New Authoritarian Regimes and the Public Space.

An Analysis of Russia’s
Institutionalised Civil Society

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Summary

The paper explores political power attitudes towards social pluralism in post-Soviet Russia as a way to better understand the mechanisms of functioning and self-preservation of this political system as a whole. The relevance of such an analysis lies in the fact that the Russian case can provide useful insights to better grasp the way the contemporary forms of authoritarian governance can survive in the era of democracy and find legitimacy. This analysis is aimed at linking the notion of “new authoritarianisms”, which has gained momentum in current literature on regime transformations, to Russia’s public space, documenting this dimension empirically. As such, it wants to contribute to clarify a current research topic in Comparative politics—the response of post-modern authoritarian regimes to external pressures to democratise—and to advancing that discussion in the Russian case. Indeed, while this issue is being increasingly discussed within the semi-authoritarian regimes literature, so far few researches have explored its specific links with the social space. The basic argument is that there is a conscious choice from the incumbents aimed at establishing a “legitimised” civil society where social actors can arrange their activity without challenging directly the official power. In the attempt to adapt the notion of “sovereign democracy” to the needs of integration in a globalised world, the rhetoric of civil society is used with a specific meaning, which differs from that linked to liberal democracies; instead of being conceived as a part of society which operates outside, and sometimes in opposition to, the realm of the State, it corresponds to a space directly managed from above. The paper will focus on one specific aspect of such an “institutionalised” civil society, namely the “Obschestvennaya Palata Rossiyskoy Federatsii”, a sort of public Chamber where the main social interests are supposed to be represented.

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Introduction.

Defective democracies, hybrid regimes and new authoritarianisms

The last decade of the XXI century has seen the proliferation of regimes that can hardly be ascribed to the democratic or authoritarian model *tout court*. They show ambiguous features which deny such a clear-cut classification. In these polities the rhetoric of democracy, claiming the formal acceptance of a well-defined set of institutions and procedures and the respect for a limited sphere of civil and political liberties is combined with illiberal or authoritarian characteristics. On the one hand we have the official recognition of a space where the multiparty system and civil society organisations can operate. The independent press is well tolerated within certain limits and so is the political debate. On the other hand, however, these regimes are seriously deficient as to the real representativeness of the multiple social interests, show a low level of political participation beyond elections and a lack of effectiveness of the rule of law.

To provide an adequate characterisation of these patterns of institutional ambiguity bequeathed by the Third Wave of democratisation, scholars in Comparative politics have adopted basically three different analytical approaches: such political systems have been defined as “imperfect democratic forms”, “hybrid regimes” or “new authoritarianisms”

Firstly, in the transitology literature this type of phenomena has been treated as either not yet, or not sufficiently consolidated democracies. The fact that elections were held with some degree of competition and uncertainty has led some scholars to think of them as democratic regimes, although “defective”. In essence, the recognition of formal rights and political freedoms that these systems assured was emphasised, despite the lack of any effective guarantee of the civil rights. Thus, residual, *ad hoc* categories were invented for them stressing their non-compliance with the liberal democracy paradigm: electoral democracies (Diamond 1999), illiberal democracies (Zakaria 1997), delegated democracies (O’Donnell 1994) are just some of the labels that have been used to describe these political arrangements.

In recent years the trend to include such political systems in the widest range of “hybrid regimes” has become quite widespread in democratisation studies, where they are referred to as ’mixed regimes that fall in the sprawling middle of a political continuum anchored by democracy on one end […] and dictatorship on the other hand’. On closer inspection, these political configurations are anything but a new phenomenon. In the 60s and 70s non-democratic regimes with multiparty elections already existed. However, the greater relevance they have gained recently comes from some basic reasons. First, the number of regimes eager to present

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1 This classification is made by Schedler (2006: 4-6).
3 Linz’s seminal work on the authoritarianisms firstly published in 1975 includes those cases of electoral competition in multiparty systems taking place within authoritarian regimes.
themselves as electoral democracies, with regular, multiparty and competitive elections, has been growing over the last years. This is not surprising, considering that with the end of the Cold War the ideological legitimacy of the authoritarian governances has virtually run out. On the other hand, governments are still unwilling to accept limitations on their exercise of power imposed by the democratic rules. The result is a large-scale diffusion of regimes maintaining the appearance of democracy without fully exposing themselves to the risk of leadership succession imposed by the democratic game.

Yet, this classification has highlighted a certain divergence between the sub-categories ascribed to democratic settings, albeit defective, and the complex reality of post-modern authoritarian features. In particular, the failure of the authoritarian regimes to democratise in the post-Soviet space and Sub-Saharan Africa has highlighted the inadequacy of such categories as hybrid regimes to grasp the new political transformations. To be questioned is the very idea that these regimes are democratic in spite of some imperfections. What is pointed out by many scholars, in fact, is that numerous cases usually labelled as missed democracies or hybrids systems constitute particular authoritarian regimes, able to consolidate over time and to stand as real alternatives to both democracies and traditional authoritarianisms. These institutional arrangements allow the political competition and the call for elections, but the rules of the game are so systematically violated and to the detriment of oppositions, to break the minimum standards required for partly free regimes. Undoubtedly, even fully democratic regimes sometimes incur the infringement of these rules, but not as seriously as to make highly unlikely, if not impossible, the victory of the opposition.

