Russian Electoral Engineering from *Perestroika* to Putin

Derek S. Hutcheson

Abstract
The article examines electoral politics over the last 35 years in the Russian Federation, since the end of the Soviet Union to the present day. It traces the party and electoral system through several phases of development, from hyper-pluralism in the wake of the Soviet Union's collapse to the electoral authoritarianism of the late Putin period. A particular focus is on the 'toolkit' of measures used to constrict competition and ensure favourable electoral outcomes for the Kremlin and its associates, and on public confidence (or the lack thereof) in the legitimacy of the electoral process. Whilst we can over-romanticise the pluralism of the late 1980s and 1990s, there is an inherent danger for the Kremlin in relying on extracting ever greater gains from an ever-narrower base of support, at the expense of systemic renewal. In the long-term, this may presage another epochal shift in the Russian political system.

Introduction

It is notable that the Russian political system characteristically goes through substantial upheaval approximately every 35-40 years.[1] The death of Mikhail Gorbachev in August 2022 inevitably led to reflection on electoral developments in Russia since the end of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), the last such major upheaval. Obituaries of Gorbachev contrasted the opening up

1 Starting from the assassination of Tsar Alexander II in 1881, the Russian Revolution followed 36 years later (1917); the death of Stalin 36 years after that (1953); and the fall of the Berlin Wall 36 further years into the future (1989), predating the collapse of the USSR itself two years later. Each of these crucial dates was followed by several years of unrest and flux, before the emergence of a strong leader and a more stable pattern of politics that lasted around 20-30 years until the next big dislocation. Without being overly prescriptive, the mid-2020s would be the time in which major political change might be expected to occur, if this historical cycle continues.

Derek S. Hutcheson är professor vid Institutionen för globala politiska studier, Malmö universitet.
E-post: derek.hutcheson@mau.se

of pluralism during his six years as General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) from 1985 to 1991 with the closing down of it again under Russia's longstanding president, Vladimir Putin. Gorbachev's death in the same year as Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine also draws attention to the fact that the cycle of Russian politics that followed his fall from power more than three decades ago may itself soon be reaching its endgame.

It is argued in this article that we are in danger of over-romanticising the emergence of pluralism in the late 1980s and early 1990s. *Perestroika* opened the Soviet political system up, but the revolution it promised was forestalled by a legacy of questionable electoral practices that was never fully overcome in the 1990s and which reconsolidated into a more electoral authoritarian political system in the decades that followed. In recent years, commentators have become increasingly dismissive of the democratic credentials of Russian elections, in some cases with some justification. But this underestimates their importance as legitimising tools and as a means to map the regime's support bases. The Russian electoral system is one of the many tools used by the regime to consolidate and maintain its power and thus forms the focus of this article.

The article first of all focuses on the development of the party and electoral system since the late Soviet Union to the present day. It goes on to examine public confidence in the legitimacy of the electoral process, and growing political alienation. There is an inherent danger for the Kremlin, insofar its electoral victories are obtained by extracting ever greater gains from an ever-narrower base of support. In the long-term, this may cause problems for the feasibility of the regime and presage the next such epochal shift in the Russian political system.

The phases of Russian electoral development

Since 1993, the Russian Federation has held eight legislative elections to the State Duma and six presidential elections. Three national referenda or referendum-like votes have been held (two on the constitution in 1993 and 2020; and one in early 1993 about confidence in the president). On top of this, Russia has backed arms-length pseudo-referendums in the country's near abroad, aimed at legitimising its annexation of Ukrainian territory. The results of the presidential and parliamentary elections are summarized in tables 1 and 2.

Russia's political system is dominated by its executive, meaning that presidential elections are the more politically significant contests. However, they rarely provide much psephological excitement. Only in 1996 has the result of a presidential election initially been in doubt. President Boris Yeltsin's spin doctors used every trick in the book, and a few that were not, to bring him to re-election from a starting point of an 8 percent approval rating (Levada 1996). Apart from that, presidential elections, held every four years from 1996

onwards and every six years since 2012, have been fairly tame affairs. Not since Putin's first election in 2000 has the second-placed candidate obtained more than 18 per cent of the vote. They have also been notable for the fact that more or less same cast of perennial opposition candidates has competed unsuccessfully in every contest against Presidents Yeltsin (1991 and 1996), Putin (2000, 2004, 2012 and 2018) and Dmitrii Medvedev (2008), as table 1 shows.[2]

Parliamentary elections provide more interest for the political scientist. Following the 2-year interim parliament (State Duma) elected in 1993, legislative elections were held every four years from 1995 until 2011, before moving to a 5-year cycle. As will be discussed in more detail below, the elections of

2 The whole country is a single electoral district, with a majoritarian system. If no candidate secures 50 percent of the vote in the first round, a second-round run-off is held between the top two candidates. This has only happened once, in 1996.

Tabel 1. Presidential election results, 1996-2018

Year	1996 (1)	1996 (2)	2000	2004	2008	2012	2018
Total turnout (votes)	75,744,549	74,815,898	75,181,071	69,581,761	74,849,264	71,780,800	73,629,581
Total turnout (% of electorate)	69.8	68.9	68.7	64.4	69.8	65.3	67.5
of which early voters (%)	0.0	0.0	0.2	0.2	0.3	0.3	0.3
of which in polling station (%)	95.4	95.2	95.1	93.2	92.3	91.4	93.2
of which outside polling station (%)	4.6	4.8	4.7	6.6	7.5	8.2	6.5
No. of candidates	10	2	11	6	4	5	7
Votes for candidates (% vote)							
Yeltsin, Boris	35.3	53.8	-	-	-	-	-
Putin, Vladimir	-	-	52.9	71.3	-	63.6	76.7
Medvedev, Dmitrii	-	-	-	-	70.3	-	-
Zyuganov, Gennadii (CPRF)	32.3	40.3	29.2	-	17.7	17.2	-
Yavlinsky, Grigorii (Yabloko)	7.3	-	5.8	-	-	-	1.1
Zhirinovsky, Vladimir (LDPR)	5.7	-	2.7	-	9.3	6.2	5.6
Mironov, Sergei	-	-	-	0.8	-	3.9	-
Lebed', Aleksandr	14.5	-	-	-	-	-	-
Kharitonov, Nikolai (CPRF)	-	-	-	13.7	-	-	-
Prokhorov, Mikhail	-	-	-	-	-	8.0	-
Grudinin, Pavel (CPRF)	-	-	-	-	-	-	11.8
Other candidates (combined)	2.2	0.0	6.7	10.2	1.3	0.0	3.8
Against All candidates	1.5	4.8	1.9	3.4	-	-	-

Sources: Central Electoral Commission (1996–2018), compiled, recalculated and rendered comparable by author.

