

Russian Authoritarian Pluralism: a Local and Global Trend?

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Abstract *Russia is a country that has witnessed increasingly authoritarian governance over the last decade. Civil liberties have been curtailed; local and regional political power has been usurped by the Kremlin. Russia remains a democracy inasmuch as elections are conducted, but increasingly those elections are so heavily influenced by state control over the media and fiscal elements of social power that substantive Western notions of democracy have greatly atrophied. However, the decline in substantive democracy has received solid support from the Russian electorate. As such, under the leadership of Boris Yeltsin and Vladimir Putin, Russia has become an 'authoritarian pluralist' state that now expresses long-standing cultural affinity for a strong authoritarian rule under an increasingly thin veneer of democratic principles. Furthermore, variations of this new Russian model seem to be spreading globally.*

Democracy is the dictatorship of the law. The stronger the state is, the freer the individual.

Vladimir Putin

Introduction

It has now been nearly two decades since democracy began taking root in the rocky terrain of the Soviet Union. By the beginning of 1989, the USSR was in the midst of extensive reforms centred on Mikhail Gorbachev's intertwined policies of glasnost and perestroika. With these reforms, which included the revocation of the Communist Party's constitutional monopoly on power and the introduction of multiparty elections, the foundations for liberal democracy had been laid in the Soviet sphere. Boris Yeltsin, however, charged with charting Russia's post-Soviet transition following Gorbachev's resignation, often wavered between the roles of democrat and dictator. As Russian political scientist Lilia Shevtsova inquired, 'Who, then, is the real Yeltsin? Is he the reformer, whose achievements have not been fully recognised by his countrymen, or is he a demagogue and populist whose only goal

¹The views expressed here are the authors' alone, and do not represent the official position of the United States government and/or its various branches.

has been pure power?’ (1999, 270).² Yeltsin’s frequent flirtation with authoritarianism—and the continuation of such policies under his successor, Vladimir Putin—illustrates an underlying continuity between modern Russian democracy and the behavioural norms of previous Soviet and Czarist regimes.

Noted democratic theorist Robert Putnam contends that scholars commonly examine at least one of three basic elements to explain the effectiveness of modern democratic institutions: institutional design, socioeconomic factors and sociocultural factors (1993, 9–11). While all three of these elements have played a significant role in Russia’s post-Soviet experience, in this paper we argue that the institutional design and sociocultural factors are the more critical. As Putnam further observes, Plato recognised in the *Republic* that governments vary in accordance with their citizens’ dispositions (Putnam 1993, 11). In the case of the Russian populace, recent history indicates that this ‘disposition’ now allows for the incorporation of authoritarian sociocultural characteristics into a democratic institutional design. This essay will show that contemporary Russia demonstrates a synthesis of the old and new political orders. We argue that a uniquely Russian form of democracy has emerged that is both similar to and differentiated from Western notions of democracy—a synthesis that we term ‘authoritarian pluralism’.

Scholars have debated the precise meanings of such terms as ‘democracy’ and ‘democratic transition’. At the most basic level, ‘democracy’ connotes a political system based on the free and fair elections of public representatives. The modern, Western conception of liberal democracy, however, transcends the mere electoral choice of rulers by a nation’s populace. In addition, Western analysts have enumerated such additional liberal democratic attributes as multiple parties, the separation of powers, freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of religion, freedom of association, various civil or human rights and an effective set of checks and balances on power (cf Zakaria 1997). It is also clear that, globally, many democracies deviate significantly from this Western ‘archetype’ of liberal democracy.

In order to evaluate and differentiate between the various types of democratic regimes, some analysts have now acknowledged the basic distinction between ‘procedural’ and ‘substantive’ democracies. Ellen Comisso defines procedural democracy as a government based on the consent of the governed, formalised in a constitution specifying the government’s powers, and featuring competitive elections, universal suffrage, the protection of basic human rights, and a process in which officials may be held accountable to the general public. Procedural democracy is concerned fundamentally with the establishment of the basic democratic institutions and the ‘rules of the game’ necessary for effective governance (Comisso 1997, 3–4). However, the existence of democratic government ‘on paper’ does not necessarily equate with a ‘liberal’ democracy in practice. Comisso asserts that substantive forms of democracy link democratic government to a particular social and economic order, seeking genuine

² Response to editorial observation on source material: We have not referred to literature in Russian. This paper is based on sources translated into English. We cite Russian authors whose works have been translated. We have never heard any assertions that the translation services that we draw upon here are somehow unreliable. Such a criticism is only valid if a substantive gap exists between the material published in Russian and that which is translated or published in English. There is no evidence that the Russian-language literature holds unique knowledge that the translated literature does not.

representation in both word and deed. Hence, substantive democracy concerns itself primarily with the *outcomes* of democratic governance, rather than merely the fundamental 'requirements' thereof—in essence, stressing the spirit of the law over simply its letter. In this paper, we draw upon Comisso's differentiation between procedural and substantive democracy as the main theoretical lens to help analyse Russia's transition.

Many scholars have asserted the idea that Russia has had virtually no historical experience with democratic governance and it is authoritarian by nature.³ As such, the state's long-term lack of civic tradition—political equality, interpersonal and institutional trust, social tolerance and civil associations—has served as a stumbling block in the development of both procedural and substantive norms of governance in Russia (cf Walkin 1962, 4–6). Putnam identifies such civic traditions as functional prerequisites for effective democratic governance (Putnam 1993, 7–8, 86–91). While these norms of interaction may not have existed when post-Soviet constitutional reforms were enacted, this does not preclude their gradual development over time. Philippe Schmitter, for instance, has challenged mainstream notions that a civic tradition is a prerequisite for the development of a meaningful democracy. Schmitter turns this idea on its head, arguing instead that civic culture may in fact be an outgrowth of practising procedural democracy (2000). Hence, authoritarian pluralism is most accurately described as a transitional mode of governance bridging the gap between Russia's authoritarian past and its potential for a more substantively democratic future.

