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'I've Seen This Before': What Failed Democratization Can Teach Us About Democratic Erosion

Bureaucracy – the Power of the State

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This is the fourth installment in a series, which was introduced [here](#). The first episode on Civil Society can be read [here](#), and the second episode on political society can be read [here](#), and the third on rule of law can be read [here](#).

As I often joke with my undergraduate students, revolutions can be thrilling—but sooner or later, someone has to pick up the garbage. The seemingly mundane question of who governs and how often determines whether lofty ideals survive their first encounter with reality. The government's monopoly on the legitimate use of force and its essential duties to extract, administer, and command ultimately define its success or failure.

In this episode, I turn to one of the least glamorous yet most vital functions of modern democracy: the state's capacity to effectively govern through a professional and functioning bureaucracy. Scholars Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan, in their seminal work on democratic transitions, remind us that such a bureaucracy is not merely a technical apparatus but an indispensable arena of democratic consolidation^[1]. As discussed in the previous episode on rule of law and constitutionalism, democracy requires not only limits on power but the institutional capacity to make those limits meaningful.

For Linz and Stepan, a consolidated democracy must balance the capacity to rule with the restraint not to overreach. Bureaucracies make this possible. They carry out policies beyond the lifespan of any administration, preserve institutional memory, and turn political will into practical governance. In their steadiness lies democracy's endurance. When they work well, bureaucracies make democratic day-to-day governance mundane. And that, paradoxically, is their greatest virtue. As Max Weber famously observed, bureaucracy replaces the arbitrary will of rulers with the rational administration of impersonal rules[2].

The impersonal, rational, and transparent nature of democratic bureaucracy, however, is a mirror image of its authoritarian counterpart. While Democratic institutions rely on formal rules and impartiality, authoritarians often begin not by dismantling institutions but by colonizing them. In this process, they replace professional competence with personal loyalty, undermine civil service protections, and politicize agencies that were meant to serve the public rather than the ruler. For example, in Vladimir Putin's Russia, this process was gradual but systematic. There, the bureaucracy was reoriented around the "vertical of power," where appointments were contingent on personal loyalty to the Kremlin[3]. Over time, the emphasis of loyalty over professionalism transformed ministries into instruments of political control and patronage. As discussed in Episodes 2 and 3, this transformation paralleled the erosion of the boundary between law enforcement and political enforcement, as legal institutions became tools for consolidating power.

The "Vertical of Power"

The general myth behind Putin's popularity is his ability to turn Russia from the economic, social and political chaos of the '90s into a functional and efficient state. Remarkably, the "functioning state" was perhaps the only arena left intact after the collapse of the USSR.

Focus on efficiency and rule of law were at the core of many reforms promised by Putin's government. Yet, over two decades, the regime built what it termed a "vertical of power" (*vertikal vlasti*)—a centralized hierarchy designed to ensure loyalty and control over regional and bureaucratic elites. What began as a promise of administrative efficiency evolved into a mechanism for consolidating personal rule rooted in personal and institutional loyalty to the "first person[4]".

From his first months in office, Putin restructured the state apparatus by populating it with trusted figures from the security and intelligence services—the *siloviki*. This term, derived from *silovye struktury* ("power ministries"), refers to individuals from the FSB, military, or police backgrounds who came to dominate both federal and regional administrations. Their loyalty to the president outweighed professional qualifications, effectively merging the political and

coercive arms of the state. The appointment of *siloviki* to key economic and administrative posts blurred the distinction between governance and enforcement, ensuring that bureaucratic advancement depended less on competence and more on fidelity to the Kremlin. By 2008, over 25% of high-ranking officials in the federal government had backgrounds in security services, institutionalizing what was once informal of patronage into the very structure of governance. One emblematic *silovik* loyal to Putin is Igor Sechin, a former intelligence officer who rose from the presidential staff to head Rosneft, turning the state oil sector into both an economic and political instrument of the Kremlin.[5]

Moreover, the agencies of Russian security apparatus, such as the FSB, Investigative Committee, and Prosecutor General's Office, became central actors in enforcing political loyalty. High-profile prosecutions of opposition figures, from Mikhail Khodorkovsky in the early 2000s to Alexei Navalny two decades later, signaled the regime's willingness to weaponize legality.

Putin's *siloviki* were also instrumental in dismantling Russian federal systems, established under the constitution of 1994. The 2000 creation of seven (later eight) federal districts, each overseen by loyal presidential envoys, marked the first step toward administrative centralization. The 2004 abolition of direct gubernatorial elections, justified as a measure against terrorism following the Beslan tragedy, removed one of the last mechanisms of regional accountability. Governors became presidential appointees, answerable to Moscow rather than local electorates. Municipal governments were further weakened through fiscal dependency, as tax revenues were recentralized and regional legislatures stripped of discretion. By the mid-2010s, even modest attempts at local self-government were subordinated to federal "coordination," rendering Russia a federation in name only.

