

Polity IV Country Report 2006: Russia

<table style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr> <td style="width: 15%;">Score:</td> <td style="width: 15%;">2005</td> <td style="width: 15%;">2006</td> <td style="width: 15%;">Change</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Polity:</td> <td>7</td> <td>7</td> <td>0</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Democ:</td> <td>7</td> <td>7</td> <td>0</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Autoc:</td> <td>0</td> <td>0</td> <td>0</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Durable:</td> <td></td> <td>5</td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td>Tentative:</td> <td></td> <td>No</td> <td></td> </tr> </table>	Score:	2005	2006	Change	Polity:	7	7	0	Democ:	7	7	0	Autoc:	0	0	0	Durable:		5		Tentative:		No		
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SCODE	RUS	CCODE	365	Date of Report	12 December 2007																				
Polity IV Component Variables																									
XRREG	XRCOMP	XROPEN	XCONST	PARREG	PARCOMP																				
3	3	4	5	2	4																				
Date of Most Recent Polity Transition (3 or more point change)																									
End Date		25 March 2000		Begin Date																					
				26 March 2000																					
Polity Fragmentation: No																									
Constitution	1993																								
Executive(s)	President: Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin; initially gained office as acting president in January 2000 following the resignation of President Boris Yeltsin; directly elected March 2000; reelected 14 March 2004, 71.2%																								
Legislature	Bicameral: State Duma (450 seats; proportionately elected; most recent elections, 2 December 2007) United Russia (ER): 315 Communist Party of the Russian Federation (KPRF): 57 Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR): 40 Fair Russia (SR): 38 Federation Council (178 seats; 2 representing each region)																								
Judiciary	Constitutional Court; Supreme Court																								

Narrative Description:

Executive Recruitment: Competitive Elections (8)

In March 2000, Russia accomplished its first peaceful and democratic transfer of executive power in the nation's history as President Vladimir Putin was elected in an 11-candidate race to succeed retiring Boris Yeltsin. Despite minor electoral irregularities and strong government influence over the media, independent observers judged the elections to be generally free and fair. The meteoric rise to power of Putin, from head of the Federal Security Services (successor to the KGB) to prime minister, to acting president, to elected president *in one year*, surprised virtually all analysts of Russian politics. According to experts and pollsters, Putin achieved a profound shift in Russian public opinion and, for the first time in a decade, amassed a significant support base from formerly split constituencies and disparate parties. Building on his success in conducting the second Chechen war while serving as prime minister and, then, acting president, Putin avoided a second round of balloting by capturing 52.9% of the popular vote in the first round. While the

economic oligarchs and regional political barons in Russia had also initially supported Putin as a defender of the Yeltsin-designed status quo, their support has subsequently vanished under the weight of Putin's political and economic reform efforts once in office. So long as the preservation of political and civil liberties do not conflict with his pursuit of the "more important" objectives of economic reform and state building, there is no reason to think that Putin will seek to eliminate Russia's fragile democratic institutions in the near future. However, his apparent indifference to democracy continues to be a source of concern for supporters of political liberalism in a land where democratic norms and institutions are still in their infancy.

Presidential elections were held on March 14, 2004, and resulted in an overwhelming victory for incumbent President Putin, who received nearly 72% of the popular vote. Seven candidates stood in the election with the runner-up (Communist Party) receiving less than 14% of the vote. Rules for the selection of candidates require that they either be nominated by a party represented in the Duma or collect 2 million signatures supporting their candidacy; two candidates were nominated by parties and the others submitted nomination petitions (the latter method was used by Putin). As the popularity of the Putin presidency was polled at about 79% prior to the election, the outcome was never in question. One would-be candidate was rejected by the Central Electoral Commission on a technicality and that decision was upheld by the Russian Supreme Court. Another candidate, Ivan Rybkin, defaulted under curious/suspicious circumstances and fled to the UK; Rybkin was not a strong challenger to Putin and his departure did not affect the outcome of the election. The only potential point of contention in the election process was the possibility that the turnout would not meet the 50% minimum threshold to validate the election. Supporters of the incumbent president actively encouraged voters to go to the polls, sometimes a bit over-zealously. Obviously unethical tactics were reported and these were corrected, such as the threatened denial of treatment by hospitals in Khabarovsk unless a patient filled out an absentee ballot. No oppositional parties or candidates were restricted in their activities or access, although the incumbent enjoyed considerable advantages of office. No problems reported in voting, counting, or reporting procedures.

