

Exploring democracy in the Russian Federation: political regime, public opinion and international assistance

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This article discusses three questions: what is the purpose of ‘democratic’ institutions and practices in Russia’s authoritarian political system; how do these institutions and practices authoritarian country. For reasons of clarity and because it is not my ambition to coin yet another label for Russia’s post-communist political order, I will stick to the rather broad category of semi-authoritarianism. In other words, Russia’s essentially authoritarian polity is not without a meaningful element of pluralism and contestation. This article discusses the dynamics of democratic ideas, institutions and procedures under the conditions of authoritarianism.

The nature of the regime is linked with two other relevant issues: with the assessment of democracy in Russian public opinion and with the international democracy-promotion effort for Russia. This leads to the following questions, discussed consecutively: what is the role and relevance of those institutions and procedures of the current Russian political system which one associates with the democratic type of governance (political parties, legislature, elections), how do these specific institutional features resonate with perceptions of democracy among the Russian population and how do these practices and ideas relate to external democracy promotion in the Russian Federation?

Authoritarianism with adjectives

The rapidly growing literature on ‘hybrid’ political regimes is arguably the most important development in democracy research. The category of hybrid regimes was introduced as a specific subset of democratic governance, linking adjectives to ‘democracy’, such as electoral, illiberal, façade and ultimately pseudo-democracies. It gradually lost its transitional and democratizing bias, and developed into a subset of authoritarianism, adding such qualifying notions as ‘electoral’ (Schedler 2006), ‘plebiscitarian’ (Rose *et al.* 2006) or more generally ‘competitive’ (Levitsky and Way 2002). Ultimately, the adjective ‘hybrid’ lost its definitional relevance, as a growing number of mixed regimes further developed into the direction of full or, slightly tautological, ‘hegemonic’ (Roessler and Howard 2007) authoritarianism. The most important criterion used to distinguish between the various types of hybrid regimes is the level and the role of pluralism, contestation and competitiveness, mostly by the presence and the nature of elections, of representative institutions, of the media, of civil society and of the rule of law.

The development of hybrid regimes should be understood in the context of a larger process of political change, sometimes being understood as a democratic reverse wave. Although the idea of a global process of de-democratization is debatable (Doorenspleet 2000, Carothers 2009), the authoritarian turn in Russian politics from the mid-1990s does bear similarities with the trajectories in some other newly democratizing countries. The policies of the Yeltsin and Putin leaderships corroborate the more general observation that, different from earlier transitions from democracy, non-democratic behaviour by democratically elected politicians is the dominant pattern of democratic regression. The lines of distinction are often less clear now than they were after earlier waves of regression. As is the case in Russia, authoritarian rule does not simply *replace* democracy: either ideologically or institutionally. It continues to meaningfully employ various aspects of democratic governance – elections being the most conspicuous example. Scholars and practitioners struggle with the conceptualization and the reform of apparently novel political regimes that have adopted various attributes of democracy, more so than ‘traditional’ dictatorships did, but which function in a decidedly non-democratic manner.

Of particular relevance to the sustainability of these forms of authoritarianism is the issue of popular legitimacy. In contemporary politics, democracy is a crucial aspect of every claim of political legitimacy, by any type of regime. In this sense, democracy can still be considered as the only game in town. Typologies of democracy have lost most of the ideological relevance of the Cold War decades, although they have never disappeared completely. They may even be making a comeback. Such adjectives as ‘non-Western’, ‘sovereign’ and other more particularistic types like ‘Chinese’ or ‘Venezuelan’ serve the purpose of distinguishing it from the Western, liberal democratic template.

The gradual erosion of democratic governance by elected leaders proves more difficult to counter by external pro-democracy actors than the formal deposition of democratic leaders. Recent examples of democratic stagnation and reversal have not only frustrated the international

democracy assistance efforts in recipient countries, but they also threaten to undermine its legitimacy in Western donor countries. Why would one spend tax money on foreign policy activities of such limited if not counterproductive effect?

Political contestation in Russia

Generally, interpretations of the political regime in the Russian Federation have followed the pattern outlined above. Russia cannot any longer be defined as hybrid in the sense of ‘flawed’ democratic, but neither is it fully authoritarian. The whole idea of adding qualifying adjectives to authoritarianism is to indicate that these regimes employ rhetoric, institutions and procedures which are not typically associated with authoritarianism but with democracy. These democratic features may serve three purposes: a declaratory or façade role, a legitimizing function and a governing function, to more effectively manage power.

Democracy as façade, as an exercise in ‘deception’ (Hassner 2008, p. 9), remains the most common interpretation of why and how formal democratic institutions and procedures function in the context of authoritarian regimes. Democratic rules and institutions are believed to have a mere rhetorical function, to obfuscate the real, authoritarian nature of the political regime. But who is to be deceived, and why? The façade interpretation implicitly supports the argument that in Russian-style authoritarianism democratic rules serves a significant purpose, namely to ‘mislead’ domestic and foreign audiences. Its façade metaphor is based on two inferred assumptions. First, Russians want Russia to be a democracy, otherwise they would not need to be deceived. And second, legitimation by the West is important to the regime, following the logic of consequences, which emphasizes the instrumental nature of ‘democracy’: cashing the perks of appearing and pretending to be democratic.