The political system that operates in contemporary Russia fulfils many of the basic 'requirements' of procedural democracy. The government is based on a constitution that officially codifies civil rights, free elections and a separation of powers. In practice, however, the Russian government has failed to transcend into the realm of truly substantive democratic governance, and in many regards the trend is in the opposite direction. Although the post-Soviet reformers established a constitutional, multiparty system based on free elections, the establishment of meaningful checks and balances, a true separation of powers and a spirited defence of individual civil liberties in this system have proved deficient. We argue that while Russia has forged many of the basic building blocks of procedural democracy, its progress towards more substantive outcomes remains hindered by the state's traditional, authoritarian political culture. Therefore, to more accurately categorise Russia's multiparty electoral system, we employ the term 'pluralism' to refer to the procedural aspects of the contemporary Russian politics, and, in using the term 'authoritarian', we acknowledge the system's shortcomings in terms of substantive democratic outcomes.

Beginning with a brief summary of Russia's political history, we evaluate the political actions of Russia's first two presidents: Boris Yeltsin and Vladimir Putin. Of particular importance is a review of three key elements of contemporary Russian political culture: first, the enduring use of military force as a means of imposing state legitimacy; second, the complex mixture of democratic and autocratic political tactics employed by Yeltsin in the creation of the present Russian state; and, third, the solidification of Yeltsin's authoritarian pluralism by Vladimir Putin. We conclude by

³ For a rejection of the 'essentialist' approach, see Martin Malia (1999).

illustrating how the fusion of authoritarianism and democracy witnessed in Russia is part of an increasingly globalised phenomenon.

Kto Kovo: A Legacy of Violence

Under the Bolsheviks, democracy existed in name only: elections were held and representatives were chosen, but because of the Communist Party's monopoly on political participation one of the necessary characteristics of procedural democracy was absent. In reality, Vladimir Lenin and his compatriots created an authoritarian governing order very similar to that of their Czarist predecessors. One of the enduring characteristics of Bolshevik governance was the crucial role violence played to maintain the domestic power base of the ruling elite, to defend the state from outside aggression and to maintain Moscow's sovereignty over conquered territories. Soviet policies, both external and internal, were based on Lenin's zero-sum worldview. According to Walter Clemens,

Lenin taught that the fundamental quest of politics is '*Kto kovo*'—[literally] Who, whom? Which side will destroy the other? Armed with this view, he and his successors built a system that could seize and hold power but not one that interacts optimally with other states and systems or even with its own subjects. (Clemens 1990, xix)

It would be an appalling blunder to underemphasise the importance of coercive state violence in Russian history. Coercive force had maintained the Czars' power for centuries, and aggressive military force had created the Russian Empire. Military defeat by Germany in World War I had helped to unleash a civil upheaval that witnessed the triumph of the faction that most ruthlessly exercised the use of violence—the Bolsheviks. The Red Army ensured the survival of the Bolshevik state by victory in the Civil War; and Stalin used massive state violence to purge political enemies and to effectively industrialise the country by ruthlessly expending human capital. Military force proved to be the only effective tool for protecting the state from outside threats during World War II, and force was effective in expanding and maintaining the Soviet sphere of influence during the Cold War years (Borer 1994, 128–130).

The importance of repressive means of control is perhaps best illustrated by the collapse of the Soviet empire as a result of Gorbachev's reforms, which fundamentally rejected Lenin's *kto kovo* ethic. Gorbachev attempted to interject both procedural and substantive elements of democracy into the Bolshevik system. The end of the Soviet empire would not have occurred between 1989 and 1991 without the rejection of the use of force enshrined in Gorbachev's policies. Glasnost (openness) was an attempt to substantively liberalise Soviet politics by introducing free speech and by openly encouraging citizens to criticise the existing order. Perestroika (restructuring) included a variety of procedural reforms, including the introduction of competitive elections and the end of the Communist Party's constitutionally guaranteed political monopoly.⁴ In 1989, the Brezhnev Doctrine—the ideological linchpin that justified military intervention throughout the Soviet

⁴ Article Six of the Soviet constitution, which gave such a monopoly to the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, was revoked by Gorbachev.

sphere—was revoked when the Red Army departed Afghanistan and when Solidarity candidates in Poland were allowed to run for office in parliamentary elections. These events initiated a socialist-bloc domino effect of substantive democratic ‘street politics’ that rapidly swept through Eastern Europe and culminated in the peaceful disintegration of the USSR in December 1991 (Borer 1994, 130–142). Violence, however, did not long remain absent from Russian politics.

From this history, several key characteristics emerge. First and foremost, Russian authoritarianism connotes a consolidation of power in the executive—whether in the person of the czar or the premier. Additionally, a lack of any meaningful checks and balances on the scope of the ruler’s power historically characterises Russian authoritarianism. Russia’s rulers traditionally exercised a tight degree of control over free speech and the media. Finally, Russia’s routine use of force against external and internal threats to maintain power is a defining trait. These attributes of traditional rule remained deeply embedded in the domestic political culture as the state began its post-Soviet democratic transition in the early 1990s. Peaceful mass protests may have brought down the old regime, but the time-honoured behavioural codes of the Russian polity took only a temporary reprieve from public life (Borer 1997; Blago 2000).