President Putin is constitutionally prohibited from running for a third, consecutive, presidential term. On 10 December 2007, President Putin ended speculation by endorsing one of his hand-picked deputy prime ministers, Dmitry Medvedev, as candidate in presidential elections scheduled for March 2008. Medvedev immediately announced that, if elected, he intended to name Putin to the post of prime minister. Putin supporters control the legislature with over a three-quarters majority. The prime minister is head of government and is appointed by the president; that office is also first-in-line of executive succession should the president be incapacitated or resign from office. Although the Putin administration's preparations for the upcoming presidential elections do not directly violate the constitution, they do appear intent on circumventing mechanisms to ensure executive responsiveness and accountability through the voluntary transfer of executive authority.

Executive Constraints: Substantial Limitations (5)

The early post-Communist years in Russia were defined by a gridlock of governance. Throughout 1992 and 1993, the Communist-dominated Duma placed significant constraints on the reform efforts of President Yeltsin and his pro-market brethren. In September 1993, faced with Duma-backed legislation that would have significantly reduced the powers of the executive branch and derailed proposed economic reforms, President Yeltsin summarily dissolved the legislature. In response, the Duma voted to impeach Yeltsin and designated Vice President Rutskoi as Interim President. After a two-week military standoff between the executive and legislative branches of government (which claimed over 150 lives), Yeltsin regained control of the government and initiated a sweeping realignment of executive-legislative relations in Russia. The 1993 Constitution considerably strengthened the powers of the president and weakened those of the legislature.

Under the dictates of the 1993 Constitution, the president appoints the prime minister who, in turn, works with the president to select a cabinet (whose members do not require parliamentary confirmation). The president, moreover, can fire any member of the cabinet, including the prime minister, at will. While the president's selection of the prime minister must be approved by the Duma, the president can dissolve the legislature and call for new elections if this body rejects his/her nominee three times. In addition to the president's considerable cabinet authority, the Russian president has significant legislative powers. The president has a strong veto over normal legislation, which requires a two-thirds majority in both houses of the legislature to override. Moreover, the Constitution provides the president sweeping powers to issue decrees on any subject. Such decrees have no time limit and do not require parliamentary approval; they are

considered legally binding provided they do not contradict existing law. At least on paper, the 1993 Constitution established a “super-presidential” system with limited horizontal accountability.

Although President Yeltsin formally held executive power on par with that wielded by his predecessors in the former Soviet system, in practice, his powers were much more limited. Financial constraints, executive branch in-fighting and the fluid nature of political parties in Russia all worked to undermine the effectiveness of the executive branch in the 1990s. In order to overcome the objections of the Communist-led Duma to executive branch proposals for political and economic reform, President Yeltsin was forced to appeal to influential interest groups in Russian society: regional governors, economic oligarchs, and military and bureaucratic officials, for support and loyalty. In the process of establishing these informal political arrangements, Yeltsin effectively undermined the rule of law and, subsequently, devalued and weakened the power of the executive branch.

In the last few years the power of the executive branch has been reestablished as President Putin has sought to strengthen the Russian state, weaken the power of the economic oligarchs, and reassert presidential control over the Duma. With the significant gains of the pro-Kremlin Unity party in the 1999 legislative elections, the parliament has become more compliant to executive branch initiatives. Legislative elections in 2003 brought a significant majority for the personalist, pro-Putin, party United Russia. The Communist Party now controls only fifty-five seats. Putin has further weakened the Communist opposition by courting individual leaders in an attempt to divide the party. President Putin relies on a strong pro-presidential center in the Duma that puts a majority within reach of almost all presidential priorities. He has used this majority to reassert central control over Russia’s wayward regions and diminish the constraints on the presidential authority from regional leaders. He relieved regional leaders (governors) of the right to sit in the Federation Council thus reducing their influence over federal policy and also stripping them of their immunity from criminal prosecution. Putin also introduced legislation empowering the president to dismiss democratically elected governors and regional legislators if they violated federal law. Russia’s judiciary is subject to manipulation by central and local political authorities and seriously impaired by a lack of resources and by high levels of corruption. On the other hand, it has shown signs of limited independence.

