

al laws, while the regional authorities systematically failed to enforce federal laws.<sup>82</sup> This was also true for administrative resources, including the regions' capacity to influence appointments to federal agencies, even the security and law enforcement agencies such as the prosecutor's office and the police, as de facto control over them passed to regional political-financial groups, and even to criminal groups in a number of cases.<sup>83</sup> The regional authorities also possessed vast economic resources, including control over property rights and over budget flows, the subnational component of which, as a share of the total national budget, rose to almost 60 percent in 1998.<sup>84</sup> To a large extent, regional governments played the role of the veto actor in Russian economic policy.<sup>85</sup> In addition, the federal authorities lost influence over regional political regimes, and the regional elites soon transformed into veto actors in federal elections, thereby forcing the federal authorities to make new concessions with regard to further decentralization. State capture by rent-seeking oligarchs also inhibited effective policy making in various arenas. Finally, the experience of "divided government" in terms of executive-legislative relations led to the postponement or suspension of many important and much-needed laws, thus making it impossible to carry out reforms.<sup>86</sup> The inefficient institutional equilibrium in Russia ultimately contributed to the 1998 financial crisis.<sup>87</sup>

To summarize, one might argue that two of the major limits on Russian authoritarianism in the 1990s were imposed not by the array of political actors and institutions, but by two other exogenous constraints. The first was the weakness of the Russian state in the 1990s: it was faced with major decay in terms of its capacity. The second was that the fragmentation of the elite also prevented power maximization and led to constant reshuffling of winning coalitions. However, these tendencies were temporary and undesirable for many political actors. By the end of the 1990s, most of Russia's political, economic, and societal actors realized that the partial equilibrium of Russia's political regime, which had emerged by default after 1993, would be shaken and transformed. And even those actors who wanted major political changes had no clear agenda for possible directions of further reforms. In the 2000s, the demand for change was satisfied, but the remedy for the "growing pains" of the 1990s afflicted Russia's political regime with numerous chronic diseases.

## CHAPTER 4

## THE (IN)FAMOUS 2000s

## IMPOSED CONSENSUS

**ONE CAN IMAGINE THE** reactions of an attentive and devoted observer of Russia's domestic politics who fell asleep, Rip van Winkle-like, in late August 1998 and awakened exactly ten years after, in late August 2008. It is quite likely that this observer would not recognize the country that had served as a focus of his/her interests, at least at first glance. He or she would be very surprised at the major ongoing changes. A deep and protracted transformation recession had been replaced by a decade of impressive economic growth and positive developmental trends of socioeconomic indicators (though these tendencies came into question once again after the global economic crisis of 2008–2009). Instead of major elite conflicts against a background of state weakness (both on nationwide and regional scales), the new hierarchical governance model known as the "power vertical" had been established, and the new dominant party, United Russia, had gained a majority of seats in the State Duma as well as in regional legislatures. The degree of mass support for Russia's political leaders and their policies had shifted from incredibly low to incredibly high numbers: the majority of Russian citizens sincerely supported the status quo regime.<sup>1</sup> Last but not least, over these ten years Russia twice changed its heads of state by electoral means: Vladimir Putin, who was first elected as president in 2000, left the post in March 2008, and forty-two-year-old Dmitry Medvedev, the former first deputy prime minister of the Russian government, became the third popularly elected president of the country.

After the initial shock, the observer would most likely agree with those experts who argued that Russia in the 2000s might serve as an example of a "normal" young democracy, one in the process of overcoming numerous painful pathologies and moving, if slowly and inconsistently, toward democracy and progress.<sup>2</sup> He or she would also agree with positive assessments of Russia among the group of countries (labeled BRIC at that time)<sup>3</sup> that were

perceived as would-be new global leaders. It is possible that the observer could even agree with some positive views of Russia as a “success story” of post-Communist democratization, despite numerous troubles and shortcomings.<sup>4</sup> However, after a closer look and a more detailed analysis, the observer could not miss the fundamental deficiencies of Russia’s political regime and of the rules of the game that lie at its heart. Despite the regime’s legitimacy being electoral in nature, voting practices were unfree and unfair, not to mention marked by widespread electoral fraud. Similar observations would be relevant for other routines in Russian politics, such as the puppetlike parliament, which, according to the statement (mistakenly) attributed to its chair, had become “not the site for discussions”;<sup>5</sup> powerless political parties, which played no role in government and policy formation;<sup>6</sup> loyal and subordinated nonstate actors, such as business agents,<sup>7</sup> major media outlets, and most of the NGOs;<sup>8</sup> arbitrary use of the economic power of the state; and a politically dependent and rubber-stamped judiciary. In addition, the ubiquitous corruption in Russia served not only as a byproduct of bad governance, but rather as a major substantive goal of ruling the country.<sup>9</sup> While the observer would have been familiar with many of these features since the period of the “roaring 1990s,” their scope and scale dramatically increased in the 2000s. One might expect that the observer’s initial optimistic impression would shift toward deep skepticism: he or she would come to the conclusion that behind the glamorous façade of fast-growing emerging power, which successfully overcame certain problems of the transition period, the fatal flaws of the political regime had become even more detrimental over the course of the decade.

What are the causes of these combinations of continuity and change in Russian politics during the 2000s, and how did they affect the evolutionary trajectory of regime change? Was this period, which some experts praised as “stability” and others condemned as “stasis,” a departure from the turbulent stage of the “roaring 1990s,” or rather its logical continuation? Why and how were Putin and his cronies able to monopolize political power in the country? What were the incentives and political strategies of the Russian leaders who successfully achieved their political goals? And why did Putin, who had invested tremendous efforts into authoritarian regime building in Russia, opt for a succession of leadership and transfer the presidential post to his nominee Dmitry Medvedev? The following chapter will seek answers to these and other questions.

## SOURCES AND FOUNDATIONS OF IMPOSED CONSENSUS

In a sense, Putin’s rise to power in 1999–2000 resulted from a chain of lucky circumstances. It so happened that Putin found himself to be the right man

in the right place at the right time; unquestionably loyal to Boris Yeltsin, he was able to guarantee physical security for his patron, the latter’s family members, and the country’s ruling elite as a whole, and to maintain the foundations of the newly established political and economic order. Putin completed these tasks successfully. But his place in the political history of Russia went far beyond just the role of Yeltsin’s successor; Putin’s rule in 2000–2008 was a period of extraordinarily high economic growth on the one hand, and of tremendous monopolization of political power on the other. In this regard, Putin’s first presidential terms were a sharp contrast to Yeltsin’s rule, which involved a deep and protracted transformation recession and political fragmentation and major conflicts among Russia’s elite.

From the perspective of formal rules of the game, the institutional legacy of Yeltsin’s rule was quite favorable for his successor; it allowed Putin to monopolize political power through the effective use of the constitution, which placed vague and weak institutional constraints on presidential government and made him a dominant actor almost by default. However, these opportunities were rather limited because of three major political constraints, which Putin also inherited from his predecessor. First, due to the weakness of the Russian state, political leaders could not use just any tools to maintain their dominance; they had to be very selective in the application of both carrots and sticks to their subordinates, and only on a case-by-case basis. Second, due to the major fragmentation of Russia’s elite, the winning coalition around the president was not a stable and efficient group of supporters and followers, but rather a loose conglomerate of competing cliques. Third, the degree of mass support for Russia’s leaders and the regime as a whole in the 1990s was low: against the background of economic troubles, the political order was perceived as very inefficient. Thus, in 2000 there was only one way for Putin to become a dominant actor not only *de jure* but also *de facto*. He had to be more or less consistent with the ideal type of political leadership so aptly defined by Yeltsin soon after his victory in the 1993 conflict with the parliament: “somebody had to be the boss in the country; that’s all there was to it.”<sup>10</sup> But to be “the boss in the country” Putin had to accomplish three major interrelated tasks: (1) restoring and strengthening both the coercive and the redistributive capacity of the Russian state; (2) coercing various segments of the Russian elite to become subordinate to the Kremlin, and minimizing the risk of their disloyalty; and (3) achieving a stable high level of mass support for Russia’s regime and its leadership. Tasks (1) and (3) first required major success on the part of the Kremlin in terms of economic development and the rearrangement of the Russian state,<sup>11</sup> while task (2) was first and foremost political in nature. Putin had to do more than just demonstrate who the boss in the country

was through the use of coercion: after all, Yeltsin had also fired high-profile officials from time to time, and placed great pressure on his political rivals (as happened in October 1993 and almost happened in March 1996), yet he had achieved limited success at best. Putin had to establish a combination of positive and negative incentives for the Russian elite, who maintained their loyalty to the political leadership and to the political regime as a whole irrespective of the political circumstances at any given moment. In other words, Putin, as a dominant actor, had to offer his subordinates a combination of carrots and sticks that left them no choice of strategic behavior other than unconditional subordination to the Kremlin, either voluntary or involuntary. This mechanism of coordination among the elite might be considered “imposed consensus”<sup>12</sup> but its essence, its most vivid characteristics, were like those presented in the infamous statement from the movie *The Godfather*: “an offer he can’t refuse.”

Yet the crucial difference between the imposed consensus built in Russia under Vladimir Putin in the 2000s and the methods employed by the characters in *The Godfather* is important for understanding the logic of Russia’s regime. While fictional Sicilian mafia characters mainly rely upon extensive and harsh use of violence (or the threat thereof), the Kremlin applied these tools vis-à-vis its rivals rather rarely and selectively (with some notable exceptions). Carrots, rather than sticks, served as the major instruments for achieving imposed consensus in Russia. The loyalty of various segments of Russia’s elite to the regime, and to Putin personally, granted them access to tremendous rent-seeking opportunities in exchange for their support of the political status quo. This mechanism, based upon universal corruption, enriched the insiders of imposed consensus in terms of personal and/or corporate wealth, but it also allowed Russia’s rulers to dismiss disloyal subordinated actors at any time by accusing them of abuse and/or malpractice (in most cases, this abuse and/or malpractice was very extreme). At first glance, maintaining imposed consensus by these methods was very costly and inefficient in terms of governing the country, but its benefits for the Kremlin exceeded any costs in terms of the regime’s insulation from the risk of disloyalty by subordinated actors. As Bruce Bueno de Mesquita and Alastair Smith correctly note, paraphrasing Lord Acton, “if corruption empowers, then absolute corruption empowers absolutely.”<sup>13</sup> Those subordinated actors whose status and wealth heavily depended upon their loyalty to the regime had no incentives for rebellion in any form. While Putin was able to establish and maintain imposed consensus due to his success in the recentralization of the Russian state and impressive economic growth, he also made effective use of this mechanism for his own empowerment through a biased set of systematic institutional changes. The

authoritarian regime in Russia under Putin was institutionalized with the reformation of major institutions such as the separation of powers, electoral and party systems, and center-regional relationships. This strategy, as employed by the Kremlin, brought major benefits to Russia’s leaders.

Despite the difference in means, the goals of Putin and his associates were nearly the same as those of Vito Corleone and his clan (namely, maximizing their own power and wealth), and it is no wonder that Putin’s approach to building his winning coalition also shared some similarities to the actions of *The Godfather*’s characters. In both cases, the power of the dominant actor was based upon personal cronyism and patronage, and multiple clients had no room for maneuvers; there were no alternative patrons and no opportunities for collective action against “the boss.” Unlike Yeltsin, who had had to rush to build his own winning coalition atop the ruins of the Communist regime in the 1990s using the materials available at the time, Putin enjoyed the benefits of postrevolutionary conservative stabilization in the early 2000s,<sup>14</sup> when he had enough time and resources to consistently and consciously develop imposed consensus. Over the eight years of his first presidency (2000–2008), Putin promoted his long-standing friends and followers to top positions in politics, government, and business, located or established secure and unimportant niches for precarious and unreliable “fellow travelers,” and isolated potential rivals whose disloyalty and resistance might pose a challenge. The reshuffling of the winning coalition under Putin changed the very nature of linkages within the Russian elite. According to the analysis of elite networks in Russia produced by Philipp Chapkovski, in 2000, when Putin took power, he was, so to speak, the first among equals in terms of nodes in intralite connections; some other key figures of Yeltsin’s presidency, such as Anatoly Chubais, had comparable personal influence. However, by 2008, when Putin left presidential office for a while and transferred the role of head of state to Dmitry Medvedev, the structure of the elite networks was completely different. Putin was the only node in the center of the linkages: nobody else among the elite had personal influence even slightly comparable to that of the dominant actor.<sup>15</sup> In a similar vein, other authors have noted that that the rivalry among cliques within the ruling group, known in journalist slang as the struggle between “the Kremlin’s towers,” was replaced by a highly manageable and centralized hierarchy, which was once compared to a “solar system.”<sup>16</sup> While the cliques within the Russian elite did not disappear, and their struggles were often rather fierce, the dominant actor was able to serve as a veto player in the decision-making process, and did not permit his subordinates to go too far in their rent-seeking behavior without being sanctioned by the boss.

Initially, Putin had two major trump cards that allowed him to over-

come all real or potential rivals. First, the decisive factor behind the imposed consensus was Putin's great ability to gain electoral legitimacy, by sharp contrast with Yeltsin despite his reelection in 1996. Broadly speaking, while the incumbent vote in the presidential election of 1996 was merely *against* Zyuganov, in 2000 it was a vote *for* Putin even though he had been chosen as a designated successor by his predecessor, and the popular vote just confirmed this choice.<sup>17</sup> Second, after a decade of recession and painful and troubled reforms, the trends of Russian economic development had changed in more positive directions. A favorable alignment of the world market (in other words, high oil prices) allowed Putin and his government to solve—at least in the short term—such problems as the stabilization of public finances, the currency exchange rate, and the payment of pension debts and wage arrears. Under Putin, some liberal-minded economists occupied key positions in the Russian government, and the new directions in policy were oriented toward market reforms in the same way as in the early 1990s. However, the political and economic conditions for these reforms were more comfortable than they had been a decade earlier. The economic changes of the early 2000s (first and foremost, lightening the tax burden on companies and taxpayers) brought major benefits for the country but also empowered Putin,<sup>18</sup> making the “free rein” approach more available to him due to increasing mass support for his leadership.<sup>19</sup> Thus, Putin's claim to the role of dominant actor in Russian politics fell on fertile ground: not only were the Russian elite forced to be loyal to him, but Russian society at large also sincerely perceived him as “the country's boss.”

However, the reshuffling of the winning coalition was a necessary but not a sufficient condition for Putin's successful domination. He not only had to replace key actors and to place his followers in prominent positions, but also to change the formal and informal rules of the game, which had partly been inherited from the Soviet period and partly established in the “roaring 1990s.” This approach required not only systematic institutional changes, initiated by Putin and his associates in various domains, but also a choice of optimal sequences of moves for building and maintaining imposed consensus. The very first move in this strategic approach was to enforce loyalty among those actors who initially posed major challenges to Putin, namely the parliament, political parties, the regional elite, oligarchs, and the media.

First and foremost, Putin launched his presidency with a forceful commitment to revitalize state capacity. His programmatic rhetoric focused on the keyword “state,” reminiscent of the keyword “market” in the rhetoric of liberal economists in the early 1990s, or, if you prefer, the keyword “God” in religious texts.<sup>20</sup> In fact, the military operation in Chechnya and the attempts to use (or

abuse) the security apparatus as a major tool in domestic as well as in foreign policy—whether successful or not—had a decisive impact on the remobilization of the state's administrative capacities. While one could trace the roots of this major change in the role of the state to Putin's KGB background,<sup>21</sup> its consequences were much broader than that implies. It meant not only the rise of the military and security elite (who had definitely played a limited role in Russian politics after the Soviet collapse in 1991), as well as their integration into a new mechanism of imposed consensus, but also the rise of security as a powerful tool for the dominant actor. Though costly in economic terms, the security-dominated revitalization of state capacity gave Putin certain opportunities to maintain a balance among the different segments of the elite and to increase his popularity. The drive to impose “order” instead of the chaos and instability of the 1990s was endorsed by the public mood and greatly appreciated by the Russian elite and the general public. But despite this drive, again, Adam Przeworski's bitter statement that “since any order is better than any disorder, any order is established,”<sup>22</sup> mentioned earlier, remained as accurate a description of Russia's political trajectory as in the 1990s.