In June 1991, still under the Soviet regime, Yeltsin became the first freely elected president in Russian history. In the wake of the failed August 1991 coup, Gorbachev maintained his commitment to substantive liberal ideals and refused to order the state security apparatus to intervene with force. Subsequently, Yeltsin and the leaders of the other 14 Union Republics were able to peacefully usurp Gorbachev’s power. Thus, in late 1991, at the birth of the first post-Soviet Russian state, the institutional structures of power were an incongruous mixture. Power was shared by the parliament (the Russian Republic’s Supreme Soviet) and the presidency. The parliament’s legal basis of legitimacy was rooted in the defunct 1978 Soviet constitution; however, like Yeltsin, its members had been democratically elected. The presidency had been created *extra-constitutionally* as a result of a democratic referendum during the Soviet era (De Nevers 1994, 8–10). Yeltsin’s office was also created in the now illegitimate Soviet period, but his popularity and legitimacy were enhanced by his crucial leadership role in confronting the old order. As increasingly complex problems of the economic and political transition challenged Yeltsin’s rule, autocracy and violence re-emerged as preferred methods for solving intractable problems.

Procedural Consolidation and Substantive Decline

The first evidence of Russia’s return to a more authoritarian style occurred shortly after the August 1991 coup. Parliament granted Yeltsin the temporary right to pursue economic reform through decree, effectively allowing Yeltsin to ignore Gorbachev’s waning authority. In addition, the parliament granted Yeltsin the power to appoint and dismiss heads of the federal administration, thus giving Yeltsin direct leverage within Russia’s regional governments. Yeltsin used this power with the stated intent of appointing leaders who would rapidly implement his economic reform policies.⁵

⁵ Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report, FBIS-SOV-91-203 (21 October 1991): 60. Hereafter cited as FBIS.

The emerging elements of substantive democracy introduced by Gorbachev began to erode as Yeltsin proceeded to establish what Shevtsova terms a 'superpresidential regime' (1999, 277). He neglected to establish an effective system of checks and balances or other structures that would help promote substantive democratic outcomes, focusing instead on increasing his procedural executive power. Yeltsin and his advisers referred to this structure as the 'presidential vertical' and viewed it as the most effective manner in which to guide Russia through its chaotic post-Soviet transition. Moreover, Shevtsova argues that Yeltsin's overarching intention was to institute a highly personalised political system that would ensure that power remained in his own grasp (1999, 21). Not surprisingly, Yeltsin's consolidation of power in the executive planted the seeds for tension between the president and the parliament.

By 1993, the battle between Yeltsin and his parliamentary opponents had become so acrimonious that the Russian economy and government had virtually ceased to function. This decisive struggle for power boiled down to the final drafting of and voting on a new constitution. All sides in the conflict agreed that a new document was necessary to break the deadlock over who would control economic policy. However, the design of the new government was a highly contentious issue, with Yeltsin promoting a stronger executive, and the parliament supporting a stronger legislature (De Nevers 1994, 10–14). When the Russian Constitutional Court declared that Yeltsin had violated the Soviet-era constitution, and when members of parliament refused to accede to presidential authority, the die was cast for Yeltsin's second and increasingly authoritarian step. A tense standoff ensued during which the parliament impeached the President and set up a dual government at the Russian White House. Heavily armed opponents of Yeltsin seized the Ostankino television station, killing a number of unarmed people in the process. This act gave Yeltsin a pretext for action. Yeltsin terminated the standoff by blasting the White House with tank fire on 4 October 1993.⁶ Such an action had more in common with Lenin's *kto kovo* approach to problem-solving than to the liberal aspirations pursued by Gorbachev.

New regional legislatures with reduced powers were created by presidential decree, with all administrative appointments and dismissals placed under the sole domain of the president (Teague 1993, 7–23). In December 1993, elections were held for the new Duma, and the President's constitution was approved by a majority of voters. Thus, the crucial struggle to establish executive or legislative sovereignty, which had paralysed the central government and led to economic disintegration and regional dissent in the previous system, had been resolved in favour of the executive (Bruni and Zhuravlyov 1993). The new constitution's institutional design for procedural democracy was born from a crucible of political disarray and military-imposed violence. As a result, the behavioural patterns and institutional structures of authoritarian pluralism began to coalesce.

Graham Smith offers an analysis of continuity between the old and new, stressing that the fall of the Soviet Union was not a revolution, but rather a *transition* from communism. 'Most notably,' he argues, 'despite the creation of new

⁶ *Rossiiskiy Vestnik* (23 September 1993); *Pravda* (23 September 1993); *Sevodnya* (23 September 1993); *Megapolis-Express* (29 September, 1993); all in *Current Digest of the Post Soviet Press*, 45:38 (20 October 1993), 8–9. See also Jonathan Steele (1994, 382).

polities and political institutions, and contested elections, there has been a remarkable continuity in political elites, particularly in Russia and the southern borderland states, many of whose leaders held positions of power in the mid-1980s or even earlier' (Smith 1999, 4). In effect, the culturally embedded authoritarian aspects of the ancien régime remained solidly intact in Russia, and Western-style pluralist elements were grafted onto them.