Political Participation: Political Liberalization: Limited and/or Decreasing Overt Coercion (9)

While far from consolidated, nevertheless, democratic norms and institutions in Russia have been bolstered by the electoral contests of the past decade. In contrast to the political climate of the early 1990s, all major political players now openly voice their belief that elections are the only legitimate means for assuming power. With the notable exception of the Chechen secessionist group, the extremist, anti-system parties commonly found in the early post-communist era have either become marginalized from the political mainstream or have reformed themselves into active democratic participants. However, Russia’s effort to consolidate democracy continues to face serious challenges. While the most recent elections were not marred by significant political violence or voter fraud, the Kremlin continued to use its institutional powers to interfere with the electoral process. Most significantly, the government effectively restricted media freedom. Independent media coverage of the political arena in Russia has been curtailed in recent years by politically-motivated tax audits and libel suits levied against opposition voices as well as the withholding of financial support from government media operations that exercised independent editorial judgment. Most recently, President Putin has endorsed a new information security doctrine that implies the need to restrict access by the Russian public to foreign news media. In related developments, NTV, the only independent television station with nationwide broadcast coverage, was taken over in April 2001 by a subsidiary of the state-owned gas company (Gazprom-Media). Many of NTV’s journalists moved to TV-6, which was then forced off the air in January 2002 in liquidation proceedings. Both media outlets had been critical of the Putin government and many critics accused the president of moving to maintain control over the media.

Formally a one-party communist state, Russia has seen the formation of numerous political parties since political pluralism was instituted in the early 1990s. However, few of these parties have been substantial or lasting. In general, Russia’s political parties are weak and fluid in nature. By the mid-1990s there existed over 250 registered parties, with about ten significant political blocs which could be arranged ideologically into three broad groupings: (1) conservative ex-communist; (2) radical right-wing nationalist and populist; and (3) liberal-centrist or right-of-center pro-market and pro-pluralist bodies. Political tensions between these blocs were palpable and led to a virtual paralysis of coherent government action. In an effort to overcome the factional tensions between these groups and secure his political base, President Yeltsin became increasingly reliant on state security agencies, economic oligarchs and regional governors to do his political bidding. Government officials and political supporters enjoying Yeltsin’s favor were

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permitted to violate the rule of law and engage in illegal economic activity while those who did not were subjected to political intimidation and incarceration.

In each election cycle, new organizations and blocs are formed, often on a personalistic basis, to fight for a leading role and then often just as quickly disappear. Twenty-five parties and groups contested in the 1999 legislative elections, with less than half of them winning at least a single seat in the Duma. In an effort to reduce party fractionalization and increase the loyalty of the Duma to the executive branch, in the fall of 1999 Yeltsin and his allies created a new party, Unity, that was completely dependent on the Kremlin for financial support, organizational muscle and campaign expertise. While lacking an established policy platform, regional organization or well-defined electorate, Unity used the organizational advantages provided by the Kremlin to capture almost 25% of the popular vote in the 1999 parliamentary elections. The sudden success of Unity underscores the fundamental weakness of political parties in Russia. In a further movement toward political consolidation, in December 2001, four parties supporting President Putin (including Unity and OVR) agreed to consolidation as the All Russian Party of Unity and Fatherland. This new pro-presidential party commanded a 240-seat majority in the 450-seat Duma.

Legislative elections for the State Duma (lower house of the bicameral legislature) held on December 7, 2003, resulted in substantial gains for the United Russia bloc, which increased its number of seats from 240 in 2001 elections to 306 in the 2003 elections. Although President Putin has no official party affiliation, it is well-known that the Unity bloc actively supports Putin's political agenda. As such, in 2004, the President enjoyed the support of a 2/3 majority in the lower house and thus was assured of gaining the necessary 2/3 majority vote to pass constitutional changes. OSCE observers were uncomfortable with the advantages that United Russia gained from its affiliation with the executive branch, however, the strength of these advantages resulted equally from the 1) growing popularity of the Putin agenda for stopping Russia's slide into anarchy; 2) the concomitant discrediting of the liberal agenda for dismantling the social safety net, taking advantage of economic changes to increase the wealth of the "oligarchs" at the expense of the middle class, and creating conditions whereby official corruption and organized crime flourished; 3) the inability of opposition parties to design a common platform and alliance from which to more effectively challenge the President's position; and 4) the perception of a "state of siege" characterized by Islamic terrorism and the war in Chechnya, US hegemony and military advances in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the expanding influence of the EU. No oppositional parties were restricted in their activities, no problems reported in voting, counting, or reporting procedures.

Having gained a re-election mandate and consolidated support in the legislature, Putin moved quickly to promote a political agenda dominated by the overarching theme of overcoming internal dissension and, by doing so, increasing internal and external security. Regaining international prestige would have to be paid for by central government control over petroleum resources, which is Russia's main engine of economic growth, at least over the medium term until the economy rebounded to provide a reliable tax base. The government's move against Yukos for tax evasion and other unethical practices and the seizure of its assets and resale, keeps major oil firmly within government control.

