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Regime typologies and the Russian political system

This essay aims to review and assess the typologies of political regimes, developed by scholars of democracy, and define the type of the current Russian political system.

Among numerous typologies of political regimes, the most prominent are those which divide all political systems into two basic types: *democratic* and *authoritarian*. These types differ along one major criterion: the presence or absence of elections (Aristotle). Over the last fifty years, the concepts of democracy have acquired new criteria, which allowed to capture more precisely specific features of different regimes. Currently, scholars identify three major typologies of political regimes: *electoral*, *liberal*, and *authoritarian*. Below we review each typology in an attempt to expose the features of the current Russian political regime.

Electoral Typology

Over 50 years ago, Joseph Schumpeter offered the definition of democracy, which has remained prominent until today in political science. According to his assertion, democracy is an “institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people’s vote”¹. This formulation, along with the basic understanding of democracy as a system of elections, became the foundation for contemporary narrow definition of democracy as *a system of governance, based on fair and contested elections*. Many top Western political scientists, including Samuel Huntington and Adam Przeworski, continue to use this definition in their assessments of democratic development. In particular, they consider the level of fairness and contestation in elections to determine the quality of a regime. These scholars argue against overloading the definition of democracy to avoid the difficulties of carrying out empirical research. The presence of contested struggle for votes, they assert, describes accurately enough major differences between democracies and authoritarian regimes.

In addition to two pure types of governance – democracy and authoritarianism, the advocates of electoral typology offer two additional types. Both types are transitional categories between democracy and dictatorship. They differ depending on the level of *fairness* and *contestation* in elections. (Table 1). In this context, fairness means the correspondence of election results to the preferences of the majority of the voters. Contestation implies the participation of alternative candidates running for public office.

Table 1. Electoral Typology of Political Regimes

	Contested Elections		
		YES	NO
Fair elections	YES	Electoral Democracy	Delegative Democracy
	NO	Pseudo democracy	Authoritarian Regimes

¹ Joseph A Schumpeter, . *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*., 3rd ed. 1962, New York: Harper Torchbooks p. 269

The first type – *pseudo democracy* – reflects political systems in which elections are formally contested, but the election results are flawed with irregularities. The party of power can rig the elections so that the results reflect not the preferences of the voters, but interests of the power holders. According to Juan Linz and Seimur Martin Lipset, pseudo democracies are no longer authoritarian regimes, but not yet electoral democracies. Linz argues that in these regimes “existence of formally democratic political institutions, such as multiparty electoral competition, masks (often in part to legitimate) the reality of authoritarian domination”². Linz further asserts that the political opposition within pseudo democracies never has a real chance of electoral victory, while the ruling party refuses to admit its electoral defeat. Pseudo democracies can even tolerate some democratic institutions, such as political parties and civil society. However, unfair political competition dramatically decreases the responsibility of politicians before the voters.

According to Giovanni Sartori, regimes with one party system qualify as pseudo democracies as well. A ruling party in these regimes totally monopolizes all political space and often resorts to force and control of mass media in reaching its political objectives. Dominating elites leave the opposition no chance for a real political competition. The examples of such regimes include Mexico (before 1988), Senegal and Singapore.

The second transitional type - *delegative democracy* - emerges when elections are fair (in terms of correspondence of results to voter preferences) but are not truly contested by alternative candidates. The concept of delegative democracy was first offered by the Argentinean political scientist Guillermo O'Donnell. He applied it to the analysis of Latin American countries, where underdeveloped social institutions were dominated by strong presidency. In such regimes, society *delegates* all political power to a single strong leader. His predominance renders ineffective all mechanisms of checks and balances. Institutions of legislative and executive power become passive observers of presidential actions. Delegative democracy often emerges in the face of grave economic crisis or during radical economic reforms. Voters choose the president based not on detailed agenda, but on an open promise to restore order and improve the welfare of the population. Gradually, such regimes might acquire authoritarian features or become dictatorial altogether. Classical examples of delegative democracies include Argentina, Brazil, Peru, Ecuador and the Philippines.