As result, numerous analyses and new classifications have been conceived in democratisation studies. In essence, alongside the democratic and hybrid regimes are the so-called new-authoritarian regimes, which differ from the traditional, closed authoritarianisms for resorting to more subtle forms of controlling pluralism rather than overt coercion. They can be classified according to the degree of electoral competition they ensure (Diamond 2002): thus, a first possible distinction is between politically closed regimes and regimes that provide some degree of multiparty electoral competition, i.e. the “electoral authoritarianism” (Schedler 2006). The latter may, in turn, be divided into “competitive authoritarianisms” on the one hand, following the definition of Levitsky and Way (2010), and “hegemonic authoritarianisms” on the other hand. In the former case the parliamentary opposition, despite the imbalanced play-field in favour of the incumbent coalition or party, retains some ability to affect the electoral outcomes. Whereas in the latter case that possibility is practically absent, as the dominant party wins almost all the seats, thwarting attempts by opposition to put significant challenges to the government.

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Empirical research has recently displayed the rise of these new forms of authoritarian governance as a result of the post-Third Wave of democratisation. This observation raises fundamental questions: how do non-democratic regimes succeed in consolidating themselves in the era of democracy? How can they acquire popular legitimacy while resorting to an autocratic exercise of power? So far these questions have been mostly addressed in large-N comparative studies with little focus on each country’s specific neo-authoritarian traits. The present work intends to analyse in depth a specific competitive authoritarian polity, namely contemporary Russia, and the implications of this peculiar regime for the public sphere. As it will be argued in the present discussion, the ‘civil society’ proves to be a crucial arena for the Russian elite to ensure legitimacy and political stability, to the extent that it becomes one of the foundations of the system in its authoritarian features.

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Conceptualising the “New authoritarian regimes”

The empirical observation of the post-Soviet space has greatly contributed to raise the issue of democratic transitions and to rethink the classic typologies in literature, if only through a more disenchanted reading of these political transformations. More than twenty years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, with the exception of the Baltic states and the Eastern European states, which are turning towards consolidated democratic regimes, none of the other countries is in transition toward democracy. On the contrary, they all fall short of democratic rules and practices, sometimes showing even more disappointing performances than in the Gorbachev’s USSR. For these new political realities, the question that arises is to understand to what extent the traditional theoretical frameworks may be useful in explaining the non democratic regimes of post-modernity.

Analyses of the post-authoritarian institutional trajectories are generally based on the use of categories and indicators that measure the proximity of the case studies to the democratic model. This approach suffers at least from two drawbacks. First, it requires a linear evolution towards the procedures and institutional arrangements of liberal democracies, neglecting the possibility of alternative routes that escape from the democracy building scheme. Secondly, it ends up focusing all attention on the explanatory variables of success/failure in establishing a democratic system, such as the balance of constitutional powers or the intensity of the economic reforms\(^6\). In fact, this approach turns out to be inadequate to grasp thoroughly the features of those regimes, like Russia, where the presence of formal democratic institutions, especially elections, are an instrument to legitimise the political authority in its semi-authoritarian and authoritarian characteristics\(^7\). Here the central point is not to measure the distance of the case study to an ideal, democratic reference point, invariably embedded in the Western political and philosophical tradition, but rather to understand how the exercise of power in its various configurations is arranged in that particular context.

At this regard, Levitsky and Way’s typology of ‘competitive authoritarianism’ captures very clearly the distinctive features of the authoritarian arrangements of the post-Cold War era:

Competitive authoritarian regimes are civilian regimes in which formal democratic institutions exist and are widely viewed as the primary means of gaining power, but in which incumbents’ abuse of the state places them at a significant advantage compared with their opponents. Such regimes are competitive in that opposition

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\(^6\) On the issue of relations between democracy and the institutional models, see Linz and Valenzuela (1994), Mainswaring and Shugart (1997); as for the debate on free-market reforms and their impact on democratization, see Aslund (1995), Bunce (1999), Fish (2005).

\(^7\) On the specificity of the regimes established in the post-communist space see Marsh, Gvosdev (2002), Fritz (2007), Ganev (2001).
parties use democratic institutions to challenge seriously for power, but they are not
democratic because the playing field is heavily skewed in favour of incumbents.
Competition is thus real but unfair.\(^8\).

In this perspective, it is interesting to explore how authoritarian leaders are able to preserve
their power in an international environment that requires to conform to democratic standards. In
practice, the question is how they manage to manipulate the elections, to control the media and
to intimidate the opposition while seeking the appearance of democratic legitimacy. Indeed, the
maintenance of this delicate balance needs the building up of a precise strategy of action from the
leadership. In the Eurasian regimes the political elites seem primarily oriented to blunt the most
radical urges in society and to control the main sources of pluralism rather than resorting to the
overt coercion typical of “traditional authoritarianisms”. As Gvosdev puts it with regard to the
post-Soviet strategies of containing social diversity, ‘rather than imposing a single philosophical-
spiritual system upon the entire population, the state instead present a menu of acceptable
“choices” from which the population is free to choose’.\(^9\) The aim is to filter out the many cultural
and ideological trends that flow in through the circuits of economic globalisation and channel
them within acceptable limits set by the state.