The next major step toward building imposed consensus brought the Kremlin its first visible success, due to the principal change in the State Duma's loyalty vis-à-vis the executive branch. Between 1993 and 1999, the parliament (both the lower chamber and the upper house) served as a base for opposition(s) of different colors.<sup>23</sup> By contrast, after the 1999 parliamentary elections, the pro-Putin Unity and its allies controlled one-third of the seats, serving as a veto group at minimum.<sup>24</sup> At the very first parliamentary session, Unity and the Communist Party reached an informal agreement on sharing powerful positions within the Duma, with covert support for Putin's administration. The Communists secured the post of chairman of the State Duma, while pro-Putin factions gained control over important committees, and the remaining minor factions received virtually nothing. Although the minority tried to protest against these deals, it was forced to agree with the new institutional arrangements. Moreover, since the minor factions were rewarded later on with posts of secondary importance, they almost always voted in favor of Putin in the State Duma. Soon afterward, Fatherland was forced to join Unity and its allies in a formal pro-Putin grand coalition, and was taken over in the form of a merger under a new label, United Russia (formally established in December 2001). Thus, the Kremlin acquired control over 235 of the 450 parliamentary seats, a secure majority.<sup>25</sup> In practice, this meant that the Duma was able to pass major bills without taking the positions of any opposition parties into account. No wonder, then, that the chamber supported virtually all bills proposed by the president and his government. Finally, in 2002, the



pro-Putin coalition (with the support of the minor liberal parties) removed the Communists and their allies from chairmanship of all parliamentary committees, and imposed its unilateral dominance over the State Duma.<sup>26</sup> After this failure, the Communists completely lost their influence in parliamentary politics, and were never able to restore their role. The consequences of this major turn in Russian parliamentary politics were rather contradictory for the State Duma. For the first time in more than ten years, the Kremlin received stable legislative support in terms of the lawmaking process. Major bills devoted to tax, labor, pensions, judicial, and other reforms were enthusiastically adopted by the State Duma thanks to the support of the pro-Putin coalition (as well as the liberals). But at the same time, the political influence of the legislature itself was reduced to rubber-stamp voting for executive proposals regardless of their contents. Kremlin loyalists unanimously voted for Putin's proposals anyway. Overall, while the lawmaking activity of the State Duma increased, its performance in terms of political representation became limited, and it lost political autonomy. It now served mostly as a site for the legal arrangement of policy decisions already adopted by the Kremlin; public discussions were not completely buried in the lower house, but they did become meaningless.<sup>27</sup>

This success with the State Duma was a great help to Putin, who, during the period of his ascendancy to power, was faced with the risk of disloyalty from the other influential autonomous actor, the regional elite. Their attempt to establish an alternative mechanism of coordination during the time of the 1999 parliamentary elections (namely, the Fatherland—All Russia bloc) was perceived as the major immediate threat to Putin, while their wide and unchecked powers were perceived rather negatively by the federal elite and the public. In May 2000, Putin initiated a new agenda aiming to recentralize the governance of the country. He established seven federal districts spanning Russia's entire territory (with each federal district comprising about a dozen Russian regions) and appointed envoys, who were given control over branches of federal ministries, as well as control over the use of federal property and funds from the federal budget. This policy innovation, called "federal reform," pursued the very political goal of weakening regional leaders relative to the federal center in the manner of a zero-sum game: the powers of regional leaders, who had previously enjoyed almost unlimited rule in their fiefdoms, were significantly restrained, although not eliminated.<sup>28</sup> Also, regional leaders were empowered due to the ex officio formation of the upper chamber of the Russian legislature, the Federation Council, composed of chief executives and heads of legislatures from each region. This model was widely criticized for inefficient lawmaking and a lack of democratic accountability.<sup>29</sup> Meanwhile,

Putin proposed a bill on the reform of the Federation Council, with the major goal of removing regional leaders from the upper chamber, thus abolishing their parliamentary immunity. Instead, the new members of the Federation Council were appointed by the regional governments, and most of them were professional lobbyists, absolutely loyal to the Kremlin despite (or because of) their dubious legitimacy. After this bill was implemented in 2002, the Federation Council completely lost its political relevance and turned into a rubber-stamp entity.<sup>30</sup> After yet another bill, Putin gained the right to dismiss regional legislatures and/or fire elected chief executives where they violated federal laws (under some circumstances, even without a court decision). In July 2000, despite sluggish resistance from the Federation Council, the federal reform bills were enthusiastically adopted by the loyal State Duma. Most of the regional leaders were forced to agree to subordinated status or face the risk of major punishments, as happened in the case of Kursk Oblast. The incumbent governor, Alexander Rutskoi, a former rival of Yeltsin and vice president in 1991–1993, was an active opponent of Putin's federal reforms. When he sought reelection in his region in October 2000, he was removed from the ballot list one day before the polls by a court decision. He was accused of violations of electoral law and abuse of incumbency (though any incumbent, including Putin, merited removal from the ballot list for the same reasons). This was a very effective lesson for regional leaders; after that, none of them openly raised his or her voice against Putin or claimed any political autonomy.

Simultaneously, Putin launched attacks on independent media, primarily TV, which had a broad audience and was able to affect public opinion, as the war of Yeltsin's succession had vividly demonstrated. Among the three national TV channels, the state-owned RTR had been politically loyal to Putin from the very beginning. In August 2000, the Kremlin changed the management of Channel 1 (ORT) with its 51 percent of state-owned shares, while the (formally) minor shareholder, tycoon Boris Berezovsky, was forced to sell his shares and leave the country after being intimidated by major criminal charges, and completely lost control over said media resource.<sup>31</sup> The only nonstate national television company was NTV, controlled by yet another tycoon, Vladimir Gusinsky. This channel had backed the OVR during the 1999 parliamentary elections and Yavlinsky during the 2000 presidential race, and was the only national TV channel that openly criticized Putin. In May 2000, the General Prosecutor's Office and the tax police launched a series of attacks on NTV and other Gusinsky-run media outlets. In June 2000, Gusinsky was arrested for alleged violations of law during privatization in the 1990s. Although he was later released, and emigrated to Israel, the harsh attacks on NTV continued. Taking advantage of Gusinsky-run media's excessive debts to the state-controlled

joint-stock-holding Gazprom, the Kremlin gave significant aid to Gazprom in order to impose its control over NTV and replace their management. Soon after, NTV news coverage shifted in a more pro-Putin direction. Some of the former NTV journalist team, who had opposed this decision, moved to the Berezovsky-owned channel TV-6, but in late 2001 TV-6 was closed by a court decision. Again, some other media outlets, which had previously claimed independence, learned their lesson and became loyal to the Kremlin.<sup>32</sup>

The pattern of relationships between the state and major business leaders developed on a similar carrot-and-stick model; the Kremlin rewarded its loyalists and threatened those who claimed autonomy. The presidential administration reasserted control over the management of major state-controlled companies (first and foremost, Gazprom), while the prosecutors and the police were able to target anyone for tax evasion, violations of law during the process of privatization, and the like. In June 2000, Putin met with key representatives of large companies (both private and state-owned) at his country residence, and offered Big Business an informal deal, unofficially dubbed the "barbeque agreement."<sup>33</sup> The idea was that the state would not review property rights, and would maintain no favoritism toward the oligarchs, thus preventing any cronyism, while Big Business would have to remain loyal to the authorities, and not interfere in the process of political decision making. The few oligarchs (including Boris Berezovsky) who did not agree to the conditions of this informal deal soon lost their assets and were forced to leave Russia. The remaining representatives of Big Business in Russia simply had no choice under the circumstances. To a certain degree, the barbeque agreement marked a new stage in state-business relationships: the Russian state took a step toward the oligarchs in promoting more favorable conditions for business. Big Business, in its turn, while it did not stop lobbying for its interests in the Russian parliament and in regional legislatures, accepted the institutional arrangements developed by the Kremlin. Furthermore, Big Business actively supported a number of Putin's initiatives, including the recentralization of the state, which destroyed local barriers to business development and was directed toward the formation of a common national Russian market.<sup>34</sup> The Kremlin recognized major associations of Russian entrepreneurs as official junior partners in a framework of what appeared to be a corporatist model of interaction between the state and interest groups in Russia,<sup>35</sup> while business leaders declared their loyalty to the Kremlin.

The same style of relationships between the state and nonstate actors was typical for the "third-sector" NGOs; most of them received funding from the state under the patronage of the presidential administration, and shifted their criticism from the regime as such to specific examples of its policies. In

short, in the early 2000s virtually all actors in Russia expressed their loyalty to Putin, and agreed to subordinated status either voluntarily or under pressure.

Thus, during the very first years of his presidency, Putin attained major success in building his political monopoly. The imposed consensus of the Russian elite under Putin was based on the following principles: (1) an implicit taboo on open political contestation among the federal elite (in other words, a taboo on electoral democracy as such); (2) an informal agreement between the dominant and subordinated actors on loyalty in exchange for access to resources and rents; (3) the prevalence of informal and actor-specific particularistic rules of the game over formal and universal norms in the political arena. The latter principle fits the logic of the "dictatorship of law" announced by Putin as a top priority of his political program in July 2000. In fact, the dictatorship of law is very much dissimilar to the principle of the rule of law:<sup>36</sup> it is based on the purely instrumental use of formal institutions, or legal norms, as tools and means of coercion by the dominant actor toward outsiders to the imposed consensus (as in the cases of Gusinsky or Rutskoï). This biased set of rules and norms, as well as their selective enforcement by the coercive apparatus of the state, became an integral part of imposed consensus. It did not lead to the emergence of the rule of law, but rather served as a smokescreen for informal governance<sup>37</sup> based upon the arbitrary rule of the Kremlin and its loyalists.<sup>38</sup> These tools proved to be powerful means for achieving Kremlin's goals, and the ruling group used them effectively in the next stages of building and maintaining imposed consensus.

## THE PARTY OF POWER AND THE POWER VERTICAL: FROM COMPETITION TO HIERARCHY

All rulers in the world would like to govern their respective countries without checks and balances. In established regimes, however, they are faced with constraints based upon institutions or other influential actors (both domestic and international). It is no surprise that leaders in newly established states and nations are sometimes more successful in authoritarian regime building from scratch if they are able to avoid or remove these constraints and eliminate alternatives to their governments. But why are some autocrats more successful than others in this respect? Comparative studies of authoritarianism offer a useful distinction between personalist, party-based, and military authoritarian regimes, which form on different power bases and employ different strategies of dominance. Upon the collapse of the Soviet Union, post-Soviet states demonstrated a wide spectrum of personalist authoritarian regimes, although some of them were destroyed in 2003–2005 during the wave of so-called "color revolutions" in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan. Unlike its neighbors,

Russia exhibited a rather distinctive pattern of authoritarian regime building. While Yeltsin's strategy in the 1990s was largely personalist, despite several unsuccessful attempts to establish pro-Kremlin parties of power,<sup>39</sup> Russia's authoritarian turn under Putin in the 2000s coincided with the spectacular rise of United Russia, the party of power<sup>40</sup> that dominated the electoral and parliamentary arenas by the end of Putin's rule. Over the course of the 2000s, the Kremlin invested deliberate and thorough effort into building a dominant party, which was then able to gain majorities in national and subnational legislatures and greatly contributed to the continuity of Russia's authoritarian regime beyond the leadership succession in 2008.<sup>41</sup> Given that party-based authoritarian regimes are usually the longest-lived in comparison with personalist and military regimes, at first sight this Kremlin strategy of dominant party building seems very rational in the long term, but in the 2010s it proved to be short-lived.

Why did the Kremlin choose this strategy after Putin's unexpected rise to power in 1999–2000? To a great extent, this choice was driven by having learned from Russia's own experience under Yeltsin as well as from other post-Soviet states. Yeltsin's personalist rule was highly unpopular in the eyes of Russia's citizens due to its poor performance, and was faced with a deeply fragmented elite organized around multiple cliques of oligarchs and regional leaders.<sup>42</sup> This arrangement left Yeltsin room to maneuver using "divide and conquer" strategies, but it was rather risky in terms of leadership succession, as the experience of some post-Soviet states (especially the Ukrainian "Orange Revolution") indicates.<sup>43</sup> In Russia, the presidential turnover in 1999–2000 also produced a shift in loyalty among the formerly subordinated elite, and the rise of the loose Fatherland–All Russia coalition on the eve of the parliamentary and presidential elections threatened the very survival of Yeltsin and his entourage. Even though on this occasion the Kremlin had been able to avoid this outcome with successful electoral campaigning and by manufacturing its own political vehicle, Unity,<sup>44</sup> the post-Yeltsin elite had little intention of falling into the same trap. Beyond these short-term considerations, Putin and his associates sought to establish long-term foundations for the stability and continuity of their regime. This task implied that they had to prevent any opportunities for coordinated opposition among the elite through the demolition and/or cooptation of all independent organizational entities (such as parties, interest groups, NGOs, and the media) and to ensure the long-term loyalty of the elite and the masses to the status quo regime, irrespective of its performance, the personal qualities of the leadership, and so forth.

From this perspective, a version of the personalist authoritarian regime that had emerged in Russia by the early 2000s would be the least useful in-

strument, because regimes of this kind are the most vulnerable to losing their equilibrium compared to other forms of authoritarianism. Thus, Russia's rulers had to choose between two different strategies for long-term authoritarian regime building. One option was a "hard" version of personalist authoritarianism, in the manner of Belarus or Turkmenistan, which would base the loyalty of the elite and society at large on the intense use of violence, coercion, and intimidation. But this strategy would be costly for the Kremlin; quite apart from the need for huge investment in a large-scale coercion apparatus to diminish the threat of major disobedience, such regimes could be faced with the danger of international isolation and political turmoil. Also, given the fact that in hard personalist authoritarian regimes the elite could become victims of repression more often than ordinary citizens, Russia's rulers and subordinated members of the winning coalition had little incentive to launch such a risky enterprise. In Robert Dahl's terms, in Russia's post-Communist setting the costs of repression were incredibly high.<sup>45</sup> A "soft," nonrepressive party-based authoritarian regime looked much more attractive as an alternative for both the Kremlin and the various segments of the Russian elite. It could successfully solve three major problems: the establishment and maintenance of monopolist political control by the rulers, the prevention of alternative coordination among the elite, and the building of long-term loyalty among the elite and the public, while being less coercive and thus less costly for the Kremlin than the hard version of personalist authoritarianism. Indeed, it could lower the regime's costs of tolerating dissent without the risk of losing power due to open political competition.<sup>46</sup> In addition, a soft party-based authoritarianism would be very functional and instrumental for rulers in three other respects: (1) it could enhance the regime's legitimacy through efficient political patronage and the discouragement of alternatives to the status quo;<sup>47</sup> (2) it could effectively and flexibly perform policy adoption and implementation due to the nonideological nature of the dominant party;<sup>48</sup> (3) it would maintain elite loyalty through the mutual reinforcement of both bureaucratic and political mechanisms of control.

While the choice of this strategy for authoritarian regime building in Russia might bring long-term and large-scale benefits to the Kremlin, it also required a significant amount of political investment with a relatively long compensation period. Even though the political environment in Russia in the early 2000s was very advantageous for the Kremlin's authoritarian regime building due to the recentralization of the Russian state, unprecedented economic growth, and the monopolization of state control over major economic assets, political and institutional engineering as well as organizational efforts were nevertheless vital for this venture. The Kremlin had to go beyond

avoiding the risk of disloyalty from subordinated actors: it had to offer them full-fledged political and institutional integration into a new self-enforcing hierarchy of decision making led by the dominant actor. The need to transform imposed consensus into a more sustainable mechanism of control over political actors and society at large became more acute after the wave of color revolutions in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan in 2003–2005. The Kremlin's new strategy included three major components:

- (1) Cooptation of subnational “political machines” controlled by regional and local chief executives into a nationwide “echelon” controlled by the Kremlin;<sup>49</sup>
- (2) Building a highly controlled party system that could deliver the electoral results desired by the Kremlin, irrespective of the preferences of Russian voters, and leaving both the elite and the voters with no choices unwanted by the Kremlin;
- (3) The return of control over major resources and leverages in the economic arena to the state apparatus, thus increasing opportunities for rent-seeking for the regime's loyalists, and decreasing the chances for alternative coordination of real and/or potential opposition.<sup>50</sup>

Although the recentralization of the Russian state, which was launched by Putin in 2000 and dubbed “federal reform” in Russian political jargon, was a great help in restoring the Kremlin's political control over the regional elite, its results were rather partial and incomplete. The restoration of the administrative capacity of the central state, the centralization of the tax system, and the reduction of financial and other resources controlled by regional leaders, as well as the encroachment of nationwide companies into local markets (previously captured by regional bosses and their followers), served as major sticks. The Kremlin was also able to support the reforms with tempting carrots of federal transfers and federal investment projects. Still, despite the recentralization of the Russian state (or perhaps because of it), most of the regional chief executives (hereafter, governors)<sup>51</sup> secured or even strengthened their control over their respective areas in the early 2000s, due to the successful cooptation or sometimes coercion of autonomous subnational political and economic actors. As Grigorii V. Golosov has convincingly demonstrated, while in 1995–1999 regional incumbents won 45 out of 88 gubernatorial elections, in 1999–2003 they retained their posts after 59 out of 88 regional elections; moreover, incumbents lost only 16 gubernatorial races, and abstained from running in 13 electoral campaigns.<sup>52</sup> In some cases the Kremlin had such limited chances of imposing its control over political and economic developments in given regions that it was forced to employ selective individ-

ual bargaining with influential regional chief executives. These negotiations led to various outcomes, such as the incumbent's survival and the preservation of the regional political status quo in exchange for the federal election results desired by the Kremlin (as was the case in Bashkortostan in 2003), or Kremlin-driven promotion of the regional governor to a top post in Moscow, with subsequent redistribution of regional power and/or property in favor of the Kremlin. The latter scenario was implemented in Yakutia (Sakha), where the long-standing incumbent declined to participate in new chief executive elections, and received the post of deputy chair of the Federation Council. The Kremlin's nominee won the race, and control over the republic's major asset, its diamond industry, was taken out of hands of the local ethnic elite and given to the central government. In a similar fashion, the governors of Primorsky Krai and St. Petersburg, who had been widely criticized for their inefficiency, left their posts for appointments as federal ministers, and were later replaced by Kremlin-backed candidates.<sup>53</sup> Selective use of sanctions (as in the case of Rutskoi) complemented the Kremlin's practices of individual bargaining with the regional elite; the federal authorities were able to achieve desirable results with minimal agency costs. This approach was very much in line with the implementation of the dictatorship of law, which became nearly universal in the early 2000s;<sup>54</sup> the recentralization of the Russian state was not an exception. Nevertheless, despite the extensive use of administrative tools of control, the Kremlin also actively used elections and political parties to diminish and further eliminate regionalism from Russia's political arena and to achieve vertical integration of subnational politics under its own control.

