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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Far from a deterrent to the development of Russian democracy, the powerful Russian presidential system that emerged from the crisis of the fall of 1993 may be a key factor to the endurance of democratic structures. If measured by standards of a free press, a functioning (if distorted) market, generally secure civil liberties, and other criteria normally associated with industrial democracies, then Russia’s democratic consolidation continues and seems to be strengthening. The Russians have had two national referenda, two parliamentary elections, and a two-stage presidential election—all of which have been grudgingly accepted as fair even by the losers—through which the population could have effected severe changes but chose not to do so.

Messy politics is not necessarily undemocratic politics. Russian democracy has survived since 1990 against tremendous odds. In large part, this outcome is due to the institution of the Russian presidency, which has been one of the most important bridges in the transition from communism to democracy. Due to the legacy of the communist past, and in a period of enormous political fluidity, assumptions from Western social science literature that such dominating presidential systems are unstable or antidemocratic are simply not valid. We ought to take seriously that Russian presidentialism was consciously chosen as the form of political organization best suited to the Russian social context. The product of the communist experience, where atomization of individuals under dictatorial one-party control and the crushing of all spontaneous autonomous groupings from discussion groups to philatelists was pervasive, Russian politics became the politics of mistrust, where most citizens are guarded with each other, expect little from government institutions, and highly suspicious or positively fearful of organized political parties and movements.

Russian presidentialism has played a crucial part in the transition from Soviet communism to Russian democracy because, in general, presidentialist systems are more likely than other arrangements to preserve the processes of democratic consolidation in societies that are characterized by a lack of social trust. The dividing powers of Russian presidentialism make changing the legal status quo difficult, and dramatically reduce the possibility that any one group or bloc can capture the government in toto; moreover, even victory in such a system does not translate into an immediate ability to reorganize political life. Where trust is lacking, the shortcomings of presidentialism are turned on their head, and emerge instead as positive virtues. Absent a powerful president, in a society where social trust is lacking the contention of rival actors and forces could quickly become lethal and threaten chaos. In recognition of that, people and even the president’s opponents, rely on his power, as on a balance wheel, for their own ultimate security.

The Appendix describes the structure of a book in progress based upon this research project.

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2 Composed by NCEER Staff
THE PARADOX OF RUSSIAN PRESIDENTIAL DEMOCRACY

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To put it bluntly, someone in the country has to be the chief. That’s all there is to it.
--Boris Yeltsin, 1994

“THIS RUINOUS VICIOUS CIRCLE”

"Was Russia really doomed to bloodshed?" Boris Yeltsin posed this question to himself in the pages of his journal on October 1, 1993. For days, members of the Russian Federation’s parliament had been holed up in their chamber, the White House, in defiance of Yeltsin’s decrees suspending the constitution and ordering them to disband. The president was resolute that the parliament no longer ruled Russia; the lawmakers had in turn impeached Yeltsin and were now armed and vowing to die. Pressure on the Russian Army became intense as both sides laid claim to their loyalties. A political standoff had become, in Yeltsin’s words, “a crisis of statehood,” in which he felt it had become his duty “to break this ruinous vicious circle.” Seventy-two hours later, military and security forces opened fire on the White House, and dozens were killed and wounded in the very heart of Moscow. Dozens of elected legislators, including the chairman of the parliament and Yeltsin’s own vice president, were then marched out and taken in chains to prison.

Russian democracy was for a time pronounced dead. For some, Yeltsin had finally thrown off the disguise of a democrat, as habits learned in his years as a senior member of the Soviet Communist Party reasserted themselves and his authoritarian instincts triumphed over a flirtation with representative democracy. For others, it was clear that the institutions of Russian government, too hastily cobbled together from the wreckage of a Soviet superstate that had been too quickly destroyed, were inadequate to the task of maintaining a republic. In either case, there could be but one outcome: dictatorship.

The Paradox of Russian Presidential Democracy

The feared emergence of the “firm hand” and the consequent establishment of a new Russian autocracy did not take place. What emerged from the ashes of the White House in 1993 was a Second Russian Republic (the First being the transitional arrangements that governed the Russian

5 Numerous examples of such dire prophecies abounded at the time. Robert Daniels charged that "Yeltsin’s aim as it has unfolded since 1991 was not to preserve representative government," but rather to establish a "presidential dictatorship," while Lilia Shevtsova warned that Yeltsin was "becoming ever more despotic." See Lilia Shevtsova, "The Two Sides of the New Russia," Journal of Democracy 6, no. 3, July 1995, p. 66, and Robert Daniels, "Yeltsin, Reform and the West," The Soviet and Post-Soviet Review (formerly Soviet Union/Union Sovietique) 20, nos. 2-3, pp. 135-136.
remnant of the USSR after 1991), a rough-hewn but functioning democracy that has since been tested by crises ranging from raucous elections to war. Since 1993, the Russian Federation has managed to complete two parliamentary elections, two national referenda (including one adopting a new Constitution) and a strongly contested two-phase presidential election. To be sure, crime abounds, ethnic conflict remains an open wound in national life, and the economy will be a shambles for some time to come. But basic civil liberties, open elections, and a free press stubbornly remain in place.

If the endurance of Russian democracy under a Yeltsin regime was unexpected to Russia watchers, it is all the more puzzling to scholars of democracy and political change. The Second Republic was constituted as a presidential republic, a form widely held as the least likely to provide a fertile environment for democratic development. Boris Yeltsin is in his last term as president of the Russian Federation, and the issue of his putatively “authoritarian” personality is now more or less irrelevant. But the realization that there will be other Russian presidents makes the question of presidentialism itself even more pressing; the failures of presidential regimes in other nations have convinced many that presidentialism is so flawed as to be a danger to democracy in and of itself, even without the added complication of a mercurial leader like Yeltsin. Simply put, Russian presidential democracy is a paradox that has confounded the expectations not only of Kremlinologists (who no doubt are getting used to being confounded), but also of a broader community of political scientists.

Of course, one explanation for the puzzling persistence of Russian democracy, and the one most often heard in the streets of Russia itself in the early 1990s, is that there is no puzzle at all: Russia is not a democracy. At best, it is “nomenklatura democracy,” a system that mimics the modern republic but in effect only operates to the benefit of the elite and remains unaccountable to the electorate. A similar approach is to treat the situation as something of a fluke, an interlude of “conservative stability” that has more to do with the disarray of Moscow’s elites than with democratic values per se. (It should be noted that even the American system has similarly been explained as something of a fluke as well; Giovanni Sartori has written that admirers of American presidentialism “[fail] to realize that the American system works in spite of its constitution—hardly

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6 Steven Fish is right to remind us that questions of whether Yeltsin “is a genuine ‘democrat’ and if so, what kind,” are questions that probably have “no definitive answer” in any case. M. Steven Fish, Democracy from Scratch (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1995), p. 205.

7 Lilia Shevtsova, “The Current Russian Political Situation,” lecture at the U.S.-Russian Forum, Moscow, Russia, July 13, 1994. One Russian political scientist suggested to me, rather cynically, that democracy in Russia was best conceived of as an accident, the byproduct of the inattentiveness of Moscow’s power brokers while they took sides in the struggle between Yeltsin and Gorbachev.
thanks to its constitution." and that in the end, American government is little more than "the institutionalization of pork-barrel politics—nothing much to be admired."[emphasis original].

But if Russian democracy is merely a misnomer, then what of the elections, the media, the civil liberties, the marketplace and the other marks of liberal capitalist democracy? To recognize Russian democracy as imperfect is one thing; to deny Russia is a democracy at all is quite another. While it is true that the Second Republic is still in its infancy, it is nonetheless of little help to resort to the depiction of an "accidental" Russian democracy, for this leaves us only with the unfalsifiable explanation that when Russia is authoritarian, it is authoritarian, but when it exhibits democratic behavior it is still authoritarian if only we wait long enough to see it return to form.