In a similar vein, Schedler notes that many of the new electoral regimes are neither democratic
nor democratising but simply authoritarian, albeit in ways that elude the traditional typologies of
authoritarian rule. He deploying the term ‘electoral authoritarianism’ to distinguish these particular
polities both from electoral democracies and from ‘closed’ autocracies:

Almost all regimes, democracies and dictatorships alike, claim to embody the
principle of popular sovereignty. Yet, whereas electoral authoritarian (EA) regimes
open up top positions of executive and legislative power to elections that are
participatory as well as competitive in form, other types of authoritarian regimes, if
they make recourse to electoral processes at all, do so in much more limited ways.

Unlike authoritarian regimes that permit limited forms of pluralism in civil society,
EA regimes go a step further and open up political society (the party system) as well
to limited forms of pluralism. . . . Unlike single party regimes that organize one-party
(or national front) elections, either with or without intraparty competition, EA
regimes allow for organized dissidence in the form of multiparty competition.\(^10\)

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\(^8\) Levitsky & Way, 2010:5.
These political systems are all exposed to numerous internal and external sources of tension for the very fact of accepting a relatively high degree of social and political diversity. The presence of elections, some independent media, courts, regularly offers the opportunity for the opposition forces to challenge the established order. On the one hand, the incumbents risk losing their power if they fail to sufficiently constrain democratic forces. On the other hand, they know that repression would have resonance both inside and outside, with negative effects for the legitimacy of the regime. In practice, the massive use of repression and persecution of opposition typical of authoritarianism and totalitarianism of the XX century gives way to more sophisticated but less expensive tools of limiting pluralism.

Borrowing some concepts from Linz’s work on the authoritarianisms (Linz 2000), we can identify four principal dimensions along which the different features between traditional and new authoritarian regimes emerge with particular evidence. First, unlike traditional authoritarian regimes, which limit dissent arbitrarily and resort to forms of violent persecution, the ‘new authoritarianisms’ do accept more or less varied expressions of social and political diversity in the inter-party electoral competition and in the recognition of prominent actors in civil society; at the same time, however, using non-coercive forms of authoritarian control, ranging from electoral fraud to the intimidation and co-option of the main political opponents, they give rise to social consensus and consolidate their power. Second, unlike the classic forms of authoritarianism, they rely on much less sophisticated and pervasive ideological constructs: the reference to national identity is usually the main theme. However, its penetration into the society is never so keen as to produce orchestrated political participation. On the contrary, particularly with reference to post-communist societies, apathy and lack of interest in politics among the citizens are usually highlighted. This suggests that the popularity of the new authoritarian leaders is based more on the poor visibility of the opposition forces and the lack of credible alternatives than on successful strategies of mobilisation.
Figure 2. Differences between traditional and new authoritarianisms along four principal dimensions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Traditional authoritarian regimes</th>
<th>New authoritarian regimes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Competition</strong></td>
<td>Political and social diversity is extensively limited with few opportunities for the opposition of gaining relevance in the political arena</td>
<td>Political competition is formally guaranteed in the inter party electoral competition and the prominent actors of civil society are recognised</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Coercion</strong></td>
<td>Overt violence against opposition in the form of repression and intimidation is the norm</td>
<td>Use of mostly non-coercive, subtle forms of limiting pluralism such as manipulation of elections and co-optation of opposition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ideological legitimacy</strong></td>
<td>Strong ideological articulation as the main instrument of legitimising the regime</td>
<td>Low level of pervasiveness of the ideology beyond the nationalistic, patriotic motives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mobilisation</strong></td>
<td>Effective strategies of mass mobilisation ensured through repression and terror</td>
<td>Low level of political participation in society and passive support to the authoritarian leaders</td>
</tr>
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The way contemporary authoritarian regimes cope with the great dilemma of democratic legitimacy represents a prominent topic in Comparative politics. In this respect, Russian’s specific authoritarian political order acquires a profound relevance for the implications it may have not only for the internal future developments but also for the political influence it exercises on the entire post-Soviet region.

**Managing pluralism in Russia’s politics and society**

Analysis of the Russian case offers interesting insights to show the usefulness of the neo-authoritarian regime findings. Over the past decade this country has increasingly assumed the traits of an authoritarian or semi-authoritarian political system while retaining some democratic features: it has liberalised political competition allowing multiparty regular elections, but it has still retained authoritarian features, which emerge with particular evidence in the way the political leadership intervenes in the social realm. In a framework of democratic rule the leadership has succeeded in organising the limitation of the social space by shaping the boundaries of accepted pluralism. In a country deeply embedded in the processes of social differentiation and economic development characteristic of modernity, the incumbents cannot stop the flows of information coming in from the outside, nor can they bound cultural and political diversity systematically;
nonetheless, they do circumscribe social and political opposition, resorting to intimidation, co-optation and systematic control rather than overt coercion and repression.