Levitsky and Way (2002) distinguish between four arenas of democratic contestation in semi-authoritarian regimes: the electoral arena, the legislature, the judiciary and the media as central points of competition. These domains of pluralism relate to the ‘governing’ function of democratic rules and procedures in Russia. All four realms of contestation can be found in the Russian Federation, albeit to a limited extent. The formal independence of the judiciary is considerably demarcated in practice, but individual judges may seek, and have sought for the limits of what is politically feasible and acceptable. The media in Russia offer a mixed picture too. Television as well as the larger part of the printed press is either under the control of the state or of loyal oligarchs. Independent or critical media-outlets have been reduced and marginalized, but some continue to exist.

Elections are an important aspect of any semi-authoritarian polity, remaining (potentially) important to the regime as well as to its opponents. Eliminating elections is not a serious option in Russia or in most other authoritarian countries. There is no straightforward relationship between rulers’ democratic inclinations or the lack thereof, and the absence or presence of democratic institutions. Elites may also have reason to believe that these democratic institutions and practices may actually sustain their non-democratic ambitions, their authoritarian regimes.

Political parties are another relevant feature of most authoritarian or semi-authoritarian regimes. Two parallel developments occurred in Russia from the early 2000s: the continuing decline of the opposition and the increasing predominance of the party (now parties) of power. In the Russian Federation *One Russia* plays the role government parties in semi-authoritarian regimes are generally supposed to play. *One Russia* has become the centre of a regime-engineered and controlled party *system*. The party system as it developed (or actually, as it was engineered) should at least partly be considered a response to the high level of party fragmentation and volatility during the first post-communist decade – on the demand side of

party politics (electoral volatility) as well as on the supply side (the high level of turnover of parties and political entrepreneurship). Paradoxically, party politics have become increasingly important in the Russian Federation: ‘... while Russia’s nascent political regime in the 1990s (...) was by and large non-party-based’, as Vladimir Gel’man (2008, p. 915) asserts, ‘Russia’s emerging non-democratic regime in the 2000s became increasingly party-based’. One aspect of party politics remained unchanged though: although the supply side of Russia’s political party system may have shifted from individual political entrepreneurs to the country’s leadership, it still decisively affects the demand side. The populace has largely remained reactive, if not passive and overwhelmingly sceptical.

Research on Russia’s party system focuses on its strategic and coercive dimension. It is generally discussed within the context of the Putin leadership’s attempts to establish a long-term basis for regime continuity. Russia’s ‘party regime’ is typically understood as a technocratic exercise, and the apparently non-ideological nature of the One Russia Party is therefore considered as one of its main assets. The purposively non-ideological nature of One Russia is not unchallenged. The ideational link between regime, regime-party and society, the ‘soft power’ dimension of dominant party politics additional to its material and coercive aspects, could also be considered as a relevant aspect of Russia’s party system (Hale 2008). This does not so much change the position of One Russia, which remains a regime institution, at the whims of the country’s supreme leadership, but it does affect the way the party (or its potential successor) mobilizes support and helps to strengthen pro-regime political consensus.

No single party represented in the Duma is fully independent of the Kremlin. Contestation and competitiveness in the legislature are very limited and political party pluralism in Russia has become extremely circumscribed. However, they are not completely absent yet. Russia’s current regime-engineered party system is *not* fully monopolistic. Elements of pluralism continue to exist, and they may regain strength. Significant competition could either develop from competition between regime-party formations (One Russia, *A Just Russia* and *The Right Cause*, the Kremlin-led ‘liberal’ party, which came out of the *Union of Right Forces*) and the semi-oppositional parties (Communist party of the Russian Federation and the Liberal-Democratic Party of Russia) or, more probably, emerge from divisions among or within regime-parties, mobilized by different segments of the ruling elite. In the latter case, the attempts by the Putin leadership to create a government-controlled party *system* may eventually backfire. After Putin agreed to head One Russia, The A Just Russia Party reportedly sought the political backing of President Medvedev, to become the second ‘party of power’ (Simonov *et al.* 2009, p. 43). The interesting aspect of this episode is not so much that A Just Russia ultimately failed to gain the support of Medvedev, but that they pursued it in the first place.

Regime stability

Semi-authoritarian regimes are considered to be more volatile than either democracies or full dictatorships. Instability typically follows from the inherently contradictory nature of these regimes: the combination of authoritarian practices with principally democratic institutions and procedures. Earlier political crises in former Soviet republics may offer some insights into the patterns of political change in semi-authoritarian regimes. In Georgia (2003), Ukraine (2004) and Kyrgyzstan (2005) the conditions of regime vulnerability and collapse were largely identical: the weakening of the autocrat’s position, the emergence of an alternative leader (from *within* the incumbent regime), calculated and self-interested behaviour and competition by important segments of the power elite, the mobilization of popular support and eventually, leadership and policy change (see Way 2005, Hale 2006).

A crucially important variable in explaining political crises and change is elite unity. As Way (2005, p. 234) argues: 'the consolidation of authoritarian rule is almost always endangered by elite disunity around a specific autocrat or ruling group'. This gives poignancy to the Putin–Medvedev duumvirate. The construction of a two-headed leadership was designed to maintain the power of the current elite, and to avoid internal division, while formally complying with democratic procedures. Although the duumvirate changes little about the personalistic, informal and authoritarian nature of political power and influence in Russia, typically of applying 'democratic' procedures in an authoritarian context, it may eventually undermine the very same regime it was supposed to sustain.

