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

Political Society

By Lena Surzhko-Harned
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This is the second installment in a series, which was introduced here, and included the first episode here.

In 2013[i], Juan Linz, one of the most influential political scientists of the 20th century, argued in his analysis of democratic consolidation and failure that the U.S. was a rare empirical case that managed to avoid the “perils of presidentialism [ii]” – the temptation of a strong president to usurp power. This was due to residual “political wisdom” including, the checks and balances that legislators and courts provide.

The independence of legislators, however, is not simply a matter of individual legislators’ strength of character or moral fiber. In the field of comparative politics, legislators are known as “the single-minded seekers of reelection,[iii]” influenced by party leadership, donor relations, and systemic rules that structure political competition, including electoral rules, campaign financing, and party discipline – in short, an autonomous and orderly political society.

In this episode of “I’ve Seen This Before,” I offer some observations on political society — the second arena of democratic consolidation, or building a new democracy. In their seminal work, “Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation,” Linz and co-author Alfred Stepan define political society as “that

arena in which the polity specifically arranged itself to contest the legitimate right to exercise control over public power and the state apparatus.[iv] " Simply put, political society is the space where politicians, parties, and leaders compete for power. It's where they fight it out over who gets to run the government and how decisions are made. It's in that arena where different groups and ideas clash to win the public's support and gain legitimate authority to lead. The scholars, who study how democracies grow and survive, say a consolidated democracy includes the development and appreciation of core institutions, such as "political parties, elections, electoral rules, political leadership, interparty alliances, and legislatures" because without fair, open, and trusted competition for power, a democracy can't really function.

In fact, political society has a logical connection to the vibrant and independent civil society – the marketplace of ideas where the "science of association[v]" forms the social capital. The political society offers a set of rules for political conflict resolution. Linz and Stepan argue that while civil society can destroy a non-democratic regime, true democratic consolidation requires the presence of political society. Thus, building and maintaining the institutions and norms of a political contestation takes a strategic vision and a steadfast commitment to democratic norms.

Historically, U.S. parties have not been explicitly connected to the personalities of its leaders, and party discipline has been low both due to accepted norms and the flexibility of localized electoral rules and administration. Thus, the "political wisdom" is the result of institutionalization and independence of the political society. Personalization and polarization of the political parties, centralization of the elections, weakening trust in electoral process – all undermine the political society and its functions needed for a healthy democracy. Modern authoritarians, like Russia's Vladimir Putin, do not outright ban elections, instead they openly subjugate the political society as a necessary step in creating the vertical of power.

Smothered at birth? "Phony democracy" and political society in Russia

Civil societies have been instrumental in bringing down communist regimes in East and Central Europe. Solidarity movements in Poland and Charter 77 in Czechoslovakia have since become iconic representations of anti-communist struggles. In the former USSR, environmental and national liberation movements, like Rukh in Ukraine or Singing Revolution in the Baltics; civic groups, like Memorial or Helsinki Group; student protests; and numerous dissidents all paved the way to a civil society that opposed oppressive regimes. In fact, civil society often receives the limelight as brave and virtuous rebels. As such, the transition to politics as normal, albeit logical, proves to be an immensely difficult task for many civil society groups, who see politics as dirty.

In Russia, after USSR's collapse, the creation of the political society was an uphill battle from the start. The term "party" even became dirty due to close connections between the Communist Party to the Soviet State apparatus — including the security services like KGB and the Gulag system. Gorbachev's constitutional reform in 1988 attempted to salvage the Communist Party's reputation, but alas, it was beyond saving. Boris Yeltsin carried this dislike of the Party after he demonstratively quit the rank of the Politburo and later refused to form a political party to support his own political agenda and candidacy for the office of Russian President. As such, the public perception of political parties remained negative during the first and freest decade of Russian Federation.