Amongst Russian intellectuals a great deal of soul searching took place in the early post-Soviet period. A significant number of scholars and pundits argued that Russia should pursue its own path of development, eschewing the wholesale adaptation of a Western model. As a result, Russia witnessed the re-emergence of 'Eurasian' thinking that combined traditional romantic-nationalist perceptions of a shared Slavic experience juxtaposed with geopolitical concerns over Russia's position in the international hierarchy of great powers. In citing writers from the 1920s such as Nikolai Trubetskoy, Pyotr Savitsky and Georgy Vernadsky, contemporary Eurasian authors like Lev Gumilyov have seeded the intellectual ground from which Yeltsin and later Putin found policy sustenance. These authors stress that 'the territory of the former Russian Empire or USSR is a specific historical and geographical universe, belonging to neither Europe nor to Asia, being a specific unique phenomena [sic]' (Gumilyov 1993, 9). Trubetzky declared, 'I deny any possibility of a universal human culture' (1991).

In 1993, the Russian press began publishing reviews of the writings of early Eurasian scholars, including BY Vladimirtsov's 1922 work *Chingis-khan*, which stressed the lasting impact that Genghis Khan had on Russian development. He asserted, 'Russia will be transformed only when it realizes that its sun really does rise in the east and not the other way around' (Bedyurov 1993, 10–12). Other variations on this theme also were influential. For instance, Nobel Laureate Alexander Solzhenitsyn was often quoted for denouncing pro-Western, democratic elements in Russian society and urged Russians to seek spiritual clarity, claiming that free elections and multiparty politics were negative forces that harmed the 'organic' Russian polity. Although he supported the separatist claims of ethnic groups in non-Russian areas such as Chechnya, Solzhenitsyn enraged Ukrainians and Belarusians by denying they were ethnically different from Russians. He called for redrawing the borders of Russian, Ukraine, Belarusia and Kazakhstan to accurately represent the ethnic make-up of the territory (Solzhenitsyn 1991).

The First Chechen War and the Elections of 1995–1996

By late 1994, President Yeltsin's harshest critics were Russian ethno-nationalists who accused him of failing to stand up for Russia's interests vis-à-vis the West, and for his failure to protect the interests of ethnic Russians living in former Soviet territories. To re-establish his tarnished nationalist credentials, Yeltsin ordered Russian armed forces into the Republic of Chechnya to restore Moscow's sovereignty in the region in what is now referred to as the First Chechen War (*Newsweek International* 1995, 46–47).

As a result of the indiscriminate violence and the large numbers of civilian casualties and refugees, many of Yeltsin's supporters in the parliament denounced the attack and stated that they would not support him in the 1996 presidential

election (Thornhill 1995, 11). In turn, many of Yeltsin's critics among the Russian nationalist forces, who held the balance of power in the parliament after the 1993 elections, approved his decision. Among the general public the war was highly unpopular, and military intervention had precisely the opposite of the planned effect on Yeltsin's popularity. Yeltsin's public approval plummeted to single digits in opinion polls, thus suggesting that some liberal elements remained vibrant in Russian society. However, within the government, hard-liners gained new influence with the President, while moderates and liberals were further marginalised (McFaul 1995, 153–155).

In the early months of 1996, it seemed unlikely that Yeltsin would secure a second term. Public opinion polls in January 1996 showed him with a mere eight per cent of the popular vote (Shevtsova 1999, 156). However, Yeltsin again demonstrated his stature as Russia's political phoenix by staging a dramatic comeback to win the presidency on 3 July 1996.⁷ His electoral success was a result of utilising to his full advantage the institutional design that he had put in place with the 1993 constitution. Yeltsin began by sacrificing a number of unpopular pro-Western ministers.⁸ Yeltsin then shored up the support of the regional leadership that he had abandoned after the adoption of the new constitution by signing 14 separate power-sharing agreements that further clarified the emerging pluralist structures of Russian federalism and increased the powers and autonomy of local leaders.⁹

As the election approached, Yeltsin began openly violating many campaign rules he had signed into law. Although campaigning laws limited spending to US\$10 million per candidate, no enforcement mechanisms were in place, and most observers agreed that Yeltsin spent at least US\$100 million.¹⁰ The President used state bureaucratic controls over the media to blanket Russia with supportive campaign messages and to hinder his opponents' access, a clear use of procedural power at the expense of substantive democratic norms of equal access and fair play. In effect, Yeltsin turned the Federal Treasury into his campaign fund, making billions of dollars in government pledges to local constituencies.¹¹ It was an effective tactic. Many Russians had experienced chronic delays in payment of wages and benefits, but on the eve of the election much of the arrears had been paid by the treasury, clearly linking the rubles in citizens' pockets to the largesse of the incumbent president.¹²

Only hours after results of the first round of the election had been tabulated—indicating that the President had won a narrow plurality of 35 per cent of the vote and that he would face the Communist candidate, Gennady Zyuganov, in the second round—Yeltsin deployed one of his most important endgame tactical manoeuvres. The Kremlin announced that Yeltsin had appointed Afghan War hero Alexander Lebed, the third-place finisher with 14.7 per cent of the vote, as Secretary of the National Security Council. To solidify Lebed's support in the second round, Yeltsin fired the inner circle of hard-line advisers who had

⁷ *Open Media Research Institute Russian Presidential Election Survey*, 13, 4 July 1996.

⁸ *US News and World Report*, 120:4 (29 January 1996), 45.

⁹ *OMRI Daily Digest*, 2:103 (28 May 1996).

¹⁰ *Washington Post*, 7 July 1996.

¹¹ *Washington Post*, 6 July 1996.