Note: Candidates listed in order of victory, then by candidates with multiple candidacies, and by year of first candidacy. 1996 figures refer to the two rounds of voting.

Tabel 2. State Duma election results (party list votes), 1993-2021

Year	1993	1995	1999	2003	2007	2011	2016	2021
Total turnout (votes)	58,187,755	69,614,711	66,840,603	60,712,299	69,609,446	65,774,462	52,700,992	56,484,685
Total turnout (% of electorate)	54.8	64.8	61.8	55.7	63.8	60.2	47.9	51.7
of which early voters (%)	-	0.7	0.1	0.1	0.2	0.3	0.2	0.3
of which in polling station (%)	-	94.7	95.7	94.4	93.4	93.1	93.3	85.3
of which outside polling station (%)	-	4.6	4.2	5.5	6.4	6.6	6.5	14.4
Total parties (N)	13	43	26	23	11	7	14	14
Effective number of parties (ENP) – Party list vote	8.3	11.1	6.8	5.4	2.3	3.2	3.2	3.4
Party vote shares (% of votes cast)								
United Russia (UR)	-	-	-	37.6	64.3	49.3	54.2	49.8
Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF)	12.4	22.3	24.3	12.6	11.6	19.2	13.3	18.9
Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR)	22.9	11.2	6.0*	11.5	8.1	11.7	13.1	7.6
A Just Russia (AJR)	-	-	-	-	7.7	13.2	6.2	7.5
New People (NP)	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	5.3
Yabloko	7.9	6. 9	5.9	(4.3)	(1.6)	(3.4)	(2.0)	(1.3)
Union of Rightist Forces (URF)	-	-	8.5	(4.0)	(1.0)	-	-	-
Agrarian Party of Russia (APR)	8.0	3.8	-	(3.6)	(2.3)	-	-	-
Democratic Party of Russia (DPR)	5.5	-	-	(0.2)	(0.1)	-	-	-
Motherland	-	-	-	9.02	-	-	-	-
Unity	-	-	23.3	-	-	-	-	-
Fatherland-All Russia (FAR)	-	-	13.3	-	-	-	-	-
Women of Russia	8.1	(4.6)	(2.0)	-	-	-	-	-
Our Home is Russia (OHR)	-	10.1	(1.2)	-	-	-	-	-
Party of Russian Unity and Accord (PRUA)	6.7	(0.4)	-	-	-	-	-	-
Russia's Choice (RC)	15.5	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Other parties, not listed separately	8.7	36.1	18.7	14.9	3.1	1.6	9.2	7.5
Against all parties	4.2	1.8	3.3	4.7	-	-	-	-

Sources: Central Electoral Commission (1993-2021), compiled and rendered comparable by author.

Notes: Table lists all parties that have won more than 5% of the vote in at least one election. 'ENP' reflects the 'effective number of parties (Laasko & Taagepera 1979) and is calculated by the author based on all vote shares (excluding the 'against all vote' from 1993-2003). Parties are listed in reverse order of election (2021 parties at the top), then by vote share. Vote shares in brackets denote the vote shares of parties that failed to cross the electoral threshold in that particular election. All other parties that have never crossed the threshold are summarised in the 'other' category.

* In 1999 the LDPR was called 'Zhirinovsky's Bloc' and was – technically – a different list, though it contained most of the same people as the original LDPR list that was disqualified.

the 1990s were very unpredictable affairs, whereas since the 2000s the party system has been much more stable – arguably verging on moribund.

THE EMERGENCE OF PLURALISM IN THE LATE SOVIET PERIOD

Like the Swedish word *val*, the Russian word for 'election' (*vybor*) contains a double meaning – the act of making a choice, and a formal occasion on which political representatives are selected. Elections in the USSR fulfilled only the latter definition, affirming those in power rather than choosing them (Hermet et al. 1978). Only the CPSU and bodies that were under its direct or indirect control could nominate candidates (USSR Constitution 1977: Art 100). The Party served the purposes of interest aggregation, ideological reinforcement and political and social control (Lane 1969: 203–230). Dissenting opinions were usually expressed in other ways than the ballot box: local 'letters to the editor', and ironic anecdotes around the kitchen table, amongst other things (Adams 2005).

The official vote tally in favour of the slate of candidates was never reported as being less than 99% in any Supreme Soviet election from 1945 to 1984 (White 1985). But Soviet elections were not entirely pointless: the canvassing and mobilization efforts provided valuable feedback on local social problems (idem.), and also served as a means of controlling the internal residence permit system (Zaslavsky & Brym 1978).

Democratization under *perestroika* was initially a means of improving workplace accountability and renewing cadres (Gorbachev 1988a: 36–38). But once unleashed, the drive towards pluralism proved difficult to stop and spilled into the political arena. Experimentally, 5 per cent or so of provincial deputies in 1987 local elections were elected in multi-member constituencies (Hahn 1988). The elections to the 1989 All-Union Congress of People's Deputies (CPD) proved a watershed – based on the then-revolutionary principle that 'the voters should be given the right of genuine choice both at the stage of the discussion and nomination of candidates and at the stage of voting' (Gorbachev 1988b). In other words, in the majority of constituencies there was more than one candidate. Several prominent CPSU luminaries were defeated, and there were also more scientists, and even the entry to the legislature of a handful of clergy and rural leaseholders (Nazimova and Sheinis 1989). Lively discussions ensued in the meetings of the Congress, prominently featuring such as the Soviet dissident Andrei Sakharov. But though revolutionary at the time, it was notable that the number of CPSU members actually increased, and the choice that Gorbachev advocated did not yet extend to multiple parties, as opposed to candidates.

With gathering momentum, two further electoral innovations took place at the sub-national level that would have significance for many years to come. In March 1990, the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR) – at that point one of the 15 constituent republics of the USSR – held a republic-level

CPD election. Just over a year later, in summer 1991, Boris Yeltsin won the first competitive election to the newly-created presidency of the RSFSR. Yeltsin was seen as the candidate who represented the cleanest break with the communist past, and won comfortably against five other candidates (White et al. 1994).

At the time, these developments were unprecedented. A couple of years later, for example, American president Bill Clinton noted that Yeltsin was 'the first democratically elected president in a thousand years of Russian history' (Broder 1993). And the proliferation of informal political organizations that had sprung up in the late 1980s were legalized by the removal of the CPSU's constitutional monopoly in March 1990. By the end of that year, there were at least 457 political movements in the RSFSR alone (Berezovsky et al. 1991).

