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The Perils of a Protracted Transition

[Michael McFaul](#)

[What Went Wrong in Russia?](#)

On 17 August 1998, the Russian government took emergency measures to avert an economic meltdown, but these did little to halt the crisis. A week later, the ruble had lost two-thirds of its value vis-à-vis the dollar. In one day, the two major economic achievements of the Boris Yeltsin era--control of inflation and a stable, transferable currency--were wiped out. The stock market all but disappeared, the ruble continued to fall, banks closed, prices soared, and stores emptied as people started to stockpile durable goods like cigarettes, sugar, and flour. Responding desperately to a desperate situation, Yeltsin fired Prime Minister Sergei Kirienko and his government and eventually nominated Yevgeny Primakov to head a coalition government of centrists, communists, liberals, and even one member from Vladimir Zhirinovskiy's Liberal Democratic Party. Several months after taking power, however, this new government had done little to devise a strategy for halting Russia's economic woes.

Many predicted that political breakdown would soon follow. Throughout the summer, and especially after the assassination of democratic leader Galina Starovoitova in November 1998, the Weimar metaphor surfaced in every discussion of Russia's future. The threat of dissolution of the Russian Federation also loomed as a possible nightmare scenario, as regional leaders began to respond to the economic crisis with little regard for national laws or national interests.

To date, however, the more surprising story is how resilient Russia's political system has proven to be. It has absorbed the shock of economic meltdown and survived. Although Russian political leaders flirted with extraconstitutional measures, they have so far generally **[End Page 4]** abided by the constitutional process in seeking solutions to the economic crisis. Most importantly, Russian political actors have followed the rules of the game in dismissing one government and selecting another. In the process, a de facto shift of power has occurred, with the president becoming weaker and the government and the two houses of parliament--the Federation Council and the State Duma--assuming greater responsibility for governing. This ability to adapt to new political situations underscores the system's endurance. When put to the test, Russia's nascent democratic system did not collapse.

In earlier crises in August 1991 and October 1993, institutions broke down, political actors used brute force to pursue their ends, and military confrontation ensued. Why has this latest crisis not produced a similar outcome?

Violence or extraconstitutional measures were not pursued because Russia is what Larry Diamond defines as an electoral democracy: "a civilian, constitutional system in which the legislative and chief executive offices are filled through regular, competitive, multiparty elections with universal suffrage."¹ Since 1993, when forces with alternative ideas for organizing the Russian state exhausted themselves, all Russia's major political actors have committed themselves to the rules of electoral democracy for lack of a better alternative. The very existence of these rules and the adherence to them over time have helped to sustain the current institutional order. As the latest crisis demonstrated, these political institutions do not simply reflect the immediate interests of the powerful, but have an autonomous influence on Russian political life.

This does not mean, however, that Russia is a liberal democracy.² On the contrary, the consequences of Russia's transition have been dire for liberal democracy. Pluralist institutions of interest intermediation are weak; mass-based interest groups are marginal; and the institutions that could help redress this imbalance--such as a strong parliament, an effective party system, or an independent judiciary--still do not exist. These shortcomings leave Russia's democratic system vulnerable to future challenges. This vulnerability, however, is not a permanent condition resulting from long-term historical or cultural forces, but a product of Russia's protracted, confrontational, and imposed transition.

A Long Process

If it is accepted that Russia's transition to democracy began in the mid-Gorbachev years, it is one of the longest in recent history. Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan define a successfully completed democratic transition as the moment when "sufficient agreement has been reached about political procedures to produce an elected government, when a government comes to power that is the direct result of a free and **[End Page 5]** popular vote, when this government *de facto* has the authority to generate new policies, and when the executive, legislative, and judicial power generated by the new democracy does not have to share power with other bodies *de jure*."³ Russia certainly did not meet these conditions until December 1993, when Russian voters ratified a new constitution and elected a new parliament, and may not have met them until after the 1996 presidential election. (Before that time, the head of state had not been elected under the new constitution.) In fact, some argue that the transition will have been completed only when a change of executive power takes place through an electoral process. Whether the end of the transition is seen as 1993, 1996, or the year 2000, the process has been a long one, especially when compared to the more successful transitions in Eastern Europe.

