

NIKOLAI PETROV

The Political Mechanics of the Russian Regime

Substitutes Versus Institutions

The author analyzes the functional logic behind the regime of “highly managed democracy” under Putin and the Putin–Medvedev tandem, with special emphasis on the role played by substitute pseudoinstitutions.

In 2009 the country entered a period of large-scale accidents and technogenic disasters: the accident at the Saiano-Shushensk hydroelectric plant in August, the fire at military stores in Ulianovsk and the crash of the Nevsky Express in November, the terrible conflagration in Perm at the beginning of December. Each of these cases, considered in isolation, can be attributed to a tragic concurrence of circumstances, blunders in a given department, human error, and so on. Taken together, however, they paint a gloomy picture of an avalanche of systemic failures and dysfunctions and a regulatory system in widespread disarray. It is important to emphasize that the problems result not only from the dilapidated Soviet technological infrastructure but also from a disintegrating regulatory system. Without claiming to be a prophet, I can see many “thin spots” in our country’s technological fabric—in the municipal services infrastructure, in worn-out industrial equipment, in the transportation system, and so on. In the psychological and financial context of an ongoing economic

crisis, we have to assume the worst is still to come—if not today, then tomorrow. For the problems will not go away; they can only accumulate. As in the case of the North Caucasus, we face serious, cumulative systemic problems on a scale that exceeds by orders of magnitude any possibilities of effective intervention.

Of the long series of problems, I focus on those of management and regulation—on the technology of power. Unless we solve these problems, we will not only fail to move forward and achieve modernization in any form but be unable even to remain in the same spot. I base my attempt to analyze our political system and its evolution on the approach that my colleagues and I are developing for our research project “Highly Managed Democracy in Russia and Its Prospects.”

Highly Managed Democracy

The system of state administration that formed in Russia under President Putin may be defined as *highly managed democracy* (HMD). In this context, the term HMD does not mean that the present model has a democratic foundation. The word “democracy” here refers, rather, to HMD’s source: the protodemocracy of the Yeltsin period, which later evolved toward “managed democracy,” the last and highest stage of which is HMD. The system of HMD is riven by internal contradictions; it is not capable of reproduction. It is an unstable, bifurcated, and transitional system, predestined either to continue sliding into authoritarianism or to turn back toward democracy. The second scenario seems to me not only preferable but also more likely. Thus, the very term “highly managed democracy” emphasizes both the current attempt at excessively rigid and centralized—beyond the limits of rationality and effectiveness—control and certainty that at the next stage democratization is inevitable.¹

The political system built by Putin grows out of the system that existed under Yeltsin and is rightly regarded by many experts as the realization and logical culmination of a structure whose contours, as well as the designs for specific parts and mechanisms, can be discerned in plans prepared by Yeltsin’s presidential administration.

It is another matter that this outcome is (1) the culmination of only one set of trends that developed under Yeltsin, while other trends were suppressed, and the overall balance changed;² and (2) a picture stamped with the professional experience and habits of its chief creators, who came from the security services and regional legal administrations.³

English translation © 2011 M.E. Sharpe, Inc., from the Russian text © 2009 Levada Center and InterCenter. “Politicheskaia mekhanika rossiiskoi vlasti: substituty protiv institutov,” *Vestnik obshchestvennogo mneniia*, 2009, no. 4, pp. 5–23. Translated by Stephen D. Shenfield.

Many works criticize the political system built by Putin from an ideological standpoint: for being undemocratic, for failing to take into sufficient account and to harmonize the interests of large elite groups and social strata, and for assigning too great a role to the bureaucracy.⁴ At the same time, these works usually treat the system itself as a black box, without analyzing its internal structure, combinations of different segments, capacity for coordinated action, decision-making mechanisms, and so on. Other works analyze in detail individual components of the system: parliamentarism, elections, other institutions, elites and personnel, and so on.⁵ As useful as such analysis and comparison with other countries are, it seems to me that in this approach the individual parts obscure the whole. The system as a whole turns out to be worse than its individual elements and mechanisms, worse than the segments that constitute it and the people who work in it.

The assessment offered here takes as its starting point not so much moral positions as issues of control—effectiveness and efficiency. This approach to HMD applies the insights of political cybernetics, focusing on problems of control and feedback, on the capacity of the system for efficient functioning and self-reproduction.

The ABCs of HMD

The essence of highly managed democracy can be briefly presented as a set of theses.