Few questions in post-Soviet politics remain as politicized or as polarizing, in part because the answers have enormous implications for the conduct of American foreign policy. Approaches to the question of Russian "democracy," however, are often flat statements that accept or, more often, reject the idea. "The Russian transition," Gerald Easter wrote in early 1997, "has given rise to a hybrid regime, in which a strong authoritarian president coexists with a weak democratic parliament," and while "many institutional features of democracy [currently] exist in Russia...democratic consolidation appears well out of reach."9 This kind of off-hand dismissal of Russian democracy is not uncommon, and reflects the presumption among many scholars that the Russian Federation is undemocratic until decisively proven otherwise.

This presumption was more understandable in the first year or two of the Russian transition. But the experience of the six years since the Soviet collapse (including the failure to fulfill the worst predictions of authoritarian regression) has, in my view, shifted the burden of proof to those who contend that the Russian Federation is not a democracy. If measured by standards of a free press, a functioning (if distorted) market, generally secure civil liberties, and other criteria normally associated with industrial democracies, then Russia’s democratic consolidation continues and seems to be strengthening. Moreover, the Russians have had two national referenda, two parliamentary elections, and a two-stage presidential election—all of which have been grudgingly accepted as fair even by the losers—through which they could have effected severe changes.10 “It’s getting to the

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10 Indeed, even Communist presidential candidate Gennady Zyuganov admitted that his predictions of fraud were not borne out, and electoral post-mortems by sympathetic newspapers such as Sovetskaia Rossia placed blame squarely on the shoulders of the opposition candidates for failing to run effective campaigns. Shortly before the second round, liberal candidate Grigori Yavlinsky vented his frustration with his poor showing by charging that the elections were "unfair and unfree," but then curiously pronounced himself pleased with the campaign and predicted he would win. See A. Frolov, "Pochemu El’tsinu udalos’ vyigrat’?", Sovetskaia Rossia, July 9, 1996, p. 2, and Natal’ia Gorodetskaia, “Grigori Yavlinskii schitaet vybory ‘neravnopravnymi i nesvobodnymi’,” Segodniia, June 7, 1996, p. 2.
point," an exasperated Western diplomat in Moscow told The Wall St. Journal in late 1996, "where you wonder what [Russia] has to do to prove it's a democracy."11

Two things are apparent about the criticisms leveled against Russian democracy. One is that while many analysts might question the idea that Russia is democratic, few are willing to go on to take the next step, which is to argue that it is therefore authoritarian. This is because defining "democracy" is a messy business, with criteria strewn across concepts ranging from accountability to constitutional structure, while the criteria associated with authoritarianism (i.e., coercively limited pluralism) are fairly clear. Thus, while it is not difficult to find ways in which Russia fails to meet at least some of the tests of democracy, it is much harder to find ways in which it meets even a minimal definition of authoritarianism. The second and more disturbing characteristic of criticisms of Russian democracy is a kind of exceptionalism that is applied to the Russian case, an approach that applies to the Russian Federation criteria that many other "democratic" nations might well fail to meet if subjected to similar scrutiny. (Irregularities in campaign finance, gruesome incidents in the conduct of military operations, and corruption among high officials and other scandals are not unknown in the United States or its European allies, but such events are not commonly used as a prima facie case that the Western nations are not democracies.)

None of this is to condone the daily conduct of Russian politics but rather only to point out that messy politics are not necessarily undemocratic politics. To be sure, the manner in which both Yeltsin and his rivals in the Duma have governed has hardly been elegant, but it is too much to argue that therefore the Russian Federation is an authoritarian state. To say that the Russian civil administration is often corrupt, that Russian streets are plagued by crime, and that Russian political institutions are ruled by powerful politicians and special interests is to say only that Russia, for better or worse, is starting to look like most industrial democracies. Democracy in Russia is not efficient, it is not particularly well-organized and it is certainly not attractive. Neither is democracy in France, Peru, Greece, South Korea, and a host of other nations that today need not endure prolonged debate over their general orientation or stability, whatever their spotty pasts.

If we refuse to accept the dead end of exceptionalism, several questions remain: Why has Russia turned to presidential republicanism despite the experiences of presidentialism elsewhere and the dire and repeated warnings of scholars?12 By any standards, the Russian presidency is vested with immense powers; why has it failed to decay into an authoritarian instrument? And how does the

12 Matthew Shugart and John Carey have wryly noted that despite the strong preferences of the scholarly community for parliamentarism, "among practicing politicians, the message is getting through slowly, if at all," especially in Eastern Europe. Juan Linz finds this attraction "curious" given the failures of presidential regimes in the developing world. See Matthew Shugart and John Carey, Presidents and Assemblies: Constitutional Design and Electoral Dynamics (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1992), p. 2, and Linz's preface in Linz and Valenzuela, eds., p. x.
presidential system in Russia actually function? Has Russia escaped disaster because of its political institutions, or in spite of them? These in turn serve only to frame the most important question: the Russian Federation is a democracy—unlovely at times, to be sure, and perhaps worthy only of two cheers rather than three—but a democracy nonetheless. Why?

This research project seeks to answer these questions, and in the process to undertake a rethinking of the relationship between society, representative institutions, and democracy. The most surprising part of the story of Russian democracy since 1990, of course, is that it has survived at all against tremendous odds. But perhaps more surprising is the realization that the institution of the Russian presidency, contrary to almost every expectation, has been one of the most important bridges—perhaps the most important—in the transition from communism to democracy.

**Presidentialism and its Discontents**

To say that academics and constitutional engineers are pessimistic about the capacity of presidentialism to strengthen democracy in Russia or anywhere else (besides the “great exceptions” of the United States and France) is something of an understatement. The lengthy debate over presidentialism and parliamentarism will not be reproduced in its entirety here: suffice it to say that it is, in Matthew Shugart and John Carey’s words, a “sharp polemic on the subject of whether presidential or parliamentary democracy is the ‘better’ form of representative government,” in which “most of the scholarly literature on the subject comes out quite squarely behind parliamentarism as the preferred alternative.”

The simplest brief against presidentialism begins with the assumption that the “most important difference among democratic regimes concerns the generation and accountability of executive authority,” and then notes the inescapable fact that most of the world’s existing democracies are parliamentary in form. The argument, at this level, is both analytical and normative: because so many parliamentary regimes remain democracies and so many presidential regimes have collapsed into authoritarianism, parliamentarism somehow strengthens democracy, presidentialism somehow weakens it, and new, fragile democracies should therefore choose parliamentarism to maximize their odds of survival. But more positive and assertive arguments rely heavily on abstract institutional analyses of the structure of presidentialism. This is probably because a close look at the categorization of the cases underlying these generalizations produces some strikingly odd comparisons (the U.S. and Cyprus? Australia and Jamaica?), and there is an especially suspicious clustering of cases of “presidential failures” in Latin America. (Although Russia is technically

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13 Shugart and Carey, p. 2.
14 Linz in Linz and Valenzuela, eds., p. x.
structured as a “semipresidential” system—a relatively rare arrangement where the president appoints a prime minister to act as parliamentary leader—it conforms to the “pure” presidential model in all important respects.)