Moreover, the electoral process during the 1990s did not inspire much confidence. Afterall, Russian were not new to elections or mandatory voting during the soviet days. What made the elections in a free Russia different was the arrival of the so-called political technologies and political technologists, aka campaign strategists. Equipped with knowledge from advanced democracies and not shy of utilizing tactics like voter bribery and smear campaigns against opponents, the early elections, including the presidential elections in 1996, soured the already cynical Russian voters. Further, lack of consistency in electoral law as well as a mere logistics of forming a national political party in a large country made the formation of political parties a challenge. Thus, the first decade of democratic Russian experience lacked the institutionalized free political contestations and was instead described by scholars as "electoralism" or "phony" democracy[vi].

Putin's "United Russia" – "electoral monarchy[vii]" and sovereign democracy

When Vladimir Putin came to power as a handpicked successor and a largely unknown political figure—packaged in the form of a soft-spoken man lacking the charisma of his predecessors—a team of image-makers went to work. He received extensive airtime on major television networks owned by pro-Yeltsin oligarchs, which portrayed him as a decisive, no-nonsense leader and a true man of the people[viii]. Juxtaposed with the image of an aging, womanizing, and frequently inebriated Yeltsin, Putin was presented as a strait-laced family man—disciplined by jiu jitsu, calm under pressure, and committed to restoring order. He was cast as the levelheaded leader who would end lawlessness, resolve the Chechen conflict, and confront terrorism.

The creation of the United Russia party soon followed, positioned as Putin's political vehicle and a potential "party of power"—securing a parliamentary majority in the State Duma, advancing the executive's agenda, and marginalizing the opposition. Together, Putin and United Russia shaped the foundations of

contemporary Russia, as “managed democracy” or authoritarianism functioning behind the democratic façade[ix].

As discussed in the previous dispatch, the state's takeover of major media outlets placed a powerful instrument in the Kremlin’s hands—one that would prove essential for influencing public opinion through propaganda. Putin and United Russia consistently benefited from favorable coverage on state media and access to other state resources. However, to ensure tighter control, the regime soon implemented a range of additional measures to suppress political pluralism: changes to electoral laws, restrictive regulations on party registration and campaign financing, and, increasingly, direct attacks on political opponents.

Almost immediately after taking power, the federal law on political parties in 2001 and an amendment to the electoral rights in 2002 set strict requirements for party registration and campaign funding. The goal was to encourage the formation of nationwide parties and ban foreign intrusion into Russian politics. In practice, the laws destroyed small and regional parties. Moreover, the so-called violations of complex registration paperwork were used to invalidate registration for oppositions groups and candidates.

In 2004, federal law removed direct elections of regional governors, enabling the Kremlin to consolidate regional power and reward loyalty. The raised electoral threshold for Duma elections in 2005 further hindered smaller political parties from entering the parliament. These changes directly benefited the United Russia party and handpicked systemic opposition parties, which would create the veneer of democratic competition. These included the Liberal Democratic Party (populist), the reestablished Communist Party of Russian Federation (nostalgic Marxist-Leninist), and Rodina (nationalist left). On the other hand, true oppositions parties, like Yabloko, established in 1993, were marginalized and pushed out of power and parliament.

By 2008 the United Russia became *the* party of power and Putin. When constitution prevented Putin from running for the third term in office, he could comfortably step in to the shoes of the Prime Minister – the head of United Russia and support his own PM Dmitry Medvedev as United Russia’s presidential candidate. The first two terms of Putin and United Russia were pivotal in shaping the political landscape of modern Russia. The seemingly small and incremental changes in the federal law created a puppet political society and consolidated authoritarian systems in Russia.

In 2011, when United Russia nominated Vladimir Putin as its presidential candidate, public protests erupted across the country. The so-called Bolotnaya protests marked the rise of Alexei Navalny, a previously little-known politician and anti-corruption blogger who had begun his political career in the

liberal Yabloko party. The regime responded with violence and a wave of arrests. Further demonstrations followed in 2012, sparked by widespread reports of electoral fraud. Upon returning to the presidency for a third term, Putin showed little tolerance for street politics or political opposition. More changes to federal laws followed.