In a sense, Russia experienced not one but three transitions. The first began when Mikhail Gorbachev initiated a series of liberalization measures, including greater freedom of speech, elections, and a new relationship between the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and the Soviet state. As the head of a totalitarian state, Gorbachev imposed these reforms from above. Eventually, however, these measures gave rise to new and independent political actors with more radical agendas for change. Though Gorbachev and other reformers within the old Soviet regime periodically attempted to negotiate with moderates in Russia's democratic movement, they did not succeed in reaching a transition agreement. Instead, regime hard-liners tried to roll back reform by decreeing emergency rule in August 1991, an action that Russia's democratic forces succeeded in defeating.

The failed August 1991 coup created propitious conditions for another attempt at democratic transition. Led by Boris Yeltsin, Russia's democratic forces had a unique window of opportunity to erect new democratic institutions by negotiating a new set of political rules with their communist opponents. The holding of new elections and the adoption of a new constitution might have helped to legitimate a new democratic order.⁴ Yeltsin, however, decided not to take this course. In fact, Yeltsin devoted very little time at all to designing new political institutions within Russia, focusing instead on dismantling the Soviet Union and initiating economic reform. His inattention to political reform eventually stimulated opposition that, in the fall of 1993, resulted in another military

confrontation between groups with conflicting visions of Russia's political system. Yeltsin once again prevailed in this standoff, but at a much higher price than in 1991; dozens of Russians were killed. The last time that Moscow had endured such political violence was during the 1917 Bolshevik coup.

Unlike in 1991, Yeltsin used his temporary political advantage in the fall of 1993 to institute a new political order. In November of that year, he issued a new constitution and announced that a referendum on it **[End Page 6]** would take place in December 1993. At the same time, voters were asked to elect representatives to a new bicameral parliament.

The "October events"--the euphemism coined to describe the armed conflict between the president and the parliament on 3-4 October 1993--represented a real blow to popular support for Russian democracy. Yet a majority (or close to a majority, as the turnout numbers may have been falsified) did participate and voted to ratify the new constitution. Equally important, major opposition parties, including the Communist Party of the Russian Federation and the Agrarian Party, opted, after long and hard debate, to participate in these elections.

Since 1993, all major political actors have continued to abide by the rules of the game outlined in the new constitution. All politicians and parties of consequence participated in the 1995 parliamentary elections, the 1996 presidential election, and the dozens of regional elections that have occurred over the last two years. On the whole, elections have been competitive and consequential; two-thirds of the Duma deputies elected in 1993 failed to win or decided not to run in 1995, and nearly half of the regional governors lost their reelection bids. Elections have become the only game in town for winning political power, while the constitution has survived as the ultimate guide for resolving conflicts between the executive and legislative branches.

A major reason why Russia's transition to electoral democracy was so long and conflict-ridden was the contested agenda of change. In transitions from authoritarian rule in Latin America and Southern Europe, questions concerning the basic organization of the economy were generally off-limits. Transitions from communist rule, on the other hand, placed economic questions squarely on the table, complicating the transition process. Multiethnic states like the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia also had to face a third issue--defining state borders. Soviet and Russian leaders therefore faced a more complex challenge in negotiating this triple transition than did their counterparts in Poland, let alone Spain. It was the intensity of opposing views on this three-part agenda that really prolonged the transition process and fueled confrontation.

At the beginning of the Russian transition, no consensus existed among political elites on any of these issues. Conflicting ideas about state borders led to the August 1991 coup. After Yeltsin's side prevailed in this confrontation, the victors dictated a resolution to this hotly debated issue by dissolving the Soviet Union. In short, the issue of borders was resolved through unilateral action, not by negotiation.

Opinions also differed strongly on the organization of the economy. Throughout the Gorbachev period and the early post-Soviet years, communist leaders maintained a real opposition to market reforms, offering a brand of state socialism in its place. If many postcommunist countries debated what sort of market reforms to pursue after the fall of communism, Russia debated whether to pursue market reforms at all. **[End Page 7]** Only after Yeltsin's violent defeat of his opponents in October 1993 was his government able to push through policies it deemed necessary to ensure the irreversibility of capitalism. Over time and out of weakness, most of those who opposed capitalism eventually recognized the legitimacy of private property and the need for markets.⁵ This recognition, however, came very late in Russia's transition. The debate about the relationship between the state and the market is still much broader in Russia than in Eastern Europe.

