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Russia's duma elections and the practice of Russian democracy

Former President Vladimir Putin and official spokespersons for the Russian political leadership have repeatedly proclaimed their commitment to democratic values, but western observers and domestic critics are sceptical.¹ The most recent election for the Russian parliament on 2 December 2007—the state duma—exemplified the many ambiguities about the state of democracy in Russia. While the elections were ostensibly competitive—11 parties on the ballot and four winning seats in the legislature—international observers, to the extent they were present, made contradictory judgements on the democratic credentials of the vote. Not surprisingly, those from the Commonwealth of Independent States approved the election, while the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) refused to send observers be-

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¹ See, for example, Putin's "Message to the federal assembly of the Russian Federation," Moscow, 26 April 2007, which particularly focuses on the role of new electoral procedures for Russia's democratic development, and refers to the "pseudodemocratic phraseology" of some critics, www.kremlin.ru.

cause the conditions offered by the Russian government were said to prevent them from doing a proper job. The Council of Europe, on the other hand, carried out its observer mission, concluding that while the elections were “to a great extent free in terms of a variety voting options, they were definitely not fair.”²

Problems with the election had less to do with overt fraud (although opposition forces made some allegations of that as well) but with restrictions on conditions preceding and surrounding the vote. These restrictions included selective enforcement of electoral laws in order to exclude some parties from participating, general crackdowns on critics of the regime, restrictions on public gatherings by groups opposing the government, and media bias. The Council of Europe made specific mention of “abuse of administrative resources,” as well as unequal media access, use of force against and harassment of opposition leaders, restrictive effects of electoral legislation, and voting improprieties on election day.³ In addition, pressure on voters to support United Russia was widely reported in the press, with allegations that school teachers, other state employees, and students were threatened with sanctions if they didn’t vote “correctly.”⁴ In the larger context, many observers considered these actions unfavourable in democratic governance.

Given the consistently high level of popularity of Vladimir Putin both preceding and following the election, and the availability of methods of informal influence over regional elites (who in turn have informal tools to influence the regional vote), the extraordinary methods applied in order to assure a high vote for United Russia seem puzzling. Some of these measures simply opened the door to further allegations about a slide toward authoritarianism, while being unlikely to affect the outcome in any significant way.

2 “Observation of the parliamentary elections in the Russian Federation (2 December 2007),” Ad hoc committee of the bureau of the assembly, parliamentary assembly of the Council of Europe, document 11473, 20 December 2007, 5, www.assembly.coe.int.

3 Ibid.

4 Survey results indicated that 17 percent of respondents reported that they or those close to them were faced with threats or payments from representatives of the local organs, from superiors at work, from electoral commission workers, or from other officials in relation to participation in the election. Analytical Center of Yurii Levada, “Chestnost’ vyborov (4 December 2007,” based on a survey carried out 20-24 November 2007 involving a representative sample of Russia with 1600 respondents, www.levada.ru.

This article explores possible reasons underlying the efforts of the Russian leadership to assure the election outcome, and suggests some criteria for assessing their compatibility with democratic practice. The underlying argument is that the “colour revolutions” that took place in other postcommunist countries since November 2003, notably Ukraine’s orange revolution, offered a powerful impetus for Russian elites to “manage” the 2007 Russian parliamentary election even more firmly than they had in 2003. No doubt other underlying factors reinforced this tendency, including Putin’s own career background and personal inclinations, worries about terrorist attacks, cultural predispositions, the weakness of civil society, and “legacies of totalitarianism.” This analysis resists the temptation of falling back on these standard explanations, and assumes a rational calculation of interest on the part of the Russian leadership.

BACKSLIDE FROM DEMOCRACY PRECEDING THE 2007 ELECTION?

The 2007 дума elections should be viewed in the larger context of Russia’s “backslide” from the democratization impetus that took hold in the Yeltsin years. Western scholarly literature has identified the establishment of postcommunist institutional structures involving “super-presidential systems” as a common feature that makes initial commitments to democratic processes but then sees regression to more authoritarian structures. Indeed, one outcome of the orange revolution in Ukraine was constitutional changes that reduced the power of the president and increased the role of parliament.