The new forms of authoritarian governance vary considerably in their ability to co-opt or divide oppositions, repress protests and control civil society. The incumbents’ capacity to resist opposition challenges as well as external pressure to democratise is strongly influenced by domestic variables (actors, institutions and procedures). In this respect Levitsky and Way stress the relevance of such factors as the level of cohesion of the autocratic leaders and the state coercive capacity in guaranteeing the authoritarian stability. In fact the strengthening of the power vertical in Putin’s Russia has had a strong impact in the regime capacity to limit the main sources of dissent and opposition within its borders. The transition from Yeltsin to Putin era has been accompanied by a strengthening of the state structures and interests, which especially emerges in the greater autonomy and effectiveness of the decision-making process. This occurred despite the persistence of inefficiencies in the administrative sphere and the plague of corruption. The increased power of the state in terms of autonomy and capacity, combined with the availability of huge reserves of oil and gas, has made Russia less vulnerable to external pressures than under Yeltsin. In the early ‘90s the economic and fiscal crisis had weakened the country and the political leadership itself in the face of international demands for a fast transition towards democracy and market economy. What was missing in that time was the level of cohesion and organisation of the political establishment supporting the President, who could not count on a strong party structure and often resorted to unreliable and unstable alliances. In addition, the way the transition to the new economic system was handled, based on wild privatisations with sell-off of state property, had reduced the regulatory capacity of the state on the economy to the benefit of the oligarchs. The latter had became a key player in the decision-making during the Yeltsin era, creating a fusion between private and state interests with negative consequences for the state autonomy.

In sharp contrast with the Yeltsin presidency, Putin inaugurated a period of stateness recovery in terms of ability of the central authority to exercise command over the social and economic realms. During his first term Putin has extensively used the link with the security services and the influence on the courts to restrict the oligarchs’ strong autonomy of action. At the same time his government has proved to be much more efficient in terms of organisational strategy, relying on the backing of the security services and, especially, the United Russia party as a support structure to the Kremlin’s policies in parliament.

Additionally, since Putin’s second term in office the traits of the Russian political system have emerged even more clearly with the development of an ideological synthesis supporting the regime. Its guidelines are to be found in a series of documents drawn by politicians from the

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presidential entourage. In particular, this doctrine is centered around the concept of ‘sovereign democracy’, which has strong implications for the political and social development planned for the country. Broadly used in public speeches, it combines the discourse on Russia as an independent and sovereign power with the practical need to compact the ruling elite around the line dictated from the Kremlin, ensuring an effective glue and a powerful source of legitimacy. Vladislav Surkov, vice president of the presidential administration, in his famous policy document called “The Nationalisation of the Future” refers to Russia as a «puissant energy power» that will rise «out of a struggle for possession of high technology and not out of an overgrowth of the energy sector»\textsuperscript{12}. Here the task of reforming Russia is perceived as a sort of national mission to be accomplished through a specific, domestic model of development. In this way, the “sovereign democracy” construct meets up the leadership’s peculiar view on how to carry out the great project of modernisation, one of the most urgent and debated question in contemporary Russia. The official rhetoric emphasises the priority of reforming the country without losing traditional values and political stability, what Dmitrii Trenin has called “conservative modernisation”\textsuperscript{13}.

The system established in contemporary Russia is emerging as a new authoritarian model in the very fact of promoting social and political diversity and simultaneously its ‘normalisation’ in order to ensure the maintenance of the social order. First, this affects the arena of political competition: the Russian political arrangement formally provides elections and a multi-party system in response to the requirements of an ‘electoral democracy’. However, the electoral legislation and inter-party competition over the last three elections in post-Soviet Russia have shown that these procedures are pretty meaningless in practice. In the foreground stands the UR party with its excessive power in the electoral arena, against a party system not fully structured and highly unfavourable to minor forces in terms of resources and economic support. The ‘party of power’ has proved to be a successful investment for the Russian elite to manage access to political and administrative offices, co-opt allies in the Duma and, in general, align its members to the presidential agenda. Most importantly, it has established itself as an instrument of legitimation and preservation of autocratic power, thus solving the great dilemma of contemporary authoritarian regimes\textsuperscript{14}.

Next to the arena of political competition, contemporary Russia shows its unique character in limiting pluralism with respect to the more politically engaged sectors of society. At this regard, the leadership shows a real commitment in promoting the sphere of civil society, provided that the supervision of its main organisational forms is assured. Since his first presidential term, Putin

\textsuperscript{12} Surkov 2006.
\textsuperscript{13} Trenin 2010.
\textsuperscript{14} On the characteristic of the Russia’s party system see Gel’mann 2008 and Remington 2008. On the role of United Russia as a “dominant party” see Reuter & Remington 2009: 503.
has always addressed special attention to the role of social organisations for the development of
the country: the Civic Forum in 2001 was an attempt by the leadership to achieve a dialogue and
partnership with NGOs and activists, culminating in the creation of a new institution
representing the civil society actors in Russia, the Public Chamber of the Russian Federation
(PCRF). However, as it will be discussed in the following pages, the procedure of appointing the
members, its composition and limits to a truly independent action make it an instrument for
containing the expression of social diversity.

The international dimension in democratisation studies and the Russian case

In the post-Cold War era democratisation processes have attracted increasing attention in
academic literature not only on the basis of internal variables, but also considering the role of
external factors in contributing to these processes. This has accompanied the pursuit by
international actors, such as the EU, of more ambitious goals in their external action, directed
towards the internalisation of democratic systems of governance by third countries. In particular,
a major issue addressed in scholarly studies has concerned the EU’s external influence as a supra-
national system, the bearer of a given set of shared values and practices, on the institutional
arrangements of non-candidate and non-member countries. In brief, the literature on the
international dimension of democratisation examines how authoritarian regimes are subject to
external pressures and under what conditions these are strong enough to cause a transition to
democracy. However, what receives little attention is how these regimes resist such pressure and
the policies they adopt to counteract democratic tendencies and the effects of diffusion; such
cases are not addressed or are dismissed as exceptions. This article wants to shed light on this
question by examining the mechanisms used by the political elite to counteract the democratising
pressures to which the country is inevitably exposed through participation in a dynamic,
globalised world.

