

The 2018 Russian Presidential Election: “No-Mistakes” Strategy towards Authoritarianism

Introduction

I remember how on November 9, 2017 I woke up in disbelief that Donald Trump was elected president in USA. “The Americans will feel pain for this mistake”, I thought. Now I know: at least Americans are allowed to make mistakes. Russians, on the other hand, are not. I will not wake up on March 19 wondering who the next president of Russia is. Not because Russian electorate is predictable, not because there is political stability in the country. Because Russians simply do not get to choose whether they can or cannot make mistakes. An overpowering control of the Russian authority with political elite on the top has made an impressive effort to ensure that there is not a single chance for the 2018 elections to have an unexpected (or should I say *unplanned*) outcome. I’ve struggled for a long time to acknowledge that current political regime in Russia is authoritarian. However, the striking thought that Russian society is not given a choice of making mistakes resolved this dilemma in favour of authoritarianism.

The purpose of this article is to reflect on political state of Russia as an authoritarian regime in the light of the 2018 elections. I will first briefly analyze the country’s position on international arena to demonstrate the discrepancies in the image of Russia pictured by the authorities and the way its strategy seen in the world. Then I will move on to analysis of the 2018 elections through providing a brief prehistory, in particular, the constitution amendment of 2008 and new interpretation of the provisions in regard to number of terms an individual can serve as the president. Next, I will demonstrate why the Russian electorate does not have a choice in the current elections through analyzing the candidates and pre-election race. In conclusion, I will summarize my arguments and reflect on why the right to make mistakes is the crucial factor in identifying whether Russia is a democratic or authoritarian regime.

Russian *Fear Means Respect* Approach to International Affairs

Modern Russia is a unique phenomenon. It is feared by international community for its aggressive politics and radical approach to international relations;¹ it is respected for being a valuable

¹ A number of events support this, such as the annexation of Crimea, conflict with Ukraine and earlier conflict with Georgia. For more information, see: Nisbet. E. C., Stoycheff, E. Why Russians Support Putin’s Foreign Policy.

economic and energy partner;² it is being laughed at for its hypocrisy and continuous denial of allegations of obvious violations of international standards, rights and obligations.³ There is a saying in Russia: *fear means respect*. While this may reflect a certain degree of realism that is deeply embedded in Russian political culture,⁴ today it seems to have become one of Russian authorities' favorite explanations of political, economic and social hostility of the rest of the world towards Russia. Instead of looking for the causes of problems within internal political structure, the government continues to blame the world for promotion of hate and false image of Russia as undemocratic state.⁵ Yet the very nature of the 2018 elections shows that indeed Russia is under authoritarian rule.

On the Road towards Authoritarianism

We should first go back to 2008, when Dmitry Medvedev was elected as the President of the Russian Federation for brief 4 years. On November 5, 2008, he proposed to make changes to the Constitution by extending the presidency term from 4 to 6 years. This proposal received impressive 86% of approval of the government.⁶ Needless to say, Mr. Putin as the recently appointed Head of the Government was also in favour of this amendment.⁷ The speed of the amendment (it only took 3 months from proposal to publication of an updated Constitution) as well as majority approval by the government and excluding of the public from discussing the proposed change show that the Russian government is not interested in ensuring that the society participates in the political processes. It rather creates a patronage relationship with the citizens, sending the “we know better” message. Exclusion of the society from participating in making decision in regard to changes in

September 6, 2017. *The Conversation*. Available at <https://theconversation.com/why-russians-support-putins-foreign-policy-64353>. 2008 Georgia Russia Conflict Fast Facts. March 26, 2017. *CNN Library*. Available at <https://edition.cnn.com/2014/03/13/world/europe/2008-georgia-russia-conflict/>

² See *European Union, Trade in goods with Russia*, 2017 Report for specific figures on trade. Available at http://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/docs/2006/september/tradoc_113440.pdf.

³ You can watch the recent NBC interview of Megyn Kelly with Vladimir Putin to see how Mr. Putin continuously denies allegations of interference in USA elections by asking for more and more official papers and reports. Interview is available at <https://www.nbcnews.com/video/confronting-putin-part-1-1182081091616>.

⁴ Lynch, A. C. The Realism of Russia's Foreign Policy. 2007. *Europe-Asia Studies* 53, no. 1: 7-31.

⁵ Diligensky, G., Chugov, S. “The West” in Russian Mentality. 2000. *Office for Information and Press, Brussels. Institute of World Economy and International Relations, Moscow*. Available at <https://www.nato.int/acad/fellow/98-00/diliguenski.pdf>.

⁶ Госдума в первом чтении увеличила срок полномочий президента. November 14, 2008. *Lenta.ru*. Available at <https://lenta.ru/news/2008/11/14/increase/>.