At the same time, we should be wary of over-romanticising the late Soviet era. The 1989 and 1990 elections preceded the legalization of other parties, and CPSU members still accounted for 86 per cent of the deputies at the first convocation of the RSFSR CPD (Izgarshev et al. 1990). The polarization between pro- and anti-reform groups would later render the political system almost unworkable when the RSFSR became the newly-independent Russian Federation at the end of 1991 (Law on State Name Change 1991). Moreover, there were numerous reports of pre-election selection meetings in 1989 and 1990 being used to hinder or stop independent candidates from being nominated, or of uncooperative electoral commissions refusing registration (Brovkin 1990; Lolganov 1989; Ivanchenko & Lyubarev 2006: 23). These mirror many of allegations that plague the electoral system to this day – indicating that observers at the time were perhaps too quick to dismiss them as the teething troubles of democracy rather than systemic issues that carried over to the post-Soviet era.

THE EARLY POST-SOVIET YEARS: A 'FLOATING' PARTY SYSTEM

Unlike most of the states of post-communist Europe, the 'founding' elections of the post-Soviet era came not immediately, but two years after the collapse of the old regime, giving incumbent elites time to entrench. The first parliamentary elections to the State Duma (and the ratification of a new constitution) came in December 1993, following Yeltsin's shelling of parliament in October 1993 – the bloody culmination of a two-year fight over which institution had the over-riding power over the other.

Legislative elections in the 1990s and early 2000s were characterized by vast numbers of hopeless and short-lived political organizations that contested each election and disappeared before the next one. Respectively 41.0 percent, 52.4 percent and 58.1 per cent of the vote in the 1995, 1999 and 2003 elections went to lists that had not even been on the ballot previously, rendering it very difficult to measure electoral stability in a context of party volatility.

Various conceptualizations of this period in Russian politics can be made, ranging from Rose's description of the constant flux as a 'floating' party system

(Rose 2000), to the idea of a 'party *non*-system' (Sanchez 2009). Parties were characterized by shallow linkage between society and state, low levels of legitimacy and identification, and weak accountability (Thames 2007: 458; Hale 2006).[3] As Table 2 shows, it would not even have been mathematically possible for all organizations standing for election to cross the 5 percent electoral threshold from 1995 to 2003.

There were various reasons for this instability. First, Yeltsin was reluctant to throw his full weight behind a pro-presidential party, in case it became a rival power base (Gill 2015: 89). Second, the separation of the executive and the legislature encouraged 'irresponsible opposition' (Sartori 2005: 205). Politics became polarized around a legislature/executive competition in which the legislature was free to oppose without having to enact workable policies (Robinson 1998). Finally, loose association registration rules and a mixed unconnected electoral system (discussed in more detail below) created incentives for ambitious politicians to create their own micro-organizations to boost their personal profiles, rather than consolidate forces.

Nonetheless, amongst the larger parties the roots of a party system were beginning to form. In the mid- to late 1990s, the strongest political grouping was that of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF), the self-proclaimed successor party to the CPSU, headed from its February 1993 re-founding congress – and to this day – by Gennadii Zyuganov (Vyzhutovich 1993). Alongside it (and surprise winner of the party list part of the 1993 election) was the Liberal Democratic Party of the Russian Federation (LDPR), led by the charismatic nationalist Vladimir Zhirinovsky. Belying the party's name, he had a reputation as a hardline nationalist political clown (advocating, amongst things, blowing radioactive dust over the Baltic states; and predicting that Russian soldiers would one day stop on the shores of the Indian Ocean [Zhirinovsky 1998: 53]). But closer examination revealed a closeness to the regime that allowed him to be used as a 'kiteflyer' for outlandish ideas that could be implemented in watered-down and more sensible form by the government. By contrast, the Kremlin struggled to gain a supportive parliamentary foothold of its own, as will be discussed later. Its two attempts to do so (the 'parties of power' Russia's Choice in 1993 and Our Home is Russia in 1995) failed to gain much public traction, and were outflanked by the CPRF and its allies. These early State Dumas also had liberal parties (Yabloko (1993–2003) and the Union of Rightist Forces (1999–2003)), a wing which has been absent for most of this century.

3 Individual party histories can be studied in more detail elsewhere (Barygin et al 1999; March 2002; Hutcheson 2003, 2018; Ivanov 2008; Danilin 2015).

ENGINEERING A DOMINANT PARTY SYSTEM (1999-2011)

The turning point of the Russian Federation's broader political development was the 1999 State Duma election. The latest Kremlin-backed party, Unity, took second place to the CPRF and comfortably eclipsed the rival elite-based party, Fatherland-All Russia (FAR). The culmination of this internal power battle resulted in an elite pact that saw Yeltsin resign early and prime minister Vladimir Putin succeed him (Petrov et al. 2022).

Upon assuming the presidency in 2000, Putin set about consolidating a pro-presidential majority in the legislature. As the constant institutional confrontation during Yeltsin's second term had shown, a supportive legislature was crucial for the consolidation of power. Andreas Schedler (2013) highlights a typical feature of electoral authoritarian regimes: their desire to imitate the trappings of liberal democracy by holding regular multi-party elections, but skewing the playing field so that it is not level. From the early 2000s, politics became a contest not only within the rules of the game, but *about* the rules of the game. Electoral reforms actively began to shape the electoral system to favour particular actors over others, and to secure a working majority at all levels of power for pro-Kremlin forces (Turchenko & Shevchuk 2016).

As table 2 shows, the feckless pluralism of the 1990s gave way to a political system increasingly dominated by the Kremlin's newly formed United Russia party. The effective number of parties (Laakso & Taagepera 1979) was just 2.3 in 2007 – unprecedentedly low for a system based on proportional representation. Similarly, the share of the vote that went to parties that had not stood in the previous election had declined to zero by 2011.

