ Ruben Enikolopov, Maria Petrova, and Ekaterina Zhuravskaya. 2011. "Media and Political Persuasion: Evidence from Russia." *American Economic Review*, 101 (7): 3253-85.

⁵⁰ Hale. *Regime Cycles*; Gel'man. "Out of the Frying Pan, Into the Fire?"

In 2000, the new ruling group, led by Putin, had to respond to the challenges that arose during the elite conflict of 1999, and, once they had consolidated power, the subsequent color revolutions. The major lessons the Kremlin learned from these experiences were that its political monopoly could not be sustained over time just by default. The leadership had to take active measures to strengthen its hold on power through the skillful use of political and institutional instruments, which they deployed to prevent the coordination of alternative elites and citizens-at-large and to increase entry barriers to the political market. In complement to the measures outlined above, such as recentralization of subnational authoritarianism and investments into dominant party building, the Kremlin began to exert pressure on already weak organizational entities, such as opposition parties, independent media, and NGOs that might facilitate coordination among alternative elites and decrease the costs of political participation. Almost all of these organizations were faced with making the tough choice between cooptation into the regime as loyal, junior, subordinated agents or accepting the peripheral status of being relegated to the hopeless, “niche” opposition.⁵¹ These “tough” political constraints came on top of the “soft” political constraints applied from the standard “menu of manipulations” of electoral authoritarianism,⁵² including: (1) biased political reporting in the media; (2) direct and indirect state funding for pro-governmental parties and NGOs; (3) systematic use (or, rather, abuse) of state resources to ensure electoral victory for the incumbent at any cost; and (4) biased court decisions consistently favoring state officials and/or their loyalists over opposition-minded (or independent) activists. Simultaneously, the ruling groups effectively adjusted and fine-tuned the electoral laws to ensure that they provided them with the best advantage. Elections served as a means of legitimizing the status quo regime, and allowed the ruling group to adopt a wide range of policies across various arenas irrespective of voter preferences. Russian elections also helped to rotate the elites without them having to compete for votes, due to the very fact that the winners of future elections were appointed well before citizens went to the polls.

The overwhelming triumph of UR during the 2007 parliamentary elections (64.3 percent of votes) marked the apogee of Russia’s electoral authoritarianism. But this success coincided with the major challenge of presidential term limits for Putin, who could not run for a third consecutive period in office in 2008. He was faced with a difficult choice. Possible solutions included amending the constitution to abolish term limits, adopting a new constitution from scratch, or, completely eliminating the

⁵¹ Kenneth Greene. 2007. *Why Dominant Parties Lose: Mexico’s Democratization in Comparative Perspective*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

⁵² Andreas Schedler. 2002. “Elections without Democracy: The Menu of Manipulations.” *Journal of Democracy*, 13 (2): 36-50.

constitution as a set of formal rules of the game and the media discussed all these possibilities intensively. In fact, “Putin’s dilemma” was the choice between two evolutionary trajectories for the political regime: either to invest into the window dressing of a democratic façade or to tear off the mask and establish an authoritarian regime that had much in common with a classical dictatorship. While picking a loyal successor would mean the former choice, remaining in office for a third consecutive term would become a major shift to the latter option.

We might never be able to answer precisely the question of why Putin and his team preferred not to retain all power levers in their hands “once and forever” and decided to transfer formal powers to the chosen successor, Dmitry Medvedev. The costs of turning the electoral authoritarian regime (with its democratic mimicry) into a naked and unequivocal classical dictatorship were quite high because they would have undermined the domestic and, especially, international legitimacy of the regime. Besides, the nuisance of being associated with a group of dictators, such as Belarus’s Lukashenko or Uzbekistan’s Karimov, Russia’s rulers would be faced with major troubles in legalizing their incomes and property in the West. These considerations may have played a certain role in resolving Putin’s dilemma. But, most probably, the answer is that electoral authoritarianism, despite certain costs required to maintain the status quo regime, essentially satisfied the Kremlin’s wishes, and incentives encouraging making major changes were not sufficiently strong. If so, then Putin’s dilemma was resolved mainly by default, given the widespread predictions that four years of inertia under Medvedev would preserve the domestic and international environment for the regime. These expectations, however, proved to be wrong: surprisingly, the 2011-2012 electoral cycle launched the downward phase of electoral authoritarianism in Russia.