Thus far, Russia's political leadership has proved to possess sufficient sources of ideological, material and organizational strength to defend itself against subversive influences and pressure – whether from within (the elite), from below (society) or from without (pro-democracy efforts by Western non-governmental organizations (NGOs)). Russia does not run a serious risk of regime collapse, but it is not immune to change either, and the 'democratic' institutional features of the regime, designed to strengthen it, may actually weaken it. Mass politics is difficult to predict. In Russia, political efficacy is extremely low: the citizen feels utterly unable to influence the policies that affect him or her (Hahn and Logvinenko 2008, p. 1351). This is the missing link of Russian politics: the connection between grass-roots opinions and activity and high (actually: *real*) politics. Society lacks the organizational strength and the institutional avenues through which it might influence and gradually change politics. In simplified terms: many Russians feel frustrated over the fact that they do not have the possibilities to influence change in a system which they might not actually want to change. This systemic defect seems relatively harmless in times of prosperity. It may become more serious though, when the tide turns, although a consistent majority of Russians consider mass unrest unlikely and only a minority (around one out of every five Russians) appear to be willing to participate in protest (Interfax 2008).

Semi-authoritarianism may be prone to political instability, but the margins of change of this regime type are wide. Within the context of an authoritarian polity, political change may take two forms: either change resulting in a new regime or regime type, whether democratic or fully authoritarian, or more limited changes within the parameters of competitive authoritarian rule, leading to a new government or leadership. Even if the combination of protest from below and internal dissension at the elite level may generate an irresistible pressure for change in Russia, it will most probably remain limited to the latter: a change of government, not of political regime. 'Regime' concerns the *how* issue: the *system* of governance, in other words, the combination of actors, institutions and rules which define the political game. A change of government or leadership relates to the *who* question? Who governs, who rules? Political change in the Russian Federation in the foreseeable future will be about who is to govern the country, rather than how it is going to be governed.

Authoritarianism and legitimacy

One of the most challenging and under-researched aspects of semi-authoritarian regimes is the issue of popular legitimacy and more particularly, the extent to which these regime types are a function of popular support for democracy or the lack thereof. Most research on post-Third Wave authoritarianism focuses on regime capacity to impose and continue authoritarian rule, thereby concentrating on aspects of domestic policies and institutions, or on the international environment and the vulnerability to outside pressure. Popular opinion as a variable of semi-authoritarianism is often neglected. The population is either left out of the analysis, and considered as an almost passive object of political manipulation, or is seen as a potential agent of democratic breakthrough and transition, which is not very convincing either.

Political legitimacy concerns the recognition of the right to govern. It is a moot concept, and in the context of authoritarian politics even outright problematic. The claim of legitimacy rests on popular consent, understood as the belief that the existing political order (a combination of basic values, institutions and policies) is the most appropriate one for a given society. The common idea that in democratic countries political legitimacy typically finds its expression in free and fair elections, raises two important questions: is legitimacy necessarily absent when democracy is absent, and depending on the answer to the first question, how to measure popular legitimacy if the citizenry cannot express its political choices freely because freedom of expression as well as free and fair elections are lacking? The answer to the first question is negative: legitimacy and popular consent are not tied exclusively to democracy. Despite the ‘virtually universal assent to the idea that democracy is the only normatively legitimate form of government’ (Gilley 2009, p. 182), one could convincingly argue that legitimacy may be associated with various forms of political organization – democratic as well as non-democratic. The second issue seems more problematic therefore: how to define and measure legitimacy in the absence of the political freedom needed to freely express or reject it?

As to the question how legitimacy works in contemporary semi-authoritarian regimes, one may distinguish between ‘thick’ and ‘thin’ concepts of legitimacy. The former refers to shared norms or ideas; while the latter primarily concerns regime performance. Whereas thick legitimacy relates to the type of political regime or order; thin legitimacy refers to the incumbent state leadership and its actual policies. The answer to the question as to why non-democratic governments would seek political legitimacy at all is mostly pragmatically defined: because it is easier to rule on the basis of popular consent than on the use or threat of state coercion. In other words, legitimacy is most commonly perceived in instrumental terms, which closely correlates with the thin or performance-based interpretation of legitimacy. Ideational or thick legitimacy is deemed less plausible. My argument would be, though, that authoritarian governments provide their subjects with goods of both kinds: economic growth, welfare and stability, even protection against arbitrary state repression, but also national identity and pride.

Sources of legitimacy

The ability to deliver on the economy is typically considered as the most important source of legitimacy of authoritarian regimes, Putin’s Russia included. Economic achievements are a shaky source of legitimacy though. As the Russia case has shown convincingly, economic performance is heavily influenced by factors beyond the reach of the regime. The link between economic development and political attitudes allows for few generalizations. Russia under Putin reminds us of the disturbing fact that economic growth does not necessarily support democracy. If anything, Russia’s economic upturn from the late 1990s has weakened rather than strengthened popular demands for democratization. Economic growth politically translated in stronger pro-government, perhaps even pro-regime support. The political consequences of a serious economic downturn seem even more unsure. The Russian Federation is among the countries which are hit hardest by the global financial and economic crisis. Despite the particularly close intertwining of politics and the economy in Russia (the country is practically owned by those who rule it) and the fact that Putin has always relied on the image of a capable, rational authority and not charismatic leadership, the political consequences of the crisis have thus far remained limited.

Stability is another crucial source of legitimacy. In the turbulent times of transition, a regime’s claim that its continued incumbency is the only realistic way of ensuring political stability and public safety may sound convincing, especially when a regime already has a credible

track record of restoring and maintaining security. The promise *to deliver* and then *maintain* stability is at the very core of regime legitimacy in the world's two most important non-democratic regimes: Russia and China.

