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Michael McFaul

**Institutions:** Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

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# Russian Democracy: Still Not a Lost Cause

In the recent explosion of articles about "Who Lost Russia," analysts have focused almost exclusively on the trials and tribulations of Russia's economic reform and Western attempts to assist these reforms. Russia's financial collapse in August 1998 and recent accusations of money laundering through the Bank of New York are cited as evidence that Russia is lost. The logic of this analysis is flawed. It assumes that these setbacks to economic reform or the rule of law represent end points in Russian history. In fact, they may really just reflect the transitional consequences of Russia's ongoing revolution. Russia is midstream in one of the most far-reaching attempts in history to simultaneously transform an empire, a polity, and an economy. It is naive to expect this revolution to go smoothly all the way.

Russia's transition has been not only long but also confrontational and at times violent. Negotiation between the ancient regime leaders and democratic challengers never produced agreements or constitutions. Instead, imposition was the mode of transition. Most dramatically, Yeltsin's imposition of the political rules of the game in the fall of 1993 produced the current political order. This system, often called the Second Russian Republic, has many qualities of an electoral democracy, even if it lacks the deeper attributes of liberal democracy.<sup>1</sup>

After destroying his political enemies by force in October 1993, Yeltsin used his temporary political advantage to dictate a new political order, initiating Russia's third attempt at democratic transition. In November 1993, he published a new constitution and announced a referendum on the new basic law for December 1993. At the same time, voters were asked to elect

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Michael McFaul is a senior associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in Washington and an assistant professor of political science and Hoover Fellow at Stanford University in California.

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representatives to a new bicameral parliament replacing the Congress of People's Deputies. The October events—a euphemism for the armed conflict between the president and the parliament on October 3-4, 1993—were a blow to popular support for Russian democracy. Opinion polls immediately after the October 1993 standoff revealed that support for democracy—a word unfortunately identified with the Yeltsin regime—had decreased considerably. Yet a majority (or close to a majority because the turnout numbers were probably falsified) participated and voted to ratify a

new constitution. Equally important, major parties from the opposition, including the Communist Party of the Russian Federation and the Agrarian Party of Russia, chose after long and hard debate to participate. Even the losers from the October 1993 standoff believed they were better off if they acquiesced to Yeltsin's rules, however flawed, than if they challenged the regime by other means.

## The Kremlin-controlled media has blatantly violated Russia's electoral law.

Since 1993, all major political actors have abided by the political rules of the game outlined in the new constitution. Likewise, all political individuals and organizations of consequence participated in the 1995 parliamentary election, the 1996 presidential election, and dozens of elections for regional executives and legislative representatives since 1996. On the whole, elections have been competitive and consequential, as two-thirds of the Duma deputies elected in 1993 did not win reelection or compete for reelection in 1995, and nearly half of the regional heads of administration lost reelection bids. The 1999-2000 electoral cycle already has produced some negative signs for the future of competitive and fair elections. Most disturbingly, the Kremlin-controlled media has blatantly violated Russia's electoral law by viciously attacking opposition parties participating the December 1999 parliamentary elections, a hint of what might ensue in 2000 presidential elections. Nonetheless, however imperfect, elections are the only game in town for assuming political power, and the constitution survives as the ultimate guide for resolving conflicts between the executive and the legislative branches.

Measuring the stability and quality of this system involves two related but distinct undertakings. Full-blown liberal democracies have well-developed party systems, vibrant civil societies, rule of law, an independent media, and mature liberal norms embedded in society. They are more immune to anti-democratic challenges than partial or electoral democracies that use elec-

tions to select political leaders but lack many of these deeper qualities of democracy.<sup>2</sup> However, a political system can be stable without being liberal. Likewise an electoral democracy can be stable without being a liberal democracy. In a democratic polity, stability may be enhanced and even stimulated by development of liberal institutions, but the causal arrow may also point in the opposite direction. Moreover, countries can get stuck in the “twilight zone”<sup>3</sup> between electoral and liberal democracy, sometimes called unconsolidated democracies or illiberal democracies.