The third issue on the agenda of change--the nature of the future political system--took the longest to resolve. Until the fall of 1993, communists persisted in pushing for the system of soviets as the basic organization of the Russian government. Even the anticommunist movement was divided on whether democracy was appropriate for Russia during its transition from communist rule. Many prominent advisors to Yeltsin maintained that Russia needed an authoritarian regime to manage the

transformation to capitalism.

Only after the October 1993 tragedy did Yeltsin turn his attention to creating new political institutions. As mentioned above, he dictated a solution to the debate about the form of government and then offered his opponents the choice of either accepting or rejecting it. Out of weakness and the lack of a better alternative, Yeltsin's opponents acquiesced to the new rules and began to participate in the new constitutional order after the December 1993 elections. Whether Yeltsin himself would agree to abide by the new rules, however, remained uncertain. Most ominously, no one knew if Yeltsin would accept the results of the 1996 presidential election if he lost. Well into the presidential campaign, Yeltsin advisors repeatedly hinted that he would not.

Because Yeltsin won, we do not know if the political system would have survived a Yeltsin defeat. What we do know is that Yeltsin can no longer challenge the existing political order, as he has neither the political support, the military firepower, nor the will to hold onto power through extraconstitutional means. Ironically, the latest economic crisis may have helped to strengthen Russian democracy, as it has further weakened the one actor previously most willing and able to overthrow the democratic system--Boris Yeltsin.

Stalemate and Its Consequences

Much of the earlier writing on democratization presupposed that stalemate between prodemocracy forces and those in favor of the *ancien régime* was favorable to transition, because the inability of opposing sides to defeat their enemy would compel them to negotiate. Stalemate, however, can also have the opposite effect. If opponents believe that they cannot be defeated, they may be tempted to fight on. **[End Page 8]** Will the army fight to protect the *ancien régime*? Will the people mobilize to overthrow the authoritarian state? During times of transition, such calculations are difficult to make.

In the Russian transition, stalemate played a negative role. Rather than compelling opposing sides to compromise, the relatively equal balance of power fostered conflict. During the Gorbachev era, the balance of power between hard-liners and democrats was not tilted in favor of either side. In this situation, the hard-liners eventually decided in August 1991 to resort to military power to preserve the Union and squelch the opposition. Throughout most of Russia and the other republics, their demonstration of power met little resistance. Only in Moscow, St. Petersburg, and a few other cities did the democratic opposition mobilize in defiance of the coup attempt. This isolated resistance, however, proved decisive, as Yeltsin and his allies succeeded in undermining the putsch, giving him and his counterparts in Ukraine and Belarus the opportunity to dissolve the Soviet Union.

In contrast to the democratic movements in Poland, Hungary, or Czechoslovakia, the Russian "democrats" did not have overwhelming support, either within the elite or among the population at large. In contrast to most East European transitions, communist groups refused to recognize the democratic victory in August 1991 and considered the policies pursued by the democrats thereafter to be illegitimate and undemocratic. In particular, Yeltsin's decisions to dissolve the USSR and to launch radical economic reforms did not enjoy widespread support and did not result from negotiations with his political opponents.

Had Yeltsin enjoyed a preponderance of power over his political opponents, he might have been able to ignore his enemies' opinion about these decisions. But because the balance of power between those "for the revolution" and those "against the revolution" was relatively equal, Yeltsin's opponents recovered from their August 1991 setback and remobilized to challenge his reforms, and eventually his regime. Again tempted to achieve political objectives through military force, the two sides clashed once more in October 1993.

In the wake of the October 1993 events, many analysts mistakenly assumed that Yeltsin's preponderance of power would be permanent. Generous observers described the new political order as a super-presidential system; less charitable observers called it an electoral monarchy, an

authoritarian regime, or a dictatorship. These judgments proved premature. Elections helped to correct the balance of power, as Yeltsin's opponents won decisively in both the 1993 and 1995 elections. Yeltsin did win the 1996 presidential election, but that election was more a referendum on the revolution than a measure of his personal support in society. Soon thereafter, Yeltsin's poor health weakened his electoral mandate and gradually eroded his "authoritarian" grip on Russian politics. And as noted above, the August 1998 financial **[End Page 9]** crisis delivered the latest and most damaging blow to Yeltsin's political power.