The reason why presidential systems are prone to backsliding, according to M. Steven Fish, has to do with the dangers associated with a concentration of power in the national executive branches, particularly in the face of weak opposition forces and an ineffectual or largely impotent legislature.⁵

Persuasive as this explanation is, it is important to avoid institutional determinism; some of the same factors that make postcommunist presidential systems prone to authoritarian tendencies also explain their establishment in the first place. Among these are historical preferences for personal power relationships, clientele-based traditions, and the weak institutionalization of previously competitive political parties.

5 M. Steven Fish, “The dynamics of democratic erosion,” in Richard D. Anderson, Jr., Steven M. Fish, Stephen E. Hanson, and Philip G. Roeder, eds., *Postcommunism and the Theory of Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 54-95.

In the Russian case, the foundation for a strong presidency was established in the 1993 constitution. While Yeltsin took advantage of presidential prerogatives such as the power of decree and appointment, he was not successful in using these tools to establish the capacity of the state to assure compliance with national legislation or policies. Basically, despite the existence of a strong presidential office, the state was weak. Putin's efforts to restore state capacity—in part through what he dubbed a “vertical structure of executive power”—relied not only on powers granted to the president in the constitution, but also on his personal authority and popularity. His political adeptness was in combining institutional innovations with personal ties with regional leaders and other potentially competing power centres. Fish points out the anti-institutional bias of postcommunist super presidencies, since institutions “may become wellsprings of rival power centres.”⁶ This may explain the decision of both Yeltsin and Putin not to join a political party, even as Putin agreed to head the United Party electoral list in 2007 (without being a United Russia member). In doing so, neither leader made himself accountable to any institution. And, as Fish points out, super presidencies in post-communist states have frequently been justified as necessary to promote democracy against the old guard. An example of this is in Putin's position of strong central power reinforcing the rule of law, thus laying the groundwork for democracy.

Elections provide an excellent opportunity to assess the health of democratization efforts because they represent the clearest opportunity for citizens to demand accountability from their leaders, and because they can be avenues for real power transfers from one political force to another, something that democratization theorists have identified as the marker of democratic consolidation. In this, political elites must accept uncertain outcomes of election rules is fair (i.e., if the outcome of elections are not predetermined and elections are accepted as the “only game in town”).⁷

Concerns about democracy in Russia have grown since Putin became president in 2000, but especially since the 2003-04 election cycle. One trigger for concern has been a decline in the role of elections as a vehicle for leadership selection and a concomitant loss of public capacity to hold leaders

6 Ibid., 83.

7 Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan, “Toward consolidated democracies,” *Journal of Democracy* 7, no. 2 (1996): 14-33.

accountable. While plenty of elections still occur, they have less impact than before. The decision in 2004 to eliminate the popular election of governors of Russia's federal units has reduced the ability of the public to have control over important elements of national politics. The governors, now proposed by the president and approved by the regional legislature, are highly dependent on the federal centre. The regional legislatures have become quite docile in approving the president's nominees. Legislative elections continue, but the Kremlin's favoured party, United Russia, has been the winner in almost all of these.⁸ In cases where opposition parties threatened to challenge that dominant position (e.g., the Yabloko party in St. Petersburg), they were kept off the ballot based on a contested application of election laws.⁹ The appointed governor in turn determines one of the region's representatives to the upper house of the national legislature (the federation council) and the regional legislature appoints the other. These relationships, rooted in the quasi-appointment of the governors, have produced a cycle of dependence between regional and central authorities. Even before these changes, Russians had good reason to question the efficacy of elections in affecting political outcomes, since they have never really led to an alteration in government. Public opinion polls confirm that most Russians do not expect elections to have a significant impact on their lives.¹⁰

With elections playing a smaller role, informal political relationships have become more important, particularly the reinforcement of patronage ties between Moscow and regional elites. The use of United Russia as a vehicle of political patronage for the Kremlin has become increasingly public, making evident the dependence of officials at all levels on the goodwill of the president and his advisers. This patronage system has become an alternate vehicle to elections for political promotion to top posts. It also has the

8 Darrell Slider, "'United Russia' and Russia's governors: The path to a one-party system," paper presented by the American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies national convention, Washington DC, 17 November 2006.

9 Galina Stolyarova, "Yabloko thrown out of elections," *St. Petersburg Times*, 30 January 2007, www.sptimes.ru.

10 See results report by the Russian survey organization, the public opinion foundation, "Views on elections," 16 August 2007 (1500 respondents from 44 regions) indicating 59 percent of respondents didn't expect the parliamentary elections to have an effect on the lives of ordinary people, with another 25 percent finding it hard to say whether there would be any significant effect, www.bd.english.fom.ru.

added benefit of reversing the direction of accountability for regional and other elites—upward to the Kremlin, rather than downward to the voters.