The current Russian political system has many attributes of an unconsolidated democracy or electoral democracy, while still lacking the features of a liberal democracy. The distribution of formal powers between the president and parliament is too skewed in favor of the president. Russia's party system, civil society, and rule of law are underdeveloped. The crude military methods being deployed to “fight terrorism” in Chechnya suggests that respect for basic human rights of all Russian citizens still does not exist within the Russian state or society. Yet this system exhibits qualities of stability. In Russia today, all major actors demonstrate an interest in the institutions of democracy. No major group believes that it will be better off by deviating from electoral and constitutional rules. Different actors want to change the specific form of the constitution and the specific rules governing elections, but no major political force has an incentive to violate these basic democratic rules of the game of Russia's polity.

## **The Revolution Is Over**

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In contrast to earlier periods in the Soviet-Russian transition, the current system is more stable owing to two major changes. One is the narrowed agenda of change. A decade ago, three major questions were on the agenda: Where were the borders of the nation and state? What kind of economy should the Soviet Union-Russia have? What kind of political system should be created? Today two of these major issues are resolved. With the exception of Chechnya, the borders of the Russian state are no longer in dispute. Likewise the market has replaced the command economy, and few believe that there will be a reversal. Although Russia and Belarus have moved closer to reuniting over the past several years, no serious political force in Russia today believes that it can recreate the Soviet Union by controlling the Kremlin. Nor do serious actors believe that they can roll back capitalism if they take back the Kremlin extraconstitutionally.

As the stakes for obtaining political power decrease, the time horizons of those seeking political power stretch further into the future. When the Soviet Union's fate was on the line, political actors heavily discounted the fu-

ture and focused solely on the short-term consequences of collapse or preservation of the state. The same was true of economic reform. Political actors rightly believed that initial decisions about these outcomes would have long-term consequences; therefore the time to effect initial trajectories was the present, not the future. Because actors did not know the consequences of losing these debates, they played for broke, believing there might be no tomorrow if they lost. As these issues have been resolved, the imperative for immediate action is no longer obvious, because actors are compelled to adopt longer-term policy agendas within the general parameters of the economic and political system in place. Equally important, the losers have not been killed or imprisoned but have reemerged as important actors within the new political system. For example, Anatoly Lukyanov, a loser from the August 1991 coup attempt, is a Duma Deputy and chairman of the Legislative Affairs Committee, whereas Aleksandr Rutskoi, a loser from the 1993 military confrontation, is governor of Kursk Oblast. The safer it is to lose, the longer politicians can stay in the democratic game.

### **Challenges to Stability from Within the Kremlin**

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A second stabilizing development has been the new balance of power between political forces that has evolved since the 1993 showdown. A skewed distribution of power in favor of one side created a focal point for institutional emergence in 1993; Yeltsin dictated the rules and everyone had two choices—acquiesce or reject. Most acquiesced. Ironically, the weakening of this same side over time has helped preserve the 1993 constitutional design. After October 1993, Yeltsin and his entourage represented the one political force in Russia with the power to undermine the new political rules of the game. At the beginning of 1996, when Yeltsin's popular support hovered in the single digits only months before the presidential election, many predicted that he would use his disproportionate power (or, more accurately, his perceived preponderance of power) to stay in command. One of his closest advisers at the time, Aleksandr Korzhakov, urged him to do so. When tempted by the extraconstitutional option during the 1996 presidential election, Yeltsin abided by the electoral process.

We do not know, and probably never will, why he decided to play by these electoral rules. On the one hand, the president must have reasoned that he was too weak, domestically and internationally, to pull off a coup. Even if he and his allies wanted to use extraconstitutional means to impose their preferences regarding a political issue, the probability that the military would intervene again on his behalf or that the population would support him was much lower after the October 1993 confrontation.<sup>4</sup> On

the other hand, despite poor ratings, Yeltsin was confident he could win the election. If he believed he could win, the electoral path was a less costly way to hold onto power.