Following Levitsky and Way’s approach, two dimensions can be distinguished in the post-
Cold War international influence on democratisation processes, the Western leverage and the
linkage with the West. The first one refers to the exercise of external pressure from one hand and
a country’s vulnerability to such pressure from the other hand. The seizure and strength of a
country’s state and economics, as well as the bargaining power of autocratic governments in
terms of interests at stake (energy production, military and strategic relevance) are all important
factors in determining the exposure to external demands for democracy. The linkage to the West,

15 Magen & Morlino, 2008; Burnell 2005; Carothers 2006; Crawford 2003.
16 This view is shared by Ambrosio 2007.
the second dimension, is defined as the density of ties (economic, political, diplomatic, social, and organisational) and cross-border flows (of capital, goods and services, people and information) with Western countries, the EU and Western-dominated institutions. The tighter the ties with the Western democratic community, the higher the probability that the domestic distribution of power and resources strengthens democratic forces and weakens and isolates autocrats.

Russia’s pluralism in the public space offers useful insights to better grasp the way external pressure to democratise is dealt with by the incumbents. Political leaders in the post-Conf War era cannot but publicly acknowledge the importance of civic initiatives and democratic participation. Civil society is unanimously considered an essential prerequisite of the transition to democracy in the fundamental task of limiting the state power in its relations with society. For a country deeply embedded in the circuits of post-modern communication, the unanimous endorsement of the civic forms of participation coming from the international community is a fact that the political elite cannot ignore. Putin has stated on several occasions that ‘only the people – through the institutions of the democratic state and civil society – have the right and are able to guarantee the stability of the moral and political foundations of the country’s development for many years to come’; and that ‘by blaming and criticising the authorities, [civil society] helps them understand their mistakes and correct policies in the public interest’. Similarly, his successor Medvedev has frequently referred to the civil society theme in his public speeches, stressing the state’s responsibility in creating favourable conditions for its development.

Yet, the Russian regime shows its own pattern of reacting to this kind of external pressure, which is far from the bare conformation to a Western-style civil society. In 2006 the Duma approved a Law on non-governmental organisations which envisaged strict registration and taxation procedures especially for foreign organisations or those receiving funding from abroad. The law was soon greeted by a stream of criticism from many NGOs and the Russian ombudsman. Commenting the new legislation, Putin explained ‘we need this law in order to secure our political system from outside interference and to protect our society and citizens from the spread of a terrorist ideology, the hateful ideology that can operate under the mask of this or that organisation’. Vladislav Surkov’s own idea of civil society sounds even more meaningful. In a speech addressing the Public Chamber, he stated: ‘the social organisations - non-political organisations, are not supposed to be engaged in the struggle for or against political power, but in

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the solution of problems of social interests. In our country [...] many civil society figures spend their time mostly examining the political system, somebody criticising it, but nothing is done in that sphere where the critics are made.\footnote{Stenogramma vystupleniya pervogo zamestitelya rukoboditelya administratsii Prezidenta RF Surkova Vladislava Yur'evicha, 20 Oct. 2009, \url{www.oprf.ru/files/stenogramma124.doc}.}

In these statements the term ‘civil society’ is widely used by the Russian elite with reference to a type of different or alternative activism compared with the one commonly ascribed to liberal democracies. In practice, it assumes a special meaning in reference to contemporary Russia, to the extent that it becomes one of the foundations of the system in its authoritarian features.

What emerges is a rather formal adaptation to the universally accepted paradigm of social pluralism and democratic participation, with the maintenance of the substantial levers of circumscribing pluralism in the social sphere. This suggests on one hand the willingness to receive public legitimacy among the liberal-democracies, and on the other hand the necessity to manage the promotion of these initiatives in a way that does not threaten the established order. The implication of this “state-centered” view of civil society are evident: to the extent that the officially acknowledged role of the social organisations is to provide support to the government’s policy agenda, or at least not to oppose it directly, the chances to successfully expose the abuses of power and to make the rulers responsible before their voters inevitably shrink. In practice, what is questioned is the very identity of non-state actors, whose fundamental mission should be to influence the institutional choices by monitoring the activity of the state bodies and exerting pressure on the decision-making process.

In Russia domestic factors come up with disruptive force in the face of the external democratising pressure, showing the uniqueness of this context compared to other polities. However, both leverage and linkage do matter when analysing the main features of Russia’s contemporary regime. Although their intensity is relatively low, they still end up shaping the government’s attitudes and decisions to a certain degree.

The initiatives that have been taken in the civil society arena over the last decade best exemplify how autocratic incumbents commit themselves to meet international democratic standards and institutions while retaining the capacity to orchestrate their very concrete functioning. This need has become especially urgent after the ‘coloured revolutions’, under the slogan of greater democracy and transparency, dethroned the post-Soviet regimes in Georgia (2003), Ukraine (2004) and Kyrgyzstan (2005). After that the administration has tried to control the activities of those organisations perceived as hostile to the state by interposing obstacles to their activity. In recent years the control over independent social actors has become extremely tight, testifying a stiffening of the rules on registration and taxation of the non-profit sector and the use of the police to intimidate political opponents. Alongside that is the promotion by the
authorities of a pro-government activism which is due to collaborate with the Kremlin and to support its policy\textsuperscript{22}.