It is still widely accepted that no viable alternative to democracy as a legitimate political order has arisen yet. From a doctrinaire point of view, this observation seems correct. From a political perspective, however, the 'no alternative' maxim is less obvious. First, semi-authoritarian regimes do not need ideological constructs of universal pretensions to legitimize their rule. The nation, the national state is their focal point. Second, the 'ideology' of pivotal semi-authoritarian states is not devoid of international dimensions either, and these explicitly rival Western liberal democracy. Not only do these states reject the very essence of (liberal) democracy as an international norm, but they have also reinvigorated a *rival* model of development with clear international appeal: a non-liberal, strong-hand approach to political and economic modernization (Carothers 2007, p. 12).

Nationalism is the most crucial component of semi-authoritarian regimes' endeavours to create legitimacy on the basis of shared norms or ideas. Nationalism as a mode of legitimacy is an inherently particularistic phenomenon, which nonetheless contains some notable common features. First, sources of legitimacy are not mutually exclusive. Nationalism in particular, overlaps with other modes of legitimacy. It gives substance to a normative interpretation of the state, which is of special importance in those semi-authoritarian countries, including Russia, where regime and state largely conflate. Second, nationalist discourse does more than just divert attention away from domestic problems and regimes' shortcomings. Nationalism grows out of success too. 'Imagine that you lived in a country that had been poor and unstable for centuries. And then, finally, things turn and your nation is on the rise', as Zakaria (2008, pp. 32–33) puts it. 'You would be proud and anxious to be seen. This desire for recognition and respect is surging throughout the world'. Third, nationalism contains important international dimensions. 'External legitimization' (Burnell 2006, p. 549) can go both ways: international cooperation, recognition or support may bolster a regime's popular legitimacy but so can the manipulation and exploitation of anti-foreigner sentiments. Moreover, as recent experience shows, in the case of practically all semi-authoritarian regimes today, these sentiments contain serious anti-Western biases. And finally, although nationalism as an instrument of legitimacy may mainly have demobilizing intentions and effects, examples to the contrary (such as the activities of the youth movement (*Nashi*) and other pro-regime organizations in Russia) are known too. And they carry specific dangers. Nationalism is inevitably biased, and not without risks to authoritarian rulers. It needs to correspond with the specific identity and interests of the powers that be and must therefore be carefully defined in form and content. Spontaneity is not appreciated.

State–society relations in current non-democratic countries are often discussed in dichotomous terms. Semi-authoritarianism is typically understood as an exercise to disguise, legitimate and reproduce authoritarian practices through quasi-democratic institutions and procedures. This state versus society paradigm is an oversimplification. Popular support or acceptance exists for a variety of reasons, either positive (based on normative or material conditions), negative (resignation, fear) or for a combination of both. Positive support, either through performance or shared norms, is generally associated with regime legitimacy. Negative support may sustain regime stability, but not its legitimacy.

How to measure popular support and regime legitimacy in a semi- or fully authoritarian country? Unfortunately, there are few alternatives to the indicators commonly used in democracies: voter turnout, election results and public opinion polls. The data from Russian and Western polls used in this research are far from systematic, and they are not devoid of contradictions. They do enable us, however, to draw some preliminary conclusions about how Russian citizens

perceive the political order in their country and the extent to which this is influenced by popular opinion on democracy and democratic governance.

Public opinion and democracy

Under the *New Russia Barometer* (N/RB) project, 14 public opinion surveys were held in the Russian Federation from early 1992 to the mid-2000s. They indicate that generally popular support for Russia's post-communist rulers fluctuated dramatically: 30% of the population backed the new regime in 1992; a low point was reached in 1995 (26%), after which ratings went up to 65% in 2004 (Rose *et al.* 2006, p. 90, Figure 5.1).

The early Putin presidency derived its legitimacy largely from the marked contrast with its predecessor regime: the Yeltsin years in particular. Two issues stand out: economic performance and the restoration of order and stability. When Russians were asked about their evaluation of the Gorbachev reforms, 70% mentioned freedom of expression as one of its major achievements, while 75% criticized the late communist regime's inability to maintain order (Rose *et al.* 2006, pp. 77–78). It is probably wrong to argue, as many Western observers do, that Russians have acquiesced in the politically restrictive measures of the Putin government in exchange for stability and economic growth. It is the combination of perceptions of stability and freedom that appears to be one of the mainstays of legitimacy: the great majority of Russians have a clear sense of freedom, and they felt better able to enjoy it under the more restrictive though securer conditions of the Putin government than in the freer, but chaotic and uncertain Yeltsin years (Rose *et al.* 2006, p. 181).

Paradoxically, the Russian population combines regime support with wide political dissatisfaction and cynicism. Every single poll indicates that Russians are generally, in majority, sceptical and distrustful of political institutions. Without going into the various distinctions (interpersonal versus political trust) and explanations (cultural versus institutional theories) of trust, if trust is indeed critical to democracy and to new democracies in particular, then Russia presents an extraordinarily sombre picture. And what is more, Russians appear to be particularly sceptical about the institutions of democracy in their country, the legislature and political parties in particular (Miller *et al.* 1997, Mishler and Rose 2001, Sil and Chen 2004, Schlagentokh 2005, Diamond 2008a, Gilley 2009).