Although equal balances of power had previously encouraged conflict, this new balance of power appears to have fostered mutual agreement on a peaceful and democratic process for resolving conflicts. No actor or group of actors in Russia today believes that it can take power by nondemocratic means. Yeltsin certainly cannot. With his approval rating in single digits, his army in shambles, and his private military forces no longer commanded by people loyal to himself, he can no longer threaten to stay in power beyond his elected term. Since becoming prime minister, Yevgeny Primakov has appointed former KGB officials to key offices within the state and the media, and suggested to regional governors that they might prefer to be reappointed by the central government rather than risk the uncertainties of new elections. Some have cited these moves as evidence that Primakov is making preparations to stay in power by any means necessary. To date, however, these warnings seem premature, as Primakov and his supporters still lack the capacity to postpone or falsify elections even if they did want to subvert the electoral process.

At the same time, Yeltsin's opponents do not appear powerful enough to assume power through nondemocratic means. The military, a traditional threat to weak democracies during times of economic crisis in other countries, has shown no proclivity to intervene in politics.⁶ Potential successors to Yeltsin, such as Moscow mayor Yuri Luzhkov and Krasnoyarsk governor Aleksandr Lebed, project authoritarian personalities and have made antidemocratic statements, leading some to fear that Russia's next elected president may be its last. In practice, however, neither Luzhkov nor Lebed has lived up to his authoritarian reputation.

Luzhkov, Lebed, the communists, and even those affiliated with the current government--the so-called party of power--continue to play by the rules of the game, not just from a sense of weakness, but also in the belief that the current rules serve their immediate political purposes. These divergent political actors all believe that they have some chance to win the next election, and that their odds of winning through the ballot box are better than their odds of taking power by force. Despite any objections they may have to the institutional configuration imposed by Yeltsin in 1993, all now realize that the costs of overturning Russia's current imperfect democracy through nondemocratic means would be much greater than the costs of participating in an imperfect democracy.

Institutional Legacies of the Transition

The consolidation of liberal democratic institutions and liberal democratic values has been impeded by several factors that are the **[End Page 10]** legacy of Russia's protracted and conflict-ridden transition from communist rule: superpresidentialism, an underdeveloped party system, a disengaged civil society, the lack of an independent judiciary, and declining popular support for democracy.

Superpresidentialism. Concentrated power in the hands of the president is not primarily the result of some sort of Russian cultural or historical proclivity for authoritarianism or strong individual leaders. The office of the presidency and its "super powers" emerged directly from the transition process. After defeating his enemies by force in October 1993, Yeltsin did not need to negotiate or compromise over the new constitutional draft creating a superpresidential system. Some consideration was given to insuring that the new constitution would be supported by a majority of Russian citizens. For instance, Yeltsin believed that the election had to take place sooner rather than later so that the period of transitional dictatorial rule was limited. On the whole, however, the constitutional design reflected what Yeltsin and his allies thought would be most beneficial to

themselves at the time.

The popular ratification of this new constitution helped to lock the strong presidency into place. After an initial period of hesitation, all political actors, including those whom Yeltsin had vanquished in the fall of 1993, acquiesced to this new institutional order and began to play within these new rules of the game. During the next presidential election in 1996, all major political groups, including those that had resisted the idea of creating a presidency in earlier periods, ran candidates for the chief executive office.

Since Yeltsin's reelection, a new coalition in favor of a weaker presidency has begun to take shape within Russian political circles. With the exception of Vladimir Zhirinovsky's Liberal Democratic Party, all parliamentary factions have supported constitutional amendments aimed at giving the Duma greater control over the government. After the 1996 presidential election, many of Russia's most prominent business leaders also began to advocate a stronger parliament, fearing that the next president might use his power to undo the major privatizations undertaken during the Yeltsin era. Even some of Yeltsin's own advisors have advocated a weakening of the presidential office, because they are both increasingly troubled by Yeltsin's declining leadership abilities and fearful of who his successor might be.⁷

Despite this new coalition, the presidential office is unlikely to disappear anytime soon. The constitutional amendment process is extremely cumbersome. More importantly, several individuals and their backers have already begun to make investments in their presidential campaigns for the 2000 election. Whichever of these hopefuls wins, it is unlikely that he will sacrifice the political and [End Page 11] economic investments made to obtain the office for the sake of parliamentary democracy.