Which type of regime best suits contemporary Russian political system? In the very narrow definition of the term its political system definitely qualifies as electoral democracy. Elections in Russia are held regularly and are formally contested. However, the assessment of Russian political system within a broader framework of democracy requires answers to two crucial questions. These are: a) whether presidential and legislative elections are truly contested and b) whether election results are fair in reflecting real preferences of the majority of the voters.

Michael McFaul and Timothy Colton analyzed Russian elections of 1999-2000 and characterized current Russian political system as “managed democracy”. This concept is similar to the definition of delegative democracy. Results of recent Russian legislative and presidential elections accurately reflected the preferences of the voters, but opposition candidates experienced hard pressures from the state and the party of power during the election campaign. Thus, these elections were fair in form but not truly contested in substance.

McFaul further argues that strengthening of federal power during Putin's administration had a negative effect on the development of the party system and civil society. The state dominates in its relations with the people. As a result political activity of the population decreases and the state begins to use its power in order to manipulate voter preferences. It does so within formal constitutional space and definition of electoral democracy.

Should the state in Russia continue to manipulate election process during the next round of elections, this will indicate transformation of the regime from delegative democracy into

² Juan Linz “Democracy Today: An Agenda for Students of Democracy. Scandinavian Political Studies, 1997 20,2.

pseudo democracy. If elections turn out to be both unfair and uncontested, then Russian political regime might be explicitly classified as an autocracy.

Liberal typology.

The simplicity of electoral typology might be considered as a serious drawback since it allows to classify as democracies the regimes which are democratic in form but not in substance. This shortcoming of electoral definition became obvious during the third wave of democratization.³

It is during this time in the 1980's-1990's, when many countries in Latin American and, then, in Eastern Europe, began transition from authoritarian rule to democracy. All these regimes embraced elections and formed political parties. However, it soon became apparent that these "new democracies" could not be valued the same as developed democratic regimes. In new circumstances the electoral typology failed to draw the line between democratic and authoritarian regimes. In critique of electoral typology, American scholar Terry Karl asserted that "however central to democracy, elections occur intermittently and only allow citizens to choose between the highly aggregated alternatives offered by political parties, which can, especially in the early stages of a democratic transition, proliferate in a bewildering variety"⁴. According to Karl and other critics of electoralism, even fair and contested elections do not serve as sufficient guarantee of democracy. In the period between elections state apparatus might choose to dictate its will to the citizens. Even fair and contested elections might allow the winning majority to oppress the minority. This is especially pronounced in multi ethnic and multi cultural regimes.

Liberal typology of political regime emerged as a result of this underlying critique of electoral approach. Liberal typology broadened the concept of democracy by adding new evaluation criteria into its definition. The supporters of liberal typology desired to account not only for formal procedural features of holding regular election but also look inside the contextual components of political process.

The most well known definition of liberal democracy belongs to Robert Dahl. He introduced into the democratic vocabulary the concept of *polyarchy*. Dahl argued that true democracy (rule by the people) is actually impossible. He was more comfortable discussing rules but the many ("poly") as he believed that to be a more accurate way to describe modern, representative democracies.

Dahl also introduced two important dimensions of liberal democracy: *contestation* (organized political competition through regular, free, and fair elections) and *participation* (the right of virtually all adults to vote and contest for office).

Table 2. Liberal Typology (Robert Dahl).

	Participation		
		YES	NO
Contestation	YES	Polyarchy	Oligarchy
	NO	Populist authoritarianism	Autocracy

Organized political competition implies, first of all, that opposition has real chance to win elections. If opposition has no chances for coming to power, bare presence of opposition is not at

³ The first wave of democratization occurred after the end of World War I, when many countries acquired formal independence and chose democratic form of governance. The second wave took place after the end of Second World War and coincided with the process of decolonization.

⁴ Terry Karl "Imposing Consent? Electoralism versus Democratization in El Salvador. In *Elections and Democratization in Latin America, 1980-1985.*, Paul Drake and Eduardo Silva, eds., San Diego: Center for Iberian and Latin American Studies



all consequential for improving the quality of democracy. The criterion of organized competition further stipulates that chance for opposition to win emerges only when ruling party is prepared to acknowledge and support election results even if for them it means total defeat.

Participation means that citizens have inalienable rights and freedoms, which they actively exercise. People openly contest for office, use political parties and civil society to signal and defend their interests.