There were two distinguishing features of this party system. The first was that UR was not just a powerful organization *per se*, but an epitome of a party organizational *type* – a 'party of power'. Analogous parties are found in a number of post-Soviet states, as well as in semi-authoritarian systems in Latin America and Asia (Laverty 2015). What distinguishes 'parties of power' is that their formation derives from state patronage by the authorities, rather than winning power from outside. In the State Duma, the two erstwhile rival factions (Unity and FAR) combined in 2002 with unaffiliated and regional deputies to push the CPRF out of its dominant position in the committee structures (Vinogradov & Sadchikov 2002) and create an 'imposed consensus' across the national and regional political sphere that formed the starting point for the formation of UR (Gel'man 2015: 71-98). The resultant organization has gone on to dominate legislative politics ever since, though it took some time before all regions came into line (Reuter 2017). What was different about UR from previous such efforts was the full energy that the Kremlin devoted to securing its system-defining role in a way that did not exist back in 1995

when a half-hearted attempt was made to create two pro-Yeltsin parties that subsequently sank with barely a trace.[4]

Throughout the 2000s and 2010s, UR provided a stable structure for career advancement (Reuter and Remington 2009; Smyth et al. 2007). Its domination of the State Duma created a dominant party system (Gel'man 2008; Smyth et al. 2007), or as Sartori would have termed it, a 'hegemonic' one. The other three parties which survived in the State Duma – the CPRF, LDPR and the new-for-2007 subordinate 'party of power' A Just Russia (AJR) – essentially acted as 'licensed, second class parties. The presence of such parties may afford the appearance but surely does not afford the substance of competitive politics' (Sartori 2005: 205).

Nonetheless, despite such huge majorities, UR was still essentially a front organization for the technocratic, non-partisan executive. Its Duma faction comprised a mixture of civil society functionaries, regional political careerists, and ethnic and religious minorities, most of whom lacked a strong public profile (Avioutskii 2012). Its main role was to manage the passage of the presidential administration's legislation through the Duma, mediate intra-elite conflicts, link the centre and the regions, and present the public party face of the regime. But its autonomy over public policy was very low, and real power lay outside its boundaries. Neither Putin nor Medvedev – though they explicitly backed it – were reliant upon it for their authority.

THE CARTEL PARTY SYSTEM (2011-2020)

The results from the 2011, 2016 and 2021 State Duma elections were superficially similar. Except for the arrival of a small 15-person faction from the newly-registered New People party in 2021 (Stanovaja 2021), the party system has remained an almost static constellation since 2007: one dominating pro-government party (UR) surrounded by the same group of within-system parliamentary opposition parties. There has been barely any turnover of personnel. The death in office of LDPR leader Vladimir Zhirinovsky in April 2022 occurred in the thirty-third year of his leadership. His Communist Party counterpart, Gennadii Zyuganov, has also led his party through every post-Soviet election.

By this time the State Duma increasingly resembled a 'cartel party system' (Hutcheson 2013; cf Katz & Mair 2018). In such systems, parties engage in superficial competition but colonize the state and use their incumbency to keep new actors outside the system. Since the late 2000s, all four major parties

4 The idea was to encourage a two-party system akin to the Democrats and Republicans in the United States. But the respective leaders – State Duma Speaker Ivan Rybkin and Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin – were far from the 'Jefferson and Hamilton' of modern Russian politics that the newspapers dubbed them (Bovt & Kalashnikova 1995). Their pedestrian campaigning efforts, as well as electoral system incentives to party fragmentation, sank their efforts.

have repeatedly passed laws that privilege parliamentary parties over non-parliamentary ones – e.g., exemption from signature collection for electoral registration, and ever-more generous state subsidies (Hutcheson 2013). In turn, they have segmented the electorate between pro-government (UR), leftist (CPRF) nationalist (LDPR) and social-democratic oppositionist (AJR) voters.

By 2011, there were only 7 legal political parties in Russia, four of which were represented in the State Duma. Though there was a liberalization of the party law thereafter, the majority of the new organizations have either been 'spoiler' parties (deliberately mimicking longer-standing opposition parties, in order to split their votes), or enjoyed only minimal support. Extra-parliamentary forces have become marginalized, and face significant bureaucratic barriers to re-entering the system. Some have taken their protests to the streets or refused to enter the electoral arena in the first place. Given the choice of 'exit, voice or loyalty' (Hirschman 1970), the decisions taken by opposition parties in the early 2000s affected their fates. Liberals have existed at the margins of anti-systemic protest ever since Yabloko lost its representation in 2003. The marginalization of the liberals was partly a result of the cartel engineering discussed above, and partly a result of perpetual splits in the liberal movement itself. By contrast, the two largest opposition parties chose (at least semi-) loyalty, which is how they retained their roles as part of the cartel. The CPRF's position inside rather than outside the system ensured its long-term survival, albeit as a marginal actor. As late as 1995 the CPRF was described as a 'sworn enemy' of the Yeltsin regime (Molchanov 1995), but by the mid-2000s, in much weakened form, it had become a within-system repository for protest votes. Such a role is important for the regime as well, as it allows it to maintain the impression that there are critical voices in parliament in the face of criticism of the lack of pluralism in Russian politics. The other parliamentary parties (the LDPR and AJR) were from the start more co-opted into the system, and remained so as it consolidated – but occasionally made loud protests on narrow issues.

At the regional level, with only a few exceptions, United Russia also won majorities in most regional legislatures from the mid-2000s onwards, with the same four parties splitting the remaining spoils (Ross 2014). But competition at the regional level was sometimes more intense than it appeared from the voting figures alone, as local notables connected to prominent enterprises competed for influence, and/or represented the interests of state enterprises, in the legislative bodies (Szakonyi 2020; Barsukova & Denisova-Schmidt 2022).

AN AUTHORITARIAN PARTY SYSTEM? (2020-)

The divide between the within-system cartel and the extra-parliamentary opposition has widened over time. Some have long considered the Russian party system to be an authoritarian one (for example Seredina 2022; Golosov 2022), but the present author would argue that it is only in the last few years

that it has definitively moved from the 'electoral authoritarian' category to the full-blooded variety. Interactions between pro-regime parties and in-system opposition parties have moved beyond the 'cartel' stage, and been replaced with almost full co-option into a regime that increasingly has closed off alternative avenues for dissent.

By one definition, autocracy occurs when 'the government achieve[s] power through democratic means … but subsequently change[s] the formal or informal rules, such that competition in subsequent elections [is] limited' (Geddes et al. 2014). This definition increasingly applies to Russia. Though this process has been a ratcheting one over many years, there has been a notable narrowing of the already-limited competition between parties since the start of this decade, and of the opportunities for dissent. Although the 2021 State Duma election saw the breakthrough, for the first time since 2007, of a new political party in the State Duma, the evidence so far is that the 'New People' party behaves very much like the old ones. The CPRF retains its position as the most obvious systemic opposition party, but it has also acquiesced strongly with the Kremlin's xenophobic nationalism. It has largely eschewed ideological renewal (Lassila & Nizhnikau 2022) and (like the other Duma parties) has given unanimous support to all major measures connected to the war in Ukraine. It has also sided with the regime against non-parliamentary opposition. Aleksei Navalnyi, who symbolized the anti-systemic opposition until his imprisonment in 2021 (Dollbaum et al. 2021), is according to CPRF leader Gennadii Zyuganov a 'representative of American finance capital' who has 'defamed Russian reality' (Anufrieva 2021) – a view not dissimilar to the regime's. That said, the CPRF benefited slightly in 2020–21 from the Navalnyi-organized 'Smart Voting' campaign. This was based on an app that encouraged opposition voters to consolidate their votes behind whichever candidate was best placed to beat UR. It made a marginal difference in concentrating the opposition vote – though in very few cases did they actually succeed in defeating the UR incumbents outright (Turchenko & Golosov 2022).