The outcome of the December 2011 parliamentary election was a new critical juncture for the regime’s trajectory. Despite all of the Kremlin’s efforts, UR failed to get 50 percent of the votes, and the sudden wave of political protests came seemingly out of nowhere. To what extent did the partial electoral defeat of Russia’s authoritarian regime result from the intended or unintended moves of the political actors? One might argue that these outcomes are by no means unique and country-specific phenomena. Scholars paid special attention to the “stunning elections,” which might be held by authoritarian regimes for enhancing their legitimacy, but resulted in defeats of the ruling group and sometimes (though not always) paving the way for full-fledged democratization, similar to what happened in the Soviet Union in 1989,⁵³ but their causes and mechanisms were not analyzed thoroughly enough. As the preliminary analysis of the case of

⁵³ Huntington. *The Third Wave*, 174-80.

Russia suggests, expectations among the ruling group were oriented retrospectively and they poorly took into account the major, but latent, shifts in popular political demands.⁵⁴ During the period of Medvedev's term in office, the Kremlin mostly dressed the windows of the democratic façade, but underestimated the threats of increasing cracks in the wall behind this façade. If the Kremlin presumed that the "switcheroo" within the ruling group announced in September 2011, with Putin returning as a president and Medvedev replacing him as prime minister, would automatically result in the elimination of the regime's façade, then it was a strategic miscalculation. In fact, Russia's citizens could not be eliminated from the political process with the use of repressions since the Kremlin had not invested enough resources into buying their loyalty. Thus, the balance between sticks and carrots, effectively managed in the 2000s, was broken: sticks were used too selectively and ineffectively, while carrots were in short supply for the citizens. The ruling group paid for this mistake after the 2011 parliamentary elections.

The 2011-2012 protests called into question the three political pillars of electoral authoritarianism in Russia. Economic prosperity no longer secured support for the status quo regime from the "advanced" voters (i.e., young, educated, well-to-do big-city residents), but it was also insufficient for maintaining the loyalty of "peripheral" voters (i.e., aged, unskilled, relatively poor small-town residents).⁵⁵ Fear, to some extent, was overcome due to the demonstrative bandwagon effect of mass protests,⁵⁶ and because of the successful and creative use of the Internet and social media by opposition activists. Finally, lies, which successfully served the Kremlin's interests for many years, no longer brought the same results as in the "virtual politics" of the 2000s. In this context, Lincoln's quote that one can fool some of the people all of the time, and all of the people some of the time, but cannot fool all of the people all of the time, is relevant. Russian voters could remain indifferent to the regime's manipulation for a long period of time, but the opposition was able to capitalize on these errors and effectively activate and mobilize its supporters. Nevertheless, the regime's resources and capacity were large enough, and the Kremlin did not lose its social bases before the presidential election in March 2012, and ultimately, even though with difficulties, it prevented the further spread of protests and secured the incumbents' continuing dominance.

The reaction of the ruling group to the relative defeat of electoral

⁵⁴ Belanovsky and Dmitriev. *Politicheskii krizis v Rossii*; Chaisty and Whitefield. "The Effects of the Global Economic Crisis on Russian Political Attitudes."

⁵⁵ Daniel Treisman and Mikhail Dmitriev. 2012. "The Other Russia." *Foreign Affairs*, 91 (5): 59-72.

⁵⁶ Timur Kuran. 1991. "Now out of Never: The Element of Surprise in the East European Revolution of 1989." *World Politics*, 44 (1): 7-48.

authoritarianism and the subsequent wave of protests fits standard models, previously offered for analyzing the evolutionary trajectories of classical versions of authoritarian regimes.⁵⁷ Although initially, a limited and partial liberalization of the rules of the game was proposed as a response to the protests, later on the Kremlin turned to tightening the screws, and imposing threats of sanctions against the regime's opponents: since newly offered carrots were not juicy enough, the authorities resorted to a hard stick. Although the regime liberalized the registration rules for new political parties and reestablished popular elections for regional chief executives, these concessions were emasculated to the point where they did not pose any risks to the regime. To the contrary, higher fines for participating in unsanctioned protest actions and increased pressure on opposition leaders and activists, independent media and NGOs sought to increase the costs of oppositional political participation, which has indeed dropped in the wake of the 2011-2012 protests, thereby reducing risks of its spreading such contagion across the country's provinces and among new social milieu. Rather, these political and institutional changes sought to promote the regime's consolidation by correcting mistakes made during the previous stage of authoritarian regime building. But even though the institutional sources of Russia's regime changed slightly, its equilibrium increasingly rests upon lies and fear. Ultimately, the status quo regime is secured by the fact that, despite the protests, the public does not consider the available alternatives as either realistic or attractive;⁵⁸ nevertheless, the prospects for the further consolidation of the authoritarian regime came into question.