In the following pages the most vivid expression of this organised civil society will be highlighted, the Public Chamber of the Russian Federation (PCRF), with the attempt to capture its main features and functions.

**The Public Chamber. Functions and composition**

Since perestroika, the notion of civil society has circulated in Russia primarily among those activists willing to reform the country along the guidelines of the Western democracies. Particularly, it has been widely used in academia to indicate in the post-Soviet Russia as in Western countries that part of society that is able to organise itself outside the state and the private sphere, including that of economic activity.

In an attempt to adapt ‘sovereign democracy’ to the demands of integration in a globalised world, the rhetoric of civil society is currently given a peculiar interpretation by the Russian presidential entourage: on the one hand, it includes the active participation of social forces in public matters and on the other, it defines the boundaries within which such participation is legitimate, that is, the boundaries between state and society and between the public and the private spheres. The PCRF represents the main instrument through which the leadership aims to create a sufficiently institutionalised space for civic participation and to co-opt its key players.

The Chamber’s creation, far from being an isolated event, is to be tied directly to the first, concrete initiative promoted by Putin in the field of civil society, namely the Civic Forum held in Moscow between the 20th and 21st November 2001\textsuperscript{23}. On that occasion, more than 3,500 NGOs’ representatives and government personalities met to discuss issues relating to the development of social organisations and their interaction with the federal authorities. The event was preceded by six months of preparation, starting from the meeting organised in June 2001 among leaders of NGOs, Putin and the representatives of the presidential administration. On that occasion was stated the goal of establishing closer relations between the government and the public associations. The November Forum would have represented the first step in this direction. The official aim supporting the initiative, the integration of various Russian civic organisations in a single advisory body towards the government, has resulted in the project of the Public Chamber.

Established by federal law in December 2005, the PCRF was convened for the first time in 2006 and so far it has renewed its composition every two years. In fact, as a means of interaction

\textsuperscript{22} For a detailed analysis of the various initiatives that have been carried out in the civil society sphere over the last decade see Petrone 2011.

\textsuperscript{23} On the Civic Forum see Nikitin e Buchanan 2002 and J. Squire, 2002.
between political institutions and civil society it was already active during the 1990s in various Russian regions, when ‘public chambers’ were created by the regional administrations in accordance with federal law.

The PCRF is a body with specific characteristics and functions. Its official aim is ‘to ensure interaction (vzaimodeistvie) between the interests of citizens, social organizations, bodies of state power and bodies of local self-government in resolving major issues relating to economic and social development, national security, defence of citizens’ rights and freedoms, constitutional order and development of civil society’\(^{24}\). In essence, its members should act as ombudsman: accepting petitions from citizens and acting in defence of their interests with government agencies, sending them resolutions and recommendations. The Public Chamber is in fact a purely consultative body that produces non-binding acts.

In accordance with these declared objectives the tasks that the law provides for the Chamber are: to attract citizens and social organizations towards the implementation of public policies; to support civic initiatives of national relevance and oriented to the realisation of constitutional rights and freedoms and to the legitimate interests of citizens and social organizations; to provide expertise in the production of federal bills, federal subjects’ bills and other regulatory acts of the executive authority at all levels; to ensure a form of social (obshchestvennogo) control over the work of all levels of executive power, including the federal government, and over respect for freedom of expression in the media; and to make recommendations to the organs of state power on setting priorities for state support to social organisations.

In carrying out these tasks, the PCRF has the opportunity to hold hearings on social issues, to give its opinion on violations of freedom of expression in the media by the executive, and make recommendations at this regard to the state authorities.

Analysis of the internal structure of the Chamber and the procedures for appointing its members is especially significant because it reveals who actually is considered a legitimate representative of civil society. In accordance with the law on the PCRF, the Chamber is composed of 126 representatives elected for two years in three steps: the President designates the first group of 42 members, who in turn select other 42 members from a list of social organisations at the national level; finally, the first and second groups appoint in each of the country’s seven federal districts six members belonging to regional organisations. On the Chamber’s website this appointment procedure is considered optimal because it allows to “create a structure that reflects the third sector as much as possible, in which in a single platform operate public figures, NGOs and social organizations”\(^{25}\). In fact, however, this procedure leads to a


different outcome. The role played by the President of RF in the selection of members is undeniable, in particular in the nomination of the first group, on which depends the appointment of the other two. For example, among the 42 members convened in 2008 by the President, only eight can be said to be representatives of NGOs; five represent religions (Orthodox, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Protestant) and three come from the business world; the rest are people who exercise diverse professions such as doctors, lawyers, artists, scholars, TV presenters, political scientists and newspaper editors. Similarly, the 2010 list of obshchestvenniki elected from the President shows that only 5 can be considered NGOs representatives. The rest includes three directors, a businessman, a TV presenter, three representatives of the religious sphere, a writer, two journalists, some former government authorities at regional and federal level. To verify to what extent the membership of the Chamber reproduces that of the first group we can refer to the PC composition during 2008–9 and 2010–11. What emerge is a certain similarity and continuity between the individuals selected in the second group as representatives of nation-wide social organisations and the individuals directly chosen by the President. Those personalities engaged in the civil sphere as President or member of NGOs for the most part show strong ties with the government authorities, which in some cases appear as the partners or funders of the organisation. Moreover they are mainly a traditional kind of associations, related to the Soviet period and involved in helping certain categories of people such as women, disabled, military veterans, children, prisoners.