Of course, we will never know what would have happened had Yeltsin lost the 1996 election. But we do know that his ability to stay in power by extraconstitutional means has been drastically reduced since the 1996 vote. Yeltsin's poor health, the August 1998 financial crisis, and an increasingly strained relationship with the military have weakened Yeltsin's ability to stay in power by extraconstitutional means after his term ends in the summer of 2000. Yeltsin's diminished power in combination with the growing strength of other political forces has produced a new balance of power in favor of the status quo.

Paradoxically, the recent meteoric rise in popularity of Prime Minister Vladimir Putin could eventually threaten the stable balance of power that has evolved over the last several years. Riding the wave of support for the Russian military intervention into Chechnya, Putin has enjoyed the highest approval ratings of any Russia prime minister in the last decade. If Putin can sustain this support in the long haul, he and his allies could eventually be in a position to rewrite the political rules of the game again. To survive past the next electoral cycle, Russian democracy now needs the strengthening of opposition parties like the Communist Party. Too much power concentrated in one individual or group will be destabilizing.

**So many rights exist  
that all U.S. citizens  
now are victims of  
discrimination.**

### **Challenges to Stability from Outside the Kremlin**

Yeltsin's weakened position has not translated into a strengthened position for other antidemocratic forces outside the Kremlin. Russia's political landscape is still littered with antisystemic parties, such as Viktor Anpilov's neo-communist movement, Working Russia, or Aleksandr Barkashov's neofascist group, Russia National Union. These groups openly advocate the overthrow of the existing political order, have significant and loyal followings, and received boosts in attention after the August 1999 financial meltdown.<sup>5</sup> To date, however, these groups have failed to mobilize people on a national scale. Most important, they have not articulated an alternative vision for Russia's future.

Some analysts classify the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF) as an antisystemic party. The authoritarian threat from the CPRF,

however, has not lived up to the print hype accorded it by Moscow's elite. The CPRF's adherence to the democratic process has been consistent. Neither Zyuganov nor any major figure within the CPRF has advocated changing the constitutional order by extraconstitutional means. Instead, the CPRF has participated in all postcommunist elections as a means of influencing change from within. In fact, electoral success has helped to co-opt the CPRF into the electoral process. Zyuganov and other CPRF leaders believe, even after their 1996 electoral defeat, that they can come to power through the ballot box. This particular uncertainty—about who will win the next election—has helped to stabilize Russia's democratic institutions. Regarding economic policy, the party's program has gravitated increasingly towards support for the market economy.<sup>6</sup>

## A political system can be stable without being liberal.

slide through the parliament largely intact. With one exception, the opposition-dominated parliament has signed off on all of Yeltsin's candidates for prime minister.

From August 1998 to May 1999, Russia's communists had their best opportunity to challenge the economic and political order when their candidate, Yevgeny Primakov, became prime minister against Yeltsin's wishes after the August 1998 financial meltdown. Assuming office, Primakov invited Communist Party member Yury Maslyukov to be his economic czar. Primakov's government, however, proved to be conservative in fiscal and monetary policy. Instead of chasing the IMF out of Russia, Primakov negotiated with this "tool of imperialism" and agreed to introduce legislation recommended by the International Monetary Fund (IMF). In its negotiations with the World Bank, the Primakov government rejected the bank's recommendation for pension payments as too high. When offered the opportunity to roll back capitalism, Russia's communists adhered to the general principles of the system in place. Joining and supporting a coalition government demonstrated the CPRF's commitment to the existing order.