Later electoral reforms have advantaged the pro-regime actors and excluded opposition ones still further. This step further into authoritarian practices is examined in more detail in the section below – but at this stage it is enough to note that changes to the electoral system, rules about foreign involvement and extremist organizations, and extensions of the residence requirements for presidential candidacy have further consolidated the regime's hold over the electoral arena.

The transparency of the electoral process has also diminished. Since 2020, polling in Russian elections takes place over three days instead of one, making it more difficult to observe the electoral process continuously (Law on Fundamental Guarantees 2002ff). This has also led to a marked increase in the number of votes cast unobserved outside polling stations in mobile ballot boxes,

which more than doubled in the 2021 State Duma election, to 14.4 percent of the votes (Adamovich 2021).

It was noted earlier that electoral authoritarian regimes create the façade of democratic institutions and elections as legitimising tools. Since 2014, Russia has taken this a step further with façade quasi-referendums of questionable legal validity. In this, it builds on a long line of authoritarian regimes – starting with Napoleon's France – of using plebiscitary instruments for legitimation rather than choice (Qvortrup et al. 2020). Outside its legally-recognized territory, it has given arms-length backing to sham referendums, purportedly organized by local separatist forces, in Crimea and the four easternmost provinces of Ukraine. Each of these referendums has been used as a prelude to their annexation, purportedly to demonstrate support for joining the Russian Federation – and they have not been recognized by any major international actors. The least controversial of the quasi-referendums was an internal one: a plebiscite held in 2020 to ratify 206 amendments to the Russian constitution. It was run under separate *ad hoc* legislation rather than the existing law on referendums. By doing this, certain legal safeguards were bypassed, such as the requirement to have 'yes' and 'no' campaigns and abide by rules on campaign finance (Hutcheson & McAllister 2021). Though most attention was on the resetting of presidential term limits to allow Putin to stand for re-election at least twice more, the other 205 amendments (which were packaged together with the presidential term limit question) contained a raft of conservative and nationalistic ideas that deny the legitimacy of Western liberal values and human rights, and have found echo in the language used to justify the war in Ukraine.

In short, as of late 2022, extra-parliamentary opposition was either marginalized, banned or jailed, while the within-system opposition was increasingly acquiescing in laws that further curtailed human rights and criticism of the regime – and perhaps also their own room for manoeuvre. The limited liberal media that had survived the period of electoral authoritarianism found itself largely closed, or working in exile, after the start of the war in Ukraine (cf Nygren in this issue). Repressive measures have been passed unanimously by the State Duma, rendering the five major factions in parliament almost indistinguishable from each other. In such circumstances, it seems clear that there has been a qualitative shift in the regime, justifying its classification by Golosov (2022) as an 'authoritarian party system' (cf Flikke and Petersson in this issue).

The toolbox of electoral authoritarianism

As noted above, the evolution of the party and election system to its current authoritarian state has been part of a co-ordinated effort to mould the rules of the game to the advantage of the pro-Kremlin parties, and, to a lesser extent,

the parliamentary (within-system) opposition. This has taken place on several parallel lines. Changes have been made to the parties and the electoral formula; the structure of the ballot; the electoral administration. On top of the earlier changes, amendments to the rules on eligibility for candidacy and the legislation on 'foreign agents' have closed off the final avenues for independent action within the political system. These have ratcheted up considerably since the constitutional amendments in 2020.

The sheer amount of legislative engineering in recent years has been striking. To put the matter into perspective: the framework Law on Fundamental Guarantees of Electoral Rights (2002) has at the time of writing been amended by legislative acts 109 times in the 20 years since it was passed in June 2002. From 1994 to 2002, there were just three minor amendments (1996, 1999 and 2001) and one recast of the law's predecessor.

As Birch (2011) noted, it is sometimes difficult to pinpoint the intent behind a particular electoral system change. But given the pro-Kremlin majority in the State Duma, it appears that electoral reforms are utilising the electoral system as a tool for the consolidation of power. It is notable that almost every change over the last 20 years has had the effect of shrinking rather than growing the electorate. There have been two main trajectories: changes to the electoral system itself, and restrictions on electoral rights, particularly the passive electoral rights of those most likely to be critical of the regime.

ELECTORAL SYSTEM ENGINEERING

Parties and candidacy. Access to the ballot was confined from 2007 onwards to political parties only.[5] At the same time, very strict registration, membership and auditing requirements were put in place to be recognized as a party in the first place (Law on Political Parties 2001). Though the rules on membership were subsequently liberalized after the post-election protests of 2011-12, the long period of restrictiveness effectively squeezed most non-parliamentary parties out of existence and meant that any newly-formed parties were either tacitly Kremlin-sponsored spoiler parties, or struggled to gain traction.

Electoral formula: There was change of electoral formula after 2003, from a mixed unconnected system (1993-2003) to a full proportional representation (PR) system with a very high 7 percent threshold. The aim was to remove 'unpredictable elements' from the State Duma (i.e., local elites with their own resources) and to make entry to parliament dependent on political parties' favour (White & Kryshtanovskaya 2011; Gandhi et al. 2022). Together, these two changes meant that a handful of strictly controlled parties – led by United Russia – became gatekeepers to elected office. By the time the PR system reverted

5 Prior to this, State Duma elections were open to a wide range of organizational types, and independent candidates.

back to a mixed unconnected system, from 2016 onwards, the proliferation of small parties that had existed first time round had disappeared. As a result, pluralities of the vote in most of the single-member district (SMD) contests led to a big 'winners bonus' for UR, which in the vast majority of seats placed first, but not always by a large margin.

Electoral districts. Constituency boundaries have since 2016 diluted the urban electorate, splitting major cities into small sub-districts that are attached to contiguous rural areas outside the town boundaries (Alimov 2016). Whilst stopping short of outright gerrymandering on a case-by-case basis, this systematically breaks up cities as coherent political units at the national level and dilutes the urban vote with more conservative rural voters, who generally are more prone to vote for the Kremlin and its allies.