¹² *OMRI Daily Digest*, 2:50–130 (March–June 1996).

promoted the bloody Chechen intervention. The firing of these individuals was also designed to appeal to liberal reformists who had felt betrayed by Yeltsin after the 1993 Duma elections.¹³ With these adroit tactical moves, Yeltsin neutralised the possible merger of Lebed's nationalists with the second-place Communists, while simultaneously giving the democratic reformers a reason to vote for him. In a winnowing process familiar to Americans, Yeltsin had become the lesser evil in a field of two unpopular candidates. On 3 July, he soundly defeated Zyuganov by 54 per cent to 40 per cent.¹⁴ Russia had freely elected its first post-Soviet president, showing that the new pluralist order was more stable than many had imagined. According to Richard Sakwa, 'The structure of power has changed its forms but the traditional subordination of the political process to ruling elites has taken on new forms . . . and the ruling class by and large remains in place deprived only of the top echelon of the old political system. Incomplete democratisation gave rise to a hybrid system combining both democracy and authoritarianism' (1997, 7). Sakwa goes on to argue that Russia has established a system of 'regime democracy' in the post-Soviet era:

On the one hand, the regime system is profoundly authoritarian and seeks to insulate itself from effective democratic control; on the other, to achieve legitimacy and sustainability the regime system employs democratic practices like elections and other forms of popular motivation. (1997, 16)

In similar vein, Harley Balzer describes Russia by using the concept of 'managed pluralism'. According to Balzer, 'managed pluralism combines elites' self-serving claims that a national "mentality" requires strong executive authority with more general political phenomenon of leaders endeavouring to constrain diverse cultural influences accompanying globalization while still reaping economic benefits from the international economy' (Balzer 2003, 189–227).

In many ways, both Sakwa's 'regime democracy' and Balzer's 'managed pluralism' are variations on Fareed Zakaria's concept of an illiberal democracy. According to Zakaria, free and fair elections, the rule of law, and a separation of powers are distinct from the more basic liberties of speech, assembly, religion and property. The former characteristics equate to Comisso's procedural democratic traits, whereas the latter consist of liberal attributes that Comisso categorises as substantive democratic norms.

While we concur with the general thrust of both Balzer's and Sakwa's analyses, we differentiate their elite-focused approach from our mass-based cultural conceptualisation of authoritarian pluralism. Authoritarian pluralism posits that the success or failure of elite-directed policies is derived primarily from Russia's traditional political culture, but it is not shaped primarily by elite preference as argued by Sakwa and Balzer. Thus, we agree that Yeltsin's consolidation of power around his person and his office confirms both scholars' analysis of elite preferences. However, we assert that Yeltsin's (and later Putin's) ongoing success was contingent upon a broad appeal to traditional cultural norms of authoritarianism. The public's embrace of these authoritarian political norms was ultimately expressed in its electoral support of Yeltsin within the pluralist

¹³ *Washington Post* (19–22 June 1996).

¹⁴ *OMRI Russian Presidential Election Survey*, 13 (4 July 1996).

machinery he created. Therefore, authoritarian pluralism is not a phenomenon imposed upon the masses by a backward-looking elite. Instead, it is an outgrowth of traditional authoritarian social norms that are shared along the vertical spectrum. These cultural norms, however, are not static. They have shown a dynamic quality by incorporating pluralist elements.

Russia had by 1996 taken meaningful steps toward establishing a procedural democracy. It was a constitutional government that ostensibly provided for the separation of power and basic freedoms and rights for its citizens. Moreover, repetitive cycles of free elections have now taken place for both the legislative and executive branches. However, Russia's progress towards substantive democratic outcomes is not as evident. In the case of the First Chechen War, Yeltsin made clear that he was willing to use military force to put down any significant challenges to the territorial integrity of a unified Russian polity, regardless of liberal notions of what such a polity should comprise (Comisso 1997, 11). Furthermore, with his victory in the 1996 presidential election, Yeltsin had effectively re-established the commanding-heights authority of the Russian central state and the supremacy of the office of the presidency. The power of incumbency is strong in most democracies. However, Yeltsin's cunning and unfair use of the powers of his office to turn the election to his favour is a clear example that substantive outcomes lag procedural ones.

Yeltsin's Eclipse, 1997–1999

With his health declining in late 1997, Yeltsin began a convoluted search for a successor. Following the dismissal of Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin, Yeltsin announced plans to assume the duties of prime minister himself, an act that would have violated the constitution. Yeltsin backed off from his threat and nominated the youthful Sergei Kiriyenko to the office of prime minister. After the Duma rejected Kiriyenko's nomination twice, Yeltsin yet again invoked procedural elements of the constitution, openly threatening the Duma with dissolution if it failed to confirm Kiriyenko. When faced with their own survival, the majority of Duma members confirmed Kiriyenko on 17 April 1998.

Kiriyenko's tenure in office was short-lived. Amid worsening economic conditions and social unrest, Yeltsin dismissed Kiriyenko on 23 August 1998 and, surprisingly, announced his intention to bring Chernomyrdin back into the fold as prime minister. In light of Russia's financial crisis, Yeltsin argued that it was 'necessary to bring in Chernomyrdin's experience and weight' (Shevtsova 1999, 254). Shevtsova offers an alternative analysis of Yeltsin's motives:

Kiriyenko could not guarantee Yeltsin and his family personal and financial security if the president resigned. Yeltsin's firing of Chernomyrdin in March had clearly shown that he was at that time thinking of re-election and had decided to get rid of a potential rival. The firing of Kiriyenko in August indicated that Yeltsin was ready to step down and wanted a successor who would guarantee his safety after leaving office—at the end of his term or sooner. (1999, 255–256)

The Duma, however, did not support Chernomyrdin's nomination and Yeltsin was faced with a dilemma similar to that which he confronted with Kiriyenko. He could dissolve the Duma, but this time he risked the very real possibility that his opponents would gain ground in the subsequent elections, thus threatening his

ability to control the question of the succession. In this case, Yeltsin backed down and began searching for a compromise candidate. Yeltsin eventually resorted to Yevgeny Primakov, a Soviet-era apparatchik, whom the Duma quickly confirmed.

