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Introduction

Russia's political development has been mixed since the fall of Soviet Union in 1991. An optimistic burst of activity in the early 1990s pushed the country from Soviet rule toward a greater emphasis on individual rights, but the country is now widely considered to be under authoritarian rule, or at least to be moving decisively toward centralization. At best, Russia can be seen as a *"hybrid regime"* or *"competitive authoritarianism"* that blends in some elements of electoral democracy. Russia's trajectory since 1991 is one in which a democratizing moment has been followed by a return to more centralized power and decision making by a closed set of economic and political elites *(Dickovick and Eastwood, 2015: 533)*. However, the central argument of this study is that the current Russian order is not participatory, democratic, and liberal enough due to personalization and centralization of political and economic powers by the executive body. As a result, the Russian political culture is struggling to construct a democratic fabric for the citizens based on equality, justice, rule of law, freedom, separation of powers, and egalitarian distribution. Institutional reform or re-design in the executive body, especially in the chief executive, would be a great initiative in order to visualize as well as build a democratic and liberal Russian order.

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Russian Political Culture and Authoritarianism: Personalism and Centralization in Russian Politics

Historical Legacy of Russian Authoritarianism: Peter the Great, Russia's first modern ruler, attempted to forcibly modernize the country imposing reforms i.e. *"Table of Ranks"* on his society centrally in the late seventeenth century. After a long period of Russian authoritarianism, the exile of Tsar due to the Russian Revolution of 1917 created a short-lived space for participatory decision-making model under the leadership of Lenin. But after the death of Lenin, the top leaders engaged in a struggle to establish their supremacy over the Bolshevik party as well as over the statecraft. By 1929, Stalin had consolidated his authority purging numerous alleged opponent, often using *"show trials"* and forced confessions. From cold war to the disintegration of Soviet Union marked several autocratic events damaging the democratic fabric of the Russian Federation. In order to evaluate the changing face of the Russian leadership, four classifications of government could be outlined from the October Revolution of 1917 to the present. William Zimmerman, a research professor emeritus at the University of Michigan and writer of the latest book Ruling Russia: Authoritarianism from the Revolution to Putin, explains these categories as something akin to a spectrum between democracy and totalitarianism, with varying degrees of authoritarianism between the two extremes. His major contribution to this concept is his focus on the size of the *"electorate"*, the group able to choose and remove leaders, as a defining characteristic that differentiates between various forms of authoritarianism. For example, the Soviet Union never deviated far from full authoritarianism, because even during the years of Gorbachev's *"glasnost,"* leadership was effectively selected by a small group, and structures remained in place to ensure that the leadership would not be ejected. He continues his analysis through the fall of the Soviet Union and into the present, determining that much of Yeltsin's regime fell under *"competitive authoritarianism,"* a state closer to democracy than totalitarianism. By the presidential election of 2008, however, the government under Putin had returned to full authoritarianism, because through media control, barriers to competition, and fraud, the power of choice was in the hands of very few *(Gerber)*.

Putinian Model of Russian Authoritarianism: Putin's United Russia party dominates Russian politics, occupying a majority of seats in the Duma, Russia's parliament. Effectively able to pass any law, Putin has progressively undermined civil liberties and slowly consolidated power in the hands of the central government. Using a variety of aggressive tactics such as intimidation and slander to silence domestic opposition and solidify his office, Putin has managed to remain in power for over 18 years. His allies have even rewritten the constitution to allow Putin to run for a third (now fourth), extended term as president *(Marsh, 2015)*. Under Putin, Russia has reasserted control over its traditional spheres of influence in the following ways: 1) solidify his own power base; 2) centralize authority; 3)

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strengthen the state; 4) curb the influence of the business leaders or *"oligarchs"* who might oppose him and his allies; and 5) resume a more assertive foreign policy *(Dickovick and Eastwood, 2015: 530)*. Due to Putin's authoritarian activities like revealing the government's selective targeting of political opponents for prosecution, current Russia is often described as *"hybrid"* or "competitive authoritarianism" or *"managed democracy"*.

Personalization of Political Regimes and Dysfunctional Institutions: As a semi-presidential system, both president and prime minister have considerable powers. But in reality, the prime minister is playing a decisive role in the decision-making process of Russia initiating a regime of political personalization. As a result, informal and backstage exercise of power was fundamental here and Putin's personal authority seems more important than formal powers.

Ideological Roots of Russian Competitive Authoritarianism: The roots of *"competitive authoritarianism"*, called by Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way, lie in the Cold War competition between the Leninist one-party state and free market liberal democracy. With the triumph of the Soviet Union and the United States in World War II, the two leading examples of these models competed for dominance. After years of economic distortion, political repression and stagnating standards of living, however, the Leninist one-party state began to lose the war of ideas. This ideological erosion drew from diverse sources- from images of sparkling American kitchens to underground human rights movements. The rot eventually spread to the Soviet Union, where the collapse of the Communist Party caused the Soviet Union to fracture into its constituent republics.

With the ideological collapse of the Leninist one-party state, liberal democracy was now widely perceived to be the best system for political and economic modernization.