An Agenda for Tomorrow

By early 2014, the previous authoritarian equilibrium in Russia seemed to have been restored, at least superficially: Putin had returned to the presidential office and the key posts and sources of rents had been rearranged among major special interest groups; the regime's "fellow travelers" as well as major parts of the general public voluntarily or involuntarily agreed with the preservation of the status quo; political protests had reached the saturation point and were no longer perceived as a dangerous challenge to the regime.

But this equilibrium is partial and unstable: the annexation of Crimea in March 2014 and the following confrontation with the West over Ukraine has shaken it to a great degree. Against this background, the public applauded Russia's aggressive foreign policy and Putin's approval rating

⁵⁷ Przeworski. *Democracy and the Market*, 54-66.

⁵⁸ *Obshchestvo i vlast' v usloviyakh politicheskogo krizisa*, 2012, Doklad ekspertov Tsentra strategicheskikh razrabotok <http://www.echo.msk.ru/doc/891815-echo.html> (accessed February 17, 2014).

climbed above 80 percent, according to numerous surveys.⁵⁹ At least for a while, the Russian leadership received *carte blanche* from its fellow citizens, and used this support to strengthen its dominance by tightening the screws, targeting the opposition, jamming public dissent, and toughening regulations, with the goal of reducing the opportunities for undermining Putin's rule. The Russian media orchestrated an aggressive campaign against the West and its domestic supporters, who were labelled a "fifth column." To paraphrase the Boney M song *Rasputin*, which was popular in the 1970s, Russia in the 2010s under the reign of Putin, turned into a "Russian hate machine," which increasingly relied upon lies and fear in both the domestic and international arenas.

The Kremlin effectively used this moment to correct its errors in the electoral arena: competition in sub-national elections was almost eliminated, so the September 2014 regional and local election cycle more closely resembled hegemonic (or classical) authoritarian regimes than the previous practices of electoral authoritarianism.⁶⁰ Independent media outlets reduced the criticism they leveled against the authorities, and state media's vicious attacks on civic activists and dissenters became showcases for the politics of fear. At the same time, the Russian regime became more personalized and securitized, its policy-making became more spontaneous, and its reliance upon the inner circle of cronies and security apparatus increased many risks both for elites and for society at large, making the Kremlin's next moves less and less predictable. Still, the possible future trajectories of the regime's further evolution are worth further analyzing. There are three potential scenarios: (1) the preservation of the status quo regime (and its further decay); (2) the turn to an "iron fist" with the systematic tightening of the screws by the ruling group in the building of a more repressive regime; and (3) a step-by-step creeping (and quite probably, inconsistent) democratization. The real practice of Russian politics could develop as a combination of these scenarios or as a shift from one scenario to another.

The first scenario, maintaining the status quo, is based on the assumption that the political environment for Russia's regime will remain nearly the same in terms of the constellations of key actors and their

⁵⁹ According to the Levada Center weekly nationwide surveys of Russians, the approval rating of Putin varied between 62 percent and 73 percent in March-August 2014, and the share of his positive assessments at that time reached 80 percent to 86 percent. (www.levada.ru/indeksy, accessed September 14, 2014).

⁶⁰ On the distinction between hegemonic and electoral (competitive) authoritarian regimes, see Mark Morje Howard and Philip G. Roessler. 2006. "Liberalizing Electoral Outcomes in Competitive Authoritarian Regimes." *American Journal of Political Science*. 50 (2), 365-81; for analysis with regard to Russia, see Petr Panov and Cameron Ross. 2013. "Patterns of Electoral Competition in Russian Regional Assemblies: Between 'Hegemonic' and 'Competitive' Authoritarianism." *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization*, 21 (3), 369-99.