Vladimir Zhirinovsky's Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR) represents a political force in Russia with the potential to turn against the new democratic order. Although Zhirinovsky's electoral popularity has waned considerably since his 1993 showing, he and his party still play a role in Russian politics. It is difficult to determine whether the LDPR is a fascist party-

in-waiting or has the potential to come to power. Zhirinovsky has consistently espoused racist views. He has advocated banning all political parties and creating an authoritarian regime to implement economic reform. His writings are openly imperial as he seeks to re-create greater Russia. At the same time, Zhirinovsky's actions have never strayed into extraconstitutional domains. Privately, LDPR leaders say they want to be part of the establishment—the party of power. To demonstrate this desire, Zhirinovsky ran for governor of Beograd in the spring of 1999 (and lost) in recognition that membership in the “governor’s club”—the Federation Council—is a ticket to legitimacy in elite circles. In practice, the LDPR operates more as a commercial operation than a fascist movement. For the right price, the LDPR will vote for anything.

Potential successors to Yeltsin such as Moscow mayor Yury Luzhkov, Krasnoyarsk governor Aleksandr Lebed, former Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov, and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin have made antidemocratic statements and project authoritarian personalities, suggesting that the next elected president in Russia may be the last elected president. In their actions, neither Luzhkov nor Lebed has lived up to their authoritarian reputations. Putin’s role in the Chechen invasion suggests that he is willing to violate human rights for political purposes, while his KGB background give cause for concern about his commitment to democratic principles. It is too early, however, to make a final judgement of this new, unknown figure in Russian politics. While prime minister, Primakov floated antidemocratic ideas openly, such as appointing rather than electing regional heads of administrations. Given his age and cautious demeanor, Primakov will not have the will or time to reintroduce authoritarian rule should he be elected president. Finally, Russia’s military and security services, a traditional threat to weak democracies during economic crises in other countries, show little proclivity to intervene in Russia’s domestic affairs.<sup>7</sup>

Luzhkov, Lebed, Zhirinovsky, the communists, and even those affiliated with Yeltsin continue to play by the rules not only out of a sense of weakness but also in the belief that the rules serve their immediate political purposes. It is important that these divergent political actors believe that they have some chance to win the next election. They seem to believe that, although difficult to measure, their odds of winning through the ballot box are better than by the barrel of a gun.

All now realize that the costs of overturning Russia’s imperfect democracy through nondemocratic means are much greater than the costs of participating in an imperfect democracy. No one has articulated a better alternative or outlined a means to a new political order. It is democracy by default.

## Prospects for Reform of Russia's Political System

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Factors that enhance the stability of Russian democracy do not necessarily improve the quality of its democracy. On the contrary, the factors that produce path dependency regarding the basic rules of electoral democracy can also lock in illiberal institutions. Because the agenda of change is much narrower today and the balance of power does not offer any major group the opportunity or temptation to seize (or maintain) power by other means, electoral democracy has become “the only game in town.” However, Russia’s polity still lacks many institutional and attitudinal features of a liberal democracy.

The nature of Russia’s transition from communist rule—protracted, conflictual, and imposed—has impeded consolidation of liberal democratic institutions and liberal democratic values. In other words, there is a causal relationship between the kind of transition and the kind of democracy to emerge. Russia’s protracted and confrontational transition has had negative consequences for the development of liberal democratic institutions and attitudes. Superpresidentialism, a weakly institutionalized party system, a poorly organized civil society, an ineffective state, and a slowly developing commitment to the rule of law are serious institutional flaws in Russia’s new democratic polity. Although a vast improvement over Soviet communism, the Russian system that has consolidated since 1993 lacks many qualities of a liberal democracy. These institutional flaws in turn have undermined attitudinal support for democracy within Russia. And there is no analytical or empirical reason to assume that “electoral democracy” is a weigh station on the way to “liberal democracy.” Russia could be stuck with its flawed political system for a long time.