This sequence of events is an important example of authoritarian pluralism in action. Yeltsin's decision to compromise (either by choice or by necessity) with the Duma over the issue of appointing the prime minister indicates that some substantive democratic norms have emerged. Were Yeltsin concerned *only* with the consolidation of power around himself, and were Russia purely an authoritarian regime, Yeltsin would not have been forced to negotiate. However, by entering into the give and take of liberal-style discourse over key political appointments, and by arriving at some middle ground with the political opposition, Yeltsin's behaviour is similar to that of leaders in other democracies. The complex nature of authoritarian pluralism is further explicated by these events. Russia's contemporary political system is an uncomfortable juxtaposition of idealised Western notions of pluralism and persistent traditions of illiberal strongman politics.

In 1999 Yeltsin named Vladimir Putin, a former KGB officer with virtually no experience in electoral politics, as his head of government. However, unlike with his previous prime ministers, Yeltsin publicly bestowed his blessing upon Putin as heir apparent to the Russian presidency immediately after his appointment. Amid this fourth government in 17 months, hostilities once again broke out in the Northern Caucasus (Bantin 1999; Hoffman 2000).

Exhibiting Lenin's ethic of *kto kovo*, Prime Minister Putin chose a hard-line response, ordering ground troops to Chechnya on 30 September. He believed that the rebellion 'would have spread to Dagestan, the whole Caucasus would have been taken away, it's clear ... Russia as a state ... [would] cease to exist' (Hoffman 2000). Hence, the federal government again embarked on a military campaign to seize Grozny and return Chechnya to the Russian fold—this time with mass public support.

With the Second Chechen War underway, Yeltsin lived up to his reputation of unpredictability and, on 31 December 1999, shocked the world by announcing his resignation. In explaining his decision, Yeltsin stated, 'Russia must enter the new millennium with new politicians, new faces, new intelligent, strong and energetic people. And for those of us who have been in power for many years, we must go' (Interfax Russian News 1999). Moreover, in response to his critics, Yeltsin stated, 'Many times I have often heard it said: "Yeltsin will try to hold onto power by any means, he won't hand it over to anyone." That is all lies. That is not the case' (Baltic News Service 1999). Upon Yeltsin's resignation, Prime Minister Putin assumed the role of acting president. As his first official presidential action, Putin signed an order granting Yeltsin immunity from prosecution.

Putin's Authoritarian Pluralism

Yeltsin's paradoxical legacy of authoritarian pluralism lives on in Putin, who has also made no secret of the fact that he favours a strong Russia. 'Democracy is the dictatorship of the law,' he has said. 'The stronger the state is, the freer the individual' (*Russia Today* 2000). In his 2005 state-of-the-nation address, he elaborated that Russia will 'decide for itself the pace, terms and conditions of moving towards democracy' (Arutunyan 2005). In fact, Putin's style of

governance has remained remarkably consistent in the six years since becoming Yeltsin's heir. He has shut down or taken control of Russia's independent television networks, consolidated power in Moscow and persisted in creating a political environment in which security concerns have consistently taken precedence over the tenets of democracy and freedom. Moreover, he has engaged in these activities with widespread support from the Russian public, thus lending further credence to this seemingly contradictory *mélange* of authoritarianism and pluralism. Dmitry Rogozin, leader of the nationalist Rodina party, discusses Putin's dual nature, suggesting there are in fact two Vladimir Putins. 'One proclaims certain values', Rogozin argues, 'which everyone no doubt agrees with, and urges they be followed. The other one heads the government and for all these years has done nothing to implement his appeals' (Medetsky 2005).

One of Putin's top priorities upon entering office was the further establishment of the so-called 'power vertical' in Russia's federal system, and consolidating political power in the Kremlin at the expense of regional autonomy. Putin authorised in early 2000 the creation of seven 'super-districts' headed by Kremlin-appointed 'governors general' to oversee the activities of the state's popularly elected regional governors. Russian newspaper *Segodnya* suggested that these reforms would effectively 'reduce the role of [popularly elected regional governors] to routine duties of local community service managers', while giving the newly appointed governors general unprecedented power over the eight super-districts (Odnokolenko 2000). Moreover, and perhaps tellingly, five of the seven individuals initially appointed as governors general to supervise these districts were generals drawn from either the Federal Security Service or the Russian military (Getmanenko 2000). A few months after authorising the creation of these new districts, the Russian parliament also approved Putin-backed legislation that gave the president the power to suspend any of Russia's popularly elected governors for making 'unconstitutional' decisions.

The actions of the Putin administration have produced a noticeable chilling effect on free speech in Russia. Oleg Panfilov, Director of the Center for Journalists in Extreme Situations, asserts that since Putin entered office in 2000 'journalists here [have been] informed that they simply must support the decisions of the president and government' (Augsberger 2005). This is evident, for instance, in the November 2005 decision by Moscow-based REN TV—Russia's last independent local television station—to pull news anchor Olga Romanova off the air when she complained that management was blocking news items that might anger top officials. Even former Soviet leader Gorbachev found such developments troubling, describing Romanova's treatment as 'a clarion call that tells us that we have lost the last station which kept even a little independence and objectivity in its coverage' (*Moscow News* 2005). In turn, Putin's war on the media, while waged largely under the auspices of reining in the power of corrupt oligarchs, once again clearly underscores the growing gap between the substantive goals of Western-style liberalism and the realities of Russian-style democratic politics.