From federal ministries to municipal offices, all bureaucrats under Putin's reign are expected to "deliver results" not in public service outcomes but in electoral loyalty and policy compliance. In previous episodes, we discussed how the so-called administrative resources (*administrativnyi resurs*), such as the use of state positions, budgets, and access to media, became instruments of regime maintenance. Agencies once intended as neutral regulators were repurposed into political tools: Roskomnadzor monitors and censors' media and the internet, and the Central Election Commission, long led by loyalists, legitimizes managed elections rather than ensures their fairness. Thus, technical expertise and bureaucratic professionalism were systematically devalued in favor of obedience and ideological reliability.

"Deep State" and Bureaucratic Legitimacy

A widespread effort to delegitimize state bureaucracy is a dangerous step toward the destruction of state impersonality, rationality, and transparency. In the U.S., the term “deep state” has long become a rhetorical weapon against unelected professionals who make government work—career diplomats, public health officials, intelligence analysts, and inspectors general. This narrative reframed bureaucratic continuity as subversion, suggesting that expertise is incompatible with democratic accountability. As Tom Nichols argues in “The Death of Expertise,” the erosion of trust in professional knowledge creates fertile ground for populist leaders to substitute loyalty and emotion for competence and fact[6]. Purges and loyalty tests can be justified as democratic “corrections.” The result is a hollowing of the administrative state—a process familiar to scholars of democratic erosion.

In his second term, President Donald Trump’s allies have revived a sweeping bureaucratic overhaul under “Schedule F” reforms — reclassifying tens of thousands of civil servants as political appointees — stripping away the institutional buffer that once insulated governance from partisan ends. Simultaneously, the newly created Department of Government Efficiency has already begun purging technical teams, overriding agency expertise, and embedding itself in core bureaucracies. In the ongoing Fall 2025 governmental shutdown, administration officials openly threatened mass firings of federal employees. The danger here is not only administrative chaos, but the loss of state neutrality necessary for democracy and effective governance.

The blurring of the line between law enforcement and political enforcement is another key dimension of bureaucratic subversion. When institutions are charged with upholding the law impartially, such as the Department of Justice, the FBI, and the Internal Revenue Service, they become tools of executive will; their role shifts from protecting the rule of law to protecting the ruler. This erosion of neutrality extends to the use of coercive power, including recent attempts to deploy the National Guard in ways that bypass governors and blur the constitutional line between federal and state authority. Such actions, framed in the language of “law and order,” reveal how the machinery of the state can be turned inward, using the instruments of public safety for political gain. Once law enforcement and the military are drawn into partisan conflict, the very institutions meant to uphold constitutional order risk becoming the means of its undoing. None of these trends occur in isolation, as discussed in previous installments. The erosion of bureaucratic neutrality, like the manipulation of electoral boundaries, reflects a broader strategy of entrenchment—one in which each act of political control strengthens the next, gradually hollowing out the institutions that sustain democracy.

As Linz and Stepan remind us, without a capable and independent state, neither the rule of law nor political society can endure. Bureaucracy, in this sense, is

democracy's quiet infrastructure: unglamorous but indispensable. When a government undermines its own professionals in favor of personal loyalty, things stop working properly. It is not just the policy machinery that gets broken, but the very civic order that keeps the garbage collected and the republic intact.

End Notes

- 1) Linz, J.J. and A.C. Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America, and Post-Communist Europe*. 1996, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- 2) Weber, M. (1946). *Bureaucracy*. In H. H. Gerth & C. W. Mills (Eds. & Trans.), *From Max Weber: Essays in sociology* (pp. 196–244). Oxford University Press. *Also see* Weber, M. (1978). *Economy and society: An outline of interpretive sociology* (G. Roth & C. Wittich, Eds.). University of California Press.
- 3) Fish, M. S. (2005). *Democracy derailed in Russia: The failure of open politics*. Cambridge University Press. *Also see* Gel'man, V. (2015). *Authoritarian Russia: Analyzing post-Soviet regime changes*. University of Pittsburgh Press. *Also see* Hale, H. E. (2006). *Why not parties in Russia? Democracy, federalism, and the state*. Cambridge University Press. *Also see* Petrov, N., Lipman, M., & Hale, H. E. (2014). *Three dilemmas of hybrid regime governance: Russia from Putin to Putin*. *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 30(1), 1–26.
- 4) This is a term used in Russian to describe the president – *pervoe litso*. This is also a title of an autobiographical book based on interview with Vladimir Putin that served as an introduction of Putin to the wider public before his first term as president. Putin, V. V., Gevorkyan, N., Timakova, N., & Kolesnikov, A. (2000). *First person: An astonishingly frank self-portrait by Russia's president*
- 5) Gel'man, V. (2015). *Authoritarian Russia: Analyzing post-Soviet regime changes*. University of Pittsburgh Press. *Also see* Taylor, B. D. (2018). *The code of Putinism*. Oxford University Press. *Also see* Belton, C. (2020). *Putin's people: How the KGB took back Russia and then took on the West*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- 6) Nichols, T. (2017). *The death of expertise: The campaign against established knowledge and why it matters*. Oxford University Press.



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