In 2001, the federal law “On Political Parties” directly prohibited the registration of regional parties, which by and large had previously served as political machines controlled by the regional elites. By that time, most regional legislative elections were largely nonpartisan.<sup>55</sup> After 2003, the Kremlin and the State Duma launched a reform of regional electoral systems in order to improve United Russia's performance in regional legislatures and win centralized political control over the periphery; at least half of the seats were designated for federal political parties. Despite the fact that in 2003–2004 United Russia gained a significant share of votes in many regional legislative elections, and established visible representation in many regional assemblies, this was only a limited success for the party of power; its local branches achieved good results if they were captured by regional governors and served merely as their (rather than the Kremlin's) political vehicle.<sup>56</sup> In addition, governors preferred not to put all their eggs into one basket, and often based their support on parties other than United Russia or on nonparty entities. Thus, reform of regional electoral systems brought partial and inconclusive results in terms of

political competitiveness; Perm-based political scientist Petr Panov correctly noted that previously authoritarian regions became even more authoritarian and previously competitive regions remained competitive.<sup>57</sup> As comparative analysis of subnational authoritarian regimes predicts, the Kremlin-driven advancement of party competition in subnational politics could have promoted electoral contestation, and in the medium term undermined the monopoly of regional political machines controlled by the governors.<sup>58</sup> However, such an outcome was hardly desirable for the Kremlin; after all, the federal authorities were mostly interested in preserving and strengthening their own political power, especially in anticipation of the coming national elections in 2007–2008. But this result could only be achieved with the integration of subnational political machines into a nationwide party of power.

The Kremlin adopted the decision to abolish the popular election of regional governors in September 2004 more or less by chance (as a response to a terrorist attack on a school in a small town in North Ossetia), but it was a logical conclusion of the process of political recentralization. The institutionalization of the hierarchy of top-down appointments of regional chief executives (later on extended to many, but not all, major cities) integrated subnational administrations into a centralized power vertical. The Kremlin reduced the political uncertainty of competitive elections in the regions to zero, and reduced its own agency costs. After 2005, regional chief executives were de facto appointed, the institutional arrangements in the regions were more or less unified, and the diversity of regional political regimes was diminished. While in the 1990s their varieties were so many that one could consider regional political regimes and patterns of governance as phenomena more or less autonomous from the federal center,<sup>59</sup> in the 2000s the process of Kremlin-induced bureaucratic rationalization of the rules of the game put an end to this variation. But the centralized imposition of these rules did little to improve the transparency and quality of governance in the most nondemocratic regions of Russia, such as Bashkortostan. Rather, it distorted democratic institutions in the most advanced regions, such as Perm Krai. Some expert analyses came to the conclusion that the average level of democratic credentials of Russian regions had declined by 2005 due to the major nondemocratic drift of the previously politically open and transparent regions.<sup>60</sup> But from the Kremlin's viewpoint, the abolishment of gubernatorial elections brought desirable results: after 2005, United Russia's performance in regional elections greatly improved. Still, in terms of personnel the turn to de facto appointment of regional chief executives changed little; in 2005–2007, in most of the regions, previous governors were reappointed to perform their job.<sup>61</sup> This political continuity was to some extent a side effect of the shortage of capable and experienced officials avail-

able to the Kremlin, but also resulted from the Kremlin's risk-averse strategy, which involved preservation of the status quo in center-regional relations whenever possible. Nevertheless, if one were to leave aside the problems of the ethnic regions of the North Caucasus (which had no plausible solution irrespective of the political centralization of the Russian state), all other Russian regions became completely subordinated to the Kremlin in political, economic, and administrative terms.

In terms of building a Kremlin-controlled party system, the newborn party of power, United Russia, gained a majority in the State Duma from its very emergence, and unequivocally supported virtually all the bills proposed by Putin and his government.<sup>62</sup> Thus, United Russia established its parliamentary dominance. In the December 2003 State Duma elections, the United Russia party list received only 37.6 percent of votes, but the implicit coalition policy of the party of power in single-member districts and further institutional changes to internal parliamentary rules led to the formation of a "manufactured supermajority." United Russia soon acquired more than two-thirds of the seats in the national legislature.<sup>63</sup> Not only was its parliamentary dominance strengthened, but alternatives to United Russia became irrelevant.

The introduction of de facto appointment of regional chief executives changed the bargaining power of the Kremlin vis-à-vis regional leaders, and presented a new solution to the problem of the mutual commitments of the federal and regional elite, which had previously been a major obstacle to turning United Russia into a nationwide dominant party. But after the abolition of gubernatorial elections in early 2005, the incentives were reversed; the appointment and further survival of regional chief executives largely depended on their loyalty to United Russia.<sup>64</sup> It is thus unsurprising that most of them, either willingly or reluctantly, joined the ranks of the party of power. Institutional changes left no room for the diversification of regional governors' political investments: they were forced to be loyal only to United Russia. During the 2007 State Duma elections, 65 out of 85 regional chief executives joined United Russia's list, in a sharp contrast to the 2003 parliamentary elections, where only 39 governors had done so. The Kremlin, in turn, was ready to secure the regional leaders' jobs as long as they were able to deliver votes in both federal and regional elections.<sup>65</sup> The capacity to control the regional electoral process at any cost was the most important resource for the survival of regional chief executives until the end of Putin's first presidency, often irrespective of their performance in other areas. The new formula for political compromise in center-regional relations, "the preservation of the gubernatorial power monopoly in exchange for the 'right' voting results,"<sup>66</sup> became a major element of Russia's political regime. United Russia, in turn, established



majorities in almost all regional legislatures and by 2007 achieved regional dominance; with a few exceptions, regional politics no longer produced meaningful alternatives to United Russia.

In 2003, the Kremlin initiated a new wave of institutional changes, which were oriented toward further shrinking the field of party competition. The electoral threshold for parliamentary representation in the State Duma and most regional legislatures increased from 5 percent to 7 percent. The new federal law on political parties dramatically toughened the organizational and membership requirements for political parties, which had to reregister according to the new conditions with no fewer than 50,000 members in two-thirds of Russian regions. This reform significantly raised the entry barrier to Russia's market of party politics: the formation of new political parties became extraordinarily difficult, while only 15 out of the 46 previously existing Russian parties managed to squeeze in according to these rules by 2007 and were able to participate in the December 2007 State Duma election. Furthermore, pre-election party coalitions (blocs) were prohibited altogether from 2005, rendering the survival of small party entities very problematic.<sup>67</sup> Finally, the reform of the State Duma election rules in 2007 (the shift from a mixed electoral system to closed party list representation) not only increased United Russia's own party discipline and unequivocal loyalty to the Kremlin,<sup>68</sup> but also helped the party of power to gain electoral dominance during the 2007 parliamentary elections, when the party received 64.3 percent of the votes. While many factors, ranging from unfair campaigns to the high approval rate of Russia's president Vladimir Putin, ensured United Russia's success, no other party could present a viable alternative.

Most political parties worldwide are created by politicians in order to gain public office through the popular vote. The genesis of Russia's parties of power was fundamentally different: United Russia was crafted by top officials in order to maximize their control over political arenas.<sup>69</sup> This distinction undoubtedly affected the major features of Russia's party of power in three important areas—party organization, party ideology, and party government. In terms of party organization, the United Russia model could be best described as Kremlin-based “external governance,” independent from official party leadership. While the party officials were merely in charge of everyday routine management, key Kremlin officials served as extraparty rulers who controlled strategic decision making.<sup>70</sup> Thus, the party of power could be compared to a firm whose assets were owned not by its management but by a large multi-sectoral holding company, which hired its management and personnel and could easily replace them from time to time. From the perspective of corporate control and management within the party, the external governance model was

quite efficient; it soon turned the party of power into a highly disciplined and centralized organization. No internal dissent or factionalism was tolerated, and even discussion within the party was strictly regulated by the Kremlin.

The genesis of the party of power also affected its lack of ideology. Top state officials needed United Russia as an instrument for the preservation of the status quo, but not as an instrument of political change. Accordingly, United Russia openly and deliberately manifested its loyalty to Russia's political regime and to Putin personally, while its position on major policy issues remained vague and undefined. During the 2007 State Duma election campaign, the major slogan of United Russia was “Vote for Putin's Plan!” (*Golosui za plan Putina!*) without any specific reference to the content of this “plan.” Some critics have argued that party ideology is necessary for long-term regime maintenance;<sup>71</sup> however, in the short term, United Russia's nonideology was an asset rather than a liability, because it contributed to the success of the party of power. Against the background of a decline in transitional uncertainty, the role of ideology as a product on the Russian electoral market has shrunk. The lack of ideology gave United Russia wide room for political maneuver, unlike the fragmented opposition. Indeed, the large policy distance between these parties created major obstacles to the formation of an anti-regime negative consensus coalition, which would include the Communists on the one hand and liberals on the other.<sup>72</sup> From a comparative perspective, opposition parties under dominant party regimes also prefer the preservation of the status quo (i.e., the continuity of dominant party rule) rather than their ideologically distant counterparts breaking through into power;<sup>73</sup> Russia was no exception here.

Finally, the genesis of the party of power doomed it to play a subordinate role in policy adoption and implementation; the top Kremlin officials needed party politicians as obedient followers rather than as autonomous partners. This produced a great asymmetry in terms of party government; while top federal and especially regional executive officials joined United Russia due to their status, rank-and-file party members were only occasionally rewarded with executive posts of secondary importance, based on their personal fortunes rather than party affiliation. Moreover, beyond the parliamentary and electoral arenas, the role of the party of power remained rather limited despite the aspirations of United Russia leaders. Even those members of the cabinet of ministers who joined United Russia held their posts by subordination to the president rather than to the party, and by no means exercised party influence on governmental policies. On the contrary, it was the party of power that pushed governmental policy through the State Duma and was forced to take up the challenge of political responsibility for unpopular policies, such

as the social benefits reform launched in January 2005 (after this reform, party performance in regional legislative elections was the lowest ever).<sup>74</sup> United Russia's negligible effect on policy making was to a large degree a byproduct of Russia's institutional design and its notoriously overwhelming presidential power, which diminished the role of other actors and agencies.<sup>75</sup> Putin's approach to government and policy making was ostensibly technocratic, leaving little room for party politics. These features of United Russia as a dominant party—external governance, nonideology, and its secondary role in policy making—produced certain consequences for Russia's political regime. In sharp contrast to the experience of Communist rule, which was best characterized as a "party-state" regime, the new electoral authoritarianism could be labeled "state-party"; not only did the dominant party itself informally serve as a branch of the presidential administration, but in Russia the very party system as such performed the same role.<sup>76</sup>

Post-Communist Russia exhibited a strong record of active involvement of top executive officials not only in the building of dominant parties, but also in the building of loyal and/or fake alternatives to them in the form of Kremlin satellites. These Kremlin-driven "projects" served two basic—and not mutually exclusive—goals: (1) to form a reserve or substitute for the party of power and avoid placing too many eggs in one basket (especially given the background of transitional uncertainty), and (2) to weaken the oppositions of various colors by splitting their votes with spoiler parties.<sup>77</sup> In the 2000s, the Kremlin, facing an oversupply of potential satellite parties, was very active in "inventing the opposition." Under its auspices, small leftist and nationalist parties established the Motherland ("Rodina") coalition before the 2003 elections, led by popular politicians Dmitri Rogozin and Sergei Glaziev. Its well-funded and much-publicized campaign, carried out with nationalist and populist slogans, was oriented toward diluting the Communist vote, and its electoral success exceeded initial expectations: Motherland won 9.1 percent of the eligible vote and established a parliamentary party in the State Duma. Soon after this, however, Motherland's leaders escaped the Kremlin's control; Glaziev ran in the presidential election of March 2004 without permission, and was expelled from the party's ranks. Aggressive nationalist campaigning by Rogozin and his party led to Motherland being denied registration in several regional legislative elections. Finally, in 2006, Rogozin was forced to resign from his post as party leader.<sup>78</sup> Motherland's precipitous rise and fall led the Kremlin into another venture, a satellite party intended to act both as a reserve to the party of power and to split the Communist vote. In 2006, the Kremlin initiated the merger of three previously established satellite parties (including the post-Rogozin Motherland) and the formation of a new party, A Just Russia (Spravedlivaya

Rossiya), which declared a leftist policy position and employed extensive socialist rhetoric. This was perceived as a major step toward the establishment of a "managed" two-party system in Russia. Vladislav Surkov, the chief Kremlin political strategist, even announced that while United Russia should remain the major Kremlin vehicle, or its "right leg," Just Russia would act as its substitute, like a "left leg," "if the right leg becomes numb." On the eve of the 2007 State Duma elections, polls showed strong potential for electoral support for Just Russia, and the "left leg" party became a Noah's Ark for many politicians with a previous record of partisanship, ranging from Communists to liberals.

Russia's experience of satellite party building in the 2000s was not so unique from a comparative perspective of authoritarian regimes. Besides some other post-Soviet states, such as Ukraine under Leonid Kuchma,<sup>79</sup> one might recall certain Communist regimes in Eastern Europe, which established loyal peasant or Christian parties in Poland and East Germany as channels of political control over targeted social milieus. Likewise, the Mexican party-based authoritarian regime preferred cooptation over repression in dealing with organized dissent.<sup>80</sup> It also used various channels to promote a number of satellite parties, which aimed to take votes from the real opposition, especially during the process of the PRI's decline in the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>81</sup> However, in Russia, shrinking party competition provided additional incentives for satellite parties. Party politicians outside United Russia were faced with a difficult choice between complete subordination and (relative) autonomy from the Kremlin; in fact, this was a choice between survival and possible extinction. The crisis faced by the liberal parties, such as the Union of Right Forces (which ceased to exist by 2008) and Yabloko (which lost representation in the State Duma and in regional assemblies), was the most vivid example of the latter threat.

According to several commentators' assessments, the barbeque agreement, which provided a balance of power between the state and Big Business, had a favorable effect both on the policy of economic reforms and on the preservation of political pluralism in Russia during the 2000–2003 period. However, this equilibrium was brought about only by ad hoc arrangements rather than structure-induced, let alone based on formal institutional guarantees.<sup>82</sup> As the barbecue agreement was only a tacit deal, its conditions could easily be revised unilaterally by the Kremlin.<sup>83</sup> The Russian authorities had strong incentives for such revisions based on both political and economic factors. In economic terms, the rapid rise in world oil prices and the increase of revenues from resource rent in the 2000s (especially compared with the 1990s) against the background of the significant increase in the coercive capacity of the Russian state pushed the Russian authorities into a statist economic

policy<sup>84</sup> and into re-examining the formal and informal rules of the game in their relations with business.<sup>85</sup> Under these conditions, the further extension of the Kremlin's political monopoly on the economic arena became the logical next step for the Russian authorities, especially as the idea of revising the outcomes of privatization and restoring the predominance of state ownership also had significant support in Russian society.<sup>86</sup> A major revision of property rights in this sense looked like a very rational decision from the Kremlin's perspective, especially in the wake of the 2003 parliamentary election campaign.