An illustrative example of Putin's brand of authoritarian pluralism occurred with the prosecution of Mikhail Khodorkovsky, the multi-billionaire president of the petroleum company Yukos. Khodorkovsky, who was considered Russia's most powerful oligarch and was its richest man, was arrested in October 2003 on charges of fraud and tax evasion. Most observers have concluded that, while he and other oligarchs may have flaunted the law, Khodorkovsky's only true error of

judgment was to enter the political arena. When Khodorkovsky (who was sentenced in 2005 to nine years in prison) began providing financial resources to a variety of opposition parties, he was seen in the Kremlin as a threat. In a deft display of procedural politics, Putin chose to enforce the largely dysfunctional Russian tax code as the point of his spear. He ordered Khodorkovsky's personal assets seized, and his power base Yukos was broken up, with parts of it being and sold off or re-nationalised. It was a clear statement by the Kremlin to the electoral opposition: 'dictatorship of the law' means opposition activities will be tolerated, but only if they do not threaten the status quo.¹⁵

For his part, Putin did not actively campaign and refused to participate in electoral debates, describing them as 'a senseless game' (Baker and Glasser 2004b). Meanwhile, at least four of Putin's opponents publicly announced that they were considering dropping out of the race as the March election approached, comparing it to the rubber-stamp elections of the Soviet era. As one of these opponents, Irina Khakamada, noted in February 2004, 'The presidential election campaign in Russia is increasingly developing features of lawlessness and falsehood. In this situation, the competition of ideas and alternatives is becoming impossible' (Baker and Glasser 2004a).

When the elections finally arrived on 15 March 2004 (following major gains for Putin's party in the December Duma elections and the surprise Yeltsin-esque sacking of his prime minister just a few weeks before Russians went to the polls), Putin won in a landslide with 71 per cent of the vote. As political strategist Vyacheslav Nikonov notes, 'People tend to vote for the Czar' (Baker and Glasser 2004b). It is indeed telling that despite generally taking a harder line on many issues than Yeltsin, Putin's popularity among the Russian people continued to surpass that of his predecessor. When asked in December 2003 if they would support cancelling the upcoming election to save money since Putin's victory seemed a virtual 'lock', 55 per cent of those polled responded that they would either definitely or probably agree.¹⁶

After handily winning the election with over 70 per cent of the vote, Putin further consolidated executive power by signing legislation eliminating gubernatorial elections in the regions in favour of direct presidential appointees. Citing a need for heightened security following the Beslan school hostage crisis and a series of terrorist bombings in Moscow, the President again sought to reaffirm Russia's 'power vertical' with the Kremlin at the top of the system. As former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev summarised, 'Under the banner of fighting terrorism, it is planned to sharply limit democratic freedoms and deprive the citizens of the right to directly express their attitude toward the ruling authority' (*Moscow News* 2004).

Putin's critics also argue that Russia's fledgling civil society is also now under direct attack by the administration. In January 2006, citing concerns of foreign nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) undermining Russian security, Putin signed a bill both establishing stricter registration procedures for foreign and domestic NGOs and giving the state the power to audit or close down such

¹⁵ < http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mikhail_Khodorkovsky >. See also Peter Baker and Susan Glasser (2004b).

¹⁶ < <http://www.russiavotes.org> > .

organisations. The government can deny NGOs registration based on 'threats to sovereignty, political independence, territorial integrity, national unity and originality, cultural heritage and the national interests of the Russian Federation' (Abdullaev 2006). In turn, critics of the administration have argued that the law is aimed squarely at shutting down those NGOs critical of Putin, the government or the military. It is perhaps no coincidence that the administration's attention first shifted to regulating NGOs not long after such organisations played a key role in the Ukrainian Orange Revolution that has reinvigorated substantive democracy in that country. 'What the government is doing now', asserts Darya Miloslavskaya, 'could once and for all put an end to nongovernmental organisations and the services they have been providing much more competently than the government itself' (Yablokova 2004). Given the widely accepted role of such organisations in forming the backbone of democratic civil society, such steps to limit their activities again speak to the failings of substantive democracy in Russia.

What is the overall impact of these authoritarian trends? In 2005, the democracy watchdog group Freedom House found Russia to be roughly equivalent to Egypt in terms of personal and political liberty.¹⁷ It was ranked as 'not free', Freedom House citing Putin's efforts to 'concentrate political authorities, harass and intimidate the media, and politicise the country's law-enforcement system' (Voronina and Kashin 2004). At the same time, however, survey data suggest that the populist, pluralist elements of authoritarian pluralism remain alive and well. The President enjoys widespread public support, with a January 2006 Pew Research Center study suggesting that two-thirds of Russians feel a strong leader is more important to their country than a democratic government—a pronounced drop-off from the enthusiasm for democracy expressed by Russians in the early 1990s (Filippov 2006). Since entering office in 2000, Putin's approval ratings have rarely dropped below 70 per cent, and stand at 75 per cent as of February 2006.¹⁸

Conclusion: The Globalisation of Authoritarian Pluralism

In conclusion, we interpret Putin's electoral victories in 2000 and 2004 as indications of a public legitimisation of a system that combines a cultural heritage of illiberal authoritarianism with a thin veneer of procedural democratic principles. In such symbolic acts as the revival of the Stalin-era national anthem and use of the Red Banner flag by the armed forces (Yablokova 2000), Putin has turned to Russia's history to map some aspects of its future, ushering in a new era of a uniquely Russian form of democracy. To Western liberals, the concept of authoritarian pluralism itself might seem to be an oxymoron. However, the record shows it an accurate and fitting conceptualisation of contemporary Russian politics—as professed by Russian people themselves—and one that has been mirrored in other countries as well.