This seems to confirm that ‘the Chamber is not an independent body since some of its members come from the ranks of state administration (gossluzhba). The composition of the Chamber reproduces the boundaries of civil society drawn by the presidential administration. This Chamber’s subtle dependence on the Presidential administration means that it prevents to raise issues sensitive for the Kremlin. In this respect, what emerges is a broader, official definition of civil society, including not only the NGOs engaged in protecting human rights and democracy, but also associations oriented towards more concrete problem solving that defend the interests of their own members and that, ultimately, do not constitute a source of criticism for the authorities. As Nikolai Petrov pointed out, «[the Chamber] is a mechanism of interaction between power and society. A sort of democratic decorum that should compensate for the weakness of the democratic institutions, testifying the attempt to build up a vertical, this time rooted in the civil society realm».


The overall “institutionalised” character of the obshchestvenniki indicates that the Chamber brings together those representatives of society at large selected from the Kremlin to participate in the process of harmonisation of social interests. Moreover, the Chamber’s internal regulation prevents the members from acting on behalf of their own organisation and belonging to any political party. Thus the recommendations issued end up reflecting the opinion of the Chamber in its collegiality, as the legitimate voice of civil society. To cite an example, some of the recommendations of the PCRF on February 2006 denounced to the governing authorities the practice of hazing incidents (dedovshchina) in the military, referring to the recruit Andrei Sychov who was tortured to death at the Chelyabinsk Tank School. The denouncement resulted in very generic terms and the responsibilities at the federal level were completely ignored. What came next was instead the proposal for a series of initiatives aimed at containing the problem through an active collaboration between social organisations and the institutions. Indeed the association of Soldiers’ Mothers had as its main referent the Ministry of Defence itself. In practice, in similar cases the role of PCRF is reduced to a mere technical and informational support made available to governmental authorities in an uncritical and apolitical manner.

Overall the Chamber shows a quite marginal role in addressing issues of great political significance or impact on public opinion that are likely to cast a shadow on the government authorities or state officials. The PC, particularly the “Commission for the public control on the law enforcement organs and the reform of the judiciary”, has never taken a clear stance on the trial of the former Russian tycoon Mikhail Khodorkovsky, nor has it ever questioned its fairness. In the same vein, no recommendation or other official document have been issued from the Chamber on the “Magnitsky affaire”, the outside counsel to the investment fund Hermitage Capital Management, who died in a Moscow jail in November 2009 in what have been described as torturous conditions. While this accident has prompted an outcry over prison conditions in Russia and questions about the Kremlin’s ability to stand up to corruption in the security services, it has not led to any serious initiative on the part of the Chamber, except the declared intention to shed light on the death of the lawyer.

Contrarily, PC members have played a by far prominent role in minor, less politicised controversies, like the one aroused in 2006 in Moscow South Butovo neighbourhood, when the city government made plans to construct some luxury apartments. The residents were offered to move into apartments not far away, but some of them refused, claiming that they were not adequately compensated. This was followed by a series of protests and clashes from the residents.

29 Mr Magnitsky’s death caused an outrage among the Russian elite, and Dmitry Medvedev ordered official investigations. Several high-ranking prison officials were fired, but the crime ultimately remains unsolved. Brutality in Russia, Sergei Magnitsky One Year On, “The Economist”, 16 Nov. 2010, http://www.economist.com/node/21013016.
with police forces, whose images were widely broadcast in national television channels. On that occasion some PC representatives fully endorsed the Butovo inhabitants’ cause and denounced the use of force by the police on national television\textsuperscript{30}.

Recently the Chamber has been engaged in the environmental issue concerning the Russian highway project that would slice through an ancient oak forest, the Khimki forest. The Vinci, one of Europe’s largest corporations, signed a contract for the Moscow-St. Petersburg motorway in 2009 including a 43-kilometer section that will pass through the heart of the old forest. Since then the environmental movement in defence of the Khimki forest has gained such an high visibility, thanks to its massive protest actions, to compel the government to re-examine the project’s merits. In order to demonstrate its commitment to a shared solution to the problem, the President Dmitrii Medvedev in September 2010 had instructed the Chamber to conduct a hearing on the issue to give a voice to all the arguments for and against. On that case the Public Chamber proved to act as a forum summarising the expert opinions on the feasibility of the construction, but without being able to pronounce itself to any final decision. After that, a government commission was convened to decide the fate of the project. It was finally agreed that the highway would be built, but for 8 km stretch the road passing through the forest area would not have any infrastructure buildings and shops. At the same time the rest of the road would conform to high environmental standards\textsuperscript{31}.