Highly Managed Democracy Putin Style = Personal Power of the Leader, Unconstrained by Institutions + Manipulation of Public Awareness via the Mass Media + Controlled Elections

The system of highly managed democracy erected under Putin is a complex, multilevel political construction that enables the authorities to escape public oversight and accountability while preserving the appearance of democratic procedures.⁶ It incorporates three levels of control: (1) control over actors; (2) control over institutions; and (3) control over rules of the game.

The three supports on which Putin's HMD stands are (1) personal institutional power (no longer the presidency but the prime minister's office in conjunction with United Russia), hypertrophically developed

at the expense of all other actors and institutions, which are weakened or distorted; (2) strict control over the mass media, with public opinion shaped as required through the dosing, selection, and "correct" presentation of information; and (3) controlled elections, used solely as tools to legitimize the authorities' decisions.

The Weakening and Decline of Democratic Institutions

A crucial condition for the establishment of HMD, in line with increased presidential power, was the weakening of all democratic institutions, including the parliament and political parties, the judicial branch, business, and the regional elites.

We can see this weakening most readily and in the largest number of stages in regard to the political parties. First the regime put them on a short financial and administrative lead. It then used political engineering to create many new parties under full Kremlin control. Finally, it combined several of the new parties into larger projects, while weeding the "political garden" and marginalizing or disbanding the old parties. The seven political parties that now officially exist are mainly electoral and image-making projects that the Kremlin needs to maintain control over the federal and regional parliaments.

The tactic used with the political parties, while fully effective in the utilitarian purpose of establishing control over parliament, is self-defeating in terms of the basic functions that parties perform in a democratic society, including (1) providing communication and feedback between the authorities and society; (2) hosting competitions of people and ideas; (3) balancing the interests of the main social groups in decision making; (4) securing mass support for the actions of the authorities; and (5) guiding public activity into parliamentary channels.

The Replacement of Democratic Institutions with Substitutes

As the weakened institutions have proved incapable of fully performing their functions within the political system, substitutes have gradually displaced them. Although functional analogues of the original institutions, the substitutes lack their own legitimacy and depend entirely on the president. These substitutes—which include the State Council, over a dozen presidential advisory councils, the Security Council, the Public Chamber, the presidential representatives in the federal districts and

their administrations, and the public reception centers—are not totally bad, but they cannot cope with situations that require them to play an independent role. Unlike institutions, they cannot build a framework for the system, structure it, or ensure its stability and reproduction. They are, rather, conveyor belts that give the leader control over the main spheres of public life but serve little practical purpose for anyone besides the leader. An important point is that at critical moments—such as when the president is weakened during a transfer of power or when his popularity declines—substitutes lose their strength as props, and with it goes their capacity to serve as functional replacements for institutions.

A Mechanistic System: Lack of Flexibility and Adaptivity

The entire structure of a state system where every element attaches directly to the president is extraordinarily rigid and mechanistic. Because the system has no relatively autonomous subcenters with a certain freedom to maneuver, no system of checks and balances to facilitate rapid adjustment to changing conditions, and none of the flexibility it needs, it requires constant “hands-on” management and adjustment. The center of gravity of the whole construction is located at the top, which makes it potentially unstable in the face of external shocks and internal distortions. Although the system as a whole is complex, this complexity is not that of an organism but that of a mechanical construction with little capacity for either self-development or self-regulation.

The Declining Efficiency of HMD, Offset by Petrodollars

How has HMD managed to preserve for so long the inefficient or unviable mechanisms and equipment that make up its arsenal? The answer lies in the massive flow of petrodollars into the country, which enables the authorities to cover the costs arising from HMD’s inefficiency and to take their time over economic and other reforms. Its administrative inefficiency makes HMD extraordinarily resource-intensive, and the intensive use of resources is increasing. The creation and maintenance of HMD therefore demands not just high but growing revenues from the sale of raw materials: oil, gas, metals.

While trying—not without results—to avoid the “Dutch disease” in the economy, the country has come down with its own Russian (or lingering Soviet) disease in politics and the organization of state power:

a political superstructure whose ruinous evolution can continue so long as oil revenues can cover its rising costs.