The characteristics that define a “presidential” system are themselves the source of most of the criticisms directed against presidentialism. Because these types of systems produce executive power through an electoral mandate separate from, and independent of, that of the legislature, they are assumed to be overly powerful, insufficiently accountable, and ultimately divisive. Presidencies, based on a national mandate, are by design powerful offices; therefore, as Maurice Duverger long ago warned, the personalization of presidential power is “an inevitable temptation” that can be resisted only by an incumbent with “much strength of character.” Presidential systems rely on independent mandates for each branch of representation; therefore, as Juan Linz warns, they rest on an unstable basis of “dual democratic legitimacy,” in which “a conflict is always latent and sometimes likely to erupt dramatically.” Presidential elections are winner-take-all affairs; therefore, as Arend Lijphart warns, because only one candidate and one party can win, “everybody else loses,” a bruising result that makes politics “exclusive instead of inclusive.” Presidential regimes are “rigid,” governed by fixed terms and unable to adapt to sudden changes in the political landscape; therefore, as Alfred Stepan and Cindy Skach warn, presidents and their legislatures can end up “stuck” with one another, with the executives “condemned to serve out their terms.” When a crisis erupts—as it inevitably will, the argument goes—presidential governments do not “fall” so much as they “hang,” leaving only the heavy hand of authoritarian rule to break the impasse.

The entire presidential system, in this view, from elections to governance, mitigates against compromise, against deliberation, against cooperation, against efficiency, against democratic behavior itself. The separate mandate, rather than binding the president to the will of the people, may serve to convince him of his special, even extraconstitutional rights. The fixed term of office.

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16 I am aware of the occasional attempts to present semipresidentialism as a kind of institutional “third way,” but I remain unconvinced that semipresidentialism as it has been practiced in the very few systems it exists is much more than a variant on “pure” presidentialism. Giovanni Sartori has wrestled with the problem of defining which systems are truly “semipresidential,” and he rightly points out the messy categorizations that result from definitions based solely on things like a directly-elected presidency. While I accept his narrower definition as clearer, I disagree that it describes a system all that different in practice from presidentialism. See Giovanni Sartori, Comparative Constitutional Engineering (New York: NYU Press, 1994), Ch. 7.


19 See Lijphart in Lijphart, ed., p. 19.

rather than protecting the executive from the vagaries of popular passions or legislative impulse, may become the unassailable platform from which the president launches his institutional assault against the other branches of government. And presidential elections, rather than clarifying or even magnifying the victory of the winner, may end up generating more political wreckage and popular division than they prevent.

There are numerous rejoinders to the logic of the antipresidential arguments (even leaving aside the aforementioned issue of regional bias). Most problematic is that this "mechanistic, even caricatured view of the presidency," as Donald Horowitz calls it, results in a case against presidentialism that is flatly tautological. If presidents suppress democratic institutions, they have given in to the authoritarian temptation; if they do not, they nonetheless want to but are somehow effectively held in "check," if only for the moment. But (as every good trial lawyer knows) means plus opportunity do not equal motive, and the fact of presidential power does not explain why some presidents undermine democratic processes and others do not, any more than the fact of military power explains why some military officers intervene in politics while others do not.

**The Institutional Imperative**

The seeming inevitability that unifies all these evaluations of presidentialism emanates from a shared presumption that political institutions are essentially autonomous, with a logic of their own that produces certain types of political outcomes once set in motion. The belief that institutions themselves shape political behavior reflects the "new institutionalism" debate of the past two decades, in which institutions are treated as "political actors in their own right." As Stephen Krasner once put it, institutions may come into being in a variety of ways, but once in place "they

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22 Scholars of the American presidency are not immune to this kind of non-falsifiable description of presidential aggrandizement. Consider Arthur Schlesinger's 1973 discussion of the enlargement of presidential war-making powers: "It was as much a matter of congressional abdication as of presidential usurpation. As it took place, there dwindled away checks, both written and unwritten, that had long held the Presidency under control." [emphasis added] Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Imperial Presidency* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1973), p. ix.

23 This tendency in the literature is a variation on so-called "thick" rational choice approaches. The positing of "power" as a value all presidents seek to maximize allows for easier comparability, but, in my view, at the expense of sensible analysis of cases. See Donald Green and Ian Shapiro, *Pathologies of Rational Choice Theory* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1994), pp. 17-20.

24 I use the term "institutions" in the common sense of formal and informal rules and structures that, in the words of Douglass North, "provide the framework within which human beings interact," the "rules of the game in a society or, more formally...the humanly devised constraints that shape human interaction." See Douglass North, *Structure and Change in Economic History* (New York: Norton, 1981), p. 201, and *Institutions, Institutional Change and Economic Performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1990), p. 3. Particular structural, legal, and political arrangements are all subsumed in such terminology, but I have tried to use more specific language when referring to such arrangements.

can assume a life of their own, extracting societal resources, socializing individuals, and even altering the basic nature of civil society itself."26

The issue here is not the general approach of the new institutionalism, but rather the way in which it has been adapted to antipresidentialist arguments. The institutional literature has its roots in the study of economic activity, legislatures, and public bureaucracies, and its applicability to the origins and problems of presidentialism is questionable. At the very least, as Thomas Baylis points out, the "welcome revival of scholarly interest in the influence of institutions on politics has to date left only a modest imprint on the comparative study of political executives."27 This is largely because the study of executive power itself is difficult to formalize; Harvey Mansfield refers to the "stubborn essence" of this "informal power" as being "necessarily greater than any definition can anticipate or systematize....In modern politics, the executive stands for what is singular, individual and particular."28 This does not lend itself to what Terry Moe calls the "core technology" of the new institutionalism, "a combination of social choice and the new economics of organization," which tends, he cautions, to encourage "a distinctive approach to the study of political institutions...that organizes out many of the things that everyone else considers important and interesting about modern government."29

Perhaps more unfortunate is that insofar as the new institutionalism has had an impact on the study of leadership and executive power, it has provided the basis for a leap from the sensible idea that institutions matter, to the more tenuous conclusion that executive institutions in particular are somehow determinant. Presidentialist arrangements of almost any kind, and not particular presidents, are then the supposed danger, and therefore only polities with strong democratic roots and well-designed constitutional structures can survive this institutional imperative, while the rest succumb and fall into alternating cycles of repression and democratization.10 (As an aside, this explanation ought

29 "[P]ositive theorists...actually call their own work the 'new institutionalism,'" Moe writes. "Other scholars want to know about bureaucracy and the state, but positive theorists tell them about legislatures. Other scholars want to know about the political foundations of institutions, but positive theorists tell them about gains from trade." Terry Moe, "Political Institutions: The Neglected Side of the Story," Journal of Law, Economics, and Organization, vol. 6 (special issue) 1990, p. 249.
30 Similar arguments have been stated elsewhere as variations on the strong or weak state and society matrix, the usage of which has, in my view, become problematic due to definitional conflicts. (The United States is a strong society with a weak state? Perhaps. But is France then a weak society with a strong state? Is Russia a weak state and a weak society?) For more comprehensive treatment of this issue, see Joel Migdal, Strong Societies and Weak States: State-Society Relations in the Third World (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1988) and Joel Migdal, Atul Kohli, and Vivian Shue, eds., State Power and Social Forces (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1994).
to make France, and not Russia, the truly puzzling case, and to be fair, Linz does claim that "the jury is still out" on the Fifth Republic.) Thus the institutional critique of presidentialism confuses the reasonable question of whether and to what extent institutions take on lives of their own (for clearly they do) with the more troubling issue of whether institutions predestine political outcomes.

The problem, of course, is that autonomy is not the same thing as universality: it may be true that all institutions exhibit some degree of self-interested behavior, but this does not then mean that all institutions produce similar outcomes in all environments. As Kent Weaver and Bert Rockman put it, assumptions "that the risks and opportunities associated with a particular set of political institutions will be the same regardless of different social conditions...[or] that the set of desirable institutional capacities is the same in all countries" are simply not valid. This is particularly important in thinking about the new politics of Eastern Europe; Valerie Bunce is right to label as "problematic" the idea that in the post-Soviet environment "the particular [institutional] choices made tend to stick, and that they play a crucial role in shaping the prospects for democratic consolidation," since it is clear that Eastern European institutional arrangements have often changed quickly "through the establishment of new constitutions, continual tinkering with existing constitutions, and the elasticity of practice." At best, Baylis believes, in Eastern Europe "new rules and institutions...do not instantly produce firm realities but rather create a loose structure that political actors seek to shape in the interest of their own power and policy objectives."