Some western analysts see a link between clientele-based political relationships and continuing high levels of corruption in the system.¹¹ Despite Putin's proclaimed commitment to improving the rule of law, measures of corruption have not declined under his watch, at least according to studies of Transparency International, which does an annual survey of perceptions of corruption around the world. Russia had a score of 2.3/10 in 2006 and 2007 (where 10 is the least corrupt), which was the same as in 2001. (There was some minor improvement in between but within the confidence range of the data.)¹²

In addition to their declining importance, the fairness of elections has also come under increasing scrutiny. Prior to the 2003-04 election cycle, international observers did not raise fundamental problems with the fairness of the votes. Since that time, however, international judgements on the state of Russian democracy are negative. Examples are the downgrading of Russia to "not free" status by Freedom House, the reservations about the 2003 elections expressed by western election observers (in terms of press freedom, relationship between political parties and the state, and legal guarantees for equal treatment), and the decision of the OSCE not to send election observers in 2007 and 2008 because of what it considered unreasonable restrictions by Russian authorities.¹³ The top-down creation of A Just Russia in 2006 as an alternate establishment party was apparently intended to create the im-

11 See the review article by Neil Robinson, "The political as personal: Corruption, clientelism, patronage, informal practices and the dynamics of post-communism," *Europe-Asia Studies* 59 (November 2007): 1217-222.

12 See the various studies produced from the corruptions perception index, www.transparency.org.

13 "Freedom in the world 2008: Survey data from Freedom House's annual global survey of political rights and civil liberties," Freedom House, www.freedomhouse.org. "While generally well-administered, the election failed to meet a number of OSCE commitments for democratic elections, most notably those pertaining to: unimpeded access to the media on a non-discriminatory basis, a clear separation between the State and political parties, and guarantees to enable political parties to compete on the basis of equal treatment," OSCE report, www.osce.org; "OSCE/ODIHR regrets that restrictions force cancellation of election observation mission to Russian Federation," Press release, Warsaw, 7 February 2008.

pression of real electoral competition, but it is widely viewed as transparently artificial. When A Just Russia gained more votes than United Russia in regional elections in Stavropol krai in March 2007, the region's governor, Alexandre Chernogorov (a latecomer in joining United Russia in November 2006, earlier elected to office on the Communist party label), was expelled from the party, presumably for failing to deliver a victory.¹⁴ The clear implication was that A Just Russia would not be allowed to be a real competitor to United Russia. Furthermore, the founder and leader of A Just Russia, Sergey Mironov (also head of the upper house of the Russian parliament), has been an outspoken Putin supporter.

Other issues involve changes to legislation on elections and political parties. In particular, a complex new electoral law brought the introduction of a full proportional representation system that makes it difficult for region-based parties to be registered, given the system's basis as one nationwide electoral district with a seven-percent threshold. The new electoral law is so complicated that it is relatively easy to declare any unwanted candidate or party ineligible. On the positive side, political scientists generally consider proportional representation to be favourable to political party development and are also likely to reduce the high level of fragmentation in the party system. In this sense, the new electoral system might facilitate competitive electoral politics. However, the highly centralized nature of parties makes it more likely that this particular variant of proportional representation will feed into the national patronage model that Putin has supported, with the United Russia party as its vehicle.¹⁵

In the 2007 duma elections, four parties managed to overcome the seven-percent barrier, but none is likely to emerge as a viable opposition force. Alongside the victor—United Russia—other parties scored modestly. A Just Russia got 7.7 percent of the vote and is likely to play along with United Russia on all-important issues. The Liberal Democratic party, which

14 Results were as follows: A Just Russia, 37 percent; United Russia, 24 percent; Liberal Democratic Party, 12 percent; Union of Rightist Forces, 8 percent; based on the report of the Russian central electoral commission and reported by RIA Novosti, drawn from *Kommersant*, 9 July 2007, www.en.rian.ru.