The serious limitations of this institution prove to be apparent when considering the level of awareness of the Chamber among the public. While the Chamber’s popularity is increasingly growing mostly thanks to the official media coverage, Russians show little knowledge about the specific initiatives and area of interventions of this relatively new institution. According to a VTsIOM survey, over the last years the number of Russians who know the PC has significantly grown: in 2010 51\% of respondents knew this body, whereas in 2009 the proportions of respondents was 42\%. At the same time the number of those who do not know anything about the institute has increasingly diminished (from 57\% to 48\%). Nevertheless, when asking about the PC specific tasks and skills, the vast majority of respondents prove to ignore in which affairs its members are involved (90\%). What is more, a high percentage of Russians show a certain difficulty in assessing the PC role today in society (72\%). The sphere where the Chamber activity is valued as the most successful is the protection of human rights (27\%). Then follow the lawmaking (23\%) and the promotion of the citizen initiatives (21\%). The least effective area of intervention to the respondents’ view is the control over the bureaucracy (15)\textsuperscript{32}.

\textsuperscript{30} A detail account of this issue can be found in A. B. Evans Jr. (2008).
\textsuperscript{32} \textit{Obshchestvennaya palata glazami obshchestva}, Press-Vypusk n. 1605, 18 Oct. 2010,
In short, this and other examples show that PCRF is an attempt to provide an image of an ‘institutionalised’ civil society, acting as a united body in support of the state in pursuing the good of the nation. However, whether the PCRF actually succeed in this task is another question, for its structure and internal organisation often prevent it from acting in a coherent and unified fashion. The Chamber meets in plenary session for a maximum of four times a year for a few days, usually to discuss specific issues such as social tolerance, sustainable development, demographic policy, industrial policy and innovation.

It is undeniable that the Chamber plays a positive, not secondary role in bringing to public attention certain social and political issues. It also functions as a forum where social actors have an opportunity to establish contacts and to coordinate their action. Yet, quite noticeable are the lack of ‘responsiveness’ of the Chamber and its limits in attracting and answering questions from society. Furthermore, the fact that the members are appointed and that they draw their legitimacy from the President heavily influences their role, and rules out any direct confrontation with the authorities. In this perspective the Chamber appears to be a sort of substitute of the current institutes coordinating state/society relations, such as the parliament, political parties, independent media, etc. The distinctive features of these substitute institutions, as the various president’s councils, the State Council, the plenipotentiaries in the regions, is their extra-constitutionality: they are strictly linked to the President, who can use them at his discretion, lacking their own legitimacy and the ability to operate independently.

Conclusive remarks

The present paper was aimed at offering a valuable framework for analysing contemporary Russia’s regime. It shows that using the “new authoritarianism” typology allows to highlight some peculiarities of the Russian political system which are typical of the post-Cold War forms of autocratic governance. We have borrowed such concepts as ‘competitive authoritarianism’ and ‘electoral authoritarianism’ as recently elaborated in the literature to explain certain characteristics and the specific dynamics of the Russian political system, which often eludes the traditional categories present in democratisation theory. In particular, these notions are able to grasp the ambiguous nature of a political system that combines multi-partyism and frequent elections with control over electoral competition, and formal recognition of different forms of civic participation with limitations on opportunities to express dissent. Our basic assumption was that the incumbents direct most of their interventions towards the control and circumscription of pluralism in the social sphere, as a way to guarantee the regime continuity. In this perspective, the
establishment of the PCRF can be viewed as the best example of the attempt to create an institutionalised civil society. As emerged in the discussion, the arrangements for appointing its members and the limits to a truly independent action make it a means of restraining the expression of social diversity and to bind the claims coming from the most active sectors of society to certain acceptable limits. Such an attitude actually reflects the need to legitimise the government’s action to the international community by recognising the role of civil society organisations, while controlling the main levers in limiting dissent.

It is interesting to consider Russia’s political context in the light of the recent upheavals in the Arab world and of the strategies used by the leadership to preserve the established order. The recent unrest in the North Africa and the Middle East has shown autocratic leaders coping with the societal demands of renewal. This has shown the topicality of the civil society issue when analysing these regimes. Undoubtedly, Russia’s peculiar political arrangement should be stressed with respect to these contexts: unlike the latter cases it is a country where elections have become a ritual in the 20 years of post-communist independence, laying the groundwork for the establishment of a party system with specific features. In addition, it is a country that from the years of perestroika has seen the proliferation of many social movements and organisations claiming to represent multiple interests in political decision-making. Russia is also now fully integrated into the channels of globalisation and has recently seen the formation of a stable middle class. Notwithstanding this, it is a country that in the last ten years has experienced a stiffening within the spaces of political contestation: in practice, in a framework of democratic rules Russia has succeeded in organising the limitation and control of social space in order to ensure political stability and the reproduction of power.

Interestingly, during the meeting of the anti-terrorist committee in Vladikavkaz on February 22 2011, President Medvedev has maintained that «in the Middle East and Arab world a grave situation is taking shape. [...] these are very complex states and it is quite probable that hard times are ahead, including the arrival at power of fanatics. This will mean fires for decades and the spread of extremism. They have prepared such a scenario for us before, and now more than ever they will try to realise it. In any case, this scenario won’t succeed34». In short, with respect to the upheaval in the Arab world the Kremlin’s reaction so far has been quite reminiscent of the attitude previously shown against the “orange threat”: the “us vs. them” approach in reading international events and the claim of a Western plot to change regime in Russia.

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