In the end, the institutional approach as it has been used by critics of presidentialism has little to offer in explaining the particular case of Russian presidential democracy. All of the putatively dangerous structural defects of presidentialism are present in force in Russia, including the power to issue decrees, which Russian and Western legal specialists alike think among the worst characteristic of a badly-designed office. The "inevitable" temptations of presidential power, the systemic paralysis of incoherent and competing mandates, and the to-the-death nature of the electoral struggle were all predicted to emerge and to herald the imminent collapse of the Russian Federation into authoritarianism. And yet, presidential elections took place with a minimum of chicanery and were accepted as fair even by the losers; legislation is drafted, sometimes adopted and sometimes vetoed (with vetoes occasionally overridden); legislative-executive relations, while conflictual, have been routinized, and both branches are learning to live with each other. The Russian system of

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31 Linz makes this comment in the context of noting that the only presidential democracy with a long history of constitutional continuity is the United States. What he means by the "jury being out," and whether this means that French presidential democracy is unstable or whether it is not actually a true presidential system, is unclear. Linz in Lijphart, ed., p. 118.
34 Baylis, p. 302.
presidential government is becoming more, rather than less, regularized, even where crucial issues of national security are involved. In the wake of a 1995 legislative-executive conflict over the Chechen war, for example, both sides chose negotiation over collapsing the government, prompting one legislator to marvel that “it looks like for the first time a compromise worked to settle a political crisis in Russia. This is perhaps amazing.” In 1994, the first year of the Second Republic, two observers in the liberal daily Nezavisimaia Gazeta summed up the situation by noting that “the epoch of political battles has quietly turned to a phase of routine, of work that is often bureaucratic, draft-legislative, and administrative…” Coming only seven months after the destruction of the parliament, this was a remarkable statement, and is itself a strong contradiction of the central expectations of the antipresidential consensus.

The failure of the presidential critique to account for the Russian experience says as much about the institutional approach as it does about Russian politics. Rather than take the condescending and exceptionalist position that Russian presidentialism is some sort of “mistake” made by an unenlightened society (or worse, an authoritarian ruse thrust upon an unwitting populace), we ought instead to take seriously that it was chosen, and chosen for reasons that are comprehensible in the Russian social context (even if they are not congruent with the best advice Western political scientists have to offer.) The collapse of authoritarianism in Russia and Eastern Europe was not one of a number of alternating phases of democracy and democratic failure, with longstanding institutions changing hands back and forth, accruing bits and pieces of previous arrangements. In the post-Soviet world, new institutions were consciously created, refined, discarded, reorganized and redefined through processes of negotiation and conflict at all levels of society. All this leads us, as Bunce puts it, to consider “whether the oft-posed relationship between institutions and political practice should not be reversed in the East European context,” noting that in postcommunism, “political institutions seem to be more a consequence than a cause of political developments.”

But if politics are prior to institutions in the post-Soviet world, this still leaves an open question about the social sources of politics. Stephen Holmes has pondered the question of why “parliamentarism has made no inroads in the ex-USSR, except for the Baltic states, while full-fledged presidentialism has found no takers in Eastern Europe,” leading him to suspect that “institutional choices were actually made under some set of larger constraints perhaps invisible to the constitutional bargainers themselves.” Perhaps these constraints are not so invisible: Holmes adds

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37 Bunce, p. 99.

a prediction that strong presidencies “will emerge where society is not well-organized enough to produce through elections a parliament that, in turn, is coherent enough to support a single-minded government capable of taking tough economic and other decisions.” Here, rather than plunge into irresolvable arguments about the weight of Russian history, the “real” nature of Russian political culture, or even more ethereal issues, I suggest that the problem of “social organization” or “coherence” represents a more accessible aspect of social life in Russia (or elsewhere, for that matter) that explains much about the behavior of presidents, the performance of parliaments, and the viability of democracy: the level and quality of social trust.

RUSSIAN PRESIDENTIALISM AND THE POLITICS OF MISTRUST

The study of Russian politics is a study in the politics of mistrust. Russian society is one of pervasive social mistrust, where most citizens expect little from each other, almost nothing from government institutions, and the very worst from organized political parties and movements. Participation in politics is not so much an act of citizenship as it is of self-defense; loosely affiliated groups seek representation primarily to avoid coming by default under the baleful domination of some other group. Hostile intentions between social blocs are simply assumed to exist, a prophecy that is as often correct as it is self-fulfilling. One Russian political analyst, commenting sadly on a fistfight on the floor of the Duma (a free-for-all between an ultranationalist, a priest, and a female deputy from the women’s movement) captured this sentiment when he wondered “just how much savage malice and uncontrolled hatred is stored up in other figures, leading other sorts of parties, and laying claim to direct the entire Russian government, to the highest power in their reach.”

Acknowledging that governments can and should change, he lamented that while “power might be different [tomorrow]--democratic, communist, liberal, conservative…it shouldn’t be frightening.”

This fear is the motive force of Russian presidential democracy. To govern Russia is to govern a society that is characterized by the almost complete lack of social trust; no group is willing to risk the consequences of a decisive political victory by any other group. Russian presidentialism has played a crucial part in the transition from Soviet communism to Russian republicanism because presidentialism is more likely than other arrangements to preserve processes of democratic consolidation in societies that are characterized by a lack of social trust. The divided powers of presidential systems make changing the legal status quo difficult, and dramatically reduce the possibility that any one group or bloc can capture the government in toto; moreover, even victory in such a system does not translate into an immediate ability to reorganize political life. By contrast.

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as Terry Moe points out, “a classic, highly competitive parliamentary system...takes the dangers of political uncertainty to their extreme: if the other side comes to power, they can pass whatever laws they want” (and quickly, one might add), even those that might “subvert or completely destroy everything the first party has put into place.”41 In a low-trust society, where other groups are seen as not merely competitors for power but malevolent strangers, this supremacy of unified parliamentary power may be too much risk for the citizen to bear.42

Put another way, the less trust citizens have in each other, the more anxiety they will have about the ease and speed with which the coercive instruments of the state can change hands. In fact, the lack of trust explains a great deal about what may seem to Westerners almost an obsession with legalism in societies that were in practice lawless. The collapse of Communism occurred so suddenly that there was little time, and perhaps even less inclination, for negotiation (or “pacting,” as it is sometimes called) among either elites or broader social groupings. “Russia,” Fish notes, “entered the postcoup period with the question of who shall speak for whom entirely unanswered,” or as Shevtsova described it more recently, lacking “consensus among the major players about either the object or the rules of postcommunist politics.”43 From this Ulrich Preuss has cogently concluded that “the quest for constitutionalism came up in Central and East Europe mainly because nobody could rely on the existence of an equilibrium which would render constitutional democracy a self-enforcing structure.”44

Where trust is lacking, the critique of presidentialism is turned on its head and the putative failings of presidentialism emerge as positive virtues. Presidencies are indeed powerful offices; therefore, they serve not as irresistible temptations for one person, but a restraint on the plethora of parties who seek as their primary goal the extinction of other political forces. Presidential systems rely on separated mandates; therefore, rather than creating a dilemma of “dual legitimacy,” they help to ensure that no one group can overwhelm diverse regional, social or ideological interests in a single electoral sweep. Presidential elections are winner-take-all affairs; therefore, rather than a zero-sum victory, the president’s mandate to govern is not diluted by power-sharing (or policy-sabotaging) arrangements with implacable opponents.45 Presidential systems are governed by fixed terms;

41 Moe, p. 240.
42 The U.K. is often cited as the exemplar of a high-trust society in which there is no fear of virtually unchecked parliamentary supremacy. As MP George Robertson put it to me once, “The most important thing to understand about the British system is that theoretically it shouldn't work at all. But it does, because we all agree it should.”
45 Weaver and Rockman have noted an obvious flaw in the parliamentary alternative, namely, that the out-party has a particular incentive to undermine the party in power by not cooperating and depicting the performance of the ruling party as poorly as possible. Weaver and Rockman, eds., p. 24; also see R. Kent Weaver, “Are Parliamentary Systems Better?,” The Brookings Review, Summer 1985.
therefore, rather than the beginning of a prison sentence for its inhabitant, the end of the election cycle is instead a welcome respite from the continual conflict of politics for everyone else. If trust is the prism through which the these arrangements, are viewed, then in every instance what might be considered a unnecessarily complicated or divisive institutional effect of the presidential arrangement can be reinterpreted as a form of protection for the citizen whose primary political fear is the possibility that the regime might fall into hostile hands.