Regional lists and ballot options. The option to vote 'against all' candidates (Hutcheson 2004; McAllister & White 2008) was removed after the 2003-04 electoral cycle, removing a channel for protest voting. Party lists needed to be split into regional groupings from that point onwards, meaning that smaller parties could not amass enough support in each regional section to win representation for even their first-placed candidate in every regional list (Kynev & Lyubarev 2011: 554-58).

Electoral administration. The vertical structuring of electoral commissions created a hierarchical subordination of election administration (Moraski 2007).

RESTRICTIONS ON ELECTORAL RIGHTS

In recent years, a major focus has been on expanding the principle of singularity: that candidates for elected office in Russia must not have any connections whatsoever with any other countries.

Singularity: The extension over time of restrictions based on singularity and residence is well illustrated by a comparison of the 1996 and current (2023) definitions of who is eligible to stand for election to the presidency (Law on Presidential Elections 1995, 2003ff):

> 1996: 'A citizen of the Russian Federation not younger than 35 years of age who has permanently resided in the Russian Federation for at least 10 years may be elected President of the Russian Federation.'

> 2023: 'A citizen of the Russian Federation not younger than 35 years of age, who has permanently resided in the Russian Federation for at least 25 years, and who does not have and has not previously had the citizenship of a foreign state or a residence permit or other document confirming the right of permanent residence of a citizen of the Russian Federation for territory of a foreign state, may be elected President of the Russian Federation.'

The principle of strict singularity (allegiance only to one country) is unusual but not unprecedented in international election law. It is prevalent in South America and Australia, but less common in Europe, with only Lithuania and Bulgaria preventing people with dual nationality from standing for election to the national legislature (Arrighi et al. 2019). An increasing paranoia about foreign influence has been prevalent in Russian election rules since near the end of Putin's second term in office.

Since the 2007–08 electoral cycle, citizenship of a foreign state – or crucially, a residence permit from/permanent residence in one – has prohibited somebody from standing for election to the State Duma or presidency.[6] On top of that, presidential candidates are required to have had 25 years' permanent residence in Russia (increased from ten, prior to the constitutional amendments of 2020), making it one of the strictest such requirements in the world. It need hardly be made explicit that such a proscription disproportionately affects those who have been mobile and internationally connected, effectively ensuring that anybody who has lived abroad since the late 20th century need not apply.

Foreign agents and criminals. In addition, even playing a supporting role in an election campaign, such as reporting opinion poll results or campaigning for a particular candidate, is restricted to a narrowing list of people and entities. Since 2002, foreign persons or legal entities, and stateless citizens, have been under a prohibition of such involvement. They were joined from the 2016 State Duma election onwards by international public movements and non-profit organizations 'performing the functions of a foreign agent'.

As noted elsewhere in this volume (cf Flikke 2023), the latter category is a particularly insidious one. 'Foreign agent' carries obvious allegations of espionage. Originally aimed at NGOs that engaged in (very vaguely-defined) 'political activity' and received 'support' (of any amount, implicitly financial) from outside Russia, it was expanded to encompass media outlets in 2017 and individual persons from 2019 onwards, and finally consolidated into a single law in 2022 (Law on Control 2022). There are examples too numerous to mention of how it has been used to target critical political voices by blacklisting them as 'foreign agents' (Beilinson et al. 2021). In addition to a ban on electoral activities, foreign agents are subject to 16 other categories of restriction, including a ban on involvement in public commissions and teaching in state institutions, and are subject to more complex tax procedures (ibid., Art. 11). By the end of 2022 there were 587 legal entities or individuals on the list, 198 of which had been added in the previous 12 months (OVD-Info 2022).

On top of the concern over foreign influence, passive and active electoral rights are also denied to an ever-increasing list of people on grounds of criminal

6 Note that it has always been a requirement to be a Russian citizen to stand for national-level office; the discussion here is about Russian citizens with an additional nationality.

activity. Until 2006 this applied only to those currently imprisoned by a court order. From that point onwards, electoral rights were denied to people with unspent convictions for serious or extremely serious crimes, as well as under laws on extremism. From 2016 onwards, this also extended to a 10- or 15-year quarantine period after the end of a sentence, while in 2020 a list of a further 50 or so crimes that carried a 5-year quarantine were added (Law on Fundamental Guarantees 2002ff, Art. 4.3).

It is worth noting that Russia is not alone in disenfranchising certain categories of convicted criminals. Within Europe, Germany, Austria and Greece have similar provisions for those in prison, though Russia's extensive post-prison quarantine periods are unusual. It is difficult to know exactly how many people are affected by all these measures, but one estimate, based on the number of convictions for such crimes since 2010, is that there could be around 3 million people disenfranchised under the criminal categories, and between 1 and 5 million who fall into the dual citizen categories (Golos 2021a). Together, these account for between 4 and 9 percent of the electorate. It is notable also that the effect of almost every one of the changes to the rules on eligibility in recent years has been to remove electoral rights from additional people, rather than to encourage inclusivity. As such, the changes to the electoral system and the rules on eligibility form part of a toolbox that is used to keep dissent under control.

Public attitudes towards authoritarian elections

Given this move towards autocracy, the obvious question is: what value does the study of Russian elections have? Just as we should be careful not to over-romanticize the emergence of pluralism in the late 1980s, we should also not dismiss modern Russian elections as pointless. Not only do electoral victories perform an electoral authoritarian purpose of legitimation, but arguably there is also much that can be gleaned from a detailed study of Russian election results and how the toolbox is used. First, what do patterns of turnout and variations in votes for UR and Putin tell us about the strength of the regime's support? Second, how do we know whether the strong results for pro-Kremlin parties actually reflect the will of the people – and is there any evidence that they do not? And third, how legitimate do the Russian public regard the results of the elections – and the people and institutions that they elect? In this section we analyse these three issues.

VARIATIONS IN SUPPORT FOR THE REGIME

As in other electoral authoritarian regimes, the appearance of legitimacy at the ballot box is important – though arguably in recent years it is the size of the victories, rather than the means by which they have been achieved, which has been prioritized. Vladimir Putin's approval ratings in opinion surveys have

always been extremely high (Levada-Center 2022). The total of 77.5 per cent who were reported to have voted for him in 2018 (and slightly more for the constitutional amendments in 2020) appear at first glance to confirm this.

Looking in more detail, however, there are many nuances to this high level of approbation. In the absence of vibrant competition, differential turnout levels give indications about variations in support levels for the regime. There is a dilemma, however, in using turnout as a 'vital sign' of the health of the Russian body politic. Both very high and very low turnout may actually reflect a passive electorate – in the first case, their unquestioning compliance; and in the second, their apathy.