An Underdeveloped Party System. Russia's poorly developed party system can also be attributed in part to the country's difficult transition. Parties often assume center stage in transitions at the point of first or founding elections.⁸ Had Yeltsin held elections soon after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia's nascent political parties might have been able to step in to provide voters with programmatic choices. Yeltsin, however, decided not to do so, leaving the new political parties to wallow aimlessly for the next two years with no clear political role. By the time of the next election in 1993, most of the parties created during the heyday of democratic mobilization in 1990-91 had disappeared. Liberal parties were especially hurt by the postponement of new elections, as many voters associated the painful economic decline from 1991 to 1993 with their policies.

Since 1993, some consolidation of Russia's party system has occurred. The proportional-representation component of Russia's mixed electoral system has helped to stimulate new party formation.⁹ Important advocates of liberal democracy such as Yabloko, the political party headed by Grigory Yavlinsky, would not exist without these national elections held according to proportional representation. The only reformist party not connected to the government that won proportional-representation seats in both 1993 and 1995, Yabloko is at least a proto-party, complete with a parliamentary faction, grassroots regional organizations, and democratic internal procedures. At the same time, however, its small parliamentary faction and inability to penetrate government bodies outside of Moscow are likely to relegate Yabloko to a marginal role in Russian politics for the near future.

Unfortunately, Yabloko is the only bright spot on the liberal side in terms of party formation and consolidation. Parties associated with the Yeltsin government (Russia's Choice in 1993 or Our Home Is Russia in 1995) have not managed to establish a permanent electoral base. A reconfiguration of Russia's liberal forces is currently underway under the leadership of Yegor Gaidar, Anatoly Chubais, Boris Nemtsov, and Boris Fedorov, but it remains to be seen whether this coalition can survive the next parliamentary elections.

These liberals will no longer be associated with the "party of power." Moscow mayor Yuri Luzhkov has become the new focal point for those interested in forming the next party of power. Luzhkov's organizations (there are more than one) bear only a partial resemblance to political parties; they are

more like campaign vehicles, devoid of any ideological identification, that will quickly disintegrate after the next electoral cycle is over. General Aleksandr Lebed also has cobbled together a new political party, which has the potential to steal away parts of the protest **[End Page 12]** vote from Vladimir Zhirinovskiy's Liberal Democratic Party (LDPR). Lebed's organization, even more than the LDPR, has no autonomous identity and would quickly disappear if Lebed quit the party.

The main opposition to Yeltsin, the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (KPRF), is better organized. The KPRF remains the largest national party, with a well-articulated social base that will outlive its current leaders. Its "success" in party organization, however, is really a legacy of the Communist period, as the KPRF simply inherited its Soviet predecessor's membership and organizational structure. To date, the party has not demonstrated an ability to reach beyond this inheritance; in 1996, the average age of party members was 57.

The KPRF also faces internal challenges. Despite being the Duma's largest faction, it has not demonstrated a proclivity for legislating on behalf of its constituents. Since 1996, the KPRF has increasingly cooperated with the government, signaling a real rapprochement between old and new political elites, both of which have their origins in the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Yevgeny Primakov's selection as prime minister has further solidified the KPRF's identity as a ruling party; the communists supported Primakov's nomination and have succeeded in securing several posts within his government. Radicals within the KPRF have opposed this level of cooperation with Yeltsin's regime. A split between radicals and moderates within the party might be in the offing before the next round of elections, raising questions about the KPRF's long-term viability.

Whether the KPRF's survival would be good or bad for democratic consolidation is also unclear. The KPRF's acquiescence to the new rules of the game may be the single most important factor explaining the relative stability and staying power of Russia's electoral democracy. The KPRF's electoral success has helped to coopt it into the electoral process, as Zyuganov and other party leaders now believe that they can come to power through the ballot box.¹⁰ Especially after the ascension of Primakov to the premiership, the KPRF has assumed greater responsibility for national policy, enmeshing the party in the current system. Calls for revolution, a familiar battle cry within the party only a few years ago, now occur infrequently and are never voiced by the party's top leadership.