The irony of modern Russian politics is that democracy has emerged from a millennium of one-man rule only to find that its best hope of survival lay with a system of strong executive power. Placed in its social context, Russian presidentialism (and, for that matter, its short-lived Soviet predecessor) is less a paradox than an object lesson in the political management of mistrust. Rather than an incipient dictatorship, to the fearful citizen the presidency represents a fixed period of controlled conflict in which the monopolization of public authority by any one group is virtually impossible. The Russian presidential system is, from a legal-constitutional standpoint, riddled with flaws, but it is the only arrangement that is acceptable to a population—and to a political elite—that is plagued by pervasive social anxiety. To be sure, there is deep cynicism about the institutions of government among the Russian citizenry (and more than a little cynicism among the Russian elite about the average Russian voter), but the origins of the Russian political system are nonetheless to be found in the atomized nature of Russian social life. The Russian Federation is not a presidential system because the government does not trust the people, or because the people do not trust the government; in the end, it is a presidential system because the people do not trust each other.

The Problem of Trust in Russian Society

The absence of social trust in Russian society is a problem that can be traced directly to methods of rule in the Soviet era. The hallmark of the Soviet system was the purposeful destruction of what is now understood as “social capital,” the informal networks of engagement and reciprocity that breed the kind of trust, cooperative behavior and voluntary relationships of civic associationalism that are the infrastructure of a democratic society. The very basis for these relationships was eradicated by Soviet policies designed to destroy previous social groupings, from the village to the Church, all of which were thought (correctly) to be obstacles to the regime’s goal.
of transforming and reordering of social life. This totalitarian project ruptured previous social, cultural, and even familial bonds—that is, it “atomized” society—in order to reconstitute the polity as a collection of individuals in a narrow, vertical relationship with the Party-state. The point, as Sarah Terry has emphasized, was not just to repress, but to decimate autonomous social structures.

These policies proved to have deeper roots and to be more lasting than the regime they were meant to protect. The most important lesson taught, and the most enduring lesson learned, from this period was that participation in political life was at best pointless and at worst lethal. John Lowenhardt has aptly termed this the Soviet Syndrome, “a deadly mixture of symptoms that paralyzes normal political intercourse.” In fact, this “syndrome” represented more than political paralysis; it represented a pervasive and continual anxiety about social interaction. (As Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn put it in Cancer Ward, “If decade after decade the truth cannot be told, each person’s mind begins to wander irretrievably. One’s fellow countrymen become harder to understand than Martians.”) Russian academic Vladimir Zamkovoi describes it as “a unique organic alloy of existential fear and idiotic enthusiasm” whose legacy even now is a homo sovieticus for whom public life is seen as chaotically Hobbesian, and who can therefore “readily and without regret...inflict pain and suffering on another” without clear gain, even while understanding that he himself may be the next victim of such pain and suffering.

This is, of course—as Zamkovoi himself admits—an aspect of an “ideal type,” part of a complex, composite picture of a people who were forced to engage in cruel, dispassionate, or merely self-absorbed behavior as a daily matter of survival. Still, the habit of holding family and friends close and all others at arm’s length was a common and prudent act of self-defense in the Soviet era. Russian legal scholar Gennadii Khokhriakov emphasizes that while “even in the holiest of holies—your own family—there would be no trusting relationships, no secret conversations” (lest your own child, “guided by a ‘higher truth,’” turned out to be an informer), outside the family

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48 Kenneth Jowitt calls these the phases of "transformation" and "consolidation." See Kenneth Jowitt, New World Disorder: The Leninist Extinction (Berkeley: The University of California Press), pp. 56-57.
49 See Sarah Terry, "Thinking About Post-Communist Transitions: How Different Are They?," Slavic Review 52 (2), Spring 1993, pp. 335-336.
52 Zamkovoi, p. 20. In his book about the final days of the USSR, David Remnick recounted a small, sad anecdote that illustrates this kind of cruelty. Remnick was sitting in a courtyard speaking to an elderly man when they were suddenly interrupted: a woman hurled a cat out of a tenth floor window, yelling "Animal! No room for you here! Be gone!" The cat, Remnick writes, "hit the pavement, and it sounded like the soft pop of an exploding water balloon. Now the two of us, the old man and I, were watching: the woman at the window, her face twisted into an angry knot, the cat struggling to get up on its broken legs. 'Ach,' the old man said, turning away, 'our Russian life!'...He [then] went on talking." David Remnick, Lenin's Tomb (New York: Vintage, 1994), pp. 26-27.
people "would keep themselves even further from sin: they would avoid dangerous conversations, and break off friendly relations because of even trivial suspicions."\(^5\)3

This is not to say that Soviet citizens did not interact with each other publicly and regularly. But familiarity is not the same thing as trust, and forced interaction is not the same thing as "spontaneous sociability."\(^5\)4 Public activities in the Soviet period were removed from a voluntary context and left as dessicated vessels of state-approved activity. This produced what T.H. Rigby has called the "mono-organizational society," in which "the public arena, emptied of spontaneous political life" is nonetheless "noisy with contrived activity."\(^5\)5 But underneath the state-sponsored rallies, the state-sponsored youth clubs, the state-sponsored vacation groups and all of the other sham communitarian activities that characterized Soviet social life, the alienation and fear bred by the system meant that Soviets were individuals bound into groups, not individuals associating in groups—a crucial difference from the perspective of creating social capital and building social trust.

Even the abatement of terror after the 1950s did little to alleviate the Soviet citizen's fear of his fellows or to strengthen his willingness to participate in public life, and for good reason: as Jacek Kuron pointedly put it, the social monopoly of the state in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe was such that if citizens gathered to "discuss freely a matter as simple as roof repairs on a block of apartments, it be[came] a challenge to the central authority."\(^5\)6 The regime went to absurd lengths to interfere with unofficial association among ordinary citizens, and remained vigilant in suppressing or controlling such dangerous groups as yoga devotees, karate enthusiasts, and stamp collectors well into the 1980s.\(^5\)7 By the late Brezhnev period the dominant leitmotif of Soviet public and cultural life was disengagement and self-absorption. Older Soviet citizens tended to see politics as dangerous

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\(^5\)7 Jonathan Grant has detailed the "elaborate process" through which the Soviet regime "socially reconstructed the hobby of stamp collecting," a process undertaken mostly by mid-level bureaucrats who could not tolerate the idea of a hobby as "an autonomous realm of social activity." See J. Grant, "The Social Construction of Philately in the Early Soviet Era," Comparative Studies in Society and History 37 (3), Spring 1995, p. 495. I experienced the effect of this meddling in small way in 1987, when my father, a lifetime philatelist, accompanied me to the Soviet Union. He visited a Soviet stamp shop (a small and cheerless place filled only with stamps from socialist nations), and found--after giving one of the collectors there a book of U.S. stamps as a gift--that the shop itself was merely a meeting point. The collectors quickly gathered outside the store in a hushed knot to divvy up quickly the American stamps. They no longer spoke with my father: they were now pursuing their hobby well in violation of Soviet law by trafficking in common American postage stamps, and we left them to their negotiations.
(for obvious reasons), and younger ones, while they did not see civic engagement as quite so fatal, certainly saw nothing of value in it.\textsuperscript{58}