In September 2004, the Russian government announced two constitutional changes: one that would increase central government control over its 89 constituent federal units and a second that would decrease the number of registered political parties (c250 parties in 2000). The most important change allows the federation president to nominate the governors of the 89 federal units, subject to approval by the elected regional legislature. This ensures that the regional executives will be compliant to the central government, a move that will also result in a guaranteed majority in the upper house of the Federal Assembly (the Federation Council has two representatives from each federal unit, one appointed by the regional executive and one appointed by the regional legislature). This latter result is not likely to alter the political process in practical terms, at least in the short term, as the Federation Council has not been inclined to challenge the president. (Note: Polity does not account for variations in the structures, methods, or procedures of internal organization and administration; it only accounts for qualities of the central government. Earlier versions of Polity, I and II, did include separate variables that recorded characteristics of the centralization of political power; these were abandoned.)

The move to limit the number of registered parties appears, on the surface, to be a non-partisan attempt to stimulate consolidation of parties and political agendas and, thereby, diminish the turmoil that results from having "too many cooks." It is extremely unlikely that the emerging hegemony of the Unified Russia political bloc can be effectively challenged without a similar consolidation by the opposition. The consolidation and stabilization of political party structures can take a very long time if left to evolve on their own. The most likely effect of the new rules for party registration coupled with the elimination of

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single-mandate districts is the prevention of regional blocs/challenges, localized political organizations that are easier to mobilize and, thus, more likely to emerge in unconsolidated democracies. On paper, these changes do not provide evidence of a move against access or opposition; in practice, however, it appears as if the Unified Russia bloc is using its current situational advantages to effectively restrict competition and establish itself as a dominant party. What is not clear, however, is whether the United Russia bloc would remain a unified political party without the popularity and success of President Putin as its focal point. Should Russia's fortunes change substantially, the bloc's discipline and cohesion would likely diminish and lead to fractures in its leadership and policy agenda.

On 26 April 2004, a bill placing limits on public demonstrations was signed into law after the Duma revised the original bill at the request of the president; the revisions softened many of the restrictions. Public demonstrations were prohibited near major roads, public buildings, embassies, international organizations, and industrial facilities. While this law may be viewed as a restriction on the free expression of political views, the government claims it is necessary to ensure public order and, so far, has demonstrated its responsiveness to public demonstrations in at least four instances: 1) the original bill was modified in response to public criticism; 2) the government quickly responded with concessions when public sector workers mounted a series of strikes, demonstrations, and marches in October 2004 demanding pay increases; 3) the government also quickly responded to protests demanding the resignation of the president of the Karacheyevo-Cherkessiya with promises to investigate his involvement in the murders of his son-in-laws business associates; and 4) concessions were granted in response to widespread protests to changes in social services in late 2004.

Despite President Putin's high public approval rating, throughout 2006 and 2007 the Kremlin has made systematic efforts to restrict political competition in Russia. As opposition political forces worked to mobilize their supporters in preparation for the legislative and presidential elections of December 2007 and March 2008, the Kremlin has shown increasing intolerance for the opposition movement. In 2006, Russia's chief election officer, Alexander Veshnyakov, an otherwise loyal servant of the Kremlin, spoke out against the unfair advantages enjoyed by the Putin's United Russia party. As his warnings against the specter of the return of "Soviet-style elections" to Russia increased, he was relieved of his duties in March 2007. Six of fifteen members of the election commission were replaced by hand-picked candidates of President Putin in early 2007. During the run up to elections, the political scene in Russia has been characterized by pro-Kremlin and anti-Kremlin demonstrations. As a sign of increasing tensions with the United States and the European Union, the Putin administration has become increasingly assertive in challenging Western influences and interferences in its domestic politics and has targeted opposition groups suspected of receiving Western support with harsher restrictions and harassment of their leadership. The Kremlin enacted new electoral laws in 2006 that (1) raised the minimum vote threshold necessary for parties to hold seats in national and regional bodies; (2) lowered the voter turnout minimum necessary for elections to be deemed valid; and (3) eliminated the "against all" option on the ballot. While President Putin has claimed that these new electoral rules are necessary to create a more efficient political system based on two or three parties, the political opposition has claimed that they were enacted to weaken independent political voice in the electoral process.