Yet if KPRF behavior has been mostly democratic, KPRF rhetoric still rings of illiberal values. In recent months, several KPRF leaders have made militantly antisemitic speeches, blaming Jews for all of Russia's woes. When called upon to rein in these bigots, Zyuganov instead defended them in the following words: "Our people are not blind. They cannot fail to see that the spread of Zionism in the state government in Russia is one of the reasons for the current catastrophic condition of the country, its mass impoverishment, and the process of extinction of its people."¹¹ **[End Page 13]**

Finally, it is important to remember that all these parties have little influence outside of Moscow. In some major metropolitan areas, such as St. Petersburg and Ekaterinburg, multiparty systems are beginning to take root. In most regions, however, the only real party is the party of power. Few regional leaders have open party affiliations. Several newly elected governors, including such prominent partisans as Aleksandr Rutskoi, renounced their party credentials after winning election. Most regional legislatures are dominated by local parties of power with no ideological affiliation and strong ties to local leaders.¹²

Civil Society, the Judiciary, and Public Opinion

A Disengaged Civil Society. The void left by Russia's weak parties has not been filled by other mass-based groups. In all transitions to democracy, and especially those combined with transitions to a market economy, civic groups inevitably undergo a degree of demobilization after the collapse of the *ancien régime*. This pattern has held true in Russia, as many Soviet-era organizations like Democratic Russia and Memorial achieved their aims when Soviet communism collapsed. Several additional factors unique to Russia's path of transition, especially the sustained economic

depression, have further impeded the development of civil society. New civic groups and trade unions have only begun to define their interests and to identify their supporters as they make the transition to a market economy. And they are making this transition with virtually no economic resources. The "middle class"--which finances most civic groups in the West--is emerging very slowly in Russia, and it suffered a major blow from the August 1998 financial meltdown. New labor organizations are also strapped for cash. Foreign funding has served as a band-aid solution in the interim, with all the usual negative consequences this entails.

Growing executive power at all levels of the Russian state constitutes a final negative influence on civil-society development. Mass-based civic groups are better at working with parliaments than with executives.¹³ Several regional leaders have created "social chambers," allegedly as a way to compensate for weak representative bodies and to bridge the gap between Russian civic groups and executive power. With few exceptions, however, these advisory councils merely camouflage the growing divide between the state and civil society while simultaneously undermining legislative bodies.

This alarming disengagement of society from the state does not mean that civil society has withered away entirely. Rather, the danger is that civic groups and organizations, however active in their own atomized sphere, will involve an increasingly small percentage of the population while becoming increasingly disconnected from the state as a whole, seeking instead to pursue narrow agendas in the private **[End Page 14]** sphere.¹⁴ Another danger is that a significant portion of Russia's nongovernmental organizations, far from promoting civil society, exhibit distinctly anticivic tendencies.¹⁵ The proliferation of nationalist and fascist organizations suggests that not all social capital is good for democratic consolidation.

A Weak Judiciary. The absence of an independent court system and weak adherence to the rule of law constitute another institutional barrier to the consolidation of liberal democracy in Russia. The idea of an independent court system and a supreme court as the ultimate arbitrator of legal disputes won widespread support at the highest levels during the initial phase of political liberalization. Mikhail Gorbachev often spoke of the need to create a state in which all citizens submitted to the authority of the law. Russia's democrats moved beyond rhetoric to create the Russian Constitutional Court in 1991.

The Constitutional Court quickly became a major political actor when it agreed to hear the case for holding the Communist Party accountable for crimes committed during the Soviet era. The verdict in this trial was mixed, allowing both sides to claim victory, but the precedent for an activist court was established. Later, however, the Court relinquished its authority as an arbitrator between president and parliament, when its head, Valery Zorkin, sided unequivocally with the rebellious parliament during the fall crisis in 1993. For a year thereafter, the Court ceased to function; it was reconvened only after Yeltsin had expanded the number of justices. Since then, the Court has made few important decisions.