One might at least have expected the marketplace to provide some common ground for the kind of daily interaction important to the accumulation of social capital. But the Soviet marketplace was merely one of the points of contact in the daily tug-of-war between the citizen and the state for scarce resources, rather than an open arena of free exchange between individuals. The one functioning market that \textit{did} exist in the USSR, the black market, actually corroded trust and depleted social capital, for it was fraught with legal and material risk, and supplied by what was then the Soviet criminal class. The result, Richard Lotspeich has written, is that "the shadow economy...trained large parts of the population in illegal activities, creating human capital specific to illegality and a social morality supportive of activities outside formal legality."\textsuperscript{59} In other words, the black market—i.e., the one that worked—taught the Soviet citizen that exchanges of goods were risky, furtive, and potentially lucrative for those willing to break the law, and it is unsurprising that Lotspeich found "widely felt exasperation [among] many citizens that successful businessmen must be criminals." In 1990 Soviet political scientist Aleksei Kiva warned that without a change in their beliefs the Soviet people would be "totally ruined and bankrupt, strang[ling] one another when we are starving while continuing to be proud of our specialness and uniqueness."\textsuperscript{60}

Still, in the late 1980s, when the Gorbachev regime decided to allow the growth of the so-called "\textit{neformaly}," or informal groups, loose networks (including the sports fans, karate buffs, and yoga teachers) reaggregated with startling speed. There is no firm agreement on how many of these groups existed at any given time, but rough Soviet and Western estimates place the number at some 30,000 registered organizations in 1988, doubling within a year and then trebling to 90,000 by 1990.\textsuperscript{61} Even here, there was an agenda, as John Dunlop points out:

By consciously promoting the growth and the spread of \textit{neformaly}, or informal organizations, throughout the Russian Republic and the USSR, Gorbachev and [advisor Aleksandr] Yakovlev had sought to create a "civil society," a vibrant collection of "social movements" that would aggressively support the reformist course of the Party leadership, while allowing itself to be used as a bludgeon against entrenched conservatives resisting change.\textsuperscript{62}


\textsuperscript{60} "Suspicion of Wealth Hampers Perestroika," FBIS-SOV-90-113S, June 12, 1990, p. 32.


\textsuperscript{62} Dunlop, p. 72.
Of course, civil society (insofar as Gorbachev or Yakovlev even understood the concept) cannot be “created,” and by 1991 most of these groups had disintegrated or faded away into in the kaleidoscopic reordering of society that represented not the reformation of a civil society, but a kind of endless round-robin of associations among individuals who, in the end, remained “free agents” in both a social and political sense, unattached and independent of social movements and organized political activity.63

While the sudden growth of the neformaly did not lead to the formation of more stable social or political groupings (every attempt to create even the loosest kind of “Russian popular front” from these groups in this period failed), it did illustrate two important facts of social life that would have an impact on the creation of the post-Soviet Russian Republic.64 On the one hand, it showed the degree to which Russian society had been truly atomized by force, and raised the hope that the process is reversible; given even the slightest opening, millions sought to join larger groupings (thus casting doubt on the idea that the isolation of Russian social life was either voluntary, or some sort of cultural norm.) On the other, it showed that the reaggregation of individuals would not simply produce something called “civil society” or any of the consequent political institutions associated with the concept. The rapid growth of the “informals” was like the snapping back of a tightly-stretched rubber band, a dramatic release of tension. The liberalization of the late 1980s restored something like a normal environment for association, but it could not ex nihilo create normal associations in and of itself.

All of this, in retrospect, could be looked back upon as almost comical—the idea of an ongoing struggle between the KGB, yoga clubs, and karate dojos seems especially ripe for satire—were it not for the scars of lasting social mistrust left among Russians. The absence of functioning social networks and the consequent lack of intermediate organizations in the Soviet period left the average citizen unprepared for, and with no extended network of support for, the tenuous and uncertain conditions associated with political and economic freedom. Post-Soviet Russia is now what Richard Rose calls an “hour-glass society”, in which there are strong links only among relatives and friends, no intermediate institutions (of the kind normally associated with “civil society”) and a heavy superstratum of disorganized and unrespected governmental bodies.65

At the top of this hour-glass, governing elites went to war with each other, and “how it all ended,” former Duma speaker Ivan Rybkin writes dolefully, “is well known.”66 But the bottom of the “hour-glass” is not all that stable either. It is unsurprising that family relationships were the

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64 Dunlop, p. 76.


quickest to recover from the damage of the Soviet era, but it would be a mistake to treat other patterns of mistrust as ephemeral or even epiphenomenal. Tempting as it is to ascribe the sterility of the social environment to the immediate atmosphere of repression under the Soviets, the emptiness of social life in Russia is hardly a passing anomaly. Russian Academy of Science (RAN) sociologists found “weakening of feelings of closeness to practically all groups and communities in a period of only a single year [from 1992 to 1993]” including slight drops even among friends and family (although the level of identification with those groups, and with co-workers, remains high). The RAN study ascribed this ongoing “disorientation” in Russian society to the previous policies of “herding” groups and individuals into state activities, and they conclude (echoing Zamkovoi) that Russians continue to have difficulty coping with other citizens outside of the narrow “stereotypes and categories” imposed by the previous regime. Most disturbing was that the RAN survey found slight increases of identification with only three groups: “those who don’t like to stand out,” those who think that “what matters most is luck,” and “those who aren’t interested in politics.” These feelings of mistrust and alienation deepened as society devolved into a free-for-all that many Russians describe as “bespredel” or “without boundaries.”

If all this seems to bear more than a passing resemblance to the “amoral familism” found in Edward Banfield’s classic study of southern Italy, it is no accident. Banfield’s “Montegrano” and Soviet Russia each were populated by citizens who sought to “maximize the material, short-run advantage of the nuclear family” based on the sensible assumption that “others will do likewise.” But there was a crucial difference between the Soviet and the “Montegrani:” for the Soviet, cooperation with others was not just fruitless in a material sense, but perhaps lethal. The Soviet regime turned every man into an island and each family into a fortress. In present Russian society the condition of mistrust lingers not as the vestigial product of an evolutionary process among content and isolated villagers, but rather as the echo of a cruelly Darwinian strategy of survival under a regime which, acting as a kind of perverse Leviathan, artificially created a war of all against all.

Measuring Trust and its Impact on Politics

Trust has long been recognized as a key to the creation and maintenance of healthy democracies. From the Federalist Papers to postwar studies of democratic culture and into the current era of global democratization, observers of democratic politics repeatedly reach Judith Shklar’s wise conclusion that liberal democracy requires more trust than any other political system

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known to man; or, as Robert Putnam has put it, building social capital (of which trust is an essential part) may not be easy, but it is “the key to making democracy work.” Over thirty years ago, Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba wrote in *The Civic Culture* that the “role of social trust and cooperativeness cannot be overemphasized;” they then presciently warned that although constitutional engineers

have designed formal structures of politics that attempt to enforce trustworthy behavior...without these attitudes of trust, such institutions may mean little. Social trust facilitates political cooperation among the citizens in these [democratic] nations, and without it democratic politics is impossible.70

Despite this striking and direct acknowledgment of the role of “social trust and cooperativeness” (in other words, of social capital) in democratic societies, the question has rarely been linked explicitly to the problem of democratic institutions. To be fair, in part this is because in the intervening three decades since *The Civic Culture* appeared, there were few new democracies worthy of the name and less worthy yet (unstable and of questionable character as they were) of extensive study. But it was also, in part, due to a somewhat artificial divide in the social sciences between the sociological and anthropological approaches on the one hand, and the increasingly formal approaches of political science on the other.