Administrative Oversimplification: Inadequate Solutions Proposed by the Authorities to Complex Problems Facing the Country

The current administrative mechanisms are too simple and primitive for the object they allegedly manage. The horizontal and vertical separation of powers is a complex model, and it appears simpler and more effective to subordinate all branches to one branch, the executive, and all levels to a single center. This is indeed a simpler and more effective method in a short game, where the planning horizon includes only two steps. Problems arise at the third step and grow more and more numerous. Reductionist attempts to find simple answers to complex questions, view situations in black and white, or act according to the logic of a zero-sum game are by no means harmless. Side effects, especially if we consider not only immediate but also long-term effects, may substantially outweigh the intended direct outcome. In addition, administration from a single center, without regard to specific regional conditions, may lead to diametrically opposed results in different regions.

We need not look far for examples of primitive and ineffective administrative decisions. Such decisions in the electoral sphere have removed the option of voting “against all,” reduced and even abolished the minimum participation rate for valid elections, and eliminated elections altogether. Other such decisions include the establishment of a state personnel reserve list, the creation of state corporations, and modernization modeled on the Stalin–Beria atomic energy and space projects.

The Spatial Aspect of Administrative Oversimplification: Excessive Centralization and Unitarism

People call federalism the spatial aspect of democracy. No one can effectively administer such a huge country as Russia from a single center that strictly dominates local areas. Difficulties arise from both the country’s complex territorial-administrative system and the special ethnohistorical, political-cultural, and other features that characterize the spatial structure of Russian society. Nevertheless, the regime constantly attempts to restore, in essence, the State Committee on

Planning (Gosplan) in the economy and the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) in politics. Federalism based on subsidiary units is a rather complex model, but one adequate to Russian conditions with their vast regional diversity. Centralized unitarism with a power vertical looks much simpler. In Russia there are now eighty-three regions of the Federation—six fewer than in recent years.⁷ Fundamentally, however, this reduction has made little difference, and administrative fragmentation within the model of strict subordination remains excessive. The insertion of an additional tier in the form of the federal districts partially resolves the problem of fragmentation but, by lengthening the chain of subordination, makes the system even less flexible. In resolving some problems, the amalgamation of regions generates others; moreover, the potential for accomplishing such amalgamation with relative ease is already practically exhausted. The alternative of transferring real powers and the financial base required for their exercise downward—from the center to the regions, from the regions to the cities and towns—is not available.

The Dismantling of “Failsafe” Mechanisms

Any complex system has built-in “failsafe” mechanisms that safeguard it from insiders’ carelessness and guarantee the security of the system itself and of those who try to act on it. The creation of HMD has consistently destroyed or substantially weakened the following defense mechanisms:

- independent mass media;
- the parliament as a means of taking into account the interests of the main socioeconomic, regional, and other groups and as a forum for public discussion of the most important problems;
- relatively free elections with a national agenda and referendums as direct expressions of the popular will;
- directly elected governors; and
- nonprofit organizations that provide independent sources of information and ruffle the complacency of the authorities.

As a result, the HMD system has been practically deprived of effective “failsafe” mechanisms that could reduce or block actions by the authorities that might cause substantial harm to themselves and to the system as a whole. This absence sharply raises the cost of any administrative errors and makes it impossible to avoid crises with potentially serious

consequences, up to and including the partial or total destruction of the system.

The Generation of Large-Scale Intrasystemic Crises by the System Itself

In the absence of clear built-in mechanisms to harmonize the interests and actions of different elite clans and corporations, and given the absence or ineffectiveness of “failsafe” mechanisms and quality control in decision making, individual elements of the system, in pursuit of their own narrowly understood interests, can provoke crises. Under conditions of hypercentralization and in the absence of automatically functioning defense systems like the immune system of an organism, these crises tend to develop unimpeded for a certain period of time and to spread throughout the system. Moreover, it takes extraordinary measures to overcome their consequences. Most crises of recent years—from the big crises associated with the monetization of benefits [for pensioners—Trans.] and the reform of housing and municipal services to more local crises like the banking panic of 2004 or the attempts in 2007 to regulate liquor sales (the Unified State Automated Information System)—have been artificial and immanent to the system. They do not indicate lapses in its functioning but are instead products of its functioning.

The Ineffectiveness of Intrastate Regulation

Because HMD combines features of a command system and pseudo-democratic traits, it requires an enormous and complex apparatus of internal control. Although designed to fill the gap created by the lack of transparency in the actions of state officials and by the absence of real public oversight, this apparatus cannot eliminate excessive corruption or even restrain its growth. The system needs total control to prevent members of the mid-level elite from using the powers that the system gives them to serve their own interests, rather than those of the system as a whole. The powerful and expanding control apparatus needed to compensate for the decline of transparency and public oversight places a heavy burden on the system and makes it even less flexible. It also diverts vast amounts of resources, further undermining the system’s effectiveness, which would decline even in the absence of this factor.