opportunities for rent-seeking, while the pressure from the opposition and the scope of mass protests will drop to the pre-2011 level. Under these conditions, the ruling group will have no incentives to make major revisions in the rules of the game. Their calculations would be based on the idea that inertia-based preservation of the status quo is the lesser evil for Russia's elites (in comparison with the risks of democratization and a turn toward a more repressive regime) and even as a second-best option for the opposition. But maintaining this political equilibrium would be a difficult task for Russia's rulers, who have to balance the simultaneous use of sticks and carrots. Ensuring this balance would require a tremendous rise in side payments to the regime's loyalists, so the costs of equilibrium will increase, raising doubts about the durability of this scenario, especially against the background of Russia's increasing economic problems. But if exit will again prevail over voice, then the status quo regime will face smaller challenges, while the costs of overcoming major barriers will increase for the opposition. The lack of major changes may continue until the physical extinction of Russia's rulers or at least as long as the costs of maintaining the equilibrium will not become prohibitively high.

The second scenario assumes that the ruling group will be faced with major challenges in terms of large mass protests, rising perceptions of growing threats from the West and the "fifth column" of domestic "national traitors," a further decline of public support for the regime, and growing and more open dissent among Russia's elites and other previously loyal supporters who cannot be co-opted any longer. In these conditions, the Kremlin's temptation to employ a full-fledged use of the stick might become irresistible. In the long run, this strategy rarely brings positive effects for the regime, especially if its public support is low, but for the short-term, the regime's reaction could postpone major negative consequences at the expense of rising conflicts and violence in the future. Thus, the ruling group can openly take the iron fist approach and demolish the façade of democratic institutions. It is hard to predict possible revisions of the rules of the game, but these changes are likely to depend not upon real challenges and risks for the ruling group, but rather upon its perceptions about their imagined consequences. The iron fist choice would inevitably result in increased agency costs for maintaining the political equilibrium due to increasing side payments to the coercive apparatus of the state. At the same time, a tough crackdown will not necessarily lead to risks of disequilibrium for the regime: as long as the exit option in the form of emigration will remain available for the advanced part of Russian society, the risks of a rising voice will remain relatively low, as the experience of Belarus under Lukashenka suggests. Yet, authoritarian regimes with initially low repressiveness rarely became much more repressive: after relying for a relatively long time on carrots, the successful use of sticks is

not an easy task.⁶¹ The possible turn to the iron fist could also increase the risk of intra-elite conflicts, especially given the notorious inefficiency of the coercive apparatus of the state and its deep engagement to rent-seeking economic activities. In this context, the reliance on repressions might result in the regime's collapse, similarly to what happened in the Soviet Union in August 1991.

Finally, the third scenario, a step-by-step creeping democratization through a set of strategic choices of both the ruling group and the opposition, whose strategies and constellations of actors might change over time⁶² is based on the following sequencing: under pressure from the opposition and society at large, the ruling groups might pursue some partial regime liberalization, and then the widening room for political participation might contribute to the promotion of open divisions within the ruling group, their interactions with the opposition in one way or another, and to the opening of political competition. Judging from this perspective, one might consider the wave of 2011-2012 protests as an initial move toward this scenario. But the failure at each of its steps and the return back to the status quo regime or the turning to an iron fist is no less probable than the "success story" of the regime's democratization. In fact, the strategy of the ruling group could change only if and when societal pressure will not only increase over time, but also be enhanced by simultaneous and cumulative efforts by the opposition, providing that it will be able to mobilize various segments of Russian society on the basis of a negative consensus against the existing regime. So far, the current state of affairs in Russia is nearly the opposite: the very capacity of organized political dissent is under question at the moment.

Given the electoral nature of Russia's authoritarianism, elections (as long as they exist even in the current form) might serve as a major mechanism for undermining the status quo regime. Such an outcome does not mean that Russia will become a democracy if and when the opposition will achieve an electoral defeat over the ruling group under an authoritarian regime. But the "stunning" effect of the elections will be multiplied if the opposition will be able to cooperate in terms of nominating some alternative candidates or even propose voting for anyone but the incumbents and their nominees (like its strategy in the 2011 parliamentary elections), thus maximizing the Kremlin's election losses. And if subnational elections will result in a cascade of "stunning" effects, then the ruling group might be forced to go beyond cosmetic liberalization of the rules of the game, therefore opening the political opportunity structure for the opposition. If these developments go further, one might expect that former loyalists of

⁶¹ Christian Davenport. 2007. *State Repressions and the Domestic Democratic Peace*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

⁶² Przeworski. *Democracy and the Market*, 69-72.

the ruling group would more often campaign under the opposition flag and rely upon its electoral support to address the rising anti-system mood of the voters. And if elections do become the instrument for overturning the status quo, then electoral authoritarianism will gradually give way to electoral democracy. Yet, at the moment, conditions for such an outcome are unlikely. However, the very existence of democratic institutions in Russia means that we cannot preclude this possibility entirely, even if the institutions' current function is to maintain electoral authoritarianism.