As Buzin and Lyubarev (2008) have detailed, the authorities have a number of instruments to encourage or pressurize people into voting. The absolute number of votes from each region plays a role in relative seat distribution between different regional sections of the party lists. Realistically, it is only UR that can expect to win more than one seat from each regional list (Klien & Moraski 2020). Governors, anxious to ensure maximize representation and resources for their regions, have incentives to use the hierarchy of regional, local and municipal structures such as schools and enterprises to ensure that voters are suitably mobilized.

Overall, notwithstanding a few stand-out areas of high turnout, the main characteristic of Russian parliamentary elections is apathy. Even with its large majorities, UR has not since 2007 received more votes than the number of people who have abstained from voting altogether. Similarly, in the whole post-Soviet period there has only been one presidential election (2018) in which the winner won an absolute majority of the whole electorate (not just those who turned out to vote). Since election results are calculated based only on votes cast, the non-voters paradoxically play a role in boosting the winner's relative share of the seats or votes. But the total abstentions and spoiled ballot papers give a symbolic indication of at least tacit lack of support for the regime. We can thus gain some insights into the geographical hotspots of support and apathy by examining turnout and voting figures.

Turnout across regions is heavily skewed. A handful routinely return exceptionally high turnout figures of over 90 percent, while in the majority of regions only around half the electorate (or less) participate. The highest-turnout regions are generally national republics, particularly in the North Caucasus, while some major population centres such as St Petersburg are regularly amongst the lowest. This skew contributes to very positive electoral outcomes for the Kremlin, not least because low-turnout regions generally tend to be less pro-Kremlin and thus are underweighted in the results (McAllister & White 2017).

The strongest predictor of an individual's propensity to vote is his or her age, followed by a sense of civic duty and party identification (Hutcheson 2018: 183–86). Opposition supporters have a greater propensity to abstain, either out

of futility, protest or apathy. Differences in turnout are arguably also connected to administrative mobilization of voters (Buzin & Lyubarev 2008). But the two things may be connected. Reuter (2021) has found that supporters of the regime are more likely to feel respect for the state, and hence a higher sense of civic duty to vote in the first place, than opposition voters. Amongst non-voters, at least a fifth of the abstainers have indicated in surveys that they do so because they consider a vote to be futile, or see nobody to vote for (Hutcheson 2018: 213–17).

THE WILL OF THE PEOPLE?

Manipulation of election results has been alleged at almost every election since the start of the post-Soviet era (Sobyanin and Sukhovol'skii 1995; Borisova 2000; Lukinova et al. 2011; Lyubarev et al. 2007; Myagkov et al 2009; Bader & van Ham 2015; Zavadskaya et al. 2017). How valid are these concerns? As noted above, the fundamental framework of the electoral system has been altered beyond recognition over the last 20 years, largely to the detriment of electoral openness. Yet this is not the same as actively manipulating the results of the elections themselves.

Election manipulations can be divided into three phases: 'upstream' (redrawing the rules of the game), 'midstream' (influencing voter behaviour) and 'downstream' (voting and counting irregularities) (Birch 2011). As noted above, the first two categories have featured heavily in Russian elections over the last 20 years. Legislative engineering has narrowed the field, whilst notably uneven coverage of different candidates and parties in the state media's news (Golos 2021b) may have influenced voters' behaviour even before they set foot in the polling station.

Most of the efforts of observers and analysts go into examining the third category: 'downstream' manipulation on election day and in the counts. There are many ways of trying to examine the integrity of these processes. One is through election observation, with impressions 'on the ground' from multiple locations being collated into wider reports. Even though this method has widespread international legitimacy, it has become increasingly politicized (Hutcheson 2011). Critical and glowing evaluations of the same elections by Western and CIS observers indicate that the election observation process can be used strategically by electoral authoritarian regimes, to legitimize their rule and question criticism – and also that external reports are to some extent conditioned by their preconceived ideas of the overall electoral framework rather than on-the-ground observations.

Another method is through analysis of complaints processed through the formal channels. Some violations of the electoral law are so egregious that the formal reporting and electoral court system cannot turn a blind eye to them – though there are many more allegations of malpractice than there are

convictions. Only one per 57 of the complaints lodged with the Central Electoral Commission in the 2021 State Duma election was upheld (Central Electoral Commission 2022: 474). Thirdly, statistical analysis of results can be used to spot the 'fingerprints of fraud'. The balance of available evidence from observers, official data and statistical accounts seems to indicate that statistically exceptional patterns occur regularly only in a small group of regions (Myagkov et al 2009; Hutcheson 2018: 219–255) – but that such regions disproportionately contribute votes to the pro-Kremlin parties and candidates.

The overwhelming vote shares in favour of Putin and UR and the general absence of credible opposition parties makes it unlikely that they would not win anyway, even without any irregularities. But even if the general 'will of the people' is reflected in the outcome, it is important that the election results are seen as legitimate by those who vote (Norris 2019; McAllister & White 2015). Thus we should conclude by examining voters' own perceptions of the fairness of the electoral process.

THE LEGITIMACY OF RUSSIAN ELECTIONS

Schedler notes that the archetypical 'electoral authoritarian' regime maintains the appearance of a functioning legislature while manipulating it through disempowerment, control over its selection, and fragmentation (Schedler 2010: 71–76). Though the Federal Assembly is argued by some to contain interesting factional rivalry and variations in deputy effectiveness (Noble & Chaisty 2022), this is not necessarily the public impression of the legislature. In contrast to high levels of trust in the president, political parties and the parliament have rarely been trusted by more than 20 per cent of the electorate since the 1990s (NRB8 survey 2000; Russian Research Survey, 2004, 2008, 2012, R-Research survey 2016; Levada Center 2021a). For an electoral authoritarian regime that aims to maintain legitimacy, there is a balance to be kept between keeping up the appearance of a functioning political system and discouragement of overt opposition.

A long series of series of surveys conducted after each of the State Duma elections from 1999 to 2016 have asked about the fairness of each electoral campaign's media coverage and vote counting (NRB8 survey 2000; Russian Research Survey, 2004, 2008, 2012, R-Research survey 2016; Levada Center 2021a). Around three-fifths of the electorate have consistently perceived television coverage to treat all parties fairly, while a quarter have perceived bias (which is backed up by independent monitoring). These numbers have remained fairly stable over time, despite changes in media usage (cf Nygren in this issue).

On the other hand, faith in the vote counts has fallen steadily, reaching its nadir in the 2016 State Duma election when only 44 percent perceived the count to have been fair. After briefly rising to 72 percent in the 2018 presidential

election (Hutcheson & McAllister 2018), surveys carried out after the 2020 constitutional referendum and the 2021 State Duma election indicated a resumption of the downward trend (Levada Center 2020, 2021).