HMD in Elections—Guaranteed Short-Term Gains and Long-Term Losses

In elections HMD assumes its most complex and technically perfect form. Its governing mechanisms include complicated laws with a large number of rigid requirements that make it possible to declare any electoral participant guilty of violations; prohibitively high barriers to participation, such as entry fees and numerous obstacles; disqualification of candidates by means of administrative intervention; strict control over access to media and financial resources; and extensive use of administrative resources at all stages. The federal and regional authorities appear simultaneously in several roles—as agents who establish the rules of the game, as players, and as referees. By these means the authorities prevent the electoral victory of candidates they find inconvenient, while elections cease to play an important role in maintaining the system or even for the authorities. The strategic stability of the system is sacrificed to petty tactical goals and conveniences.

Under conditions of relatively free voting, elections constitute a complex system in which all elements are interconnected, so that willfully altering some elements risks affecting all the others. Attempts to interfere in elections, including the disqualification of candidates whom the authorities find inconvenient, evoke in society a negative reaction that takes various forms, both systemic and nonsystemic. The systemic forms include abstention from voting, negativism, and voting for protest candidates; the nonsystemic forms include street demonstrations. Public confidence in elections as an institution also declines. By ignoring systemic and harshly suppressing nonsystemic protest, making themselves comfortable by removing participation thresholds, and eliminating the option of voting “against all,” the authorities may create for a certain period of time an appearance of well-being, but they cannot prevent diminished effectiveness amid reduced public competition or the negative impact on their own legitimacy.

Intra-Elite Conflicts, Their Channeling and Compartmentalization

HMD, in its orientation toward the leader as supreme arbiter and its ineffective means of conflict resolution among major elite clans and groups, is rife with tension. It naturally gives rise to conflicts. These squabbles are associated not with forward motion but with circular movement, not with

development but with maintaining the system’s relative stability. They are not resolved but constantly reproduced. They do not improve the system but maintain a certain balance of power among the major clans.

Tension among elite clans and groups takes the form of conflicts between different power structures and corporations. Actions by the authorities to resolve conflicts lead to their compartmentalization but do not promote the self-development of the system.

The “transfer of power” has not just intensified the conflict, made it sharper and more public, but has led to a phase shift—from disagreements about decisions to arguments over unilateral actions undertaken by different elite groups and constant violations of the balance of power. In the absence of institutions, the weakening of the president makes it increasingly more difficult to impose outside limits on conflicts.

The Indecisiveness of HMD

The impotence of HMD is most obvious in decision making. Without an objective and high-quality expert-analytical foundation for making decisions and designing effective mechanisms to harmonize interests, (1) decisions are made with difficulty, if at all; (2) decisions are far from optimal even for the state and the political system, never mind society; and (3) decisions announced by the authorities are often revised or deferred or never implemented. The excessive centralization and bureaucratization of the system suppress initiative at all levels while every time creating long chains of subordination and overloading the center.

The Immobility of HMD

Lacking built-in mechanisms of self-regulation and self-development, HMD is neither self-sufficient nor capable of self-reproduction. The entire system of internal state organization and state-society relations within HMD is static. It is aimed not at development but at the retention of power; it is not offensive but defensive—and, in part, escapist—in nature. In principle no one can consolidate such a power structure, which has no capacity to serve general systemic interests but only the personal and clan-corporate interests of its individual representatives. Society, shut out of decision making and implementation, is passive and inert; it leaves the authorities in peace to busy themselves with their own problems but cannot provide support for moving forward and effecting reforms. In this

situation, the authorities cannot mobilize society to fulfill tasks that are important for the country.

Incapacity of HMD for Self-Reproduction, Its Potential Instability

Because it relies on an individual leader, not on a balance of institutions, the HMD system is potentially highly unstable. The political risk of destabilization multiplies during a transfer of power from one leader to another, a time when the system, like a spinning top losing speed, has the capacity for sharp impulsive motions. Under such conditions, power cannot in principle change hands on schedule and in a normal democratic manner: the transfer must take place through a palace coup, inevitably followed by a process—perhaps an agonizing one—of personnel purges and redivisions of power and property at all levels. In an extremely personalistic HMD, succession at the top, however formal, automatically eliminates many substitutes attached to the person yielding power and therefore threatens serious destabilization.

