

# Thoughts regarding Russia's place in the regime typology \*

Ovidiana Bulumac

## Prolegomena

In social sciences, in order to somehow clarify the typologies of political regimes and to minimize the quantity and value of the exceptions from the rule that could weaken theoretical approaches, a new concept emerged: *hybrid regimes*<sup>1</sup>. A review of the literature can easily demonstrate the increasing grey area of identified regimes between the „clearly democratic” ones and the „conventionally authoritarian” regimes<sup>2</sup>.

The present essay is built upon a central issue: is Russia a hybrid regime, an authoritarian one or a transitional one? In the following pages, I intend to answer the posed question with the help of some elements that can be extracted through the operationalisation of working definitions, adding also illustrations from the media (extracted through a secondary analysis method).



Figure 1 Source: The Economist

## Concepts and definitions

Considering the general trajectory of theoretically outlining the authoritarian and democratic regimes, one can conclude by oversimplification that, in fact, they are constructed through an opposition-mirroring process: the first category is characterized by the existence and exercise of political freedoms, while the latter by their absence and non-implementation of mechanisms that could lead to them. Such a narrow perspective (and the low chances that a theoretically constructed ideal-type could have an exact referral in reality<sup>3</sup>) was somehow enriched by introducing a new concept within the political analysis discourse: *the hybrid regimes*.

The hybrid regime is the outcome of the end of the Cold War in non-Western areas, in terms of past or ongoing political regimes. By definition, it is a middle point, however not too clearly set,

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<sup>1</sup> Matthijs Bogaards (2009): *How to classify hybrid regimes? Defective democracy and electoral authoritarianism*, **Democratization**, 16:2, 399-423.

<sup>2</sup> Larry Diamond (2002): *Thinking About Hybrid Regimes*. **Journal of Democracy**, 13:2, 25

<sup>3</sup> The methodology of ideal-types belongs to max Weber, the well known German thinker that revolutionized the area of social sciences in the beginning of the 20th century.

between a liberal democracy and a dictatorship<sup>4</sup>, having traits from both regimes mixed up in a unique combination for each state in discussion, and showing a distinct dynamic<sup>5</sup> in the modern world system.

In the social sciences literature, Russia was embedded within the hybrid regimes category, more precisely being labelled as „electoral patronal system”<sup>6</sup>. In this case, „the formal mechanism for gaining, maintaining, and retaining the most powerful posts in the country is regular elections”, followed by the admittance of opposition parties and the function of „complex networks of patron–client relations” through which the power is exercised<sup>7</sup>. The entire mechanism is known under the name of „machine politics”, a concept quite different in form as well as in substance from the Russian one, of „administrative resource”<sup>8</sup>. Moreover, such a mechanism of power and money flow control<sup>9</sup> was assured by what Olga Kryshatanovskaya, a sociologist at the Russian Academy of Sciences, concluded in a research: „a quarter of the country's senior bureaucrats are *siloviki* ... which includes members of the armed forces and other security services, not just the FSB. The proportion rises to three-quarters if people simply affiliated to the security services are included. These people represent a psychologically homogeneous group, loyal to roots that go back to the Bolsheviks' first political police, the Cheka”<sup>10</sup>.

Keeping in mind such a combination of elements from two distinguishable ideal-type political regimes, the difference between a hybrid regime and a transition state becomes obvious: the latter is, actually, an outcome that is constantly found under the state of actualization by following the straight line (from democracy to autocratic regimes or backwards). In the last 10 years, Russia was considered to be an example of „what must not be done” in terms of democratization. One of the voices that stated this was Freedom House which, by measuring 7 criteria<sup>11</sup>, identified 2001 as the starting point of de-democratization of Russia. Four years later (in 2005), the same NGO reclassified Russia as a „not free” type of political regime, as a consequence of the presidential second mandate

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<sup>4</sup> Michael McFaul (2002): *The Fourth Wave of Democracy and Dictatorship: Noncooperative Transitions in the Postcommunist World*, **World Politics**, 54:2, 212–44.

<sup>5</sup> Henry E. Hale (2010): *Eurasian politics as hybrid regimes: The case of Putin's Russia*, **Journal of Eurasian Studies**, 1, 33–41.

<sup>6</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>7</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>8</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>9</sup> „By many indicators, today's security bosses enjoy a combination of power and money without precedent in Russia's history” - *Russia under Putin. The making of a neo-KGB state*, **The Economist**, 23<sup>rd</sup> August 2007.

<sup>10</sup> *Russia under Putin. The making of a neo-KGB state*, **The Economist**, 23<sup>rd</sup> August 2007.

<sup>11</sup> Electoral process, civil society, mass-media independence, state of democratic governance, local democratic governance, independence of the judicial system and corruption.

of Putin, a decision highly criticized by the Russian part. In this sense, 2008 and 2009<sup>12</sup> were the most critical years recorded. Moreover, for the year 2012, the projections are presented as unaltered<sup>13</sup>.

The fallback in Russia's case is considered to be the consequence of the changes induced by the Putin administration, a manner of governance that raised concerns regarding the future of the ex-Soviet leading power that is currently leaning towards a full-scale autocracy<sup>14</sup>. This is the point in which one can question the correctness of the hybrid regime label applied to Russia. The difference between hybrid regimes and transition ones is, from a logical perspective, quite simple: a state found in transition is characterized by the political will to change the forms of power and to legitimize them (in case of democratization tendencies) or to simply dominate them (in case of authoritarian tendencies), actions set in reference to an ideal-type of regime (democracy/dictatorship). In other words, the difference between the two categories is in fact between 1) a final but static product of different elements combined from the two types of regimes, and 2) a dynamic outcome that constantly changes and adapts itself in order to achieve a final destination (democracy or dictatorship), no matter the short-term or medium-term timeframes calculated (due to the dominant and constant actor in power).