On October 25, 2003, Mikhail Khodorkovsky, the majority owner and CEO of Yukos, the biggest Russian private oil company, was arrested on charges of tax evasion and later given a long jail sentence. According to a number of observers, the basic reasons for his arrest were purely political in nature. They were connected with Khodorkovsky's aspiration to lobby his interests in the parliament, and his support at elections of various parties whose lists included his protégés, and also with his intentions to sell his stakes in Yukos to American oil companies (possible buyers named were Chevron and Conoco Phillips), as well as his plans to actively participate in politics himself.<sup>87</sup> Khodorkovsky's arrest soon resulted in Yukos's collapse: the key company shares were sold to pay off its debts. At the same time, the Russian authorities used opaque financial schemes and acted through dummy intermediaries to ensure that major assets of producing and processing enterprises previously belonging to Yukos were placed under the control of the state oil company Rosneft, where the board of directors was headed by Putin's close ally Igor Sechin. At the same time, Yukos's assets were acquired by Rosneft far below their market price. Anders Aslund and Vadim Volkov, analyzing the fate of the Russian oligarchs of the early twenty-first century by comparison with American "robber barons" in the early twentieth century, noted the fundamental differences in the logic of antioligarchic campaigns in the Russian case. As a result of the Yukos affair, the outcome of the conflict between business and the Russian state was not just the bankruptcy and subsequent decay of the oligarchs, initiated by the authorities (as in the case of Standard Oil in the United States, for example), but also a fundamental revision of property rights that was launched in subsequent years.<sup>88</sup> In fact, the Yukos affair was a turning point in the relationship between the Russian state and business, marking a major change from the temporary balance of the bar-beque agreement to "business capture" by the Russian state, and the further rise of the "predatory state" model in Russian state-business relationships.<sup>89</sup> In practice, this model meant that state officials gained plenty of opportunities for rent-seeking due to the imposition of direct and/or indirect control over major assets and their owners, and were able to use them as cash cows

both for state-directed purposes (such as extraordinary large-scale corporate philanthropy)<sup>90</sup> and for private gains. The Yukos affair greatly contributed to the process of revision of property rights and to the creeping nationalization of a number of profitable assets in various sectors of Russian economy, while Putin's followers became the key beneficiaries of this process.<sup>91</sup>

To summarize, one should evaluate the strategy of Russia's authoritarian regime building under Putin's first presidency in the 2000s as a success story for the Kremlin. By 2007, none of political actors in the country were able to resist Putin. Opposition political parties had been pushed into narrow niches, if not ghettos, and were even regarded as a "dying species":<sup>92</sup> their presence in federal and regional legislatures was symbolic, their capacity for mobilization was weak, and their public support was low. Nonpartisan opposition politics was even less meaningful; regular and loud antisystem protest gatherings in Moscow and other cities brought together mere hundreds of activists, who were justly perceived as an irrelevant minority. And even though numerous instances of local protests, ranging from environmental to cultural protection movements, mushroomed across the country, these movements aimed to avoid politicization of their activism at any cost, and preferred to deal with specific issues rather than blaming the regime as such (as otherwise their goals had zero chance of success).<sup>93</sup> After the Yukos affair, oligarchs were ready to transfer their assets to the Kremlin upon request in exchange for personal freedom and well-being, and tended to avoid any political accent to their business: indeed, they were able to develop their companies successfully due to close connections with federal and regional officialdom. The major media (especially TV) were under the direct or indirect control of the Kremlin, and independent and/or oppositional publications and Internet resources were limited to the relatively narrow niches of their politicized audiences. At the same time, the power vertical went from the regions down to cities and towns, especially after the abolition of popular mayoral elections in some big cities and further shrinking of the political and economic autonomy of local governments.<sup>94</sup> To summarize, the efforts of authoritarian regime building in Russia in the 2000s brought numerous substantive changes, which had a major impact on further political developments.

### **AUTHORITARIAN REGIME BUILDING: TOWARD AN "INSTITUTIONAL TRAP"**

At first glance, the wave of political and institutional changes of the 2000s in Russia should have made the dream of some Kremlin strategists, that of the restoration of a "good Soviet Union," into reality. The Russian authoritarian regime in many ways resembled certain political arrangements of the power

monopoly of the Soviet era, without the major deficiencies of the Communist regime. Indeed, centrally managed control over major Russian actors replaced the ungovernable political autonomy that actors had had in the 1990s; the uncertainty of electoral competition was eradicated under unfree and unfair elections; subnational authorities became integrated into the hierarchy of the “power vertical”; and local markets were to some degree taken over by vertically integrated state-owned companies led by Gazprom. Russia’s regions and cities were governed by officials de facto appointed from the center, with the formal approval of the subnational elite. Even the forms of “state corporatism” implemented both nationwide and subnationally were similar to that which was present during the Communist period.<sup>95</sup> However, United Russia was not a new reincarnation of the Communist Party, the role of Gazprom and other large companies was very different from the unilateral dominance displayed by Soviet branch ministries, and governors and city mayors did not become “post-Soviet prefects.”<sup>96</sup> Although the noncompetitive nature of the political regime and the monopolist economy, based on resource rents, demonstrated striking similarities between the patterns of Soviet and post-Soviet politics, the differences were also crucial. They related to the very heart of the nature of the post-Soviet regime in Russia, the rationale behind its public support, and the nature of its legitimacy, and this is why the claim of the “Sovietization” of politics in post-Soviet Russia is superficial and misleading.<sup>97</sup>

The Soviet authoritarian regime employed “elections without choice,” non-competitive and almost meaningless voting only for the approved candidates, much as in many “classical” authoritarian regimes.<sup>98</sup> Post-Soviet Russian authoritarianism not only was unable to avoid elections, but used this institution as the source of its legitimacy; Putin (like Yeltsin before him) based his rule upon a popular mandate received from the voters. Moreover, elections as such became an unavoidable element of Russian politics, and their results in many ways reflected mass political preferences as well as political formations among the elite. But the very nature of national elections (at least, after 1996 Yeltsin’s reelection bid) did not imply any democratic uncertainty: in other words, there was no election outcome that had not been set up by the ruling group well in advance. On the contrary, election outcomes were designed before polls, and the act of voting served as formal voter approval of the decisions taken by the Kremlin. Thus, voter approval did not affect the political regime, government formation or policy making. This was the logic of electoral authoritarianism, which is based upon deliberately designed unfair rules of the game and their heavily biased implementation at all stages of campaigning (including, but not limited to, electoral fraud). This mode of elections under authoritarianism was a typical instance of “virtual politics,” as Andrew Wilson labeled this phe-

nomenon (while he called it post-Soviet “faking democracy,” it was in fact neither democracy nor specifically post-Soviet).<sup>99</sup> It develops as a byproduct of: (1) the power monopoly of resourceful political elite; (2) the passivity of voters; (3) the control of the rulers over major information streams; (4) the lack of international influence on the conduct of elections. All these conditions for successful authoritarian elections were already in place in Russia in the 1990s, and in the 2000s their influence became even more visible.

Meanwhile, the means of restraining political competition were very different in various electoral authoritarian regimes. Some authoritarian rulers widely employ “hard” methods of exclusion of their rivals from electoral contest (such as selective denial of the registration of candidates and/or party lists in the run-up to campaigns, and/or widespread electoral fraud). But most authoritarian regimes preferred to use (or, rather, abuse) “soft” methods of controlling authoritarian elections. These methods involved blatantly unequal access of candidates and parties to media and political funding, and full-fledged mobilization of the state apparatus to secure the rulers’ electoral victory.<sup>100</sup> Although in both instances authoritarian elections are unfair, their consequences are very different. Reliance primarily upon hard methods is a rather risky strategy because it may damage the regime’s legitimacy, especially if and when the ruling groups are unable to meet all four above-mentioned conditions. In the case of mass antiregime protests, it could even ruin authoritarian rule, if the costs of coercion of the opposition (both before and after the polls) become excessive. Mass electoral fraud during voting in the cases of Serbia (2000), Georgia (2003), Ukraine (2005), and Kyrgyzstan (2005) contributed to the breakdown of authoritarian regimes against a background of opposition-led mass mobilization. Conversely, soft methods of restraining political competition impose severe costs on the ruling groups during electoral campaigns and polling days, but they allow them to decrease the risk of delegitimation, not to mention the risk of power loss. It is thus natural that the rulers of electoral authoritarian regimes *ceteris paribus* prefer soft methods over hard ones.

The Russian electoral authoritarian regime in the 2000s was no exception. Although the scope of electoral fraud in Russia, according to numerous studies, became more widespread and its geographical area broadened over time,<sup>101</sup> these issues of Russian electoral politics were more or less the tip of the iceberg. Other institutional and political factors affected the outcomes of authoritarian elections to a greater degree. They included: (1) prohibitively high entry barriers for parties and candidates; (2) one-sided and biased media coverage of elections; (3) direct and indirect state funding of incumbents’ electoral campaigns, and informal control over the political funding of other parties and candidates; (4) systematic use of the state apparatus and of the public sector

as a whole for incumbents' campaigns, as well as to inhibit opposition campaigns; and (5) biased resolution of election disputes in favor of incumbents. These became undeniable features of elections in 2000s Russia, being typical entries from the broad "menu of manipulations" of many electoral authoritarian regimes in the world.<sup>102</sup>

Some experts even considered the actual voting under Russia's electoral authoritarian regimes not to be elections (even unfair ones), but rather, "electionlike events" which had no electoral relevance.<sup>103</sup> But even without going that far, one should recognize that the regular holding of unfree and unfair elections was greatly useful for the Kremlin in several respects. First, they legitimized the status quo political regime, as in the case of the 2004 presidential elections, when Putin received 71 percent of the vote without any meaningful competition. Second, they legitimized all the ruling group's policy directions, irrespective of voter preferences. Third, they served as a mechanism for elite turnover, not via political competition but through appointing prospective winners of elections long before polling day (similarly to Putin's appointment for the 2000 elections, and later, Medvedev's for the 2008 elections). These electoral practices differed widely from both late-Soviet "elections without choice" and the democratic standards of free and fair elections, and maintained Russia's authoritarian regime as long as the imposed consensus of the elite was effectively managed by the Kremlin and the formal and informal rules of the game preserved a nondemocratic equilibrium.

In sum, by the end of Putin's second term, Russia's rulers were able to accomplish their goals of consolidating an authoritarian regime and successfully building its major institutions, an institutional "core" of the Russian political regime.<sup>104</sup> These institutions are the following: (1) a unilateral presidential monopoly on adopting key political decisions (the regime's personalism); (2) a taboo on open electoral competition among the elite, with unfree and unfair elections (electoral authoritarianism); and (3) de facto hierarchical subordination of regional and local authorities to the central government (the power vertical).

These institutional arrangements, which declared a leftist policy position and are clearly imperfect because for several reasons: their inherent and notorious inefficiency due to extremely high corruption; hidden but fairly stiff competition between interest groups ("the Kremlin towers") for rent access and resource redistribution; and, eventually, the ruling groups' inability to implement policies that could challenge the current equilibrium, which also explains the ineffective attempts at authoritarian modernization of Russia. Nevertheless, if the rules of the game do not fully "serve the interests of those with the bargaining power to devise new rules,"<sup>105</sup> to use Douglas North's well-known phrase, they at least avoid infringing upon those interests today.

However, behind the façade of the political equilibrium, bitter disappointment and growing discontent with the current status quo regime did emerge (as clearly indicated by the 2008 survey of Russia's elite).<sup>106</sup> However, political support of the status quo is not the only reason to maintain political equilibrium. The alternatives to the status quo may look even more unattractive or unrealistic; more importantly, the costs of transition from the existing political order to something else seem prohibitively high. The business community fears new property redistribution, while the employees of state-dependent enterprises are afraid of structural reforms and unemployment; the "systemic" opposition, which remains loyal to the regime, believes that regime change will significantly reduce its influence, and so on. In addition, the bitter memory of the numerous troubles during the triple transition in the aftermath of the collapse of Communism reminds many Russians that a new wave of regime change might be very painful. In short, many of the actors and ordinary people discontent with the status quo see its continuation as a lesser evil in comparison with major regime change. It is unsurprising that, later on, the protests of 2011–2012 received little support even from those social groups that were quite critical of the Russian regime.<sup>107</sup> As long as the costs of the status quo equilibrium do not exceed its current benefits for the ruling groups and society at large, this equilibrium will be endorsed by those who have little incentive to challenge it. Thus, the "institutional trap"—a stable but socially ineffective equilibrium that almost no one wants to break—becomes a fundamental part of Russian politics.<sup>108</sup>

Such political equilibrium may well prove self-enforced—not only due to the lack or weakness of serious actors capable of challenging the regime, but also because of the inertia created by the institutional arrangements that were established in the 1990s and especially in the 2000s. To put it simply, the longer the current status quo regime is maintained, the more costly it is to overcome.

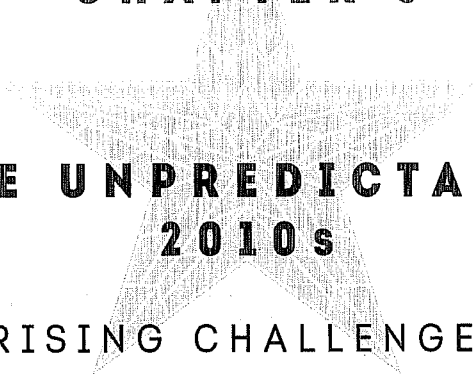
Examples of institutional traps of this kind are ubiquitous in everyday life, but also extensively present in politics. Political stagnation in the Soviet Union under Brezhnev, when virtually the same winning coalition retained power for almost twenty years, was the most prominent experience of the institutional trap in recent Russian history. The winning coalition had no incentives to conduct even minor reforms, to say nothing of major regime changes, while the demand for change among the elite and the general public remained latent at best. No wonder that the time for transforming the Soviet political regime came and went, and when Mikhail Gorbachev initiated its radical revival, the subsequent institutional changes were ill-prepared and inconsistent, finally driving the political regime and the Soviet state to collapse. Although the parallels between Russia's political regime in the 2000s and the late-Soviet stag-



nation of the 1970s and early 1980s are apparent and widespread in the media and popular books,<sup>109</sup> they are often somewhat superficial. Still, the concept of the institutional trap and its pernicious consequences is relevant for analysis of present-day Russia as much as of the last decades of the Soviet Union.

As a result, Russia finds itself in a situation where even if the elite and the public agree on the urgent need for major institutional changes, the only real incentives for political actors to effect these changes are genuine threats to their political survival. They understand the impossibility of implementing such changes without those who actually launch this meaningful disequilibrium incurring considerable losses. As long as the “stability” offered by the Kremlin is sustained, Russia ends up in a vicious cycle; the longer a status quo regime persists, the smaller the chances of successfully overcoming the institutional trap it has found itself in. In addition, numerous institutional barriers and the fragmentation of political actors hinder collective actions aimed at challenging the current status quo. Indeed, the current political equilibrium effectively creates incentives for the ruling groups to preserve the status quo at any cost as an end in itself; at the same time, the notorious inefficiency of political institutions narrows the time horizons for major actors, making them sacrifice long-term goals for the sake of short-term gains here and now. These incentives hinder even the policies of sectoral reforms, which do not affect the major institutions of the regime as such, and do not directly involve risk-taking and potential threats to its survival. Even if the Kremlin sincerely wishes to improve the quality of governance and/or the rule of law, its efforts face great obstacles caused by the institutional trap. As for the major institutional changes that could result in opening up political competition, they lie beyond the Kremlin’s agenda; Russia’s rulers have learned from Gorbachev’s perestroika experience that politicians who launch political liberalization run a major risk of losing power. Hence, they must place a “No Entry” sign in front of this path. As a result, Russia is in a situation where even if both the elite and society at large understand the deadly need for major regime changes, this has not produced incentives to reject the status quo, given perceptions of almost inevitable significant losses for virtually all political and economic actors and for the country as a whole. This paradox of low-level authoritarian regime equilibrium has also demonstrated its vulnerability to exogenous challenges that could emerge as a byproduct of the changing domestic and international environment. No wonder that the Russian political equilibrium of the 2000s was only partial and became severely shaken (yet not overthrown) in the 2010s—first by the outside pressure of political protests in 2011–2012 and then by the top leadership of the country after 2014.

## CHAPTER 5



THE UNPREDICTABLE  
2010s  
RISING CHALLENGES

**ON FEBRUARY 21, 2014,** Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovych fled Kiev, leaving his post after three months of large-scale street protests in the center of the capital. These protests began when Yanukovych, under strong pressure from Russia, refused to sign an association agreement with the European Union. The government used various means of countering these protests, including shooting some of the regime’s rivals, but in the end the result was the de facto ousting of Yanukovych: the day after his escape, the Ukrainian parliament voted for his removal from the job and called for new presidential elections.<sup>1</sup> As the Kremlin condemned this regime change in Ukraine as a coup d’état plotted by American and European donors (who openly expressed their support for protesters), the Russian authorities considered these developments a major challenge for their own regime. The wave of postelection protests that occurred in the 2000s in a number of post-Soviet countries (including Ukraine), dubbed the “color revolutions,” had been a serious warning call for the Kremlin, and served as a reason to diminish political and civic freedoms in Russia in order to remove the possibility of similarly losing power due to mass protests.<sup>2</sup> Although the dangers of a color revolution in Russia were widely exaggerated (and had a limited impact on the regime later on, during the 2011–2012 postelection protests), perceptions of these risks contributed to the Kremlin’s politics of preemptive counterrevolution.<sup>3</sup> Ten years on, the consequences of Ukrainian regime change appear much more frightening for the Kremlin: one can easily imagine Putin one day sharing the fate of his Ukrainian counterpart, albeit in somewhat different circumstances.