The Explosive Combination of a Mass of Alienated Citizens and an Antisystemic Opposition

HMD is a system with a low and declining level of citizen participation. Its operation cuts off an increasing number of social and political groups, which not only undermines its legitimacy and effectiveness but also transforms an active, potentially loyal opposition into an antisystemic opposition. By not drawing on real support from broad social strata but merely exploiting their apathy and passivity, the system sets a bomb under itself and attaches a detonator, thereby creating its own gravedigger in the form of politicians banished from the political stage and social masses shut out of decision making, whose interests will be affected and violated as soon as the active phase of the crisis is over and the system passes from inaction to action.

When the economic crisis reached Russia, the HMD system encountered, in addition to its intrinsic problems, serious external difficulties. These qualitatively new challenges resulted both from the crisis itself and from the consequent sharp contraction of the regime's resource base. The system's operating conditions deteriorated significantly. The situation of dual power—whether real or merely formal is not important—established

in the spring of 2008, however, only exacerbated the constructive defects of the system.

In speaking of our political and administrative system, I would like, first of all, to describe the replacement of institutions by substitutes—a key feature of the system, important for understanding both its architecture and its functioning.

More on “Failsafe” Mechanisms, Their Dismantling, and Its Consequences

Let us consider in greater detail the situation with regard to a number of defense mechanisms that have recently been dismantled or greatly weakened.

Parliament and the Separation of Powers in General

The most systemic and multilayered “failsafe” mechanism in contemporary political systems is the parliament. Here bills and all their possible consequences for various social groups undergo public and critical appraisal. Here identifiable parliamentarians have personal accountability for the stand they take on a final decision and for their assessments during any discussion. Here, too, a large number of qualified experts, with and without ideological agendas, testify at various stages of a debate. The parliament, by definition, has the job of representing the most diverse interest groups—whether based on ownership or gender categories, occupation, ethnicity, or region—and providing a forum for each of these groups to express its own views and uphold its interests.

The now celebrated remark of [Speaker of the State Duma] Boris Gryzlov that the parliament is no place for political discussions is usually quoted as a ridiculous oxymoron and as glaring evidence of the amateurism of the authorities' prominent representatives. Gryzlov's comment, however, was not so much a prescription as a quite adequate description of the contemporary Russian political situation. For more than ten years—since December 1999 in the case of the State Duma, a somewhat later date in the case of the Federation Council—the Russian parliament has indeed no longer been a place for discussions—at least, not for discussions that result in the most carefully weighed and thoroughly analyzed decisions.

After the Kremlin captured a majority in 2000, the Duma increasingly

turned from a public political forum and a representative legislature into a voting machine that supports decisions prepared by the executive branch. The so-called zero reading became an entrenched practice, in which the deputies and the executive branch cut a deal behind the scenes and the corresponding bill receives a green light even before its official submission to the Duma (directly by the government or through one of the deputies). It has also become usual to nip the opposition's legislative initiatives in the bud and not bring them up for discussion. In addition, the parliament has lost many of its oversight functions. We can see this trend in the Duma's loss of control over the composition of the Audit Chamber, in the declining number of its assignments and of parliamentary requests, and in the sharp decline in the number of Duma commissions set up to study the most important state issues and prepare proposals for new laws.

The election of a new Duma in 2007 merely exacerbated the situation. A parliament that includes only one party—as in Kazakhstan—turns into a party meeting. A parliament wholly dominated by one party, as in our country, is also a party meeting, but with guests. We may recall the stormy debates some years ago on the need for civilized lobbying—the passage of a lobbying law, precise observance of rules, and so on. No law was passed—and still has not been. Yet the debates died down, because the topic disappeared: lobbying shifted from the Duma to the executive branch (with the corresponding consequences in terms of corruption).

There is a propensity to oversimplify: indeed, if we regard parliament exclusively as a voting machine, then its structure can be as simple as possible. Exactly this has happened in Russia. Today the Duma no longer performs the second most complex of a parliament's functions: blocking poorly thought-out and hence dangerous or simply ineffective executive decisions. In technology, amateurs are not allowed to make engineering decisions—to keep structures from collapsing. In politics, the relationship between cause and effect is much more complex, with multiple connections and effects that show up immediately or only after a delay.

The reform to monetize benefits, which was pushed through the Duma in record time at the end of 2004, offers a graphic illustration of the pernicious effects of the absence of a parliament as a sort of Department of Technological Oversight.