The country's supreme leadership remains *relatively* unaffected by popular distrust and dissatisfaction. If the presidential elections are taken as a measure of regime (i.e. government) support, a substantial minority of Russian citizens are less than enthusiastic about their country's top leadership. Around one-third of all eligible voters in the last three elections abstained from voting, or voted against all contestants or supported non-regime candidates (47.06% in 2000, 28.69% in 2004 and 29.72% in 2008). Finally, the lack of political trust in Russia goes both ways: from the citizens to the state and from the authorities to the populace. The latter dimension of political distrust may be the crucial explanatory variable of what Kremlin theorists preferred to call 'managed democracy'. And it has a distinct historical dimension. 'The Soviet system is built on the assumption that the citizenry cannot be trusted', the American journalist Robert Kaiser (1976, p. 22) noticed in the mid-1970s. Not so much has changed.

The high level of scepticism in democratic political institutions does not seem to imply that Russians would want to eliminate these institutions, nor does it express any clear preferences for a non-democratic system. Public opinion research indicates that in most authoritarian states, a majority of the people still believe that democracy is preferable to any alternative form of government. Whether the Russian Federation confirms this picture remains dubious. The research findings are not all consistent. While the *New Russia Barometer* concludes that throughout the 1990s and 2000s two-thirds of the respondents rejected dictatorship, and only one-third

supported it (Rose *et al.* 2006, p. 96); Diamond concludes on the basis of other polls that in most of the European republics of the former Soviet Union, Russia included, only minorities say no to 'all authoritarian options' (Diamond 2008b, p. xvi).

From a comparative perspective, Russians are among the least enthusiastic about democracy in their country. Although this is a disturbing finding in itself, it needs elaboration on what Russians understand by 'democracy'. First and foremost, a majority of Russians tend to differentiate between 'democracy' and 'liberal democracy'. Public support for liberal or Western-style democracy remains limited to a relatively small, although persistent minority. From just over 30% during the second half of the 1990s to less than 20% a decade later and back to almost 30% in 2008, answered to prefer 'democracy on the model of Western countries' for Russia (Richards 2008, The Levada Center 2008). When Gallup asked a similar question in May 2008, the outcome was comparable: 18% opined that a 'Western-style democratic republic' would be the most suitable political system for the Russian Federation. Ten percent favoured a 'strong authoritarian system, which places order above freedom'. The largest percentage of respondents, 40%, preferred a system that had a lot in common with the Soviet one, though more democratic and market-based (Gallup 2009). Claims that Russians principally favour liberal democracy (c.f. Hassner 2008, p. 13) lack evidence. They seem politically rather than empirically inspired.

Whether or not these opinions have a generational dimension remains debatable. Some public opinion data suggest that younger generations are more likely to favour Western-style democracy than older ones (26% of Russians between the ages of 15 and 39, against 12% among the aged 40 and older), but these findings are contradicted by other data. Youngsters seem to be as divided on political issues as older generations are, and even if they are more supportive of reform, it is generally of market-economic reform, not of democratic political change (see Hahn and Logvinenko 2008 for an overview of research results).

The human rights perception by many Russians closely follows their understanding of democracy. Russians are strongly dissatisfied with their human rights situation. A clear majority of Russians does not feel protected by the law (The Levada Center 2006). This does not translate, however, into a strong commitment to civil liberties. Polls show that integral aspects of liberal democracy such as freedom of expression, of information and other civil rights, are not among the core political values of many Russian citizens. Russians tend to combine their hesitations on liberal democracy with an increasingly negative attitude towards the West in general. Figures on the extent to which Russians identify with Europe still vary considerably, but seem to show an overall negative trend. Additionally, Russians who believe that Western-style democracy is the most suitable form of government for their country do not necessarily hold ideas which are compatible with the regular understanding of democratic politics in the West. Only 39% of the pro-democracy respondents (against 29% of those who favour the old Soviet system) consider 'an active political opposition' to be 'very important for Russia' (Gallup 2009).

Russians associate democracy and human rights with social justice and public order rather than with the attributes of liberal democracy or individual civil rights. Not only does their support for economic 'rights' and public order far exceed their backing of civil rights, as various survey data show (The Levada Center 2008), but Russians are also overwhelmingly (75% of the respondents in early 1990 polls) prepared to accept violations of human rights for the sake of strengthening order and public safety (Gerber and Mendelson 2002). A preference for democracy is combined with support for explicitly illiberal, if not undemocratic state policies. These figures may be inflated of course, due to the fact that the Russian population had just gone through years of unprecedented turmoil and distress. I would argue against simplified path-dependent, culturalist arguments. Support for a strong leader in post-communist Russia

does not necessarily translate into a desire for authoritarianism. And stressing the relevance of a strong state does not immediately make one a hardened *gosudarstvennik* (a statist). Still, as Gerber and Mendelson (2002) conclude on the basis of their late 1990s survey: 'Russian and Western human rights organizations have detailed an increase in threats to civil liberties, but our data suggest that few in Russia are bothered by this' (see also Sil and Chen 2004).

Many Russians believe in the ideal of democracy and still back their authoritarian government. Over the 1990s and early 2000s, many Russians who view democracy as desirable have also been positive about the incumbent regime, Rose *et al.* (2006, p. 180) conclude. The discrepancy between supporting the ideal of democracy and backing the practice of authoritarianism can be explained in various ways. It may indicate the inclination among many pro-democracy Russians to identify democracy not so much with the rules of the game, with the democratic process, but with particular aspects of its outcome. It demonstrates that the understanding of democracy in terms of its preferred outcome may deviate from what is commonly understood by it. And finally, it may evidence that among those who cherish the ideal of democracy, quite a few believe that it is not suitable for their own country. As much as political legitimacy can be generated on universalistic and particularistic grounds, the understanding and appreciation of democracy seems to be determined by national conditions too, and not only by universal concepts.