15 However, based on an examination of postcommunist countries, Fish concludes, "democratic erosion cannot be attributed to proportional representation, but neither does proportional representation prevent erosion." "The dynamics of democratic erosion," 63.

won 8.1 percent of the vote, is a nationalist formation headed by Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, by and large supportive of the Kremlin—if anything pushing the political spectrum further away from liberal democratic values. And although they came in second, the Communist party of the Russian Federation (CPRF) emerged with just 11.6 percent—similar to the 2003 result, but a marked decline from the 1999 result. The CPRF could, in some sense, be considered a real opposition force, but has never operated effectively as such, even in the second half of the 1990s when it was the strongest party. United Russia's hefty win, with 64.3 percent of the vote, translated into 70 percent of the deputies, making the duma essentially a rubber-stamp organ in the process. Nonetheless, according to opinion polls carried out by the Levada Center, most Russians were satisfied with the election outcome, even if they also felt it did not really reflect a genuine instance of popular choice.¹⁶ Popular suspicions about electoral fraud were weaker than in 2003-04.¹⁷

Alongside these developments related to elections, stricter controls have been placed on civil society under Putin's watch, particularly NGOs with foreign links, but also opposition demonstrations. Alongside these restrictions, a "corporatization" of civil society seems to be occurring, with the government creating its own forum, most notably the Public Chamber, for NGO interface with the state. The state also increasingly looks to NGOs as agents of service delivery rather than as vehicles of public representation of advocacy. Limits on the media freedom are also cited as another form of control on civil society.

Russian spokespersons, commentators, and western academics have developed special terms—with "managed democracy" being the most popular—to depict the particular manner in which democratic rule is practiced in Russia. Although most Russians support the idea of democracy in a general sense, their understanding of the concept has been shaped by a distinctly different political tradition and by particular set of political experiences.¹⁸ Efforts to define democracy in a distinctively a Russian way have also been

16 Yurii Levada, "Udovletvorennost' rezul'tatam vyborov," 17 December 2007; "Vyborny v Gosdumu (materialy konferentsii)," 13 November 2007, www.levada.ru.

17 Yurii Levada, 10 December 2007, indicating that only nine percent of the 1600 respondents felt the results were falsified, www.levada.ru.

18 Yurii Levada, "Demokratiia i oppozitsiia," 18 December 2007, survey carried out 7-10 December 2007, www.levada.ru.

taken up by the political elite. For example, the articulation in 2006 of a notion of “sovereign democracy” by Vladislav Surkov, a deputy head of Putin’s presidential administration, can be taken as a sort of rule for the people:

A form of the political life of society in which the authorities, their organs and actions are selected, formed, and directed exclusively by the Russian nation in all of its diversity and integrity for the achievement of material well-being, freedom, and justice for all of the citizens, social groups, and peoples forming her (author’s translation).¹⁹

Data from surveys undertaken by Yurii Levada’s independent survey organization indicates that the Russian public seems to have some sympathy for the view that western variants of democracy may have limited applicability in Russia, and that Russia should develop its own understanding of the concept (see table 1). And, according to surveys by the independent Levada Center, a high priority in a Russian understanding of democracy would be achieving a high standard of living or realizing legal norms such as order and observation of law, equality before the law, and respecting the political rights of citizens—notably similar to elements of Surkov’s definition (see table 2). Pluralism, a free media, and rights of minorities rank much lower.²⁰

UKRAINE’S ORANGE REVOLUTION: REACTION IN MOSCOW

The orange revolution appeared to surprise Russia’s political leadership. The larger context in which the Ukrainian events occurred made them even more disturbing to Moscow. By March 2005, three such colour or “flower” revolutions had occurred within a period of just under 18 months in Soviet successor states, all associated with popular protest against perceived election fraud. First was the rose revolution in Georgia in November 2003, then the orange events in Ukraine one year later, followed by the tulip revolution in Kyrgyzstan in March 2005. Could Russia be next? As western analysts tried to uncover the common dynamics that made electoral contests the trigger for popular protest leading to regime change, leaders in neighbouring states

19 Vladimir Surkov, “Paragrafy pro suverennyiu demokratiuu” (Paragraphs on sovereign democracy), 11 November 2006, www.edinros.ru.

20 Yurii Levada, “Demokratiia v Rossii,” 30 January 2008, survey carried out 18-22 January 2008, www.levada.ru.

were undoubtedly posing the same question.²¹ The initial reaction in Moscow was to blame foreign influence for instigating the protest, a possible trigger for adoption of tighter restrictions on foreign-funded NGOs in Russia. No doubt, however, Russian leaders realized that this explanation alone was too simple.