While the lower chamber rapidly evolved, the upper chamber underwent radical change as early as 2000, with the adoption of a new procedure for forming the Federation Council. Influential regional

speakers and governors gave way to people—appointed at the initiative or with the support of the Kremlin—who often had no ties with the regions that they formally represented. After a while, the regional authorities lost the right to recall their emissaries. An absurd situation arose, in which the Speaker, not the delegating authority, decided questions of recall. It was as if ambassadors were recalled not by the states that they represented but by the states to which they were accredited. From another perspective, this decision highlights the fact that senators represent not so much regions as various federal influence groups.

The new procedure led to a sharp decline in the representation of regional interests in both houses of the Federal Assembly, which remained federal only in name. This is unacceptable for a federation—and counterproductive in a country as vast and diverse as Russia.

Furthermore, the role played by the Federation Council in the political system sharply contracted. In fact, it ceased to function as a lawmaking body. It also became exceptionally rare for the Federation Council to reject a law passed by the Duma or to establish a reconciliation commission with the lower chamber. The Federation Council automatically approves all personnel appointments.

Directly Elected Governors

Let us consider the meaning and consequences of recent developments by taking as an example the abolition of direct gubernatorial elections and the introduction of a two-stage procedure in which the president nominates candidates and the regional parliament confirms them. During the five years in which the new procedure has operated (January 2005–January 2010), it has confirmed 104 regional heads. At first, fewer governors than expected were replaced. In the first year, fewer than one-quarter of regional heads lost their jobs—ten cases out of forty-four. That is, turnover was lower than during direct gubernatorial elections. Turnover has risen rapidly, however—to fourteen cases out of thirty-three in 2006–7 and nineteen cases out of twenty-seven in 2008–9. Moreover, with increasing frequency the Kremlin has taken to replacing an incumbent governor with a “Varangian” [outsider—Ed.] from Moscow or another region.

The detailed procedure for selecting gubernatorial candidates, as prescribed by law and presidential decree, envisions active participation by the presidential representative in a given federal district, preliminary consultations in the region, and a multistage examination of candida-

cies by the Kremlin. Practice has restricted this procedure somewhat. Thus, an incomplete and largely opaque implementation exacerbates the model's retreat from democracy. In the autumn of 2009, the party with a majority in the regional parliament—United Russia—took over the presidential representatives' job of selecting and agreeing on gubernatorial candidates. The Kremlin actively tries to avoid divisions among regional political elites or objections to its proposed candidacy from the regional parliament. In practice, this encourages attempts to cut a deal before officially nominating any candidate, similar to the zero reading of bills in the State Duma.

It is still difficult to assess the full, direct effect of the switch from direct gubernatorial elections to presidential appointments, especially as the impact affects not only changes in the configuration of state power but also society. Another problem is that at around the time when the Kremlin introduced the new procedure, it halted or greatly slowed down many reforms—the monetization of benefits, the reform of housing and municipal services, and the reform of local government—rightly fearing a repetition of the massive wave of social protest that took place in January–February 2005. Thus, the new system has yet to be tested in practice—unless, of course, we argue that it proved itself when the announcement that the Kremlin would begin appointing governors broke the governors' resistance to the poorly prepared monetization reform.

It would be wrong, however, to see the retention of governors as evidence of stuttering in the new system and to regard the situation as little changed. First, each appointment takes place after active examination of the personnel reserve list and is followed by an often extensive renewal of the composition of the second- and third-tier regional leadership. Furthermore, all regional heads, both old and new, play different roles. Previously, most of them were full-fledged masters of their territories, for which they were completely responsible. People judged their performance, on the whole, by the successes of their region; and they planned on a scale of at least four to five years. Now they are highly placed functionaries whose personal interest lies in quickly and precisely carrying out orders from the center, however bad these orders may be for their regions.

By abolishing direct gubernatorial elections, the Kremlin not only placed itself in jeopardy in the event of any regional crisis but deprived the political system of an effective barrier to decisions that threatened the system, or at least minimized possible damage by modifying such decisions or delaying their nationwide implementation. Such a barrier

might have made it possible to avoid a general collapse, as in the case of the monetization reform, and to revise decisions based on experience with their implementation in other places. The sole reason why we have not yet seen the crises to which the new system must inevitably lead is that all serious decisions have been deferred to the next presidential term.

After the 2008 presidential elections, in addition to snowballing socioeconomic and political problems, the Kremlin ran up against an organizational and personnel problem created by previous appointments. In 2009–10 numerous governors who are now serving out their fourth or fifth term and approaching retirement age must be replaced. The Kremlin, having shut down the electoral mechanism for training potential governors and giving them public exposure, will have no choice in many regions except to appoint people who are poorly prepared for such a prominent role.