The reaction from the Kremlin was asymmetrical and far-reaching. Soon after the regime change in Ukraine, Putin initiated annexation of the Crimean peninsula (a region that has belonged to Ukraine since 1954 and is still used as a naval base for the Russian Black Sea fleet). Predictably, the annexation

caused a furious reaction both from Ukraine and from Western countries, which placed sanctions on the top Russian and Crimean officials involved in this process. However, Russia did not stop there, and extended its appetites to the entire area of southern and eastern Ukraine, which was considered “Novorossiia” (“New Russia”), heavily populated by Russian-speaking residents and presumably loyal to the Russian rather than the new Ukrainian leadership. These attempts largely failed in many regions of Ukraine. However, in Donbass, the industrial hub of eastern Ukraine, which had previously served as a local power base for Yanukovich, Russia-sponsored separatists proclaimed the emergence of so-called “people’s republics” and de facto usurped power. The Ukrainian army and the National Guard (formed from volunteers) launched ground operations against the rebels, who were armed and backed by the Russian military. In July 2014, a Malaysian Airlines Boeing-777 flying from Amsterdam to Kuala Lumpur was shot down over the separatist-controlled zone, presumably by a Russian surface-to-air missile, and almost 300 people were killed. Since the Russian authorities denied accusations and shifted blame to the Ukrainian military, a new round of Western sanctions (which affected not only individuals but also major Russian businesses, including energy and financial sectors) became inevitable. The Kremlin, in turn, only fueled the confrontation with the West, announcing countersanctions in the form of an import ban on many food products from the European Union, the United States, and several other countries. Furthermore, in August 2014, when Ukrainian troops nearly defeated the separatist rebels, Russian military forces encroached into the territory of Donbass and, using heavy arms, pushed the Ukrainians out of the separatist-controlled area.<sup>4</sup> The ceasefire agreement of September 2014 stopped casualties for a while but did not bring peace and stability to these regions of Ukraine.

An analysis of the impact of Ukrainian developments on Russia’s foreign policy and on international relations across the globe is beyond the scope of this book. But their impact on Russian domestic politics was remarkable. With the annexation of Crimea, Putin’s popularity skyrocketed in the eyes of Russian citizens, who were proud of this vivid demonstration of the Russian state’s coercive capacity and military power, especially since even before the annexation many had considered Crimea to belong to Russia.<sup>5</sup> “Then again, Crimea is ours!” (*zato Krym nash!*) became the slogan of the season, marked by a “rally around the Russian flag.”<sup>6</sup> These changes in public mood gave free rein to the Kremlin, which used the opportunity to target the opposition, suppressing public dissent, toughening regulations, and diminishing the chances of Putin’s dominance being undermined from within by the “fifth column” of so-called “national traitors.” The Russian media orchestrated an aggressive,

furious campaign against the West, its Ukrainian allies, and Western-oriented Russians (portrayed as “fascists”), far exceeding the degree of confrontation during the Cold War. To paraphrase the Boney M song *Rasputin*, which was popular in the 1970s, what the country became in the 2010s under Putin’s reign was “Russia’s greatest hate machine,” dangerous both to the outside world and to its own citizens. At the same time, the Russian regime became more personalist and securitized, its policy making became more spontaneous, and its reliance upon the inner circle of cronies and the security apparatus increased many risks both for the elite and for society at large, making the Kremlin’s next moves less and less predictable.<sup>7</sup> By the end of 2014, against the background of increasing economic troubles, rising inflation, and sharp depreciation of the Russian national currency, the quality of policy making at the level of agenda formation, professional expertise, and principal decisions drastically declined. Although some of these tendencies have been observed since 2012, after Putin’s return to presidential office,<sup>8</sup> the major shift in Russia’s behavior in the international arena has greatly accelerated the drive toward domestic changes.

Nevertheless, by the end of 2014 the electoral authoritarian regime in Russia preserved the same institutional “core,” which had emerged in the 1990s and been strengthened in the 2000s. Even so, in the 2010s the regime was increasingly faced with new challenges, both domestically and internationally. These challenges did not only result from exogenous shocks (such as the 2008 global economic crisis or the Ukrainian regime change) or from risky moves initiated by the Kremlin (such as Putin’s presidential job swap with Dmitry Medvedev in 2008–2012 or Russia’s aggressive confrontation with the West over Ukraine). Rather, they are inherent to many electoral authoritarian regimes around the globe. Even though it is too early to speak of a full-fledged crisis of Russian authoritarianism, let alone the possibility of its failure, the challenges to the regime raised in recent years are fundamental and unavoidable. What was the nature of these challenges, were they inevitable, why did they emerge “here and now,” why was the Kremlin able to cope with them, and how might these developments affect the further evolutionary trajectory of Russia’s political regime? This chapter is devoted to the search for answers to these questions.

## CHALLENGES TO RUSSIAN AUTHORITARIANISM

The belief in the crucial importance of information problems for the survival of authoritarian regimes<sup>9</sup> has become conventional wisdom among scholars. However, the salience of these problems and the mechanisms of their political effects vary greatly in different types of autocracies. While traditional mon-

archies as well as one-party regimes have been able to develop some plausible solutions, electoral authoritarian regimes face irresolvable problems. In a narrow sense, the very nature of political competition turns unfree and unfair elections into a crucial test for the survival of electoral authoritarian regimes in various parts of the globe.<sup>10</sup> The rulers of these regimes must not only defeat their challengers in unfair elections, but also persuade their fellow citizens and foreign nations to recognize such victories, and muffle the voices complaining about electoral unfairness.<sup>11</sup> But in the broader sense, the source of challenges lies beyond postelection protests, and relates to the rulers' need to maintain a number of institutions that are typical for democracies (not only elections but also parliaments, political parties, NGOs, semi-independent media, etc.) and serve the purposes of securing the authoritarian status quo. This maintenance requires a delicate balance between the three political pillars of authoritarian equilibrium: "lies, fear, and economic prosperity," in the words of Adam Przeworski.<sup>12</sup> If one of these three pillars is questioned, then the rulers' involuntary use of the two others is not always successful—especially for those regimes that previously relied upon carrots rather than sticks: in other words, ones that did not make heavy use of repressions<sup>13</sup> and preferred cooptation rather than coercion as instruments of maintaining their stability.<sup>14</sup> Russia has belonged to this group of authoritarian regimes (and, at present, continues to do so), and responding to various challenges has become an increasingly daunting task for its rulers over time.

When the equilibrium of the "institutional trap" was achieved during Vladimir Putin's second term, the Kremlin faced a dual challenge. In terms of politics, the temporary job swap between Putin and Medvedev during the interregnum of 2008–2012 was a risky game. But in practice, the regime's losses of legitimacy, which initially resembled major cracks in the wall in the wake of the 2011–2012 postelection protests, were short-term and more or less successfully minimized over time. In terms of governance, the idea of major advancement of the country's economic performance and international influence (vigorously advocated during Medvedev's presidency under the label of "modernization") remained wishful thinking at best, due to the lack of institutional mechanisms for implementation of such an ambitious project. To put it simply, political and institutional constraints buried any hopes of turning the Russia of the 2010s into a new South Korea of the 1970s.<sup>15</sup> The path-dependency of the regime's evolutionary trajectory seems unavoidable, and it is no wonder that a number of scholars and experts on Russian politics, economics, and society (including this author) consider inertia-based scenarios of Russia's development to be the most realistic, and deem it inclined to follow the status quo bias, typical of many discussions of that kind.<sup>16</sup>

The gap between ambitions and reality against the background of increasing information problems (especially after the unexpected rise of protests of 2011–2012) contributed to an increased perception of threat by the Kremlin after Putin's return to presidential office in 2012. On the one hand, the Kremlin attempted to avoid the dangers associated with losing legitimacy through the use of cooptation, offering Russian citizens further increases of salaries and pensions (irrespective of the prospects of the country's economic development).<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, further institutional changes were aimed at containing dissent through more tough and repressive regulations of freedom of speech (as well as other freedoms), discrediting and frightening the regime's potential opponents, and selective targeting and coercing of its open rivals. As Russians' relative economic prosperity has served the Kremlin's purposes in the 2010s less effectively than it had in the 2000s, it relies more and more upon lies and fear.

These tendencies had been developing consistently yet relatively slowly until the sudden regime change in Ukraine in February 2014, which accelerated all processes on domestic front. In terms of politics, the "winning coalition" around Putin has been reshuffled, the role of the coercive apparatus has been increased, and the government, formally led by the prime minister, Medvedev, plays only a technical role in decision making in most important policy areas. In addition, the regime has easily contained its domestic challengers: with the Russian public largely enthusiastic about the Kremlin's foreign policy, the political opposition has lost the initiative, and has failed to propose alternative solutions to the country's problems and make them part of the public agenda. As a result, its impact on Russia's agenda has been diminished while the Kremlin's harsh targeting of the "fifth column" has met with little resistance: the strategic and organizational potential of the opposition has been challenged, and its very capacity for organized political dissent is also in question. In terms of governance, the economic doctrine of priorities of state-led capitalist development (which lies behind many policies implemented since 2000)<sup>18</sup> has not been rejected but de facto abandoned for the sake of immediate reactions to external threats, involving not only economic countersanctions but also the militarization and securitization of the economy and society. These strategic changes will aggravate Russia's economic problems in coming years, although the relatively large margin of its strength (which was achieved due to the tremendous growth of 1999–2008) averts the risk of major decline, let alone collapse, in the short term.

While it is too early to predict the consequences of ongoing international and domestic changes on Russia's political regime, it would not be a great exaggeration to argue that by the end of 2014 its state was in sharp contrast to

the period of the (in)famous 2000s. During the first two terms of Putin's presidency, electoral authoritarianism in Russia was on the rise, but in the 2010s it experienced a major decline. Yet even a declining trajectory of the life cycle of any regime—especially a nondemocratic one—does not necessarily mean that it will become extinct in the foreseeable future or that it will be inevitably transformed into an “uncertain something else,” as Guillermo O'Donnell and Philippe Schmitter described the demise of many authoritarian regimes in the 1980s.<sup>19</sup> Rather, one should focus on analysis of the causes and consequences of this decline: how and why has the developmental trend of Russian authoritarian regime shifted, and to what extent were these shifts driven by exogenous factors as opposed to by Russia's actors themselves? To answer this question, I will reassess the strategy of the Kremlin (and also its domestic rivals, the opposition) in the 2010s, as well as the opportunities and constraints that these strategies met with, and the consequences of major choices by Russia's rulers for the further trajectory of political regime change in Russia.

### **AUTHORITARIAN “MODERNIZATION”: EMPTY ILLUSIONS**

Leadership succession is the Achilles's heel of many authoritarian regimes—few of them are able to find a minimally painful solution for dynastic continuity (as in Azerbaijan).<sup>20</sup> But for electoral authoritarian regimes, leadership change is a particularly painful and risky venture in terms of their legitimation, and it can pose major challenges to a regime's survival (the Ukrainian experience in 2004 offers a vivid example of this point).<sup>21</sup> From this perspective, the major intrigue of the 2007–2008 election cycle in Russia was not so much about the voting itself as about the possibilities of the subsequent presidential succession. The limit of the presidential term in office, two four-year periods, as had been included in the 1993 Russian constitution by Yeltsin's liberal advisors, posed a major challenge to Putin, whose second term would expire in the spring of 2008. He faced a difficult dilemma. One option was the revision of the constitution and abolishment (or extension) of presidential term limits, or the adoption of a completely new constitution, or even the elimination of any constitution as a legal set of formal rules of the game for Russia. Putin could openly shift from Yeltsin's above-mentioned concept (“to put it bluntly, somebody had to be the boss in the country; that's all there was to it”) to the maxim openly declared by the new chair of the Central Electoral Commission of Russia, Vladimir Churov, appointed in 2007: “Putin is always right.” This was an option previously employed by the leaders of several post-Soviet electoral authoritarian regimes (ranging from Alexander Lukashenko in Belarus to Nursultan Nazarbayev in Kazakhstan) or, beyond post-Soviet areas, in regimes such as Egypt under Hosni Mubarak. The alter-

native to this solution was for Putin to choose a loyal successor as a new head of the state, with his/her further legitimation via popular vote. According to some surveys, public opinion in Russia (which remained unconcerned with democracy as such, but approved elections as a mechanism of legitimation of rulers)<sup>22</sup> was divided over the issue of the continuation of Putin's presidency, and did not decisively object to this option:<sup>23</sup> in terms of the domestic agenda at least, Putin had more or less free rein. In December 2007, after the State Duma elections, when United Russia officially received 64.3 percent of the popular vote and gained 315 out of 450 seats in the legislature, Putin finally announced his decision. As a prospective candidate for a new presidency, he proposed Dmitry Medvedev, the first deputy prime minister and the former chief of his administration, who had often been mentioned as Putin's potential designated successor for a presidential role. Without any meaningful resistance, Medvedev received more than 70 percent of eligible votes during the presidential elections in March 2008, while Putin, according to the openly announced preliminary agreement with his chosen successor, accepted the job of prime minister, thus retaining many levers of political control. One should note that even though, according to several expert analyses, the 2007–2008 elections in Russia demonstrated an unprecedented level of fraud,<sup>24</sup> they appeared very differently to Russian eyes. As mass survey data demonstrated, most of the voters evaluated the elections as “fair,” despite widespread fraud and manipulation,<sup>25</sup> and one of the focus group participants quite naively (or cynically?) noted that “everything was fair . . . but 50 percent of the results were falsified.”<sup>26</sup>

We may never be able to answer precisely the question of why Putin and his team chose not to retain all power levers in their hands “once and for all” and instead decided to transfer formal powers to the designated successor. Such a scheme was risky for Putin, because any successor could behave unpredictably upon acquiring huge constitutional powers, and the threat of disloyalty was unavoidable. But the problem was that the costs of turning the electoral authoritarian regime (with its democratic mimicry) into a naked and unequivocal “classical” form of authoritarianism were quite high because of its dubious domestic and, especially, international legitimacy. Besides the nuisance of being associated with the category of dictators such as Lukashenko and Karimov, in the event of the abolition of presidential term limits, Russia's elite would face major problems legalizing their incomes and property in the West. But most probably, the answer is that status quo electoral authoritarianism largely satisfied the Kremlin's wishes, despite certain costs of maintaining the regime, and the incentives for further major changes were not sufficient. If so, then Putin's dilemma was resolved nearly by default, given the widespread

predictions of inertia and the expectation that the domestic and international environment of the regime would be preserved at least during Medvedev's four-year term in office. These expectations related to the continuity of rapid economic growth, to the further rise of global oil prices, and to the political apathy and nonparticipation of many Russian citizens, against the background of a weak opposition and the lack of any meaningful alternatives to the political status quo.

It would seem at first glance that Vladimir Putin's maneuver in 2007–2008, when he picked Dmitry Medvedev to be a loyal successor, a temporary substitute or “acting president” for a mere four years, and secured major leverages by governing the country as prime minister with the expectation of returning to the presidency in 2012, was worth an A+ from the college for dictators. Although these expectations were questioned during the 2011–2012 electoral cycle, which posed certain challenges to electoral authoritarianism in Russia, they were not entirely wrong. To a certain degree, these risks were inevitable and a tolerable price for preserving the continuity of power of the same ruling group. However, several expectations related to maintaining the political status quo in the 2010s did not materialize, for largely unpredictable reasons.<sup>27</sup>

The first major challenge to the regime emerged in the series of protests by Russian citizens in the aftermath of the December 4, 2011, parliamentary elections. The scope of this mass mobilization was unprecedented for the country; no antisystemic political protests since the Soviet collapse had ever had so many participants. These protests strongly contrasted with Russia's previous experience of unfair elections: the public did not refuse to accept the results. So why did some of these voters so dramatically rebel against the status quo four years later and why was this rebellion unsuccessful and short-lived?

The answer can be found through close examination of the interim period of 2008–2011, which was marked by certain efforts to improve the regime's performance and decorate its democratic façade, but in the end contributed to its disequilibrium. On the regime's side, the “ruling tandem” mechanism, where Putin and Medvedev shared executive power as the prime minister and the president respectively, had a few flaws. Although Medvedev was nothing but Putin's puppet, he played the role of a “good cop” and attempted to demonstrate his good intentions by promoting the ideas of economic modernization and political liberalization, thereby giving rise to great expectations of improvement from the domestic and international public. By contrast, Putin partly remained in his shadow as a “bad cop,” in charge of routine day-to-day management and retaining major leverages of control in his hands.