But the political scientists have had good reason to be wary of reintegrating notions like “trust” and social capital into works on new democracies, because they are admittedly slippery concepts. They are difficult to measure and their application to the analysis of politics in any regime is necessarily a subjective exercise. “The accumulation of social capital,” Francis Fukuyama has written, “is a complicated and in many ways mysterious cultural process. While governments can enact policies that have the effect of depleting social capital, they have great difficulties understanding how to build it up again.”71 To call this process “mysterious” may seem unhelpful at first, but it emphasizes the fact that “trust,” like other concepts in the study of politics such as “deterrence” or “legitimacy,” is a quality that is known to exist but is always most conspicuous in its absence. Still, the fact that it is hard to measure does not mean it is not important; one purpose of this study is to help clarify the nature of the variable itself, while pointing to useful directions for further research on social trust and its implications for politics.

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71 Fukuyama, p. 11.
Measuring “Trust”

The closed nature of the Soviet regime made it almost impossible to get at the problem of trust in the pre-perestroika period, but in the years since Russian sociologists have made up for lost time. Not surprisingly, they are deeply interested in the problem of trust and have carried out consistent polling on the issue since they were first allowed to do so in the late 1980s. These diachronic polls, combined with the kind of polling snapshots taken by the increasingly free mass media after 1989, provide the social backdrop to the events surrounding the creation of the Russian Republic. These polls have been supplemented by a growing body of data and literature provided by Western scholars who have begun (in an unusual turn) to emulate their Russian colleagues in asking similar questions about trust and political attachments. While we do not have the complete studies of the kind carried out intermittently over the past forty years in the United States (or even more consistently in the same period in West Germany), the plain fact is that we never will; we do, however, have several studies that are comparable, for example, to the well-regarded late 1995 Kaiser study of trust in America. These sources can be augmented by the traditional methods of elite analysis that, when properly applied, have served sovietology reasonably well (perhaps better, in retrospect, than the dramatic methodological atonement of many sovietologists might suggest): that is, the interpretation of public activities and speeches of political and social leaders, both those who hold power and those who seek it.

Another measure of the level of trust in Russia, and an indication in itself of the degree to which the Soviet regime destroyed the basis for generating social capital, is the nearly complete lack during the Soviet period of the kind of dense, horizontal networks we would normally associate with relationships of voluntary associationalism. The Soviet regime was explicitly designed to destroy any such existing relationships and to prevent the emergence of new ones. The destruction of civil society in the Soviet era, as it turns out, was really no such thing; rather, it was a more fundamental attack on society itself, on the individual and the daily interactions between human beings from which the larger groupings of civil society arise. Preuss, like Sarah Terry, rejects the idea that the collapse of communism between 1989 and 1991 was a rebellion on the part of civil society against statism, since there was no civil society to speak of.

One result of forty years’ “already existing socialism” was the destruction of the very associational infrastructure which is characteristic of civil society. The principles of civil society—plurality, publicity, and democratic association—were barely in place in these societies. The informal network of small underground opposition groups could not

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provide the discursive structure vital for the reflective generation, articulation, and institutionalization of societal needs.\textsuperscript{73}

Not only were these relationships lacking, but it is now clear that the Soviet regime had been more successful than anyone realized at preventing their reemergence. (This seems to confirm observations by Fukuyama, Putnam and others that destroying social capital is much easier than creating it.) “Distrust,” Rose concludes, “is a pervasive legacy of communist rule.”\textsuperscript{74} But while Rose was speaking mostly of the bonds of trust between the citizen and public institutions, his comment also reflects the lasting damage done to bonds of interpersonal and inter-group relations at all levels. Not only had the regime razed the fields of voluntary associationalism, it had plowed salt into the furrows as well.

The Russian case is therefore especially amenable to the study of trust and politics. If we can measure social capital in a relative sense, then we can say with confidence that the Russian Republic embarked on a course of conscious institutional creation in a condition of the almost complete lack of social capital, and very low levels of trust. Moreover, we can identify the sources of the damage done to Russian society that depleted social capital to this virtually nonexistent level, and follow the impact of that damage as it reverberates through the first years of a new democracy. Thus, the emphasis on trust provides an explanation of Russian presidential democracy that links modern Russia coherently to its Soviet past, sidestepping the unresolvable issue of “natural” or “historic” Russian dispositions (thereby avoiding as well specious arguments about inevitability). Of course, the conditions surrounding the collapse of the Soviet Union may well mean that the generalizations produced here may be applicable only to the former Soviet republics and their Eastern European holdings (i.e., only to the post-communist world), but that in itself is a constructive step away from what has so far been an unsatisfying attempt to import to the region questionable lessons learned under very different circumstances in Latin America and Africa.

The Implications of Trust

Trust affects the choice and performance of democratic institutions. In societies suffering from a lack of generalized, transitive trust, people not only have overwhelming personal, instrumental reasons to choose presidentialism over parliamentarism, but under such conditions it may well be that presidentialism is in fact the best hope for consolidating democracy. If this is true, three important implications follow that should force a reconsideration of our previous approaches to building democracy in the post-communist world. First, it would mean that in a low-trust environment, presidentialism mitigates, rather than strengthens, elite conflict, whether in the electoral cycle itself or in the day-to-day conduct of legislative-executive relations. Second, it would

\textsuperscript{73} Preuss, p. 109.
mean that a widespread lack of trust creates a clear social preference for presidential arrangements; this reverses the conventional wisdom that presidentialism divides society, and presents presidentialism as the result, not the cause, of social fragmentation (and that parliamentarism is likewise the result of a stable society, and not its cause). Finally, it means that presidentialism in Russia and the former Soviet area is not a "mistake," an experiment, or authoritarian camouflage, but rather a deliberate act, a compromise among elites who—like the public that elected them—see it as a necessary evil that is most likely to protect all of them from each other.

From the point of view of building institutions and maintaining a young democracy, the most important implication of a low-trust society lies not with the strength of presidents but with the weakness of parties. Effective parliamentarism, by its very definition, requires cohesive parties; it does not create them, and this in turn requires strong patterns of associationalism and trust across society. Societies that lack the networks in which social capital is accumulated—from Robert Putnam's now-famous bowling leagues, to social clubs, local parent-teacher associations, and the like—lack the basic structures of trust and association that make party politics (and therefore parliamentarism itself) possible. People simply do not associate enough to create true parties themselves, nor do they have enough trust in people they do not know to trust the parties offered them by others. At the grass roots, Russian parties are umbrellas that hold together loose groups of citizens for a time rather than organized political vehicles. At the top, they are potemkin organizations for ambitious politicians—Fish refers to this as "free-lance political entrepreneurialism"—and are as often referred to by the name of their founder or more prominent members as they are by their official name ("Gaidar's party," or "Borovoy's party" instead of "Russia's Choice" or "Economic Freedom Party," and so on). 76

The understandable failure of parties to emerge from the disarray of social life has meant that Russian political activity is characterized by a kind of "fluid factionalism" rather than lasting or firm party attachments. Parliamentary chaos, particularly in the First Republic, has been the order of the day. It is important to determine if this parliamentary disorder is the result of social conflict or due to presidential opposition; if the emphasis on trust is correct, parliamentary gridlock should be traceable to the mistrustful intrigues of elite groupings that reflect the bitter divisions in the electorate itself, rather than to presidential mischief, which in turn would mean that presidents, in low-trust environments, can and do act as restraints on irresponsible parliaments rather than vice versa. Research on Eastern European parliamentarism already strongly points to a disturbing pattern

75 Linz agrees that his parliamentary alternative needs to be supported by "strong, well-disciplined parties," begging the question of where such parties come from. See Juan Linz, "The Perils of Presidentialism," in Lijphardt, ed., p. 123.