The synthesis between traditional and contemporary forms of governance is a phenomenon now seen in other states, including those transitioning from authoritarian to democratic governance, but also in states with longer histories of

¹⁷ < <http://www.freedomhouse.org/ratings/allscores2005.xls> > .

¹⁸ < <http://www.russiavotes.org> > .

substantive democracy. Like their Russian counterparts, Argentines, Bolivians, Brazilians, Chileans, Zimbabweans, Venezuelans and even Americans have recently expressed their approval of more illiberal and authoritarian policies at the ballot box. Putin not only *seeks* to be authoritarian, he is wildly popular *because* he is authoritarian. If he were not authoritarian, a candidate who was more heavy-handed might displace him. As Valerie Bunce has theorised, 'while rapid progress in democratic consolidation improves the prospects for democratic survival in the future, it does not follow that unconsolidated democracies are necessarily less sustainable. Indeed, compromising democracy (and the state) may *contribute* to democratic survival' (Bunce 2003, 169). We also see the application of Guillermo O'Donnell's differentiation between Western notions of representative liberal democracy and 'delegative democracy' as appropriate to the case of post-Soviet Russia. O'Donnell describes delegative democracies in Latin America as those which 'rest on the premise that whoever wins election to the presidency is thereby entitled to govern as he or she sees fit, constrained only by the hard facts of existing power relations and by a constitutionally limited term in office' (O'Donnell 1994, 59). O'Donnell goes on to argue that delegative presidents typically regard parliaments as 'unnecessary encumbrances to their "mission" [and] they make strenuous efforts to hamper the development of such institutions' (O'Donnell 1994, 59).

Well over a decade old now, O'Donnell's observations on Latin America are more than timely in the year 2006. Inspired by the ascendance of former Lieutenant Colonel Hugo Chavez to the presidency of Venezuela, an emerging 'Chavetista' trend reflects many of the same attributes as Russian authoritarian pluralism. According to a recent report,

No one else has held such a concentration of power in Venezuela since the ouster of dictator Marcos Perez Jimenez in 1958. And the similarities may not stop there. Wielding a potent blend of populism and nationalism, Chavez is acting swiftly to replace civilian power with social action directed by the armed forces. He seems to be leading one of Latin America's richest and most corruption-riddled countries back toward the kind of strongman rule that was common in the region during the 1940s and '50s, and most dramatically practiced by Argentina's Juan Domingo Peron. After Chavez's constitutional sweep, both houses of the opposition-led Congress meekly declared that they had 'suspended' their sessions—were in effect going out of business. A similar fate probably awaits the Supreme Court, which has questioned Chavez's authority to sweep aside the old order in such a cavalier way. (McGirk 1999)

Chavez's model has produced a neo-leftist domino effect in Latin America, where recent elections have empowered populist (and mostly left-of-centre) leaders in Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, the Dominican Republic and Venezuela.

Strange as it may seem (considering Western liberalism's ultimate victory in the Cold War is less than two decades old), the zenith of substantive democracy's global reach may have ended on 11 September 2001. It takes little imagination to foresee the near-term global landscape being one in which procedural democratic norms are forced upon such countries as Afghanistan, Iraq and others by Western military powers who see democracy as the panacea for terrorism. However, like in Russia, the substantive components of these new democratic governments will be imperfect at best.

Further exploration of the emergence of variants of authoritarian pluralism globally is a challenging question and, due to space limitations, one that will be left for a future essay. However, we close with some general observations. We are intrigued by Harley Balzer's suggestion that political elites pursue authoritarian practices as a way to reap the benefits of the expanding international economy, while simultaneously attempting to shield themselves from the elements of globalisation that may erode their sovereign power. Accordingly, 'leaders recognize that labour unions, business associations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and other agents of civil society are necessary in a country competing in a global economy and the "soft power" marketplace. At the same time, the managed pluralist regime *seeks* both to orchestrate and to arbitrarily limit that activity' (Balzer 2003, 191).

Even the United States is an illustrative case of the global reach of authoritarian pluralism's inherently contradictory tendencies. In the last four years, believing that authoritarian governments are the primary well-springs of terrorism, the Bush administration has gone to war to champion the spread of democracy in Iraq and Afghanistan (White House 2002). However, to achieve its goal of democratic transformation in the fight against terrorism, Washington has also transformed time-honoured American notions of substantive democracy at home and abroad. Recent trends in American politics—the ill-treatment of detainees in Afghanistan, Iraq and Cuba; the CIA's policy of 'rendering' prisoners (a euphemism for outsourcing torture); the passage of the Patriot Act (which increases government powers of domestic surveillance); President George W Bush's decision to employ the highly secretive National Security Agency (NSA) to spy on Americans—suggest that in the quest for greater security the essence of substantive democracy has taken a step backward in the US under the Bush administration. Indeed, when presented with an alternative choice in the 2004 election, the American people re-elected President Bush over a challenger whose campaign had emphasised traditional substantive democratic norms as a main point of critique of the Bush White House.

Bush's re-election, like Putin's, suggests that in a globalised world that enabled the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the American people, like many others who face uncertain futures, are willing to sacrifice civil rights and due process protections to gain security. As a result, Samuel Huntington's 'third wave' of democratisation is now clearly morphing into something new. Democracy continues to spread globally, but it may be more accurate to envisage that the 'fourth wave' will be a procedural wave lacking the substantive core of liberal democracy.

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