A final comment on the issue of popular legitimacy concerns Russia's international role. In the regime's attempts to bolster popular support and, arguably (few data available are scarce), the population's readiness to give it, Russia's international position and foreign policy play an important role. The current regime has causally and convincingly linked the country's domestic order with its international position. Russia needs to have a strong state to be a Great Power. Russia needs to be a Great Power to survive. This is how the Russians see their country and its global position, and this is how it demands to be seen by others: as a sovereign Great Power in a multi-polar world. Russians appear to appreciate the sovereignty and prominence of their country more than any other feature of its regained international status.

In conclusion, as to popular legitimacy in Russia, the picture is mixed and contradictory. Public opinion polls show strong dissatisfaction among Russians with political and public institutions in general and with democratic ones in particular. They also indicate the lack of a broadly shared alternative political order, whether liberal democratic or fully authoritarian. A substantial part of the Russian populace prefers democracy while they support their non-democratic rulers. Russians generally reject liberal democracy and undervalue civic rights, but express annoyance with their lack of any political influence and about the elite's unresponsiveness. This results in a type of legitimacy, which seems to rest predominantly on non-structural factors like political personalities, policies and rhetoric. And although important normative aspects are involved too, nationalism and *statism* in particular, they may not compensate for widespread political resignation (aspects of 'negative' support) and the lack of trust in politicians and in political institutions in general, the 'state' included (Sil and Chen 2004).

Notwithstanding the current global financial and economic crisis, which has hit the Russian Federation severely, living conditions of large numbers of citizens are considerably better than they have ever been. Political stability has returned. Russians enjoy a fair measure of freedom, as long as they do not enter the political arena. Internationally, Russia is taken seriously again. Still, even among the substantial majority of Russians who profited from the economic upswing before the crisis, much is left to be desired. Insofar, however, as these aspirations are explicitly political, they do not seem to focus primarily on the attributes of democracy *per se* (political parties, parliament and so on) as they concentrate on issues commonly associated with good governance or the rule of law. Russians are primarily concerned about, and frustrated with, bureaucratic indifference and corruption, with legal inequality, with shabby healthcare and

poor education. Still, just like democracy, the rule of law too may contain some particularistic aspects. If one reads the Russian mind right, the rule of law may not so much be understood as serving the freedom of the individual vis-à-vis the state, but more as serving the strength and effectiveness of the state – in the perception of the leadership (Putin's 'dictatorship of the law') as well as in the eyes of a substantial part of society.

International democracy promotion and semi-authoritarianism

Russia never was an ideal candidate for democratization. It is a large, powerful and increasingly self-confident country, endowed with huge energy resources, which has largely recovered from the unprecedented political and socio-economic crisis of the past decades and is now guided by ambitious foreign policy aspirations. This may help to explain why evaluations of international democracy-promotion efforts in the Russian Federation show little variety. The impact of assistance is generally believed to have been limited (Mendelson and Glen 2002, Henderson 2003, Spence 2005), and occasionally even counterproductive. Western democracy-promotion efforts supposedly 'damaged both the favoured democratic forces and, at the same time, the very reputation of democracy as a political system' (Spanger 2002, p. ii). However, difficult it is to substantiate any claim with respect to the efficacy of international democracy support, the poor reputation of democracy assistance in Russia seems to be compatible with the facts on the ground. The democratic political parties of Russia, regular recipients of foreign support, have been fully marginalized. The political NGO sector remains seriously underdeveloped, and is still largely dependent on Western donors. While the restrictive legal measures taken against NGOs in Russia in 2006 were explicitly legitimated by questioning the activities of Western democracy-promotion organizations in the country, the population at large showed a supreme form of indifference.

How to appreciate international democracy assistance efforts in the light of Russia's authoritarian political turn and the Russians' own assessment of the ideal of democracy and the practice of authoritarianism?

International democracy promotion is an almost exclusively Western concern, based on the assumption that the (liberal) democratic form of government is more legitimate than any of its non-democratic alternatives. This may be a valid assumption, but it is not unproblematic. International democracy-promotion organizations struggle with the occasional and uncomfortable discrepancy between democratic and popular legitimacy. The way to deal with non-democratic regimes and with the political parties that support them 'deserve more thought than the attention they have hitherto received', as Burnell (2006, p. 546) rightly stresses, 'not least for the implications for constructive engagement by democracy promotion actors in the international community'. Popular legitimacy is an integral component of democracy, but it is not necessarily absent in authoritarian regimes either. Burnell's article counts as one of the few attempts which discusses the issue of legitimacy of authoritarian regimes as a variable of international democracy promotion.

The discussion on democracy promotion under the current restrictive conditions mostly concentrates on two constraining variables: first, on the flaws of the international effort itself (lack of sensitivity to local circumstances and conditions, lack of coherence and consistency, conflicting interests, close association of US assistance with the foreign policy priorities of the Bush administration and other deficiencies), and second, on the counter-policies of the non-democratic regimes. With respect to the first, an assumption often found among democracy-promotion institutions is that only if support would be *more*, it would be better: more strategic thinking, more coordination and integration, more political will, more assessment and, obviously, more money. This assumption should be closely interrogated. Occasional arguments for *less* support from

people who are well disposed towards democracy promotion (Lasota 1999, pp. 125–128) have generally been neglected.