By a majority of almost two to one, non-voters in both contests regarded the 2021 process to have been unfair/dishonest. But even around a third of those who *did* participate also held this view, including 16 per cent of UR voters. This builds on the picture that we saw above: using the formal rules of the election, and a mobilization drive in crucial regions, it is possible for the Kremlin to keep winning the necessary majorities to keep the system of governance on the road. However, there is growing evidence that a sizeable minority of those who participate do so without much conviction that their vote will count, or that the elections are honest. Many participate out of a general a sense of civic duty, and an additional group does so only because they are mobilized by administrative resources to do so. In addition, almost half the electorate routinely abstain in parliamentary elections. Taken together, these findings place question marks over the viability of the electoral authoritarian approach in the long-term.

Conclusions

As the foregoing article has indicated, the vibrancy of Russian democracy – such as it ever existed in the first place – has diminished over the post-Soviet period. There has been continual electoral engineering to benefit incumbents, increasing scepticism and apathy on the part of many voters that their votes actually make a difference, and extreme mobilization of voters in some the most pro-Kremlin regions. Together, these have constituted a winning combination within the formal rules of the game and returned multiple election victories for Putin, United Russia and other pro-Kremlin forces. But this has come at the expense of genuine engagement in politics, and a stability verging on stagnation in the party system.

Until Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, it seemed likely that this could continue by inertia for a number of years more. Every indication was that this was the plan, not least the resetting of presidential term limits which would allow the succession paradox to be postponed (Petersson 2021).

Three factors, however, indicate that this expected stability may not be the outcome after all. First, the shift from domestic consolidation to an aggressive and expansionist foreign policy has put much of the currently established norms into question (cf Vendil Pallin in this issue). The gambles taken by Putin in the 2022 invasion of Ukraine – mobilization of civilian reserves, setbacks on the battlefield, international political isolation, economic shortages, and the fact that Russia has self-appropriated an unstable (unrecognized) external border on occupied territory – mean that the fundamental existence of the Russian

state in the form it has existed since the collapse of the USSR can now be called into question by the regime's own instigation. Though it is entirely possible that Putin will re-consolidate his rule, it is also not inconceivable that the flux of 2022 may be the prelude to one of the periodic fundamental realignments that have occurred in Russian politics approximately every 35 years, as mentioned at the beginning of this article.

Second, the increasing reliance on the repressive tools in the authoritarian toolbox and the electoral mobilization machines of a few regions may make the system potentially more brittle, especially if any of the established vote-gatherers such as Ramzan Kadyrov in Chechnya begin to question their loyalty to Putin and mobilize against rather than for him. In short, though the party of power and the president continue to enjoy a strong formal electoral mandate, it is based on pragmatism rather than overwhelming public enthusiasm. When the system relies on simply gathering the requisite number of votes in the right places by any means possible, it is more vulnerable to disintegration if it at some point fails to do so.

Third and perhaps most significantly for the likelihood of a shift in the political scene in the next few years, the consolidation of the Russian political system over the last 15 years has come at the expense of internal renewal. The current party and state elite is not just stable, but stagnant. Not only is the entire political elite strongly interconnected both professionally and personally (Ivanov et al. 2022), but it is largely dependent on reflected public support for the Kremlin, and thus on Putin's continued high approval ratings, for its survival. That makes UR – and him – particularly vulnerable to a fall in these ratings.

Increasingly, the hierarchy of the State Duma and presidential administration resembles a gerontocracy. Aside from Putin, who celebrated his 70th birthday in 2022 after 23 years in either the presidential or prime ministerial role, the CPRF leader Gennadii Zyuganov has served as the main opposition party leader for more than 30 years. His counterpart in the LDPR, Vladimir Zhirinovsky, who died at the age of 75 in April 2022, left behind him a political vacuum of relatively unknown and uncharismatic colleagues after more than 32 years at the helm of his personality-based party. The leader of AJR-FT, former Federation Council Speaker Sergei Mironov, clearly has his political peak behind him, and is only four months younger than Putin. In short, regardless of the outcome of the Ukraine war – and even assuming a short-term consolidation of the regime – there will be shift of generations in the next few years by default. The question is whether that shift will be managed, or abrupt.

In the 2016 and 2018 electoral cycle, the Kremlin appeared to be trying to choose between two directions: to suppress opposition and rely on a narrow base of high-turnout regions to maintain its electoral advantages, or to re-mobilize its support by demonstrating that it still had fresh ideas for future

development. It seems clearly to have settled on the first, having briefly dallied with the second in the 2018 presidential campaign. The anti-liberal and nationalistic language of Putin's rhetoric around the Ukraine war, coupled with a further crackdown on dissent and independent journalism in its wake, indicate that it is too late to take the path of renewal. Thus, if power is to be retained, it seems likely that it has to be by authoritarian means (cf Flikke, Petersson, Nygren & Edenborg in this issue).

It is also of concern that such a high proportion of voters doubted the integrity of the system even before the Ukraine war. Having built his reputation on stability, economic growth and a successful foreign policy (Hutcheson & Petersson 2016), the regime can no longer simply rely on long memories of the post-Soviet chaos to maintain its legitimacy. If the Ukraine war is not victorious, the relationship of trust that has thus far characterized Putin's relationship with the Russian public may start to unravel. A damaged foreign policy outcome would see the crumbling of the last of the three pillars of Putin's support. The other two have already been rickety for some time: with increasingly reactionary *ad hoc* decision-making, the regime no longer appears a beacon of stability; and economic growth had already slowed to a trickle before the effects of economic sanctions began to be felt.

For the time being, the modest advances in pluralism of *perestroika*, and the hyper-pluralism by default of the 1990s, have given way to a predictable political system. Dissent is managed, the menu of within-system parties is carefully controlled, and opposition is pushed to the margins and exists mainly outside the parliamentary system. This is the culmination of a 10-15-year process of electoral engineering. However, the careful balance of having control over the levers of power versus maintaining at least a façade of pluralism and democracy is increasingly being lost. The system is coming to rely on tools of repression, forcible mobilization of supporters, purposeful demobilization of apathetic voters, and exemplary punishments of non-parliamentary opponents such as Navalanyi and local activists. Combined with the lack of renewal of the body politic, it is difficult to foresee a scenario in which the stability that has been built up can be maintained in the long term. As such, 2022 may come to be seen as a watershed in the post-Soviet history of Russia: not just the funeral of Mikhail Gorbachev (1931-2022) himself, but the death of the cycle of reform that began with him.

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