Few of Russia’s illiberal institutional arrangements, however, appear to be permanent features of the Russian polity. A strong presidency, for example, does not enjoy wide support within Russia. A handful of leaders, such as former Prime Minister Sergei Stepashin and Vladimir Zhirinovsky, have emphasized the importance of preserving a strong presidency, while almost everyone agrees that Russia should not become a parliamentary democracy. At the same time, almost every political party has an interest in strengthening the powers of the parliament and the prime minister. Regional executives, although fearful of stronger local parliaments, have an interest in weakening the president’s prerogative since a weakened central authority increases their local power. Over time, big business also has powerful incentives to weaken the powers of the presidency. A presidency powerful enough to give them property is powerful enough to take it away. Even some of Yeltsin’s advisers have advocated weakening the presidential office as they begin to fear

who might occupy the office after Yeltsin. The increased attention devoted to this year's parliamentary election suggests that the Duma has already increased its status and power in Russian politics since the last vote.

The one powerful actor in favor of a strong presidency is the president, be it Yeltsin or his successor. The difficult constitutional amendment process enhances the president's ability to maintain a strong presidential system. Decreasing the powers of the president will be more difficult after the next presidential elections, especially if an authoritative figure such as Putin wins. That many important constituencies do not have large stakes in the presidential system suggests that it may be vulnerable over time. Zyuganov, Yavlinsky, and Primakov are presidential candidates who support amendments which enhance the power of government and parliament and weaken the presidency.

A second institutional flaw in Russia's political system is the lack of clarity regarding lines of authority and responsibility between national and subnational governments. Some predict the Russian state will eventually implode, much as the Soviet Union did in 1991. Recent developments in the Caucuses suggest that Chechnya is not the last succession crisis but the first of many.

The history of even the most robust federal states created from below—from governments agreeing to recognize a new higher authority—suggests that the balance of power between the center and the subnational governments is always shifting and sometimes results in institutional breakdown. It is even more difficult to create federal order from the ruins of a unitary state like the Soviet Union.

At the same time, the nature of Russia's mode of transition has further accentuated federal dilemmas, suggesting that institutional ambiguities between center and regions are transitional and not permanent. In challenging Soviet authority, Yeltsin and his political allies consciously and deliberately made their struggle about sovereignty. Yeltsin employed the language of sovereignty in part to forge alliances with leaders of autonomous republics and oblasts within the Russian Federation, urging them in the summer of 1990 to "take as much sovereignty as you can handle."<sup>8</sup> After Soviet dissolution, these declarations came back to haunt him when republics made declarations of sovereignty. Closure to the federal debate did not come automatically after ratification of a new constitution because the new basic law did not include the Federal Treaty, an omission that infuriated republican leaders and liberal advocates of asymmetric federalism. Despite these objections,

**T**he distribution of formal powers is too skewed in favor of the president.

the subsequent ratification of a new constitution did slow the devolution of political power. The constitution permitted asymmetric federalism to continue by allowing the central government to enter into bilateral agreement with individual regions. At the same time, the new constitution did not provide for provision for secession, a constraint that all regional rulers except one—Chechnya—accepted.

Russia could be stuck with its flawed political system for a long time.

Republics and regions continue to engage Moscow in a series of bilateral treaties to exact more concessions. Several republic constitutions also contradict federal law. Nonetheless, the threat of outright secession by any republic has decreased, not increased, over time. Instead, the balance of power and division of jurisdiction between the “center” and the “regions” have remained in flux and open to constant renegotiations. As long as the center remains weak, Moscow will have no interest in codifying transparent rules—a necessary condition for a stable federal order—because any move toward clarification would make evident regional defiance and expose the center’s weakness. Instead, the center has had to pursue ad hoc personalized bargains with individual regional leaders, which has been successful as a strategy to avoid dissolution but has institutionalized practices antithetical to federalism.

Decentralization and the rising power of regional leaders are important checks on authoritarian rule from Moscow. Yet, the center’s ability to execute national policies through the offices of regional state institutions has weakened considerably as a result of years of polarization and stalemate within the center. Even basic state operations such as tax transfers between the center and the regions no longer occur consistently as regions assume an increasing share of taxes collected.<sup>9</sup> The continued ambiguity between center and region suggests that consolidation of a stable Russian federalism will occur only in the future.