The appointments system has already provoked several serious and public conflicts within regional political elites—for example, in Tuva, Bashkortostan, and Nizhnii Novgorod oblast—due to the natural (under the new conditions) striving of counterelites to demonstrate to the Kremlin that current regional authorities lack effective control. Regional political contests have transitioned from a positive context, in which electoral candidates presented appealing platforms, to a purely negative context in which the guiding principle is literally “the worse, the better”—another direct result of appointing governors.

An objective contradiction is apparent. The Kremlin reduces friction in the “center–governor” link (essentially turning it from a hinge joint into a rigid joint) by appointing to the regions functionaries from Moscow whom it finds convenient, but it thereby exacerbates problems in the “governor–subregional elites” link. It thus becomes natural that appointed governors wish to halt the mechanism of electing mayors. Now the “governor–mayor” link is also turning from a hinge joint into a rigid joint. In other words, individual elements of the power structure are losing their relative freedom of action, while the power structure as a whole is losing its flexibility.

Meanwhile, by depriving citizens of the right to elect leading regional officials, the Kremlin has automatically shouldered the responsibility for those officials' behavior. The negative effect of this is not immediately manifest but plays out over a long period, by altering the psychology of citizens to the psychology of subjects.

Besides its immediate impact through a decline in administrative efficiency, the switch from elected to appointed governors has dismantled the surviving elements of federalism and—as an unavoidable consequence—degraded other democratic institutions. One systemic effect of the switch has been a wave of decisions abolishing mayoral elections. The Kremlin has run into problems in assessing the performance of regional heads and in monitoring citizens' attitudes toward them. It is attempting to solve these problems in the Soviet manner, by conducting secret sociological surveys and trying to introduce a complex, formalized system of indicators.

Almost all the declared goals of the switch to appointed governors remain unrealized. The quality of the governors as a group has not improved. Politics has become more secretive at the regional as well as at the federal level. Whether the system has grown more corrupt is a big question: in principle, the more closed and opaque the decision making, the greater is the scope for corruption. We can say with certainty only that the flow of money has changed direction. Public, often scandalous electoral campaigns have given way to backroom infighting and protests against the current authorities organized by rival elite clans.

The greatest trials, however, await the system in the event of any local crisis—technogenic, socioeconomic, or political. In the absence of any blocking mechanism comparable to a safety fuse in an electricity grid, such a crisis may rapidly escalate to the federal level, throwing the entire system into crisis.

Nonprofit Organizations

Civil society can be divided into three components. The first consists of those who assist the state, a group that the Kremlin actively encourages. The second comprises those who mount a defense against the state, whom the Kremlin suppresses or strives to keep on a short leash. The third includes those whose activity has nothing to do with the state; these the Kremlin regards with indifference. Recently the Kremlin has sharply intensified its efforts to set up alternative organizations to replace defenders of human rights, independent election monitors, and so on. It has also mounted a campaign to rearrange civil society as a whole into a "proper" pyramidal structure with the Public Chamber on top.

The Public Chamber created by the state and the associated system of public councils attached to ministries and departments constitute a

sort of inner voice for the authorities. After all, the regime loves itself and will not cause itself any problems. No doubt about it—the authorities prefer a tame civil society. But as a "failsafe," a tame civil society is absolutely useless. Groups that the authorities find inconvenient include "watchdogs" and "advocacy groups." Watchdogs exist to guard society against state blunders, advocacy groups to represent the interests of various social groups—so that invalids, prisoners, or people suffering from AIDS, for instance, are not forgotten. Muffling the voices of both types of organization (which is precisely what is happening) creates the mere illusion of tranquillity—and a temporary illusion at that.

How intelligent and positive are the authorities' efforts to "tame" civil society and rearrange it to suit themselves? When the state assists nonprofit organizations that meet its approval, its assistance harms neither the state nor society; on the contrary, everyone benefits. But the rest—attempting to exercise strict control over nonprofit organizations, exerting administrative and financial pressure on them, creating clones, defaming and harassing them, and so on—ultimately boomerangs against the authorities themselves.

The problem here is the systemic effect. By muffling the voices of their critics, the central authorities free the hands of local authorities to do the same to their own, local critics. In doing so, the authorities also deprive themselves of the chance to receive warning signals of local problems and to react expeditiously to those problems.