American political scientist Philippe Schmitter further broadened the competition criterion of liberal democracy. He introduced the concept of *accountability* of politicians before the citizens for the decisions that are made. According to Schmitter, liberal democracy is first and foremost “ the system of governance in which rulers are held accountable for their actions in the public realm by citizens, acting indirectly through the competition and cooperation of their elected representatives”⁵. Guillermo O’Donnell further deepened Schmitter’s approach and argued that accountability should extend not only in the vertical but also in the horizontal dimension. While vertical accountability presumes responsibility of politicians before the people, horizontal accountability calls for system of effective checks and balances among the branches of power. According to O’Donnell, only in this configuration the political system is able to provide for effective functioning of the state and uphold the rights of its citizens.

Some scholars offer criticisms of Dahl’s concept of polyarchy. Arendt Lijphart pointed out that to accept the definition of polyarchy means to agree that majority is always right. Lijphart studied ethnically rich regimes and introduced new concept of – *consociational democracy*. He discovered that the majority, whose powers are engraved in the institutions of liberal democracy, often oppresses the rights of cultural, ethnic and religious minorities. Lijphart did not reject Dahl’s principles altogether. Rather, he offered to replace the majority rule with *consensus* based mechanism of decision making. He argues that governing should be done by the will of coalition and not of the majority.

Common efforts in defining liberal democracy led to formulation of basic components of this regime type:

- Power belongs to people, who obtained it by means of legitimate, free and fair elections. (vertical accountability)
- Powers of the executive branch are limited within the Constitution by independent powers of legislation and the judiciary (horizontal accountability)
- Any political group, acting in accordance with the Constitution, has the right to form opposition party and come to power by way of elections (organized political competition)
- Ethnic, cultural and religious minority groups are not prohibited from expressing their interests in the political process or from speaking their language or practicing their culture. (consensus)
- Beyond parties and elections, citizens have multiple channels for expression and representation of their interests and values, including diverse, independent associations and movements, which they have the freedom to form and join. (civil society)
- There are alternative sources of information to which citizens have (politically) unfettered access (independence of mass media)
- Individuals also have substantial freedom of belief, opinion, discussion, speech, publication, assembly, demonstration, and petition (rights and freedoms)
- Citizens are politically equal under the law, even though they are invariably unequal in their political resources (legal equality)
- Individual and group liberties are effectively protected by an independent, nondiscriminatory judiciary; whose decisions are enforced and respected by other centers of power (fairness)

⁵ Philippe C. Schmitter and Terry Lyn Karl “ What Democracy is....and is not”, in Larry Diamond and Marc Plattner eds., *The Global Resurgence of Democracy*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996 p.50

- The rule of law protects citizens from unjustified detention, exile, terror, torture, and undue interference in their personal lives not only by the state but also by organized nonstate or antistate forces (legality).

These criteria are used by the international organization of Freedom House to evaluate democracy in all countries of the world. Freedom House measures political rights and civil liberties on a 7 point scale, where 1 stands for full freedom, and 7 for the total absence of freedom. Countries which receive the score of 2.5 and less are considered “free” (i.e. liberal democracies). Regimes with scores in the range from 3 and 5.5 are deemed “partially free”. States which receive the rating of 5.5 to 7 are viewed as “not free” (i.e. autocracies).

Liberal democracies, according to Freedom House evaluation, can be found among most regimes in Western Europe and North America. These countries obtain the best scores in the categories of political rights and civil liberties. However, these countries account for only a small minority among world nations. Only 61 regimes out of 202, which were analyzed by Freedom House, were considered liberal democracy in 2003.

While the character of political regime in contemporary Russia does not meet the criteria of liberal democracy, it also does not contain the features of full throttled authoritarian regime. Freedom House gives Russia the score of 5 for political rights and civil liberties. Hence, Russian political regime is half a point away from being considered “not free” or authoritarian.