While we do not know what occurred behind Kremlin doors, leadership actions leading up to and following the duma election suggest a strategy premised on avoiding precisely those conditions that turned the Kuchma succession in Ukraine into an elite conflict that spilled over into the streets. Under the right set of circumstances, a replication of these conditions in Russia could increase the risk of an imitation of the Ukrainian scenario. In Ukraine, these conditions were as follows: a leadership transition in which the elite were divided and unclear as to what group would prevail; the existence of a viable opposition force (in the form of an electoral party or bloc of parties); perceived election fraud; and a society that was capable of and confident in responding to election fraud in a collective manner.

While striking differences between Ukraine and Russia might make an orange revolution scenario seem unlikely in Russia, the prospect of the upcoming major leadership succession following Putin's second term in office was a red flag for a potential opening for an elite division that could potentially set just such a trajectory in motion. As American political scientist Henry Hale has pointed out, it is precisely in situations of leadership succession that the risk of a colour revolution is the highest in countries governed by systems that he dubs "patronal presidentialism." Could the transition to a new president occur seamlessly in Russia, considering that popular trust and support was tied to Putin's person rather than to political institutions? The political leadership's actions leading up to the duma elections of December 2007 suggest that preventive measures were put in place to assure that the transition would not be exploited by opposition forces to fuel popular discontent. Because the duma and presidential elections were to be held in such close temporal proximity (with the presidential vote to follow in March 2008), any problem with the presidential succession could impact the duma election and, accordingly, if the less easily controlled legislative elections resulted in a clear victory for United Russia, this could serve as a guarantor for

21 See Henry E. Hale, "Regime cycles: Democracy, autocracy and revolution in post-soviet Russia," *World Politics* 58 (October 2005): 133-65; and Joshua Tucker, "Enough! Electoral fraud, collective action problems, and the '2nd wave' of post-communist democratic revolutions," *Perspectives on Politics* 5, no. 3 (September 2007): 537-51.

a managed leadership transition that would follow in the presidential race. Likely, United Russia would be the best vehicle to assure this outcome. In this context, Putin's decision to lend his personal popularity to that party's electoral list can be understood as an effort to assure a straight line of support for the presidential successor he had not yet named. Just about a week after the success of the duma election, Putin announced to United Russia's leaders that he would support his First Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev for the presidential post. In short order, Medvedev indicated he would offer Putin the prime ministerial position, another example of importance of personal loyalty.

In relation to each of the facilitating conditions for Ukraine's orange revolution identified above, the Russian leadership, under Putin's guidance, took clear preemptive action. First came efforts to ensure both the reality and image of a unified elite. The primary tool was the nationalization of politics under the guidance of a dominant political party responsive to Putin, with the reinforcement of clientele-based relations between regional leaders and the Kremlin as a clear element of this strategy. This is not to say that other justifications for this approach could not be offered. Regional politics in Russia have, for the most part, also been highly clientele-based, so a national patronage system might, in principle, be better able to control excesses that could contribute to corruption.

A second step involved limiting the capacity of the opposition to pose a viable alternative in addition to establishing unambiguous clarity about who would prevail in the election. Since there were no opposition parties posing a real threat to United Russia's dominance—particularly once it was announced that Putin would head the party list—this was not a difficult condition to fulfil. Outspoken critics of Putin and United Russia, such as Vladimir Ryzhkov (whose Republic Party of Russia was denied registration for having too few members) as well as former prime minister Mikhail Kasyanov and Garry Kasparov (associated with the non-electoral public movement, The Other Russia) had neither adequate public support nor were they granted legal standing to pose an electoral challenge.

In terms of election fraud, efforts to restrict the capacity of election observers to issue derogatory judgements were likely reinforced by rising tensions between the west and Russia. In this soured atmosphere, undoubtedly Russian leaders feared that even minor electoral infractions would be publicized and that western observers would misrepresent the domestic context of the elections, fuelling the efforts of domestic critics. In relation to the

2003-04 elections, western observers had focused their criticism on the pre-election environment, so this time Russian leaders insisted on a later date of entry for international election observers.²² In any case, ballot-box stuffing was unnecessary to achieve a decisive victory for United Russia. Efforts to assure consistent margins of victory across the country relied on various voter mobilization campaigns. Another means to avoid any appearance of election fraud was the earlier creation of a limited and loyal opposition party (A Just Russia), furthering an impression of real electoral competition. The Kremlin had an interest in assuring that United Russia's victory, while decisive, would not push out all other parties. The maintenance of two or three small opposition parties would reinforce the dominance of United Russia while creating an impression of pluralism.