Even when decisions of consequence have been made, they have meant very little. The executive branch cannot enforce its own decrees, let alone the decisions of the court. In addition, the jurisdictional boundaries between the Constitutional Court and the Supreme Court remain in dispute. This stalemate at the top has allowed lower courts, especially in the republics, to ignore federal decisions.

More generally, the lower courts have been slow to adjust to the new challenges of democracy and a market economy. Institutionalization of a legal system to protect property rights, govern bankruptcy procedures, enforce contracts, and ensure competition has just begun. The parliament's adoption of the Civil Code (hailed as Russia's "economic constitution") in 1995 constituted a first step toward creating these institutions, but only a first step.¹⁶ The "rule of law" also has become weaker regarding criminal and civil matters. The combination of a weak state and an incompetent, poorly financed judicial system has produced a sense of anarchy in Russia, a frightening situation to a population accustomed to a powerful authoritarian state. Popular cries for law and order, in turn, threaten to undermine individual liberties and human rights. **[End Page 15]**

Declining Public Support for Democracy. Russia's protracted and difficult transition has also undermined support for liberal democratic ideas and norms within society. In the early phase of the transition, polls indicated that public support for democratic ideas and liberal values did not differ substantially from attitudes in Eastern Europe.¹⁷ Over time, however, this support has waned. Surveys still indicate that most Russians believe in individual liberties, a free press, and a limited and divided government, but only if these principles are not identified with the word "democracy," which has come to have negative connotations. In one 1998 survey, 72 percent of Russian respondents expressed approval for the pre-Gorbachev regime while only 35 percent had any positive inclinations regarding the current regime.¹⁸ Such trends cannot be healthy for the development of liberal democracy.

Transitional factors rather than long-term cultural predispositions have caused this decline in support for democracy. Few regimes of any type can withstand a decade of economic decline. In Russia, this unprecedented drop in economic growth has occurred under a regime that calls itself a democracy. No wonder democracy has become a dirty word.

The regime's poor political performance is just as important in explaining the declining support for democracy.¹⁹ By calling themselves democrats but then acting undemocratically, Russia's postcommunist leaders, especially Boris Yeltsin, have done much to discredit democracy. For instance, Yeltsin's decision to dissolve parliament in 1993 dealt a real blow to democratic principles. His decision to invade Chechnya further undermined the legitimacy of his "democratic" regime, as it was taken without consulting the popular majority that opposed the war. Ironically, however, the electoral process helped to end the war, as Yeltsin's 1996 campaign team believed that Yeltsin had to end the war to be reelected. This direct causal relationship between popular votes and public policy, however, has been rare.

Can Russian Democracy Survive?

Russia is an electoral democracy. The path that has taken it to this stage of political development, however, has been littered with obstacles to the further consolidation of liberal democracy in Russia. This constitutes the greatest paradox of Russia's protracted and conflictual transition from communist rule. Neither the credit for creating an electoral democracy in Russia nor the blame for the failure to consolidate a liberal democracy can be attributed to one man or set of decisions.

Given the vast agenda of change that Soviet and Russian leaders faced in navigating the transition from communist rule, it may have been overly optimistic to expect that a liberal democracy would be installed in Russia only a decade after political liberalization began. The triple challenge of dismantling an empire, transforming a command system [End Page 16] into a market economy, and building a democratic polity on the ruins of a communist dictatorship would have overwhelmed even the American founding fathers. Yeltsin and his allies made several critical mistakes, but they made them under extremely difficult circumstances. Compared to what could have happened, the transition from communism has been relatively peaceful. Especially when compared to other great social revolutions of the modern era, the very fact that electoral democracy has managed to survive this triple transition is remarkable.

Russian leaders might have been able to manage even this wide array of changes had they all agreed on a common strategy of action. But they did not agree. This absence of consensus is the central cause of Russia's troubled transition. Had most major political actors in Russia agreed with Yeltsin's general strategy of dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russian federal unity, market reform, and presidential democracy, the conflict, with all its detrimental consequences for liberal democracy, would not have occurred. Similarly, if most had agreed with Gennady Zyuganov's plans, the conflict would not have occurred. Russia's protracted and conflictual transition resulted from the strategic interaction of these two political forces and was not simply the result of one side or the other. It takes two to tango, but it also takes two to fight.