Had this mechanism been only an artificial, manipulative façade concealing Putin's full-fledged control over decision making, then it could have brought some benefit to the Kremlin. However, the division of labor within the ruling tandem was imperfect, and the signals the Kremlin sent to Russian society were somewhat inconsistent. Medvedev attempted to present himself as an independent political leader, autonomous from his partner. This led to major uncertainty among both the elite and society at large, especially when Putin's plan to return to the presidency was not disclosed until September 2011. No wonder that the problem of multiple agency (in other words, being servants of two masters) to some extent disoriented the state apparatus, which escaped the political leaders' control and, given the short time horizon, mostly remained passive and demobilized. The Kremlin reacted to this political slackness cautiously, due to the very fact that Medvedev was not able to control his own state apparatus; he placed only a handful of his personal cronies in powerful positions in the Kremlin, and had limited opportunities to fire incompetent and/or corrupt officials in the central government and the presidential administration. Before 2007–2008, the Kremlin invested major resources in building United Russia as a dominant party of power and in strengthening the power vertical through a series of informal contracts with heavyweight regional governors. Later, though, United Russia became merely the legislative and electoral arm of the top officials, with no autonomy from the Kremlin.<sup>28</sup> In addition, the power vertical faced a major overhaul under Medvedev. Several long-serving regional governors were removed and were sometimes replaced by politically inexperienced newcomers, who were often unpopular among both local notables and citizens. Finally, the weakest links of the power vertical, the elected city mayors, were in many cases replaced by nonelected city managers, who came under some criticism from the local elite and urban residents.<sup>29</sup> This Kremlin approach aggravated principal-agent problems in regional and local governance and diminished the role of the power vertical to delivering votes for the Kremlin at all costs, irrespective of the performance of subnational authorities.<sup>30</sup>

Nevertheless, Medvedev also offered a positive agenda for Russia during his presidency, even if it was not implemented. His slogan of “modernization” was loudly proclaimed in numerous public statements as well as in some presidential decrees and laws, but had very little practical effect. The version of Russian modernization advocated by Medvedev was very narrow and self-contained. After all, the process of modernization in the contemporary world (the variety of competing definitions and approaches notwithstanding) includes not only socioeconomic advancements (such as industrialization, urbanization, an increase in well-being, the spread of education, increasing



mobility, and the decline of inequality) but also major political changes (such as the promotion of political rights and liberties, competitive elections and party systems, the separation of powers, etc.).<sup>31</sup> However, in Russia under Medvedev the very discussion of political modernization was perceived by the Kremlin as a kind of taboo; at best, it was considered a mid-term goal, but not an urgent matter for the country's development.<sup>32</sup> The Kremlin understood the catchword "modernization" not as a broader agenda of comprehensive change, but rather as a narrow set of policies aimed only at Russia's economic advancement. Its approach is focused on the acceleration of the development of information technology and other high-tech sectors of Russian economy, more active international integration of the country into the globalized world, and improvement of the quality of governance, without implying major steps toward the democratization of Russia's political regime. The political dimension of Russian modernization under Medvedev was deliberately limited to rhetorical liberalization, which assumed no practical implications. In other words, Medvedev's policy agenda was based upon the idea of narrow economic modernization under authoritarianism, both as a goal and as a condition for Russia's successful development.<sup>33</sup>

Although certain experts cautiously expressed some hopes in regard to Medvedev's modernization,<sup>34</sup> most critical observers noted that his loud rhetoric was little more than a demagogical smokescreen, intended to provide domestic and international audiences with illusory prospects of positive change in Russia while in fact it only concerned the preservation of the status quo.<sup>35</sup> Although these accusations are not groundless, and the Kremlin often used modernization slogans for the purpose of manipulative virtual politics, it would be misleading and superficial to consider Medvedev's policy agenda only in this respect. In many ways, this agenda reflected the genuine intentions of the Russian elite, which understood the need for major reforms in terms of economic development and quality of governance in Russia. The notorious inefficiency of the hierarchical power vertical, incredibly high corruption, constant conflicts between "Kremlin's towers" over the redistribution of rents, and Russia's sensitive losses in international arenas became inescapable features of governance in Russia prior to the 2008–2009 global economic crisis (which, in turn, only aggravated these problems). In a sense, Medvedev's rhetoric of modernization merely reflected the elite's major dissatisfaction with these elements of Putin's legacy, and their desire for major improvements in at least some policy areas.<sup>36</sup> But in practice this policy agenda was reduced to words without deeds. And the failure of the very program of authoritarian modernization was filled with principal systemic flaws that made its implementation in post-Soviet Russia impossible.

Critics of the authoritarian modernization agenda often point out that many leaders of authoritarian regimes lack incentives for conscious and consistent socioeconomic reforms; they are rarely inclined toward major changes, and often are incapable of implementing such policies.<sup>37</sup> Yet Medvedev's capacity was severely limited because of constraints imposed on his power of appointment and dismissal, and it is unsurprising that the Russian and international media tended to juxtapose his "reformist" efforts with the ultimate resistance by "antireformist" Putin and his entourage, perceived as new oligarchs.<sup>38</sup> Often, these considerations were not groundless; the large-*N* survey of Russian subelite groups conducted in 2008 by Mikhail Afanas'ev confirmed the conventional wisdom about strong antireformist sentiments among respondents with military, and especially police and security backgrounds, while a significant share of respondents preferred to go beyond Medvedev's narrow modernization agenda and endorsed the idea of political reforms.<sup>39</sup> But the problem was not only with the personalities of the Kremlin. Even if Medvedev were truly serious in his good intentions of creating a modern economy and efficient system of governance for Russia, he lacked the political instruments to implement these plans into reality while preserving the status quo authoritarian regime.<sup>40</sup>

Yet major policy reforms in any given country (whether democratic or authoritarian) cannot be implemented just because of the good (or bad) will of political leaders, regardless of the contents of these reforms. Leaders have to rely upon major support from their selectorate (which is small under authoritarian regimes)<sup>41</sup> and also make skillful use of the available political instruments that allow them to convert words into deeds in a more or less appropriate way. As for the narrow agenda of authoritarian socioeconomic modernization, the set of political instruments that may be utilized by reformist leaders to achieve these goals is rather limited. They can use one of the three available tools: the bureaucracy, the coercive apparatus, and the dominant party (or a combination). This distinction largely corresponds to the three major types of authoritarian regime in the modern world: bureaucratic, military, and one-party.<sup>42</sup> However, none of these instruments was available for modernization in early twenty-first-century Russia.

Many reflections on bureaucratic authoritarian modernization revolve around dreams of rare success stories such as Singapore under Lee Kwan Yew.<sup>43</sup> However, the bureaucracy in post-Soviet Russia was irrelevant as a major agent of modernization, and had almost nothing in common with that of East Asian bureaucrats. It lacked incentives to conduct major reforms, and the Russian authorities were unable to provide them. Moreover, bureaucratic modernization required not only a critical mass of well-trained, capable,

and motivated bureaucrats, but also a high level of state autonomy and insulation of the bureaucracy from special-interest groups, which would allow it to pursue a reform agenda. However, Russian bureaucracy met none of these conditions, and it was unrealistic to expect their emergence under an electoral authoritarian regime. On the contrary, Russian bureaucracy had experienced major institutional decay even before the Soviet collapse, and the multiple reorganizations in the turbulent time of the 1990s had not improved the situation.<sup>44</sup> In the 2000s, against a background of decline in political competitiveness and media freedom, the Russian bureaucracy effectively escaped from political control, while the Kremlin, in its turn, was more interested in the short-term political loyalty of bureaucrats than their long-term efficiency.<sup>45</sup> The results were predictable, as both Putin and Medvedev recognized corrupt officialdom as the most irresolvable problem in the period of their rule.

The use of the Russian bureaucracy as an instrument of modernization was hindered not only by its inefficiency but also by the Kremlin's paramount obsession with the idea of hierarchical centralized control as the major (if not the only) tool of governance; the power vertical was the most vivid example of this approach. For a large and diverse country with a sizable public sector, and in which state bureaucracy was highly important to the economy and in the everyday life of ordinary people, reliance upon these methods of governance led to an incredible increase in agency costs and to further aggravation of the principal-agent problems. The top-down hierarchy was unable to effectively monitor, reward, and punish all the links in the power vertical, while the mid-level bureaucrats systematically misinformed their bosses about their performance. This trap of principal-agent relationships could not be overcome through the occasional use of personnel replacements, nor without major institutional changes, especially given the shortage of reform-oriented officials.<sup>46</sup> Thus, given the lack of public accountability and the increase of centralized control, the Russian bureaucracy had little interest in pursuing a modernization agenda and preferred the preservation of the status quo. Under Medvedev's presidency, the situation hardly improved in this respect.

The "coercive" scenario of authoritarian modernization is often linked to the Chilean experience under Pinochet, which turned out to be a role model for some Russian reformers in the early 1990s.<sup>47</sup> But this arrangement of military rule, with its harsh repression of the opposition and radical market-oriented policy reforms, was exceptional in many ways; the coercive apparatus of the state (i.e., the military, police, and security services) rarely played the role of major agents of modernization.<sup>48</sup> To perform in such a capacity, the coercive apparatus of the state should be run by bright reform-minded leaders, should exhibit a high degree of organizational autonomy, structural

integration, and ideological cohesiveness, should be supported by large segments of the elite and the general public, and should not be deeply involved in business activities. This winning combination is unique across the globe, and it was completely absent in Russia. Ever since the Soviet era, the coercive apparatus directly or indirectly exerted control over significant economic resources (ranging from the military industry to the Gulags), and was involved in a bitter interbranch rivalry (as promoted by the political leadership, which employed divide-and-rule tactics),<sup>49</sup> and its limited autonomy was reduced to zero by the time of the Soviet collapse. Therefore, the military remained passive in post-Soviet Russia, and in the 2000s it lost its role as a meaningful actor in domestic politics.<sup>50</sup> As for law enforcement agencies, in the 1990s they became heavily fragmented due to state weakness and excessive decentralization, and were deeply involved in business activities even as political control over them declined.<sup>51</sup> When in the 2000s the status of law enforcers suddenly and dramatically increased, and their political influence significantly expanded,<sup>52</sup> they used these new opportunities mostly for rent-seeking, and had no interest in implementing any modernization agenda. Rent extraction and control over businesses became essential for numerous law enforcement agencies, and this fact greatly contributed to the rise of new conflicts between various actors, while attempts to stop these processes were unsuccessful.<sup>53</sup> The ideological commitments of the representatives of Russia's coercive apparatus were also hardly conducive to modernization.<sup>54</sup> To summarize, not only was this instrument unavailable in Russia, but on the contrary, there was (and still is) an urgent need for the modernization of the coercive apparatus of the state itself.<sup>55</sup> But this major task of state building was not seriously considered as part of Medvedev's agenda, and it remained unresolved after his presidency.

Finally, any hopes of the effective use of a dominant party as an instrument of authoritarian modernization were irrelevant in Russia's case, if one were to consider United Russia in this role. The experience of modernization in the Soviet Union and in post-Mao China, as well as some non-Communist authoritarian regimes (such as Mexico in the 1930s–1980s),<sup>56</sup> tells us that a centralized and well-disciplined dominant party could not only hold power in the long run but also serve as a driving force for major socioeconomic reforms. However, United Russia had no chance to turn into a Russian equivalent of the Chinese Communist Party in China or the PRI in Mexico, because its role in governance and policy making was fairly limited. To some extent, this resulted from Russia's institutional design, with its strong presidential power, as well as from the genesis of the party of power, which was established by top executive officials as their electoral and legislative arm.

But to a certain point, the subordinated status of the dominant party also resulted from the institutional legacy of the Soviet period. Even though the Communist Party of the Soviet Union was able to exert control over the state apparatus and was sometimes labeled a “party-state,” the inefficiency of party-led governance in the late-Soviet decades renders impossible any aspirations for a return to this model.

Neither the political leaders of the country, nor their followers, nor mid-range officialdom were interested in turning the party of power into a real site for decision making. United Russia was unable to serve as a major channel for elite recruitment;<sup>57</sup> the career promotion of politicians and officials was based on personal networks rather than party politics. As a result, United Russia, with its low organizational autonomy<sup>58</sup> and the lack of any substantive ideology (which is necessary for conducting policy reforms) was used by the state apparatus only as an instrument of secondary importance, a tool for the maintenance of the status quo. Even if the Kremlin wanted to rely upon United Russia as an instrument of the modernization agenda, it would soon become clear that the party of power had no levers of influence of its own on either public opinion or the state apparatus; as such, the hypothetical party-driven campaign of modernization was doomed to fail.

Thus, given the lack of efficient political instruments for implementing an agenda of policy reform, the narrow program of authoritarian socioeconomic modernization under Medvedev’s presidency was completely useless. If one does not pay heed to the loud rhetoric, which involved some accurate but ultimately empty mantras concerning the need for the rule of law and/or innovative economic development in Russia, then the implementation of this policy was limited to the shallow and partial adoption of some technological innovations. This is why certain Kremlin-led initiatives, such as e-government, resulted in the computerization of some paperwork by street-level bureaucrats, and in the creation of opportunities for ordinary people to set up appointments with these officials or send their complaints via the Internet. Even legal reforms, which were vigorously advocated by Medvedev, were limited to mostly cosmetic institutional changes, such as renaming “militia” as “police.” From a cynical perspective, the modernization agenda turned into just a new façade, with the aim of creating a positive image of the Russian leaders in the eyes of domestic and international audiences, and served as a prestigious form of conspicuous consumption by the ruling group. Without exaggeration, one can conclude that Medvedev was able to implement only two of his reforms: he reduced the number of time zones in Russia and abolished daylight saving time.

Meanwhile, the major event of Medvedev’s presidency was the global

economic crisis of 2008–2009, which harshly struck Russia’s economy. The dramatic fall of world oil prices (from \$147 per barrel in the summer of 2008 to \$35 per barrel in January 2009) not only put an end to Russia’s rulers’ ambitious claims to future global leadership based on Russia’s emerging status as a “world energy superpower,” but also posed serious questions in regard to resolving current economic problems. The decline in output during the crisis was deeper in Russia than in other G20 countries, exceeding 8 percent in 2008–2009. While the economic crisis was not that protracted and the Russian authorities were able to minimize its negative consequences with relative success,<sup>59</sup> its major indirect effects were political rather than economic. The Russian public’s dominant perceptions of the government and the political regime overall gradually began to change. In the 2000s, many Russian citizens, despite their criticism of the corruption and inefficiency of governance in the country, had considered the political status quo a lesser evil; by the early 2010s the demand for good governance, and therefore the demand for political change, began to emerge in public opinion as a result of increasing dissatisfaction with the status quo.<sup>60</sup>

While the practice of governing the country encountered multiple problems, virtual politics under Medvedev continued, and Kremlin-induced manipulations evolved to a new stage: instead of a (mostly virtual) “tightening of the screws” under Putin, a new “virtual thaw”<sup>61</sup> was offered to the Russian public in the form of many statements about liberalization, political openness, transparency, and the like (Medvedev’s “freedom is better than nonfreedom” was a prime example of this). This discursive liberalization, however, resulted only in minor if not cosmetic institutional changes. In essence, this discursive liberalization served to conceal steps taken in the opposite direction; amendments to the Russian constitution, adopted in 2008, extended the term of office for the Russian president and the State Duma to six and five years respectively.<sup>62</sup> Nevertheless, even manipulative discursive liberalization existing in speech only had major unintended consequences for the Kremlin. It contributed to the rise of public expectations about the regime’s liberalization in real terms (which would be undermined later on, after the announcement of Putin’s return to the presidency in September 2011) and to the extension of the scope of public self-expression and the decline of self-censorship in the media. In other words, the deceitful rhetoric of the authorities itself provoked a further increase in demand for the rule of law and good governance among the Russian elite and the public, but the Kremlin was not interested in turning words into deeds, and considered these words to be empty shells. Thus, discursive liberalization became a Potemkin village, a façade that covered up authoritarianism, arbitrary rule, and corruption. The gap between rising societal

demand for changes and the Kremlin's continuing supply of the status quo increased over time, and contributed to disloyalty among the voters, which became evident during the 2011 parliamentary elections.<sup>63</sup>

The "virtual thaw" also contributed to other unintended consequences. Upon acquiring its political monopoly and after coopting all relevant political, economic, and societal actors into the framework of imposed consensus, thus keeping them as loyal allies, the Kremlin paid little attention to its rivals, the nonsystemic opposition, which was pushed into a seemingly hopeless ghetto. Its chances were slim because almost all attempts to establish new opposition parties were effectively blocked at the stage of registration, almost all political protests were brutally oppressed by the police, and almost all opposition leaders were heavily discredited in the media (indeed, often they discredited themselves). However, discursive liberalization under Medvedev somewhat changed the political opportunity structure for new public initiatives and contributed to their further politicization.<sup>64</sup> The spontaneous emergence of numerous civic initiatives (mostly at the local level), ranging from environmentalists to cultural protection movements and defenders of drivers' rights,<sup>65</sup> encountered resistance from state officials: at certain points these groups realized that the only way to achieve their goals was to turn their specific concerns into political demands. Thus, civic activism, which in the 2000s served as a substitute for political activism, in the 2010s not only turned into a major school of political participation, but also offered a new recruitment pool for the opposition.<sup>66</sup>

At the same time, the opposition camp underwent a generational change of leaders and activists. Gradually, those leaders who had entered the political arena during the period of Gorbachev's perestroika (or even earlier) were replaced by new activists, who had grown up—both as people and as public figures—during the two post-Soviet decades.<sup>67</sup> The older generation tended to perceive current developments in Russia as more or less a continuation of their previous battles (which had often lost relevance over time), and the general public—correctly or not—identified them as dubious heroes of the "roaring 1990s." But the new generation aspired to a political career in new conditions, and exhibited forward-looking rather than retrospective assessments of new political developments. By contrast with its predecessors, the new generation of opposition leaders was more inclined to develop a negative consensus against the status quo regime, without regard for ideology. The most vivid example of this trend was Alexei Navalny, a charismatic anti-corruption activist and a very popular blogger, who positioned himself as a liberal and a nationalist simultaneously and soon became the most visible public figure among his generation.<sup>68</sup>

The Kremlin was well aware of these changes, but its preemptive moves were rather inefficient; the previously arranged political and institutional settings of an electoral authoritarian regime were reproduced over time, and the few attempts at reshuffling the informal winning coalition around Putin under the new label of the All-Russia People's Front (and the downplaying of the United Russia brand name) had no serious impact. Discursive liberalization imposed certain constraints, because the transition from virtual politics to real violence could become more costly over time, and the authorities used only low-scale coercion against their rivals.<sup>69</sup> Even though open antisystemic protests were broken up by the use of coercion, public criticism of the authorities and of the regime as such was more or less tolerated. When the authorities made some minor concession to civic activists, it raised the stakes for the participants and encouraged them to go beyond local protests. But when the authorities denied requests made by the angry public, they contributed to the politicization of activism and pushed participants into the ranks of the opposition. In addition, the Kremlin mostly attempted to discredit opposition activists rather than killing or imprisoning them. Whereas in 2007–2008 the Kremlin had harshly preempted any danger of a color revolution (a danger that was greatly overestimated), before the 2011–2012 elections the seeds of future protests germinated without major resistance.