Finally, crackdowns on visible opposition figures such as Kasparov and Kasyanov (and their Other Russia movement) or even prominent leaders of the more respectable liberal party, the Union of Rightist Forces (e.g., with the brief arrest of Boris Nemtsov at a St. Petersburg demonstration in November 2007), sent a loud and clear message to the public at large that public demonstrations were pointless. In and of themselves, these small public meetings posed no threat to the United Russia's expected electoral success, but the presence of police and the arrest of prominent figures created a clear disincentive for broader participation, if more fertile conditions should develop. Joshua Tucker, in his analysis of the colour revolutions, has suggested that mobilization against fraudulent elections provides an excellent opportunity for the public to overcome problems of collective action in addressing corrupt governments, because elections are designed to translate a collection of individual actions into a collective outcome.²³ The Russian leadership undermined this potential by making clear that political protest would be punished, simultaneously raising the cost to those participating in demonstrations and impressing on the public that opposition parties were unlikely to prevail. Public opinion polls expressing strong support for Putin reinforced the view that the outcome was inevitable.

22 Office for democratic institutions and human rights, "Russian federation presidential election," 14 March 2004, OSCE/ODIHR election observation mission report, Warsaw, 2 June 2004; and "Russian Federation presidential elections to the state дума," 7 December 2003, OSCE/ODIHR election observation mission report, Warsaw, 27 January 2004.

23 Tucker, "Enough!"

All of these measures would have the effect of eliciting a bandwagon effect. Media reports of threatened sanctions against public employees who did not vote for United Russia made clear that it was important to be on the winning side of power, while the personal cost of supporting the losers could potentially be high. To reduce any perceived uncertainty among the elite or the public about the outcome of the election, the Russian leadership defined the criteria for success as an overwhelming electoral win. In setting a high bar for success, the Moscow leadership created incentives for lower level and regional officials to use whatever methods might be available to achieve this end.

IS DEMOCRACY IMPORTANT FOR RUSSIA?

As noted, a large part of the Russian public is sceptical about the appropriateness of western democratic forms for Russia. One could argue that an outcome- or output-based understanding of democracy is more appropriate than an input-based definition in the Russian context.²⁴ Here the question would be whether government is “for the people” even if not necessarily “by the people.”²⁵ Broader criteria might be applied in considering whether the Russian variant of democracy, even if it does not meet western standards, might be setting a defensible trajectory for “rule for the people.” These could be: has the result been good policy, i.e., policies that have benefited society or large parts of society? Has government become more responsive and accountable to the public or to major parts of the public? Have political institutions been strengthened? Has rule of law been reinforced?

While an in-depth examination is not possible here, serious deficiencies are evident. In terms of policy outputs, the jury is still out. Much of the improvement in Russia's standard of living is the result of its oil-driven economic recovery rather than of government policy. In some areas, such as tax compliance, gains have been made, but in other areas policy failure is evident. For example, a joint Russian/American study concluded that the monetization of social benefits (the controversial policy implemented in 2004) faltered in part because of a failure to work with clients and give regions ad-

24 On input and output legitimacy see, for example, F. W. Scharpf, “Problem-solving effectiveness and democratic accountability in the EU,” Vienna, Institute for Advanced Studies, 2006, 2-5.

25 See C.B. MacPherson, *The Real World of Democracy* (Oxford:Clarendon Press), 1966.

equate room to adjust policies to meet the needs of target groups. Circular patterns of personal dependence may inhibit informed and constructive policy debate and may undermine mechanisms for correcting bad policy choices. While a strong government in Moscow may assist regional political elites in implementing or enforcing policies, if there is only weak “buy-in” from these levels or if adequate financial resources are not provided (a common complaint), then lack of coordination and poor policy outcomes may be the result.

In terms of government responsiveness, accountability, and political institutionalization, the judgement is again mixed. One notable achievement is the high level of public support for the Russian constitution, adopted in 1993. Putin’s decision to recognize the constitutional provision against a third term in office may serve to further increase the popular legitimacy of this fundamental legal document. On the other hand, political institutions continue to suffer from low levels of popular trust, alongside high levels of personal support for Putin. Putin’s personal political stature has not spilled over into support for institutions. Public opinion polls following the duma elections suggest that two out of three voters who supported United Russia did so because of Putin’s name rather than any attachment to the party.²⁶ The most trusted institutions continue to nonpolitical ones.