The principle of plurality in the political sphere is one of the most important traits of a democracy. From this perspective, a discussion can be made regarding the United Russia party (Edinaia Rossiia), founded in 2001 through a merger between the Unity and Fatherland-All Russia parties, a political structure currently presided by Vladimir Putin, which offers its full support to president Medvedev. Kremlin argues that Russia is actually a „sovereign democracy“ (a view highly criticized in the West<sup>15</sup>), defending the United Russia party by presenting it as a modern party system. However, the United Russia is, in fact, proven to be a „party of power“ that generated the politics run by dominant actors<sup>16</sup>. In short, a structure that can easily be considered as part of the „hegemonic party systems“<sup>17</sup>. From this perspective, the idea of a real and functional political opposition seems impracticable<sup>18</sup> in Russia.

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<sup>12</sup> See Freedom House (2009) *Nations in Transit*.

<sup>13</sup> See Freedom House (2009) *Nations in Transit*; *Freedom in the World (2010): Tables and Graphs*; *Freedom in the World (2012)*.

<sup>14</sup> See Larry Diamond (2002): *Thinking About Hybrid Regimes*. **Journal of Democracy**, 13:2, 21–34; Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way (2002): *The Rise of Competitive Authoritarianism*, **Journal of Democracy**, 13:2, 51-65; Graeme Gill (2006): *A New Turn to Authoritarian Rule in Russia?*, **Democratization**, 13:1, 58-77.

<sup>15</sup> See Richard Sakwa (2008): *New Cold War or Twenty Years' Crisis? Russia and International politics*, **International Affairs**, 84:2, 241-67.

<sup>16</sup> „All important decisions in Russia ... are now taken by a tiny group of men who served alongside Mr Putin in the KGB and who come from his home town of St Petersburg. In the next few months this coterie may well decide the outcome of next year's presidential election“ - *Russia under Putin. The making of a neo-KGB state*, **The Economist**, 23<sup>rd</sup> August 2007.

<sup>17</sup> Kenneth Wilson (2006): *Party-System Development under Putin*, **Post-Soviet Affairs**, 22:4, 314-48

<sup>18</sup> Vladimir Gel'man (2005): *Political Opposition in Russia: A dying Species?*, **Post-Soviet Affairs**, 21:3, 226-46.

This argument leads to a situation which McMann<sup>19</sup> explores in her book, the one that the willingness of citizens to involve in activities of a civil nature enables state institutions to function in a democratic manner. However, in Russia, such actions were, until the end of 2011, virtually non-existent in the public sphere. However, the recent elections in December last year led to a surprising drop in vote results from 64% to under 50%, giving it only a slim majority<sup>20</sup> in a context in which voices which claimed actions that led to major fraud<sup>21</sup>. In this context, even former leader Gorbaciov went public and asked for new parliamentary elections<sup>22</sup>.

However, strong street demonstrations („Facebook revolution“) were and still are emerging, with tens of thousands of persons involved, registering the biggest protest recorded after the fall of the USSR<sup>23</sup>, creating a space in which citizens can have a voice and giving a glimpse of what the start of a democracy can look like in Russia. The street protests, unlike in the past years, have serious echoes in the West, the information being leaked outside the borders almost instantly (due to the technologic revolution) with not so much difficulty as in the past experiences (a new trait of a regime that transits away from autocratic political structures which are known to ban the information and suppress the movements<sup>24</sup>).

## Short conclusions

Even though Russia was labelled by theoreticians in political science as a hybrid regime, events from the past 10 years showed that the country was furthering away not only from democracy (which is clearly light-years away) but even from the new political category of hybrid, towards authoritarianism. The evident autocratic tendency is somehow arguing that Russia, in fact, could be a transition state from hybrid towards an authoritarian regime. However, recent mass street demonstrations tend to shake once again the trajectory of the Russian state, by starting to re-emerge the voice of the citizens. And this civil awakening can, in fact, prove that there is still hope for Russia's future, a democratization process.

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<sup>19</sup> Kelly McMann (2006): *Economic Autonomy and Democracy: Hybrid Regimes in Russia and Kyrgyzstan*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>20</sup> *Russia's Future. The cracks appear*, **The Economist**, 10<sup>th</sup> December 2011

<sup>21</sup> *Cries of election fraud continue in Russia for third night*, **First Post**, 8<sup>th</sup> December 2011 available at <http://www.firstpost.com/world/cries-of-election-fraud-continue-in-russia-for-third-night-150467.html> (February 2012); *List Of Estimates On Fraud In Russia's 2011 Duma Elections*, 27<sup>th</sup> December 2011, available at <http://www.sublimeoblivion.com/2011/12/27/fraud-estimates-russia-2011/> (February 2011).

<sup>22</sup> *Gorbachev calls for new Russian elections*, **CNN**, 7<sup>th</sup> December 2011, available at [http://articles.cnn.com/2011-12-07/world/world\\_europe\\_russia-protests\\_1\\_pro-government-supporters-demonstrators-protesters?s=PM:EUROPE](http://articles.cnn.com/2011-12-07/world/world_europe_russia-protests_1_pro-government-supporters-demonstrators-protesters?s=PM:EUROPE) (February 2011).

<sup>23</sup> *Russian election: Biggest protests since fall of USSR*, **BBC**, 10<sup>th</sup> December 2011, available at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-16122524> (February 2011).

<sup>24</sup> G. B. Robertson (2011): *The Politics of Protest in Hybrid Regimes. Managing Dissent in Post-Communist Russia*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011

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