Can Russia become a liberal democracy? The explanation for Russia's democratic imperfections outlined here suggests that there is hope for positive change in the future. If individual actors made decisions in Russia's recent past that produced illiberal institutions, then individual actors can make decisions that will generate liberalizing reforms in the future. It is harder, of course, to reform existing institutions than to maintain them. The power of inertia, however, also has an upside for Russian democracy; the current electoral democracy in place possesses the same staying power as the illiberal features noted above.

Russian democracy will not be able to survive if the economy continues to deteriorate for a sustained period of time. Russia needs a quick economic turnaround that will create more propitious conditions for the consolidation of liberal democracy in the future. Ironically, however, the most surprising outcome of Russia's recent financial meltdown has been the demonstration of democracy's resilience, not its weakness. Declarations of the demise of Russian democracy are premature.

[*Michael McFaul*](#) is a senior associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and an assistant professor of political science at Stanford University. His latest book is *Russia's 1996 Presidential Election: The End of Polarized Politics* (1997).

Notes

1. Larry Diamond, *Developing Democracy: Toward Consolidation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, forthcoming in 1999).
2. On the distinction, see Diamond, *Developing Democracy*.
3. Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan eds., *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America, and Post-Communist Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 3.
4. For the full list of opportunities lost, see Michael McFaul, "Russia's Rough Ride," in Larry Diamond, Marc F. Plattner, Yunhan Chu, and Hung-mao Tien, eds., *Consolidating the Third Wave Democracies: Regional Challenges* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 64-94.
5. Some radical groups, such as Working Russia, still reject the market altogether, but this organization is only a minor political force in Russia today.
6. See Zoltan Barany, "Controlling the Military: A Partial Success" on pp.54-67 of this issue.
7. Author's interview with Presidential Advisor Emil Pain, May 1998.
8. Guillermo O'Donnell, Philippe C. Schmitter, and Laurence Whitehead, eds., *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Comparative Perspectives* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 57.
9. On the relationship between proportional representation and multiparty systems, see Matthew Soberg Shugart and John M. Carey, *Presidents and Assemblies: Constitutional Design and Electoral Dynamics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); and Giovanni Sartori, *Comparative Constitutional Engineering: An Inquiry Into Structures, Incentives, and Outcomes* (New York: New York University Press, 1994). On Duma factions, see Thomas Remington and Steven Smith, "The Development of Parliamentary Parties in Russia," *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 20 (November 1995): 457-89.
10. Zyuganov, speech delivered on 7 August 1996, reprinted in Gennady Zyuganov, *My Russia: The*

Political Autobiography of Gennady Zyuganov (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 1997), 185.

[11.](#) Zyuganov, quoted in "Kremlin: Communists consistently promote anti-Semitism," *Bozeman Daily Chronicle*, 27 December 1998.

[12.](#) Darrell Slider, "Elections to Russia's Regional Assemblies," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 12 (July-September 1996): 243-64.

[13.](#) Arend Lijphart, "Presidentialism and Majoritarian Democracy: Theoretical Observations," in Juan J. Linz and Arturo Valenzuela, eds., *The Failure of Presidential Democracy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), 91-105.

[14.](#) On decreasing levels of participation in political and civic activities as a whole, see *Politicheskii protsess v Rossii v 1994 g: sotsial'nyi kontekst i problemy politicheskogo uchastiya*, (Moscow: Russian Independent Institute for Social and National Problems, 1995).

[15.](#) See Andrei Ryabov, "Political Extremism on the Rise in Russia," *Vek* (Moscow), No. 35, September 1997. This translation appeared on Johnson's Russia List.

[16.](#) Karen Halverson, "Resolving Economic Disputes in Russia's Market Economy," *Michigan Journal of International Law* 18 (Fall 1996): 59-113.

[17.](#) See especially Boris Kapustin and Igor Klyamkin, "Liberal'nye tsennosti v soznanii rossiyan," *Polis* (Moscow) (March-April 1994): 39-75.

[18.](#) Richard Rose and Doh Chull Shin, "Qualities of Incomplete Democracies: Russia, the Czech Republic and Korea Compared," *Studies in Public Policy* 302 (Glasgow: Centre for the Study of Public Policy, 1998): 21.

[19.](#) See Diamond, *Developing Democracy*.

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