⁷ Sefanov, M. December 22, 2008. Russian Presidential Term Extended to 6 Years. *CNN*. Available at <http://edition.cnn.com/2008/WORLD/europe/12/30/russia.presidential.term.extension/>.

the main document of the country shows that Russia has been under authoritarian regime for at least past 10 years.⁸

Nevertheless, the main frustration for the world community does not come from the decision to extend the term, but rather the new interpretation of Art. 81(3) of the Russian Constitution which says: “One and the same person may not be elected President of the Russian Federation for more than two terms *running*.” It is important to mention that this article represents a modified norm from the Constitution of the USSR,⁹ the regime of which was far from democratic. Therefore, a logical question arises: how can a state be called democratic if its modern constitution reflects the norms of the communist and authoritarian past? Can the judiciary in democracy interpret provision in a way which favours lack of change which is one of the main conditions for democratic state? One way to explain such decision can be found the Russian authorities’ twisted understanding of stability – the same person in power. Whether or not this is really beneficial for the nation does not really bother the government.

The 2018 President Elections: Independent Candidate, Other Nominees and Personality Cult

Moving on to the 2018 elections, the pre-election race was not as exciting as one could imagine. In between touring, giving speeches and debating, the candidates did not attract much attention of the public. Nevertheless, one particular process has gather attention of the public – non-party candidates’ gathering of sufficient number of signatures from the electorate to be eligible to register as an official President-candidate. Mr. Putin made an interesting strategic move and abandoned the United Russia party to run as an independent candidate.¹⁰ While some see this as a demonstration of the conflict between Mr. Putin and the party which he has been associated with since 2008, this decision must be seen as a way to attract attention of electorate and demonstrate that he exercises his right of the citizen of the Russian Federation under Art. 81 which states that any permanent citizen of the Russian Federation older than 35 can be elected President of the Russian Federation. While this does create a positive image, it also refers to the idea of the

⁸ If we assume from the moment the Russian government decided to approve the amendment of the Constitution.

⁹ Путин. Третий срок. Легитимность кандидата. Статья 81 Конституции. February 16, 2012. Available at <https://langohrigel.livejournal.com/20558.html>.

¹⁰ Putin says will run as independent candidate for new Kremlin term. December 14, 2017. *Reuters*. Available at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-putin-opposition/putin-says-will-run-as-independent-candidate-for-new-kremlin-term-idUSKBN1E812L>.

personality cult. There are already signs of this, which can be found in the USSR-like admiration of Putin, his images on trendy t-shirts, his portraits in the most visible locations in offices and administrative locations (think back to Lenin and Stalin portraits in every household, sounds familiar, doesn't it?). There is a fine line between being a popular politician and creating an idealized image of almost heroic protector and saviour of the Russian state and its people.¹¹ And the farther Mr. Putin goes, the more he appears to project the second image.

By creating an illusion that Mr. Putin is one and only person capable of ensuring that Russia is not being attacked by the rest of the world, the authority has made every possible effort to make sure that those who are going to participate in election, cast their voice for Putin. Among main benefits of supporting the current president in the elections is the positive comments from the President of the USA. When has Russian authority received a kind word from its forever frenemy, America? It would be unwise for Russian electorate to undermine seemingly warming relations between two powers by voting for anyone else. The government does not allow to even entertain the idea of any other person to represent Russia. Or would it be more accurate to say *rule* Russia?

Other running candidates are represented in such a light that they will never be given advantage over Vladimir Putin. While some, like Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, who has been nominated from Liberal Democrats in every election since 1996, and new Communist Party runner Pavel Grudinin, run the sake of running and to secure governmental funding, others are a clear set up from the authority to create an illusion of choice. Baburin, Suraikin, Titov and Yavlinskyi are there just to create an illusion of a variety of options. Finally, the only woman running, daughter of former boss of Mr. Putin and a famous personality, Ksenia Sobchak represents the opposition and tends to express most radical opinions such as stating that Crimea is indeed annexed illegally and initiative to support the LGBTQ community. Nevertheless, her nomination is clearly a political and strategic move which, first, demonstrates that women in Russia are no stranger to politics and, second, opposition participates in Russian politics on an official level despite the authorities' strong

¹¹ Cohen, Yves. "The cult of number one in an age of leaders." *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 8#3 (2007): 597-634.

disapproval of actions led by Navalniy and other oppositionists.¹² Despite Sobchak's active participation in the run, the authority continues to depict the opposition as the evil and an unacceptable phenomenon for Russia, undermining the democratic notion that all political opinions have legitimate right to be represented on equal footing.

Conclusion

An active but hidden pressure of independent political thinking in Russian society through exercising the patronage over its decisions shows that there is increasing lack of political freedoms in Russia. The amendment to the Russian Constitution to favour the interests of the political elite that the government shamelessly implemented within surprisingly short period of time further confirm that the authority does not want to let go of its power and aims to remain in control for a very long time. Hidden propaganda strategies such as Mr. Putin's decision to run as an independent candidate shows the aim of creation of the personality cult to strengthen the control over Russian society. Russian society remains left outside the decision-making process and is provided with explanation that the political elite knows and will continue with "no-mistakes" strategy. All these elements combined create an exemplary case of authoritarian regime. In the end, human beings have always learned from their own mistakes. How can Russian people even know what is a mistake and what is not when they are not allowed to make them?

¹² See: Восемь кандидатов в президенты России. Кто эти люди – коротко. February 6, 2018. *BBC Русская Служба*. Available at <http://www.bbc.com/russian/features-42964894>. Russia Elections: Five Things to Know about Presidential Vote. March 16, 2018. *BBC News*. Available at <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-43316092>.

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