Another flaw in Russia’s new democracy is its weak party system. Yet, it is difficult to identify permanent coalitions or lock-in mechanisms that will perpetuate an inchoate party system indefinitely. Russia’s mixed electoral system has faced numerous challenges since 1993 but has remained in place for three consecutive parliamentary elections. The persistence of this electoral system in turn has shaped and will continue to shape the strategies of political aspirants in ways that enhance party development. That parties continue to organize the work of the Duma stimulates interest in party de-

velopment. Party fragmentation also may be transitional rather than permanent in Russian democracy. Compared with East European postcommunist transitions, Russia has been slower to decrease the number of “effective parties” in the parliament. Yet, the trajectory appears to be toward consolidation, not fragmentation, as the next Duma is likely to be dominated by four or five parties, not dozens. Structural, institutional, and geographic impediments to party development will persist, and Russia’s party system might be weakly institutionalized for a long time. But the existence of factors in favor of party development suggests that a weak party system need not be a permanent quality of the Russian political system.

## The Uncertain Future of Liberal Democracy in Russia

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Without looking too deeply into the crystal ball, one could invoke the same uncertainty about the permanence of illiberal institutions for virtually every illiberal feature of Russia’s democracy. As capitalism develops and people learn better how the institutions of interest intermediation work, civic organization has the potential to expand. The repetition of elections will help civic groups learn the importance of mobilization and political participation. “Outsider” candidates also will turn to civic groups for support if they cannot access campaign resources from the establishment. Economic growth, when it eventually occurs, will make resources currently in short supply available to civic groups. Likewise, the growth of capitalism will create incentives for developing the rule of law. Finally, improvement in the institutional quality of democracy also can change public attitudes about the value of democracy. The better Russian democracy performs, the more likely normative support for democracy will go.

This would be progress, but none of it is predestined. Russia’s illiberal system could survive for years, if not decades. The illiberal features of Russian democracy also do not appear to be permanent features of Russia’s political system. Significantly, major groups in society have incentives to change these illiberal institutions. Other major groups also have an interest in their persistence. This balance of power suggests that a struggle for the future of liberal democracy is more likely than the persistence of the status quo. The struggle, however, promises to be long.

## Notes

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1. On the emergence of this system, see Michael McFaul, “Lessons from Russia’s Protracted Transition from Communist Rule,” *Political Science Quarterly* 114, no. 1 (Spring 1999): 103-130.

2. On the important distinction between electoral and liberal democracy, see Larry Diamond, *Developing Democracy* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999).
3. Diamond, *Developing Democracy*, p. 22.
4. See Deborah Yarsike Ball, "How Reliable Are Russia's Officers?" *Jane's Intelligence Review* (May 1996): 206; *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, July 23, 1999 (interview with former Minister of the Interior Anatoly Kulikov).
5. In the 1995 parliamentary elections, Anpilov's coalition won almost three million votes. One national poll, conducted in January 1999 by the Russian Social-Economic Agency, recorded support for the Russian National Union to be as high as 8.4 percent; see "Russian Opinion Poll Puts Communists Ahead," *Bloomberg*, February 3, 1999. No other polling agency has recorded such a high number for this openly fascist organization.
6. See Mikhail Dmitriev, "Party Economic Programs and Implications," in Michael McFaul, Nikolai Petrov, and Andrei Ryabov, eds., *Primer on Russia's 1999 Duma Elections* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1999).
7. See Zoltan Barany, "Controlling the Military: A Partial Success," *Journal of Democracy* 10, no. 2 (April 1999): 54-67.
8. See John Dunlop, *The Rise of Russia and the Fall of the Soviet Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 54-58, 62-64.
9. For example, Andrei Illarionov calculates that the federal government acquired only 11.6 percent of the 33.0 percent of revenues collected by the general government, meaning that regional governments kept the majority of all tax funds collected in 1997. See Andrei Illarionov, "The Roots of the Economic Crisis: What Went Wrong in Russia," *Journal of Democracy* 10, no. 2 (April 1999): 68-82.