Concluding Remarks

To understand the direction of further regime change, we must examine two key variables in the contemporary context of electoral authoritarianism. First, on the political demand side, public opinion changes might severely affect mass behavior as well as the choices of elites. But these trends cannot be easily detected, traced and evaluated under the conditions of authoritarian regimes because of preference falsification,⁶³ which systematically distorts the results of mass surveys and focus groups, as citizens claim that they support socially and politically approved preferences, when in fact they do not. In certain instances, as in the case of the East European revolutions of 1989, true public preferences became visible almost overnight, contributing to the collapse of authoritarian regimes, but often these preferences remain unknown for a long period of time until new challenges to the regime arise "out of nowhere." If a seemingly stable authoritarian regime might be overthrown at any given critical juncture, then the behavior of all participants becomes unpredictable almost by definition.

Second, on the regime's supply side, the key issue for the survival of authoritarianism is the likelihood for the use of coercion vis-à-vis the opposition, and possible consequences of the use of repressions. In the case of Russia, this issue is especially salient. Yet leaders of numerous authoritarian regimes did not hold back on the use of force if and when their political survival came under threat, and they routinely used mass political violence, including killings. However, for those regimes which are not practicing mass repressions, the forced turn from the use of carrots to relying upon sticks is a tough choice. Even if repressions might have no immediate political consequences for a regime, they might affect the strategies of the ruling groups in the long run. The key dilemma, "to beat or not to beat" opposition-driven mass protests often were resolved on the basis of the previous experience of rulers, as in the case of China in 1989. Then the authoritarian regime was able to apply coercion against the Tiananmen Square protesters due to the prevalence among the Chinese

⁶³ Kuran. *Now Out of Never*.

Communist Party leadership of revolutionary veterans who regularly killed their fellow citizens en masse during power struggles beginning earlier in the century.⁶⁴ Russia's post-Communist experience is different because of the low repressiveness of the status quo regime and the low reliability of the coercive apparatus. But one should not consider this issue only as the problem of technical boundaries of coercion, which might be passed if and when the scope and scale of mass protests becomes unmanageable in physical terms.⁶⁵ Rather, the sequences of questions might be different: (1) Are Russia's rulers, in the case of real or imagined threats to their political survival, ready to give the command to use mass violence? (2) If so, will their subordinates successfully implement this command, so the threat will be eliminated? And, (3) if so, would Russia's rulers become hostages of the executioners they assigned to this job? Answering these questions is a daunting task.

The demise of the Communist regime and the collapse of the Soviet Union occurred in 1991, when many observers perceived it as a part of a seemingly worldwide spread of democratization, which "doomed" post-Soviet countries to become democracies. These perceptions were illusory at best. What was considered more than twenty years ago as the emergence of a new post-Communist democracy in Russia, in fact turned into the troubled formation of a new authoritarian regime, which became a part of the global "age of electoral authoritarianism" after the Cold War.⁶⁶ But, even after almost a quarter century of authoritarian regime-building, the wind of change might come to Russia again, because of many factors, including the learning effect of the recent authoritarian experience and the inevitable process of generational change.

But the lessons of the post-Soviet experience in Russia have been learned, although conditions for a conscious and purposeful democratization are far from fruitful at the moment. The public demand for political changes will probably increase over time, providing a small bias of hope that the further regime trajectory will not simply move "out of the frying pan into the fire"⁶⁷ similarly to transitions in the 1990s and especially in the 2000s. Thus, the very slogan of the protest rallies organized by the opposition – "Russia will be free!" – might become a key item on the political agenda of Russian society. In fact, Russia will be free, but the question is when, how, and at what cost.

⁶⁴ Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow and Charles Tilly. 2001. *Dynamics of Contention*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 307-22.

⁶⁵ Przeworski. *Democracy and the Market*, 64.

⁶⁶ Levitsky and Way. *Competitive Authoritarianism*; Morse. "The Age of Electoral Authoritarianism."

⁶⁷ Gel'man. "Out of the Frying Pan, Into the Fire?"