First of all, Russia is not a liberal democracy because its political system does not use the consensus mechanism for decision making and hurts the rights of its cultural, religious and ethnic minorities. This, in turn, leads to conflicts which are resolved with violation of constitutional and liberal norms. Systems of vertical and horizontal accountability function ineffectively, giving the state the ability to manipulate the information and preferences of the people. Organized political competition is overseen and regulated from the Kremlin and exist to mask the appearance of democratic process for the international audience. Participation of population in the political process is decreasing: parties are getting weaker, voter turnout diminishes over time). The state is driven to imitate participation using pressures on voters in an attempt to maintain the legitimacy of power.

Typology of authoritarian regimes.

Typology of authoritarian regime was created to systematically account for a variety of non-democracies which exist in the world. In these systems, power does not result from free and fair elections. One prominent typology of authoritarian regimes was offered by Adam Przeworski. He divided all authoritarian systems according to 1) extent to which leaders mobilize the population in order to gain support and 2) formal division of powers among its different branches. First principle defines two types of authoritarian regimes: *mobilizing* and *exclusionary*. Second helps define *divided* and *monolithic* dictatorships.

Table 3. Typology of authoritarian regimes

	Relations between the state and population		
		Mobilizing	Exclusionary
Division of power	Monolithic	Totalitarian regime Autocracy	Military junta
	Divided	Populism	Nationalism (racism)

Mobilizing regimes seek to increase its strength by actively mobilizing the population through participation in various national level projects (nationalization, industrialization, war). One typical example of such regime is Soviet Union under Stalin and Khrushchev. These systems need regular supply of support from the masses. Therefore, they use the people to validate the



legitimacy of power. State might even resort to elections to reach its ultimate goal- survival and expansion.

Exclusionary regimes build their power using support of key narrow population segments, discriminating against all other citizens. Since they do not require massive popular support, they often reject election as a legitimating mechanism. Historically, such regimes relied on one ethnic group and oppressed the interest of all others. Classic example of exclusionary regime is Nazi Germany.

Divided regimes, in addition to authoritarian executive power(not elected) incorporate legislative branch, where members might be elected by the people and even exert some restrictions on the executive. Such regimes include most of the worlds constitutional monarchies (e.g. Russian Empire after 1906) and some contemporary nationalist regimes. (e.g. Rwanda)

Monolithic regimes emerge when there is one center of power, crystallized in the form of a single dictator. Most military juntas in Latin America and Africa fit this classification.

It is rather difficult to find clear forms of authoritarian regimes. Usually, one system includes various non-democratic features. In totalitarian regimes of China and DPRK power is concentrated in one place, but population is actively used to validate the legality of the state.

In military juntas (Chile, Argentina) power was accumulated by means of pure discrimination against sizable portions of the population. Populist regimes (Brazil, Venezuela, Ecuador, Belarus) might display formal separation of power and gain popular support by promising to them often unrealistic deliverables. Finally, Nazism, as dictatorial regime, is grounded in systematic discrimination based on racial or ethnic profile.

The quantity of authoritarian regimes is diminishing over time. Three waves of democratization which occurred in the 20-th century decreased their number to only 54(see attachment). Among others, countries in this category include Cuba, Turkmenistan, China, Sudan and North Korea.

Conclusion

The table below contains the list of criteria depicting the features of Russian political regime according to typologies reviewed in this essay. Evidence suggests that Russia can be best defined as a delegative democracy-a system where elected president obtains broad mandate from the population both constitutionally and through high approval rating) to carry out decisive policies without transgressing constitutional boundaries. History demonstrates that such regimes tend to become more authoritarian and degenerate into autocracy.

Table 4. Political Regime in Russia

Regime type	Russia	Why?
Electoral democracy	YES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Regular elections with alternative candidates and several political parties
Delegative democracy	YES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Popular president with broad constitutional powers Suppression of political contestation
Pseudo democracy	POSSIBLE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Facts of election fraud
Liberal democracy	NO	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Violations of political rights and civil liberties Weak accountability of authorities Frail civil society and party system
Consociational democracy	NO	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of consensus-based decision making No coalition government Violation of minority rights
Mobilizing authoritarian regime	NO	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Decreasing voter turnout Absence of state-sponsored mobilizing



		activity
Exclusionary authoritarian regime	NO	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• General franchise• Absence of wide-scale discrimination
Divided/Monolithic authoritarian regime	NO	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Constitutional separation of power• Multiparty system• General Elections

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