The second constraining variable of democracy promotion leaves little doubt that the wide variety of measures that have been taken by authoritarian regimes has negatively impacted the efficacy of democracy assistance. Still, hybrid, semi-authoritarian regimes are a mixed bag and local conditions vary considerably. None of these regimes is particularly supportive of external interference in their domestic affairs, but although the type of counter-measures they use to impede democracy support shows some obvious similarities, there are crucial differences too. I would not go as far as Diamond does, who refers to a ‘common feature’ of authoritarian crack-downs, namely ‘a fanatical crusade to sever ties between indigenous democratic actors and international sources of financial, technical and moral support’ (Diamond 2008a, p. 86). Whatever the precise nature of the restrictive NGO regulations issued by the Putin government in 2006, they certainly do not count as a ‘crusade’. Active repression does not seem to be the pattern; creating obstacles, confusion and uncertainty is – for local organizations as well as for their international partners. Overall, the activities of international organizations have not been significantly affected. Few firm legal or other repressive actions have been taken.

The moral *raison d’être* of international democracy promotion is the quest from people in non-democracies to receive international help to achieve greater freedom. Interestingly, among the constraining factors of international democracy promotion the target populations are practically never mentioned. The lack of organization of an independent civil society may be occasionally acknowledged as a major impediment to democratic transformation as well as to effective democracy assistance, but the pro-democracy sentiments of the population at large are practically taken for granted. Democracy promoters, or for that matter democracy researchers, hardly ever ask the question of whether people want democracy and, additionally, whether they want to be assisted.

As weighty as the constraining conditions in the international democracy-promotion effort in Russia are, the enabling factors need to be taken into account too. The quest for international recognition and acceptance plays a certain role in upholding democratic procedures and institutions in the Russian Federation and consequently in the grudging acceptance of foreign democracy-promotion organizations in the country. Russia has no ideology of its own. Russia wants to be a ‘normal’ country; so Russia cannot but present itself as a democracy, accepted by other democracies (Anderson 2007). The norm of democracy still influences the cost–benefit analysis, which determines the Russian leadership’s decision to allow, oppose or repress foreign and domestic pro-democracy organizations and their activities

Rule of law assistance

In discussions about the effectiveness of external, international dimensions of democratization, the focus of attention has gradually shifted from deliberate, activist democracy-promotion policies to the wider perspective of creating an environment in which democratic culture and governance may eventually grow. In this context, liberal engagement is probably the most often-mentioned pro-democracy ‘strategy’ towards semi-authoritarian states in general and towards Russia in particular – engagement leading to ever-stronger linkage. Linkage through a strategy of engagement may be credibly presented as one of the few possibilities left to actually influence Russia’s domestic political developments, while it avoids open confrontation and comfortably coexists with actual policies of cooperation in such highly sensitive fields as international security and energy.

However, the effect of increasing linkage on democratic change is far from obvious. The linkage argument is based on the assumption that authoritarian rulers have a better chance to

politically survive when external ties with the West are weaker, while specific sources of domestic organizational power (an effective ruling party, a strong coercive apparatus, and state control over the economy, in particular over major natural resources) are stronger (Way 2008, pp. 55, 60). The Russian Federation *has* extensive ties with the West, but these have had a limited effect on the legitimacy or stability of its authoritarian political regime. On the one hand, Russia is often considered to be too big, too powerful, and too far removed from Western societies, politics and markets to be influenced by democratic ideas. Additionally, the Putin regime has rightly been credited (or discredited) with successfully warding off subversive political influences from abroad. On the other hand, however, Russia has opened up to the West and to the world beyond more extensively and more deeply than ever before. Russian citizens have had more opportunities to acquaint themselves with Western societies, life patterns and politics than they ever had before. Russia may be far from the most 'globalized' country in the world, as the KOF Index of Globalization indicates (http://globalization.kof.ethz.ch/static/pdf/rankings_2009.pdf). However, it does count as an example of how greater exposure to the West and dense(r) ties and cross-border flows with democratic countries and organizations do not necessarily translate into more Western leverage or pro-democracy influence. The Russian Federation has proved to be relatively immune to democratic diffusion effects. While the level of linkage with democratic countries and the international organizations they dominate has never been higher, Russia is less democratically inclined and more 'anti-Western' now than it has been in the last two decades – and this seems to apply to rulers and ruled alike.

The possibilities for promoting political change in Russia from the outside are narrow, and the possibilities for supporting democratic change are even narrower. The prospects of democracy assistance are beclouded by the wide margins of changeability of the country's semi-authoritarian political system, by the ineffectual nature of the institutions through which to implement democratic change, as well as by the lack of receptiveness for liberal democracy by a large part of the population. International assistance needs to strategically link the democracy-promotion effort with the nature of the non-democratic regime in question and with the preferences and priorities of the population. In the case of the Russian Federation, this would imply that a strategy phrased in explicitly political terms (aimed at the strengthening of liberal democracy) and aimed primarily at democratic political actors (oppositional parties and political NGOs) will remain ineffectual. One of the few available alternatives is to focus on the less politicized (though not necessarily less 'political') and more consensual effort to strengthen legal awareness and the rule of law.