Seeing the *"writing on the Berlin wall,"* political elites realized that they needed to appear *"liberal"* to hold on to power. But these elites refused to accept the concrete effects of liberal, pluralistic politics, including the real possibility of losing power. As a result, they developed intricate systems of *"faking"* liberal democratic politics in order to legitimize their rule with the appearance of liberal democracy while maintaining their monopoly on power. Levitsky and Way describe this new system as one where *"formal democratic institutions are widely viewed as the primary means of gaining power, but in which fraud, civil liberties violations, and abuse of state and media resources so skew the playing field that the regime cannot be labeled democratic" (Partlett, 2012).*

Hybrid Political Culture: Russia's longstanding conflict with liberalism and modernization provided a hybrid political system to the statehood. Personalization of political and economic authority also framed an autocratic decision-making

system. Also, rampant corruption by the political and economic elites heavily destroyed the culture of economic liberalization, rule of law and democratization in Russia. As if to compensate for the high degree of political apathy in domestic policy, a majority of Russians show a certain loyalty to the authorities on foreign policy. This phenomenon can be explained by the following reasons: In Russia, the support systems never developed that would have allowed individuals to become relatively independent of the state; the authorities consider any kind of protest to be revolutionary; instead of the actual vulnerability of the individual to the arbitrary actions of the authorities, propaganda offers Russians the illusion of self-importance, which lends passion to geopolitics; an emphasis on consolidating society in the face of a military threat *(Kirilova, 2018).*

Command Political Economy: State was responsible for major decisions about investment, production targets, and the social organization of economic life. Due to the *"shock therapy"* strategy of Russian privatization and the political and economic corruption, the statecraft failed to provide sufficient incentive to entrepreneurial activity and encourages a culture of dependency. All these state guided political economic activities initiated the rise of high rates of alcoholism and drug addiction, a very low birth rate, ethnic tensions and fragile judicial system. Privatization of the 1990s certainly improved economic efficiency but also created the vast inequality that damaged public perceptions about the program. In this sense, the question whether privatization was on the whole beneficial remains highly contentious. Economic and political power in Russia is still intimately intertwined. Although the oligarchs have been blamed for much of Russia's troubles, they did not directly slow down the country's economic growth. On the contrary, oligarch-owned companies are responsible for much of the dramatic increase in output in recent years. The situation in Russia today demonstrates that, in a sense, perception is stronger than reality. Although the economy is in order (GDP per capita increased from 22% of the US level in 2000 to 35% in 2012) and living standards are on the rise, *Foreign Direct Investment (FDI)* remains very low. In fact, capital outflow now stands at about 7% of GDP. That is a stunning figure, given high oil prices, abundant investment opportunities, and the nearly moribund US and European economies, which are the main recipients of Russia's fleeing capital *(Aven, 2013)*.

Oligarchic Regime and Centralization of Power: The strongest lasting image of the current centralized system of Russia is probably the dysfunctional transfer of economic power and a corrupt network of "oligarchs" and oil and natural gas mafias in which the state developed only weak institutions and lacked a rule of law. The moves to sideline those oligarchs who were critical to Putin's rule have been part and parcel of a broader centralization of power and control. Putin has reduced the role of parliament, and increased state control over the media.

Institutionalizing Political Culture and the Future Russian Order: Deepening the State Reformation

From the above analysis it clear that the current Russian political order is nothing but a shadow of the historical development of political management, longstanding authoritarianism and one leader dominated public and corporate system. The crises of democratization, political participation, freedom of conscience and press, liberalism, rule of law, institutionalization, just power transfer system, the strong judiciary is a resultant of the expanding executive influence in current Russia. History provides huge evidence that the executive of the Russian statehood sometimes tried to uphold the democratic norms but most of the times backed the authoritarian order. As institutional reform is inevitable for the Russian statecraft, reforming the executive would alter as well as change the Russian narrow political culture for the following reasons:

- The culture of liberalism in Russia is not practiced effectively due to the entrenched centralization. Always the chief executive played a decisive role in every sphere of decisions. So re-distribution of power following an institutional re-arrangement would be a vital footstep towards democratic culture for future Russia.

- The honeymoon between the political and economic elites also strengthen the executive body where informal institutions and personalities played a key role in nation's every progress. This relationship provides an invisible support to the chief executive to expand his authoritative order. So, a clear division and distribution between these elite groups might be a milestone for Russia's future democratization.

- Lack of Intra-party democracy, freedom of speech and press, functional parliament, free and fair elections, strong political opposition and rule of law provided an unseen legitimacy to Putin in exercising unlimited power upon these institutions and citizens. So, curbing the unlimited power of the executive body would expand the space for a liberal Russia in near future.

- Popular participation, popular control, and popular sovereignty would a curbing point for reforming the Russian statehood where chief executive might have to behave democratically to consolidate his political regime providing an expanding space for the Russian political culture.

Conclusion

The prevalence of personalism in Russian politics is a clear demonstration of how political development and political institutions interact initiating a culture of authoritarianism. All the institutional arrangements are strengthening the illiberal hands of the chief executive. Similarly, the legislature has been reshaped in a way that facilitates central control, while the structure of executive facilitates personalism. In a nutshell, the various features of Russian politics work together to create a top-down system where democratic culture is undermining by the executive.

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