In conclusion, during Medvedev's presidency the Russian authorities mostly invested their political efforts into painting the façade of the regime rather than paying attention to the potential threats to electoral authoritarianism from within. They probably expected that the second substitution of rulers would tear down the façade almost automatically. The Potemkin village, however, turned out to be populated by Russian citizens not particularly susceptible to coercion and/or cooption. As a result, the Kremlin-induced balance of positive and negative incentives for loyalty tipped; sticks were used rarely and selectively, and carrots remained insufficient. These factors contributed to what happened after the elections.

## THE TIME OF TROUBLES, 2011–2012

Postelectoral protests have often posed major challenges that can be incompatible with regime survival, as the experience of the color revolutions from Serbia to Kyrgyzstan tells us. Although Russia's electoral authoritarian regime in 2011–2012 did ultimately succeed in fending off these challenges, it had to pay a price for political survival, and its domestic legitimacy was placed in doubt to some degree. Indeed, authoritarian regime failure as a result of unfair elections is not an entirely new phenomenon. Samuel Huntington, in his famous analysis of the "third wave of democratization" in the 1970s and 1980s,

coined the term “stunning elections,” those that authoritarian rulers held to renew their legitimacy, but that undermined their regimes and sometimes paved the way for full-fledged democratization.<sup>70</sup> The 1989 Soviet parliamentary election serves as a paradigmatic case in this respect; although unfair and unjust, it allowed Soviet citizens to express their rejection of the political regime and contributed to mass mobilization and to the subsequent rise of an antisystemic opposition, and played an important role as one of several “turning points” in the collapse of Communist rule.<sup>71</sup> The causes of “stunning elections,” however, remain insufficiently explained. While they are not considered a kind of *deus ex machina*, most analysts tend to be deterministic in their ex post explanations. They often emphasize the key influence of socio-economic modernization and cultural changes, which give birth to political demands among the rising urban middle class and to the latter’s appearance in the political arena.<sup>72</sup> Other experts have pointed out the major impact of information technology, especially the role of the Internet and social media in speeding up political communications, reducing authorities’ control over information streams, and accomplishing the tasks of mobilization and coordination of mass protests through the mechanism of “connective action.”<sup>73</sup>

The logic of these and other structural explanations is related to major shifts in public demand in the political market. These shifts, in turn, often depend upon the effects of various exogenous changes (such as major economic shocks or dynamics of international influence) on domestic public opinion,<sup>74</sup> which are hardly predictable, especially given the ways in which the general public’s preferences are falsified under authoritarianism.<sup>75</sup> Without denying such possibilities, one should note that none of these factors, alone or in combination, can explain why at certain critical junctures some electoral authoritarian regimes survive (with major losses or without them) whereas others do not. An analysis of the supply side of political markets therefore seems useful. Under electoral authoritarianism, the political supply comes, more or less, from the ruling group (the regime) and its rivals, the opposition. Their influence on the survival and failure of electoral authoritarianism has become a hot topic, especially in lively discussions of the causes of the color revolutions. Some scholars have noted in this regard the crucial influence of oppositional efforts in mass antisystemic mobilization, the successful cooperation of various segments of the opposition, its broad international support, and its political strategies. In the aftermath of unfair elections, the combination of these factors dealt the final blow to electoral authoritarianisms from Serbia to the Ukraine.<sup>76</sup> However, these scholars’ opponents have pointed out the vulnerability of authoritarian regimes due to their lack of insulation from Western influence, the weak coercive capacities of their states and/or their inability to

establish strong dominant parties, and their inability to establish full-fledged control over the electoral process at all stages, from the nomination of the “right” candidates to the “correct” counting of votes.<sup>77</sup>

The troubles of electoral authoritarianism in Russia in 2011–2012 might be perceived through both these lenses. Regime’s strategists oriented their expectations retrospectively and without sufficient sensitivity to changing political realities, and the Kremlin offered a rather imperfect package of carrots and sticks as incentives to its fellow citizens and to the opposition. The 2011 parliamentary electoral campaign opened a narrow window of opportunity for the opposition, which successfully used it to undermine the regime from within. The regime’s reaction was delayed and sluggish, and the opposition not only came out of its ghetto but even took the initiative, as it established certain forms of cooperation and organized antisystemic mass mobilization and collective action. Although the protests did not overthrow Russia’s electoral authoritarianism, they posed a threat to the regime, which had to change its tactics and achieved its desired results only after serious setbacks.

Before the parliamentary elections of 2011, the political landscape seemed unthreatening to the Kremlin; all the systemic parties remained loyal to the authorities, the degree of public support for the regime had decreased only slightly, analysts’ concerns about rising public discontent were not taken seriously, and the Russian economy had recovered after the 2008–2009 global crisis. As a result, the authorities expected that the political status quo would be secured almost by default, and the risks involved in Putin’s return to the presidency were not perceived as crucial. The Kremlin’s strategy rested on three pillars: (1) unhesitating use of the state apparatus to maximize the United Russia vote by all available means (ranging from workplace mobilization to shameless fraud);<sup>78</sup> (2) genuine support of the status quo regime on the part of peripheral voters (rural/small-town residents, the elderly, the poor, public-sector employees); and (3) the apathy and nonparticipation of “advanced” voters (educated, young, upwardly mobile residents of large cities).<sup>79</sup> But these expectations proved to be wrong.

Before the campaign, various segments of the opposition were bitterly divided over electoral strategy; some activists suggested a boycott, claiming that participation in the act of voting would legitimate the regime, while others argued in favor of the systematic spoiling of ballot papers at the polling stations (although this approach had proved ineffective in the 2007–2008 elections), and others proposed support for systemic opposition parties such as the Communists or the liberal Yabloko as a lesser evil. In the end, the strategy advocated by Navalny and other young leaders—“vote for any party but United Russia”—became the most successful option. First, it enhanced the



negative consensus that united not only various streams of the opposition but also different groups of voters, and left no room for the regime's divide-and-rule tactics. Second, United Russia became an ideal target for protest votes, because it was perceived only as a mindless arm of the ruling group, had no ideology other than preservation of the status quo, identified with corrupt officialdom, and was unpopular among advanced voters anyway; moreover, the lame duck Medvedev as the head of the United Russia party list made the situation even worse. Past discursive liberalization was now considered to be conscious deception of voters, and his rhetoric about modernization and the rule of law was perceived as empty words. Disillusionment with Medvedev was exceptionally deep.<sup>80</sup>

With limited access to television, the opposition creatively and successfully used the Internet as a campaigning tool. While some observers have argued that the Internet and online media played a decisive role during postelection protests in the recent wave of social movements,<sup>81</sup> the Russian experience demonstrates the importance of the Internet at the initial stage of the campaign, as a means of politicization and active involvement of previously uninterested voters. YouTube, rather than Twitter or Facebook, served as the most important tool in this respect. With the opportunity to post information available to everyone (not just to users of social media), hundreds of video and music clips, and poetry mocking United Russia and the regime as a whole flooded the Web and reached numerous apolitical voters, thus subverting the regime. The YouTube video of the March 2011 debate between Navalny and a member of the State Duma from United Russia, Yevgeniy Fedorov, during which the party of power was nicknamed "the party of swindlers and thieves" by Navalny, received 600,000 hits in just over a week,<sup>82</sup> and this label for United Russia soon turned into its brand name. In the period of the electoral campaign, Navalny even proposed a competition among Internet users to produce the best negative campaign material for use against the "party of swindlers and thieves"; this provoked an explosion of mass creativity. It also contributed to the rise of interest in the elections among previously apolitical Internet users, and increased the share of votes against United Russia. The landscape of the campaign began to change, especially given the dull public appearance of United Russia and its leaders. At the same time, the systemic opposition parties realized that they would benefit from the "vote for any party but United Russia" campaign, and raised their voices against Putin's return to the presidency and against the regime as such more loudly, thus presenting a niche alternative to the status quo.<sup>83</sup> In some cases, these parties offered their labels to be used by volunteers who wished to be independent election observers; their

numbers dramatically increased in comparison to the 2007–2008 elections, especially in large cities.

The regime counteracted the opposition in a number of ways, but its moves were delayed and sometimes even fueled protest sentiments. Multiple instances of street-level bureaucrats promising various benefits to their subordinates for boosting the United Russia vote by all possible means, and issuing various threats if the party did poorly, caused a host of scandals.<sup>84</sup> In the period of the campaign, the Kremlin offered voters no new carrots, while after the experience of the "virtual thaw" the promises of sticks were not taken seriously. Moreover, even subnational officials themselves often demonstrated a desire to minimize their own campaign efforts rather than maximizing United Russia votes. The power vertical underwent extraordinary stress as some regional governors and city mayors proved incapable of coordinating subnational political machinery smoothly enough, especially in cases where elections to regional and local assemblies were held simultaneously with the State Duma campaign.

All these trends coincided with one another, and greatly contributed to the effect of the "stunning elections" in December 2011. Despite almost ubiquitous instances of vote fraud, many of which were detected by observers and widely announced via the Web, United Russia officially received 49.3 percent of the vote and 238 of 450 parliamentary seats. In fact, it lost heavily, and several data sources demonstrated that the actual United Russia results were much lower than the official numbers (in the city of Moscow, the gap between exit polls, performed by Kremlin's contracting firm, FOM, and actual results reached 20 percent,<sup>85</sup> while other analysts considered electoral fraud in Moscow polling stations to account for about 11 percent of the total vote).<sup>86</sup> The opposition could nevertheless celebrate a certain victory, because (1) United Russia could not secure a majority of votes despite all the means used to maximize its results; (2) the regime was greatly discredited in the eyes of advanced voters; and (3) the negative consensus that had emerged during the campaign deepened after the polls. This success gave rise to large-scale postelection protests, which were larger than any in post-Soviet election history, and soon exceeded the technical limits of police coercion. The public's demonstrative rejection of the status quo contributed to the shift in previously hidden public preferences and had a snowball effect on the protest.<sup>87</sup> Lies and fear, which had previously supported authoritarian equilibrium in Russia alongside economic growth,<sup>88</sup> no longer served as efficient tools for maintaining the political status quo.

The Kremlin was poorly prepared for such developments. The regime perceived the electoral failure merely as a minor bump in the road rather than a systemic challenge. Using coercion against the protesters amid declining

mass support for the regime was a risky strategy. The option of coopting some moderate opposition figures and arranging a major government reshuffle was unavailable, because it might cause further dissatisfaction within the ruling group and could be perceived by Kremlin loyalists as a sign of weakness on the part of the leadership and of the regime as a whole. Instead, all personnel changes initiated by the Kremlin were more or less a rotation of the same figures. This fact contributed to the spread of collective action and to the increasing numbers of its participants, while Putin's harsh rhetoric toward the opposition only enhanced the negative consensus and personalized Putin as their major target, changing the key slogan of the protests from "For Fair Elections!" to "Putin, Go Away!"<sup>89</sup>

The inertia and delay in the reaction of the authorities, who refused to rely upon sticks but did not offer the protesters enough carrots, contributed to the spatial diffusion of collective action, the increase in the numbers of participants, and the change in their repertoires.<sup>90</sup> Only after a new series of demonstrations in late December 2011 did the Kremlin propose some bills aimed at liberalizing the registration of new political parties and reinstating the popular election of regional governors. These measures aimed to pacify the opposition, which demanded new elections. But the proposals clearly did not satisfy the protesters, who perceived them as half-measures rather than as full concessions. Even though the membership threshold for the registration of new political parties was reduced from 45,000 to 500 people, the Kremlin retained its leverages of control over parties' access to elections. The proposals also included some dubious clauses, such as the "municipal filter": the nomination of candidates for gubernatorial elections would require the official support of 10 percent of municipal councilors, which would allow the Kremlin to effectively ban unwanted candidates from regional elections. But the most important issue was related to the fact that implementation of all of these institutional changes could affect the election and the party system, as well as regional government, only after the next election cycle, and did not respond to the protesters' immediate demands.

Despite some efforts, the few attempts to build bridges between the regime and the opposition failed. The regime's moderate supporters within the ruling group, as well as the systemic opposition parties, remained loyal to the status quo despite challenges to the regime; the risk of losing out as a result of (possible) major regime changes outweighed their dissatisfaction with the status quo. From a broader perspective, the time for an elite settlement or pact,<sup>91</sup> somewhat similar to the 1989 roundtable talks in Poland or the Moncloa Pact in post-Franco Spain, was not yet ripe in late 2011 and early 2012 in Russia. All successful negotiated democratic transitions of this kind have emerged out

of unsuccessful previous attempts at one-sided coercion and the inability to achieve a zero-sum game, resulting from the conflicting sides' perceptions of the relative balance of forces and their unwillingness to repeat a past experience.<sup>92</sup> Numbers played a decisive role in this respect, because even though the Russian opposition was able to mobilize around half a million supporters in total, by the most optimistic assessments, this was more or less trivial by comparison with Solidarity in Poland, whose membership reached 9 million in 1981 (though roundtable talks occurred only eight years later).<sup>93</sup> Russia after the 2011 parliamentary elections was a long way from these conditions, and political opportunities for bargaining between an organizationally unified (although politically declining) regime and an organizationally weak (if politically rising) opposition were largely illusory. The incentives for bargaining were insufficient, and trust between the regime and the opposition was minimal, to put it mildly. It is too early to say whether negotiated transition as a mode of overcoming authoritarianism will ever occur in Russia, but in 2011–2012 both the regime and the opposition proceeded to the next round of political battle.

The Kremlin's dominant strategy was very simple: since none of Putin's challengers could defeat him in the presidential elections, the regime put all its effort into ensuring his victory. The list of candidates included the leaders of three loyal systemic parties and the billionaire Mikhail Prokhorov; the anti-systemic opposition had no chance to compete. On this occasion, the Kremlin mobilized all the leverages of the power vertical in a more coherent and consistent way than in the State Duma elections. It developed a more aggressive media campaign based on vicious attacks against opposition leaders, who were accused of being Western agents. It intimidated voters with threats of a new color revolution in Russia and presented the status quo as the only way to preserve "stability." It fired lower-level officials, ranging from regional governors to chiefs of electoral commissions, who had produced poor results for United Russia in December 2011. Finally, it organized an aggressive campaign of countermobilization of hundreds of thousands of peripheral voters for pro-Putin meetings, which aimed to demonstrate wide public support for the incumbent.<sup>94</sup> Returning to the soccer game analogy, one can view this strategy as the equivalent of an aggressive and dirty play, designed to secure victory at any cost before the end of the match.