Rule of law assistance is defined as the wide array of activities by international organizations aimed at the improvement of legal and institutional transparency, predictability, efficiency and responsiveness. The choice of rule of law assistance in Russia far from unproblematic. It is no panacea to the general inefficacy of the democracy assistance efforts in Russia. First and foremost, the rule of law concept is open to widely diverging interpretations. And whereas the distinction between rule of law and democracy promotion may be clear from the donors' perspective, it may not be so obvious to the recipients. In other words, rule of law assistance can be as politically sensitive as democracy aid is. Second, Russia's weakly developed legal culture is an enormous barrier to effective rule of law reform and to the efficacy of rule of law assistance. Third, rule of law assistance may confront international organizations even more sharply with moral and political dilemmas than democracy assistance *per se* does: what to support and what not, whom to work with and whom not? Not only will legal reform aid, whether top-down or bottom-up, involve the participation of representatives of non-democratic governments, but it may also contribute to the effectiveness of regime policies that contradict the very same liberal democratic principles one is ultimately trying to strengthen (see also Spence 2005). Additionally, support for rule of law assistance is not meant to revive the argument about

sequencing: establish the rule of law before democratization. Attempts to promote legal norms in Russia should not be considered as an intermediate step towards democracy, but rather as a goal, a very ambitious goal, in and of itself. It is not an either – or choice. Continued assistance to Russia's marginalized democratic forces remains of importance, despite the fact that it will have no perceptible effect on the political regime as such.

The argument that rule of law assistance may expect to be more responsive to Russian reality than democracy assistance is not so much based on past experience (rule of law evaluations studies are moderately positive at best) (Ford 2001, Spence 2005), but on my reading of the concerns and desires of the larger part of Russian society, of the margins for change of the current political regime, as well as of the stated priorities of a prominent part of the political elite. Rule of law assistance may be expected to meet less political obstruction and societal distrust than democracy support. Irrespective of these comparative advantages however, the strongest and overriding argument in favour of rule of law aid to Russia is the lack of effective alternative strategies. There are few other options available, apart of course from ignoring Russia, a conclusion which quite a few international organizations have meanwhile drawn.

Conclusion

This contribution discussed three interrelated questions: what is the purpose of 'democratic' institutions and practices in Russia's authoritarian political system? How do these institutions and practices resonate with Russian public opinion on the various dimensions of democracy? And how do they relate to international democracy-promotion effort in the country? It is a careful attempt to link public opinion research with the study of authoritarianism-with-prefixes associated with the increasing number of semi-authoritarian regimes. The issues are of importance from a practical perspective too, as they touch on concerns that are not addressed systematically by either democracy-promotion practitioners or researchers. Although the key questions go beyond a single case-study, even one as important as the Russian Federation, only single case studies or very small-N comparative studies offer the possibility of breathing some real life into social science categories such as political regimes, public opinion, transformation and the like.

Adjectives are added to authoritarianism to indicate that these regimes possess characteristics that are not typically associated with authoritarian rule, namely *democratic* institutions and practices. Democratic in this context refers to the origin of these institutions and practices (democracy), not to the way they actually operate under authoritarian conditions. Democratic institutions have more than a façade, a legitimizing role to play. They are relevant to the actual functioning of the regime. However, while they are supposed to contribute to the stability and continuity of authoritarian rule, they may actually undermine it. The volatility of semi-authoritarian regimes largely follows from their inherently contradictory nature: the combination of authoritarian practices with flawed democratic institutions and procedures. The Russian Federation is no exception. Various aspects of Russia's current political regime should be understood within this context: from its state-engineered party political system to the very un-Russian issue of double-headed leadership. These and other features of the country's political regime may at least be partly attributed to the attempts by the regime to give a meaningful, pro-stability purpose to democratic institutions and procedures, while they may actually be undermining rather than strengthening the current political order.

It would be incorrect to perceive state–society relations in semi-authoritarian regimes, Russia included, in predominantly dichotomous terms: state versus society. This would not only underestimate the measure of popular legitimacy of the current regime in Russia, based on a combination of ideational and instrumental issues. For it would also misinterpret popular perceptions of political democracy, *in abstracto* as well as in practice, that is to say, the

extent to which democratically oriented Russians believe democracy as an idea is fine but does not suit Russia. Russian public opinion on matters of democracy and governance is full of paradoxes, but it does allow for some general, though not always consistent, conclusions. Political trust in Russia is low, especially trust in parties, parliaments and other supposedly democratic institutions. This lack of trust rather reflects disappointment with the actual functioning of the state (its efficacy) than frustrated democratic ambitions. Only a (significant and persistent) minority of Russians has ever considered Western-style representative democracy as suitable for their own country. At the same time, Russians feel powerless and unprotected vis-à-vis the state. They deplore their lack of influence over what happens in their own country; they are strongly dissatisfied with their human rights situation, but they do *not* translate this into a widely shared commitment to civil liberties.

Judging from regime features and popular opinion in Russia, the generally felt sense of disappointment when it comes to the impact of international democracy assistance in Russia may not come as a surprise. Disappointment is a relative notion of course. Any claim to the efficacy of external involvement in Russia's recent political trajectory remains difficult to substantiate. Not only does it depend on one's initial ambitions, but also on one's estimation of the facts on the ground: an authoritarian political system, a mixed economy, a largely free society.

The record of democracy assistance in the Russian Federation raises questions that go beyond the usual issues of donor organizations' tactics and strategies: do people want (liberal) democracy and do they want democracy assistance? After weighing the constraining and enabling conditions that affect the international democracy assistance effort in Russia, the conclusion is that the 'political' variant of democracy promotion is, and will remain, largely ineffective. Russia needs a wider, a more gradualist and less politicized approach, one which is generally associated with rule of law assistance. Rule of law support comes with all kinds of difficulties and dilemmas of its own, but still seems to relate more firmly to Russian reality than 'traditional' democracy promotion does. It corresponds more closely with the (limited) capabilities of external actors, and with the priorities of the Russian citizens as well as with the self-declared ambitions and international commitments of the Russian leadership.

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