76 "What is needed," Komsomol'skaia Pravda asked in 1994, "to set up a new party? An idea? Like minded people? Anywhere else, but not in our country. Here the chief thing is a popular or influential figure (which are by no means one and the same). The number of figures equals the number of parties." See "Political Parties Create 'Strong' Organizations." FBIS-SOV-94-237, December 9, 1994, p. 13.
in this regard, with parties (such that they are) acting the part of the would-be autocrat as they seek to extinguish each other or to further extremely particularistic interests rather than govern by grappling with more national problems. Attila Agh claims that newly emerging parties in Eastern Europe have in most cases tried to establish a “tyrannical majority,” a simple parliamentary majority that is “without any effort, taken for granted, and without any consensus being built with the minority in the parliament.” The elites leading these parties, Agh notes, “have been thinking in terms of a ‘final victory’ and have tried to push out their competitors from politics as ‘enemies.’” Baylis has likewise noted that “in several instances presidential intervention [in Eastern Europe] has provided a needed corrective...thereby impeding incipient authoritarian tendencies [of parliaments in the region].” This seems to be the case in Russia as well, once again suggesting that the patterns of politics have been shaped more by the social environment of post-communism than by institutional design.

The hypothesis that in low-trust societies presidentialism inhibits anti-democratic parliamentary extremism also implies that both elites and ordinary citizens will prefer presidential arrangements under such conditions, not because most citizens are moderate (they may or not be), but because they see no other way to protect all groups from each other. Legislatures typically mirror the divisions in the societies they serve, and in a fragmented and distrustful society parliaments are likely to be viewed as chaotic and frightening. In the Russian case, even at moments of extreme parliamentary-presidential conflict, such as the October 1993 standoff, the Russian public remained by a large margin in favor of maintaining Yeltsin and the presidency—which they knew to be two different things—for reasons that are directly linked to issues of trust and social cohesion. (If true, this should at least lay to rest the objection that the Russian presidential system was somehow foisted on an unwilling populace, a popular accusation of Russian anti-system parties and even some Western scholars.)

The preference for presidentialism among the Russian masses is matched by similar support among elites, and for similar reasons. This is not the same thing as saying that Russian politicians think that presidentialism is an optimal system; rather, they see it as the only arrangement that keeps

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78 Agh, p. 207.
all parties in play, at least for the duration of an election cycle. For example, when asked directly about which system he preferred, Konstantin Borovoy (one of the leaders of a prominent reformist party) told me in early 1996 that he felt that the presidency was too powerful an institution, and that he had clear differences with Yeltsin that would lead him away from supporting him in the upcoming election. He then added immediately that he nonetheless considered the presidential system to be the only guarantee of the survival of his party and of Russian democracy.\textsuperscript{81}

The primary opposition in Russian society to the presidential system comes, predictably enough, from the anti-system parties (such as the Communists) who need to capture a parliamentary majority, since the first-past-the-post arrangement prevents their diffuse support from coalescing into a national-level force. Indeed, the presidential system is seen as an impediment to the sudden capture of power not only by those who fear being dominated, but by those seeking to attain that domination itself. During the 1995 Duma campaign, one leader of the extremist Russian Workers Party told a rally in St. Petersburg that it was necessary to “destroy the regime from the inside:”

Unfortunately, we are not ready to break heads in the regime. We don’t have the strength yet. So we will go to the Duma. We will fight for complete victory over [St. Petersburg mayor Anatoly] Sobchak, Yeltsin and all the other bastards.\textsuperscript{82}

The notable exception here among anti-system parties is Vladimir Zhirinovskii’s Liberal Democrats, who have supported the institution of the presidency, a position that reflects Zhirinovskii’s belief that he can actually win the Russian presidency at some point. (There is some evidence that Zhirinovskii has come to see the virtues of parliamentarism in direct proportion to his slowly-dawning understanding that he will never be President of the Federation.)

\textsuperscript{81} Interview with Konstantin Borovoy, March 28, 1996, Hanover, New Hampshire. I am grateful to Dr. Borovoy for his insights.

\textsuperscript{82} Sergei Shargorodsky, “Russia-Revolution Day,” AP North American Wire, November 7, 1995. The speaker, Viktor Tiulkin, even drifted from the moderate public line set by Communist leader Gennadii Zyuganov by saying at the same rally that working people “cannot come to power by parliamentary means.”
APPENDIX: The Structure of the Book (forthcoming 1999)

The book in progress from this study is not meant as a comprehensive history of the Russian presidency, but rather an attempt to explain the emergence and survival of Russian democracy under a presidential system. It is therefore as much a study of the management of mistrust, an attempt to draw the link between social conditions and political developments, as it is a analysis of politics in the post-Soviet period generally. Chapter One begins with the events surrounding the establishment of the Soviet presidency, the office created in 1990 specifically for Mikhail Gorbachev, and specifically so that he could manage—or stop—the accelerating disintegration of the Soviet Union. The Soviet presidency was not quite detached from a legislative mandate (confirmation came from the immense Congress of People's Deputies), but it had wide popular support and represented a step forward toward a system of separated powers in the USSR. As Gorbachev was maneuvering himself into what would prove to be a short-lived USSR Presidency, Yeltsin was rapidly returning from the political exile into which Gorbachev had forced him. The first Yeltsin “presidency” was actually a premiership, and as the Russian public lost faith in the central government’s ability to forestall outright social warfare, it soon eclipsed the Soviet presidency in terms of popular support and practical strength.

Chapter Two discusses the debates that broke into the open about the creation of an independent government for the First Russian Republic. The First Republic, relying as it did on remnants of Soviet institutions, was in essence a parliamentary system, and it is a vivid illustration of the repercussions of social mistrust in a parliamentary arrangement, from the rhetorical parliamentary combat to the very real combat of the October 1993 destruction of the White House.

Chapter Three is an analysis of the reconstruction of Russian politics, both among new party organizations at large and among Moscow’s elites, that led to the Second Republic. Of particular interest are the roads not taken: the failure to establish a “special regime” or to ban elections and political activity. The chapter is centered on the reorganization of society after the trauma of the October attack, and the new legislature and presidency that emerge from the referendum and elections of December 1993. The 1993 elections could be referred to as “founding” elections, and it is a common adage that the most important elections in a post-authoritarian situation are not the first round but the second.

Chapter Four discusses the transition from the first to the second modern Duma. The legislative elections of 1995 are especially important in that they produced a result—a Communist plurality—that challenged the ruling presidential administration without bringing down the regime or even forestalling the next round of elections, a result I explain in terms of the dynamics of legislative-executive relations in a low-trust society.

Chapter Five is a brief exploration of the 1996 presidential election, an event that is noteworthy for two reasons: that it took place, and that it took place essentially without incident. It
was, however, something of a test of the hypothesis of trust, and I discuss the changing relationship between the candidates, their platforms, and the expressed views of the voters. The 1996 election is also important because it was Yeltsin's last, and his victory opened the campaign to succeed him. The conduct and outcome of the 1996 election showed that the voters understood the logic of the presidential system, and acted to keep it intact and in moderate hands. Taken together, the 1995 Duma elections and the two-round presidential elections also showed that the Russian voter was willing to cast a protest vote in legislative elections and in the first round of a presidential election. This relatively sophisticated understanding of the role of the presidency represented an equally sophisticated understanding of the fragility of Russian society, and indicated a growing moderation on the part of the voters.

The final chapter of this book explores the prospects for the strengthening of Russian democratic institutions, while revisiting the initial propositions about trust and presidentialism—and, along the way, about the autonomy of institutions in general. It also considers the possibilities of a Russian Third Republic, a constitutional reorganization that will almost certainly take place within the next decade—and perhaps sooner. In the 1996 presidential elections, Mikhail Gorbachev polled less than 1 point of popular support, and was physically assaulted at least twice. But in 1990, he was made President of the USSR practically by acclamation.