At the same time, the opposition expanded the negative consensus under the slogan "No Votes for Putin!" and encouraged the public to vote for anyone but the former (and the future) president. But the major problem for those who challenged the political status quo was the very fact that they could not offer a positive alternative. The liberals, leftists, and nationalists who had com-

bined their efforts since the postelection protests in December 2011 differed widely in terms of their political and economic views, and could not offer a joint action plan. Navalny's public statement that his economic program was limited to combating corruption provided clear evidence for the lack of a positive agenda.<sup>95</sup> But the Kremlin's refusal to bargain with the opposition united the ranks of the protesters. Even though each ideological camp within the opposition would have considered the hypothetical rule of its antisystemic comrades-in-arms to be worse than the status quo, the issue of supporting (or rather, not supporting) the regime became more salient not only for opposition leaders but also for some advanced voters. As the experience of many countries (ranging from Mexico under the last years of the PRI<sup>96</sup> to Serbia before the fall of Milošević<sup>97</sup>) suggests, the strengthening of the negative consensus among a regime's opponents is a necessary, albeit not sufficient, factor in democratization.

On the eve of the presidential elections, however, the opposition demonstrated its organizational and strategic weaknesses. Antisystemic protest mobilization was not based on strong and influential organizations (which do not exist in Russia) but rather exploited the "weak ties"<sup>98</sup> and "connective actions"<sup>99</sup> of Internet networks and social media. Although easy to mobilize for postelection protests, these ties and actions were insufficient for a large-scale nationwide campaign that could overthrow the regime. The scope of mass protests barely reached most cities beyond Moscow and St. Petersburg; in most parts of the country, it remained symbolic. Even though the opposition recruited several thousand supporters as election monitors on voting day, this number could not cover most polling stations even in large cities. Worse, numerous voters (and not only peripheral ones) perceived the preservation of the status quo as the lesser evil in comparison with major regime changes that could impose major costs on them. Furthermore, systemic opposition parties and other moderate supporters of the Kremlin retained their loyalty and were not inclined to join the ranks of the protesters because the hypothetical fall of the regime could make their political survival very questionable.<sup>100</sup> The opposition's strategy, in turn, was short sighted and limited to preparing the next protest actions; they lacked the time and/or the resources to look ahead while the regime launched its counteroffensive. Last but not least, the lack of available opposition-backed candidates made the slogan "No Votes for Putin!" less attractive to voters. In sum, the creativity and passion of the opposition leaders and their supporters could not replace organizational potential and strategic planning.

If the time lag between the parliamentary and the presidential elections had lasted more than three months, the opposition would probably have

been able to overcome these inherent weaknesses. But the campaign's schedule favored the regime, which took the initiative and responded using every possible means. In the March 2012 election, the Kremlin achieved its goals thanks to (1) the employment of a combination of intimidation and promises to mobilize supporters of the status quo (mainly, but not exclusively, among peripheral voters); (2) the use of local political machinery in a full-scale and consistent manner; and (3) the effective implementation of various types of vote fraud, ranging from letting the same people vote multiple times at different polling stations to blatantly rewriting the official voting results.<sup>101</sup> The Kremlin got what it wanted (63.6 percent of votes for Putin), even though the spread of electoral dissent was meaningful enough; Prokhorov, the only viable alternative to the status quo, received more than 20 percent of votes in Moscow and 15 percent in St. Petersburg (and about 8 percent nationwide). But none of the candidates posed a decisive threat to Putin, and the systemic opposition and its supporters, voluntary or involuntary, agreed to Putin's return to the presidency.

### THE KREMLIN STRIKES BACK

The disequilibrium of Russia's political regime that occurred during the 2011–2012 elections seemed to be exhausted soon after Putin's return to a new presidency. The Kremlin was able to redistribute key spoils and rents among members of the winning coalition after a slight reshuffling. The regime's loyal moderate supporters, including "systemic" opposition parties, businesspeople, and part of the reform-minded public who had joined the camp of protesters in 2011–2012, willingly or unwillingly agreed to the preservation of the political status quo. The wave of protest mobilization in Moscow was over; the intensity and quantity of antigovernment rallies and meetings decreased, although they did not vanish entirely. Some liberal concessions promised by the Kremlin, such as a return to the popular election of regional chief executives, were so decisively emasculated that they seemingly could not provoke major risks for the regime.<sup>102</sup> Although the economic slowdown (the growth rate in 2013 being less than 2 percent) has been widely perceived as a major challenge, no immediate threats to the political regime emerged at that time.

To some extent, these trends look like a natural political aftermath of the turbulent uproar of 2011–2012. But their main causes were related to the nature of the confrontation between the Kremlin and its emerging rivals, the opposition; both sides of the conflict learned some lessons from the experience of the protests, and attempted to reach their goals anew. Russia's authorities, quite naturally, desired to restore the previous regime's equilibrium, while the opposition, even if it was unable to subvert the regime, tried to inflict maximum

damage on the Kremlin. However, both sides of the conflict were faced with major constraints inherited from the previous trajectory of Russia's political regime; in many ways, their actions were path-dependent.

Putin promised to "tighten the screws" immediately after the March 2012 presidential elections. Indeed, the Kremlin took a number of demonstrative steps in this direction in the subsequent months. They included, first and foremost, a shift in legal regulations: raising fines for participation in prohibited protest actions, restoring criminal charges for libel in the media,<sup>103</sup> labeling NGOs with foreign funding as "foreign agents," and the like. They also included pressure on opposition leaders and activists; apart from public discrediting of opposition leaders, several major figures, such as Alexei Navalny and Sergei Udaltsov, were faced with manufactured criminal investigations, while some rank-and-file activists were accused of clashes with police in May 2012 and imprisoned, becoming examples of the risks of disobedience. Furthermore, the pressure extended to those representatives of the subelite who expressed their public support for the opposition. In May 2013, the rector of the New Economic School, Sergei Guriev, who had been involved in drafting some economic proposals for Medvedev and had also openly donated money to Navalny, after a number of interrogations and searches of his office by criminal investigators flew to Paris and announced that he would not return to Russia. Last but not least, the Kremlin initiated a "culture war" on several fronts, ranging from the imprisonment of the members of female punk group Pussy Riot, who had performed an anti-Putin show in a major Orthodox cathedral in Moscow, to a legal ban on "homosexual propaganda," the prohibition of adoption of Russian orphans by Americans, and the introduction of criminal charges for offending religious feelings.

These actions have been perceived by some observers as a major shift toward repression, if not toward the "Stalinization" of Russian politics,<sup>104</sup> while others noted that the repressions were conducted more or less in "velvet gloves."<sup>105</sup> In fact, the regime was still far from being truly harsh and bloody. Independent media and websites continued to exist and even expanded their audience, few NGOs were labeled as "foreign agents" despite numerous raids and inspections by law enforcement agencies, and Navalny, who had been accused of criminal charges, was released and placed under house arrest. The reasons for these incomplete and inconsistent moves were twofold. On the one hand, after the successful experience of building a nonrepressive authoritarian regime, Russia's rulers had little incentive to turn to full-fledged repression.<sup>106</sup> On the other hand, the Kremlin did not overestimate the scope of the protest mobilization of 2011–2012, and perceived its threat to the regime as less than crucial. Thus, the Kremlin now approached the politics of fear primarily in

terms of preventing the further spread of antiregime activism, rather than its total elimination; it perceived this as a more feasible and less costly task. This task also required the intimidation of the opposition's potential new recruits, as well as discrediting the opposition, and inflicting selective repressions on some of the most visible and/or most hated enemies (such as homosexuals or foreign spies). In a sense, this approach somewhat resembled the tactics employed by the Soviet authorities against the dissident movement in the USSR in the 1970s and 1980s; they successfully restricted the scope of open anti-regime protests despite the rise in distrust of the authorities and the Communist regime as a whole.<sup>107</sup> At that time, major challenges to the status quo were postponed, and the temptation to repeat this experience in the twenty-first century was very natural for the Kremlin.

At the same time, the liberalization of registration rules for political parties and the restoration of the popular election of regional governors seemed to open a new window of opportunity for the opposition, which also had to deal with the challenge of an electoral struggle. The problem not only related to the fact that carefully crafted formal and informal rules of the game made elections under authoritarian regimes heavily biased and unfair<sup>108</sup> (for example, the "municipal filter" made the nomination of candidates for gubernatorial elections impossible without the support of United Russia).<sup>109</sup> In addition, opposition parties and the candidates themselves faced the trap of falling into an electoral niche, receiving votes only from a narrow base of core supporters with little hope of attracting broader political constituencies. Given that the opposition lacked strong organization and had limited public support, this move seemed a reasonable minor concession from the regime; it did not undermine the status quo, but rather enhanced the legitimacy of elections and the regime, and averted the risk of antiregime contagion in terms of taking protests from polling stations to the streets.

As for the general public, it more or less agreed with the restoration of Russia's political equilibrium. The degree of mass support for Russia's regime and its leader largely stabilized; while it did not reach (and most probably will never reach again) the extraordinarily high level seen in the "good old days" of the 2000s,<sup>110</sup> it did not fall as rapidly and dramatically as it had during the last months of 2011.<sup>111</sup> However, the decline of mass support for the regime and the rise of public discontent did not automatically benefit the opposition; Russians did not perceive the political rivals of the Kremlin as a viable alternative to the status quo. Thus, the partial equilibrium of "resigned acceptance" of Russia's authoritarian regime remained unchallenged and survived over time.<sup>112</sup> Moreover, even the public demand for change was rather different from the democratic slogans of the 2011–2012 protests: requests for good governance

and better provision of public goods and services (such as education, public health, infrastructure, and the like)<sup>113</sup> were generally not linked to demands for democratization. Even supporters of the protests wanted to oust Putin and replace him with another strong (but supposedly more efficient) leader without major regime changes, making critical analysts skeptical of the democratic potential of mass support for protests.<sup>114</sup> However, the very commitment of many Russians to elections as the only acceptable way to choose their rulers (which was consistently demonstrated by numerous past studies) was considered to be a fundamental preference for democracy, even if in the most basic sense.<sup>115</sup> Yet the same commitment to choosing rulers through a popular vote might be relevant for electoral authoritarian regimes as well.

Nevertheless, the increasing gap between the public demand for changes and the supply of the status quo by the Kremlin provided some grounds for political entrepreneurship by the opposition. In 2013–2014, opposition-backed candidates won mayoral elections in Yekaterinburg, Petrozavodsk, and Novosibirsk. The major breakthrough occurred in the Moscow mayoral elections in September 2013. The incumbent, Sergei Sobyenin (a former head of Putin's presidential administration) expected an easy victory; surveys predicted no serious competition, and even his major would-be rival Navalny, the most popular and capable leader of the new generation of the opposition, initially had the support of no more than 10 percent of Moscow voters.<sup>116</sup> These expectations were very favorable for the Kremlin; a landslide victory in fair elections would greatly enhance the regime's legitimacy, discourage the opposition, and show voters that there were no viable alternatives to the status quo. This is why Navalny, who was undergoing a criminal trial during the campaign, was registered as a candidate. Apparently, the Kremlin wanted to sacrifice Navalny after the polls, but it underestimated his potential; the thirty-seven-year-old lawyer organized a very active electoral campaign based around young, dynamic, creative, and energetic staff, attracted a large number of devoted volunteers, effectively used crowdfunding techniques, and mobilized a lot of voters beyond the opposition's core supporters. The election results exceeded virtually all predictions: officially, Navalny received 27 percent of votes, and even though Sobyenin's result (51 percent) allowed him to escape the runoff, perceptions of fraud in his favor were unavoidable. Despite Navalny's electoral defeat, he reached extraordinary success at the polls, gaining more than 600,000 Muscovite votes. Still, these developments were indicative of the increasing troubles facing the Russian authorities; it became clear that major challenges for electoral authoritarianism in Russia lay ahead.

From this perspective, the Ukrainian crisis of 2014 should be perceived as a trigger event that accelerated the Kremlin's existing trend when it came to changing the domestic political agenda. The resulting changes greatly affected the regime's real or potential rivals: the opposition was bitterly divided, its previous "negative consensus" against the regime was undermined (if not disintegrated), and the Kremlin effectively pushed it back to the periphery of the political arena by discrediting, harassing, and intimidating its members. Competition in subnational elections was almost eliminated, so their new round in September 2014 more closely resembled a "hegemonic" (or "classical") version of authoritarian regimes than previous practices of electoral authoritarianism.<sup>117</sup> Independent media outlets reduced their levels of criticism, and vicious attacks on civic activists and dissenters became showcases of the politics of fear. Not only were the prodemocratic protests of 2011–2012 nearly forgotten, but the very rhetoric of democracy was abandoned by the Russian authorities, and the ultimate and demonstrative rejection of Western institutions became a mainstay of official propaganda. Against this background, Russian society did not demonstrate any serious resistance to its rulers. Quite the opposite, the mass public applauded Russia's aggressive foreign policy and appreciated the rising confrontation with the West, and Putin's approval rate reached its highest-ever level of more than 80 percent, according to numerous surveys.<sup>118</sup> At least for a while, the Russian leadership received *carte blanche* in the eyes of its fellow citizens, and used this support to strengthen its dominance. One may expect that the shortening of the time horizon for all domestic and international actors, as well as the regime's personalism and securitization, will further affect the trajectory of changes in politics and governance.

It is too early to discuss the consequences of the Ukrainian crisis for Russia's domestic agenda, but some effects are very visible; most probably, by the end of 2014 they will have become irreversible. First and foremost, the economic slowdown (which was observed even before the annexation of Crimea) is likely to turn into a full-fledged and severe decline. The foreign sanctions, Russian countersanctions, and increased military burden are only part of the story. Most importantly, economic issues lost their priority in the Kremlin's decision-making process, and the very mode of governance quickly deteriorated, since the security apparatus took the upper hand in agenda-setting for Russia's rulers. The project of "authoritarian modernization," which was launched under Putin in the early 2000s<sup>119</sup> and loudly announced under Medvedev, was sacrificed for the sake of the militarization and securitization of the country. Second, the regime's rising personalism in major policy directions (even the annexation of Crimea was a surprise for a part of Putin's inner



circle) and the decline of auxiliary political institutions—not only parliament, political parties, and regional authorities, but even the federal government—is likely to turn into a principal feature of the Russian regime.<sup>120</sup> Even though the mode of ruling the country under Putin is far from that described in *The Autumn of the Patriarch* by Gabriel García Márquez (at least as of yet), the drive in this direction is strong and striking. Third, the information problems that contributed to the wave of protests in 2011–2012 are increasingly acute and likely to become exacerbated over time. The regime, which heavily relies upon lies as the primary instrument of politics, is at constant risk of wrong decisions due to misperceptions by its rulers. In fact, Russia's foreign policy toward Ukraine (both during the Orange Revolution and in the wake of regime change in 2014) might be considered a prime example of these misperceptions. No doubt similar risks in domestic politics will increase over time.

To summarize, one may consider the balance of the political pillars of the Russian authoritarian regime to be undergoing increasing disequilibrium. While economic prosperity has become a matter of the past, lies and fears are under stress from rising challenges. These challenges have come not only from outside the country, and even not only from the Russian citizens, but also from the Kremlin's top leadership. While these rising challenges could be considered as signs of the regime's decline, it would be premature to expect it to end soon in one way or another: as numerous examples of authoritarian regimes around the globe suggest, their rulers often hold power for a long while—not despite their poor economic performance, inefficient governance, arbitrary decisions, and systematic misinformation, but precisely because of some (or even all) of these features.<sup>121</sup> To what extent Russia will join this list of long-standing authoritarian regimes remains to be seen. But what kind of political future might we expect for Russia, and what lessons might we learn from the Russian experience of authoritarian regime building after the Soviet collapse?

## CHAPTER 6

# THE AGENDA FOR TOMORROW

**FOR SOCIAL AND POLITICAL** scientists, there is probably nothing more in demand, and at the same time more speculative, than the business of predicting the future. Just as economists are expected to predict global oil prices and the dynamics of stock exchanges, political scientists are valued in the eyes of politicians as well as the public primarily for their forecasts of domestic and international politics, rather than for their theoretical explanatory schemes and/or methodological sophistication. And if someone is able to make assumptions that prove to be factually correct over time, and then he or she may be rewarded irrespective of the substantive grounds for their predictions. With regard to Russian studies, the case of Hélène Carrère d'Encausse is probably the best-known example of predictions of this kind. In 1978, she published a book in which she argued that the Soviet Union would collapse by 1990 due to the rise of the Muslim population in Central Asia, which would cause Islamic revolt and a drive for independence from the Soviet empire.<sup>1</sup> Yet when the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991 for different reasons to those she had suggested,<sup>2</sup> she received outstanding academic recognition and became a permanent secretary of the French Academy, despite (or perhaps because of) the fact that the academic value of her forecast was dubious at best.

The problem, however, is not that so-called political experts actually producing political forecasts no more precise and substantively grounded than predictions made by an “average Joe.” Virtually all political forecasts of this sort—whether made by professionals or amateurs—are based on projection of a current state of affairs into the future, with certain corrections and reservations, adjusting for either positive or negative exogenous factors. Meanwhile, real world developments often follow a different logic, one that is not always clearly understood, especially considering “wild cards”—unexpected and sometimes unpredictable factors that alter possible scenarios. It is no sur-