In 2012, new restrictions on candidate registrations prevented independent candidates from running in federal elections. In 2013, a new amendment prohibited anonymous and foreign donations to political parties and candidates. Thus, the likes of Navalny, who attracted the support of the expats, faced new challenges. The following year, a new regulation demanded that all campaign materials including TV and online advertisements must be pre-approved by the election authorities. This restriction was tightened in 2018 subjecting all online activity to review from Roscomnadzor, The Federal Service for Supervision of Communications, Information Technology and Mass Media. Since the start of full-scale invasion of Ukraine, stricter laws identify extremist organization and anti-war candidates, barring them from participation in politics.

The history of Russia is stained with blood of opponents and dissidents. Putin's Russia is not an exception. Hundreds of those critical of the Kremlin have been targeted, harassed, arrested, assaulted, abused, or died under suspicious circumstances. Among them, journalist Anna Politkovskaya, human rights activist Natalia Estemirova, lawyer Sergei Mgnitsky, opposition activists Mikhail Khodorkovsky, Gary Kasparov, Vladimir Kara-Murza, and Ilya Yashin. On Feb. 27, 2015, Boris Nemtsov, a vocal critic of Putin's regime and invasion of Ukraine, was shot steps away from Kremlin. Alexy Navalny, whose name Putin refused to say out loud, was prosecuted, poisoned, arrested and murdered in prison in 2023. Navalny's organization was since proclaimed as an extremist organization in Russia.

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While Russia remains one of the extreme cases of suppressing the genuine political society, it serves as an important lesson. Ballot stuffing, campaign fraud, media manipulation, and gerrymandering are not the only ways to influence elections. Institutional changes to parties or rules that regulate party competition, federalization/centralization of electoral rules, rules barring political competition, or those deliberately confusing or deterring voters from casting a vote contribute to democratic erosion. Rulers like Putin place themselves and their loyalists above the political competition, and Putin has not participated in a single televised presidential debate. They destroy public trust in democratic institutions by portraying elections and opposition as disorderly and divisive. Undermining the legitimacy of elections and parties as institutions of healthy competition are key in destroying democratic governance.

The use of the legal system and coercive mechanisms have been instrumental in consolidation of authoritarianism in Russia. Comparative political scientists know that aspiring authoritarians appeal to the rule of law while systemically dismantling the very system and norms of constitutionalism. In the next dispatch, I will take a closer look at the rule of law as an arena necessary for democratic survival.

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[i] https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2013/01/22/monday-we-celebrated-our-presidential-democracy-juan-linz-thinks-thats-mistaken/

[ii] Linz, J.J. "The Perils of Presidentialism," *Journal of Democracy*.1990.

[iii] Mayhew, David R. Congress: the electoral connection. 1974, Yale University Press New Haven.

[iv] Linz, J.J. and A.C. Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidaton: Southern Europe, South America, and Post-Communist Europe*. 1996, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

[v] Alexis de Tocqueville, Democracy in America, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 489–492.

[vi] Richard Sakwa, Phoney Democracy, 1991–93, in The Crisis of Russian Democracy: The Dual State, Factionalism and the Medvedev Succession (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 89–117. *See also* Richard Rose and Neil Munro, Elections Without Order: Russia's Challenge to Vladimir Putin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 25.

[vii] Richard Sakwa, The Crisis of Russian Democracy: The Dual State, Factionalism and the Medvedev Succession (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 26.

[viii] I will explore the theme of oligarchs in one of the future episodes. Here I am refereeing to Boris Berezovsky, who has taken credit for installing Putin to power. *See* Dawisha, Karen, *Putin's Kleptocracy: Who Owns Russia?* Simon & Schuster, 2014.

[ix] Pomerantsev, Peter. Nothing Is True and Everything Is Possible: The Surreal Heart of the New Russia. New York: PublicAffairs, 2014. *Also see* Cheeseman, Nic, and Brian Klaas. How to Rig an Election. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018. *Also see* Wilson, Andrew. Virtual Politics: Faking Democracy in the Post-Soviet World. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005. *Also see* Levitsky, Steven, and Lucan A. Way. Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes after the Cold War. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010.

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