Finally, in terms of rule of law, levels of corruption remain high and instances of selective enforcement of laws are not infrequent. On the other hand, the judiciary has gained some increased independence vis-à-vis the president and other executive organs, particularly in routine cases. In more important political situations, however, the law seems more a tool than an end in itself.

CONCLUSION

The Russian leadership, over the previous eight years, has sought to establish a high level of control in the political sphere. This article has attempted to explore the question of why in the context of the 2007 election, focusing on the shock effect that the Ukrainian orange revolution had on the Russian leadership.

An underlying consideration is the possibility that, despite political rhetoric, democracy is not really an important value in the current Russian con-

26 Yurii Levada, “Dumskie vybory 2007: poslednie itogi (chast’1),” 9 January 2008, www.levada.ru.

text, either for the elite, or perhaps for the larger public. Vladimir Putin's recent address to an expanded meeting of the state council on 8 February 2008 makes no mention of the term. Priorities to 2020 are related to stability, economic diversification, and the socioeconomic wellbeing of the population.²⁷ The resurgence of nationalist sentiment in Russia suggests broader public preoccupation with different problems—a reassertion of national identity, a striving for respect, and an overriding concern that life be returned to normal. Attempts to develop concepts such as “sovereign democracy” may be more rhetorical than actual. While it may be too extreme to consider such discussions pure propaganda, they surely play predominantly a legitimizing function.

As well, considerations other than democracy likely govern the Russian leadership's view of national elections. First, a great deal is at stake, particularly a great deal of wealth. The continuing close ties between state structures and those who control the country's natural resource base mean that those who win elections often gain a powerful advantage in the distribution of economic benefits.

However, one should not overemphasize this factor of elite self-interest. No doubt even more important is an underlying fear of political instability. This fear is an important source of elite unity in Russia, extending across the party spectrum. But do Russian leaders really have much to fear? Given the disappointment that Russians feel about the results of radical changes that occurred, following western models, in the 1990s, it seems unlikely that real political competition poses the threat of mass-based political unrest. And if such unrest were to be sparked, nationalist tendencies the Kremlin has at times nurtured (for example through the Nashi youth movement) would be of primary concern because of their potential to be divisive and to appeal to strong but easily mobilized emotions. However, radical change has not produced good outcomes in recent memory and Russians are tired of upheaval. Therefore, while methods used to prevent an orange outcome in Russia may reflect a rationally calculated strategy, the premise underlying it—that mass mobilization sparked by westernizing opponents could shatter Russia's fragile stability—is less credible.

27 Vladimir Putin, speech to expanded meeting of the state council, “On the strategy for the development of Russia to the year 2020,” 8 February 2008, www.kremlin.ru.

Table 1
What kind of democracy does Russia need?
Column percentages, of respondents

	2005	2006	2007
The same kind as in European countries and America	24%	18%	22%
The kind the Soviet Union had	16	13	10
A special kind corresponding to national traditions and specificities of Russia	45	48	47
Russia doesn't need democracy	6	10	7
Hard to say	10	11	14

Source: Analytical Centre of Yurii Levada, "Demokratia i oppozitsiia," 18 December 2007, survey carried out 7-10 December 2007, reported at <http://www.levada.ru/press/2007121804.htm> (translation from the Russian by the author).

Table 2
In your view, what is most important in order to be able to speak about democracy in the country?
Percentage of respondents

A high standard of living for the population	60%
Order, observation of legality	49
Equality of all citizens before the law	45
Observation of political rights and freedoms of citizens	44
Social justice	39
To possibility for citizens to monitor the actions of the authorities	31
State policy carried out in the interest of the largest strata of the population	20
State policy to protect the needy по защите неимущих	16
Separation of powers, independence of the judiciary and legislative power from the President and Government	12
Pluralism of opinions, absence of total state control over the mass media	8
Observation of rights and interests of national and other minorities	6
Hard to say	5

Source: Adapted from Analytical Center of Yurii Levada, "Demokratia v Rossii," 30 January 2008, survey carried out 18-22 January 2008, 1600 respondents in a representative sample of Russia, with the EU-Russia Fund, <http://www.levada.ru/press/2008013000.html> (translation from the Russian by the author).