Substitutes Instead of Institutions

The Putin years brought the steady and deliberate weakening of all institutions except the presidency, with its power vertical and combined law-enforcement and defense/security agencies under direct presidential control—the "president's government." Major roles in changing the overall political configuration went to the presidential representatives and their administrations, which became an important element in the new presidential Russian regime, as well as the whole tier of state administration associated with the federal districts.

Under President Putin, the prime minister led no strong or independent government. Now, as the government of the ex-president, it undoubtedly looks stronger, but it bears no resemblance to a single team. The government often behaves like a set of groups fighting over power and property—the Sechin, Shuvalov, and Zubkov groups. The greatly

weakened mass media, political parties, and State Duma have lost the remnants of their former independence. The governors, the reformed Federation Council, and local self-government have lost much of their strength. With the consolidation of the federal political elite, big business and the so-called oligarchs have become less independent. Elections play a sharply diminished role.

Putin's move from president to prime minister and chairman of United Russia, given that most of the general characteristics of the system remained unchanged, weakened the only institution that had remained strong—the presidency. The result has been further decline in the already low institutionalization of state power.

Substitutes replace weakened or immobilized institutions and are designed to ensure the functioning of the state mechanism under the new conditions.⁸ What sets substitutes apart is that although they sometimes perform the role of full-fledged institutions, that is not what they are. They either have no legal basis in the Constitution and federal law (the presidential representatives, for instance) or depend wholly on the president.⁹ As a result, their status can vary wildly as the president wills—from a rank so high that their advice and recommendations assume the form of presidential decrees and instructions to one so low that they play no real role at all.

The visual image that best illustrates the above is the props attached to floating objects in the surrealist paintings of Salvador Dali. Whereas institutions lend firm support to an inner framework, substitutes merely prop it up temporarily.

The general evolutionary line of the institutional design of the political system under Putin may be described as follows. First, the expansion of presidential power in all directions weakened every other institution. Then, when it became obvious that the weakened institutions could not perform their political functions, substitutes of various kinds were created “to help them.” Being attached to the president and lacking any independent legitimacy, these substitutes serve not only as functional replacements for the weakened institutions but also as tools for the further expansion of presidential power. Sometimes—as in the case of the presidential representatives—the creation of substitutes may precede the weakening of institutions and facilitate a power grab.

The appearance of substitutes is not unusual in itself. Generally speaking, it is part of any political evolution. Often it is simply a phase in the establishment of political institutions. The contemporary Russian political system is distinct in two ways.

First, *when institutions lose their role and content, they are not eliminated completely.* The outer shell remains. They turn into decorative elements, pseudoinstitutions, pale likenesses of themselves.

Second, *substitutes never turn into institutions.* They have no basis in legislation, including the Constitution and constitutional laws. They do not acquire independent legitimacy. They exist not so that they can someday replace ineffective institutions but to substitute for them while democratic institutions remain in a formal, decorative role.

By analogy with the shadow economy, which according to various estimates makes up 40–60 percent of the contemporary Russian economy, we can speak of “shadow political activity” that is conducted in part through substitutes. The share of shadow political activity among all political activity is high and rising rapidly.

The most diverse mechanisms may be used to weaken institutions. They may include state control of the mass media, corporate businesses, and local self-government; partial or total elimination of funding sources, with the establishment of strict control over how the money flows to political parties, nonprofit organizations, and—again—local self-government; tougher legislation and direct administrative interference—as, for instance, in the case of elections, governors, and political parties; and weakening of personnel and creation of a negative image (here the best example may be the new Federation Council).

I present parallel lists of institutions and substitutes for them in contemporary Russia [Table 1], confining myself for the sake of simplicity to bodies (*organy*) and omitting, in particular, two important and multifaceted institutions—elections and local self-government.

Many nominal institutions turn out on inspection to be substitutes. Even United Russia is not the party of power but a substitute for the party of power. What does this mean? It casts no shadow and has no reflection in a mirror. To speak more seriously, it has minimal political autonomy. It is a powerful hierarchical network that transmits signals mainly from the top down. It has hardly any inner mechanism for making decisions and is guided from without. An institution has a center inside itself; a substitute has its center on the outside.

With Medvedev's accession to the presidency, the substitutionalization of our political system reached its extreme—we might even say, the point of absurdity. The system's last remaining strong institution—presidential power—was subjected to functional cloning. Medvedev is a substitute for the president. More accurately, Medvedev

[Table 1]

[Institutions and Substitutes in the Russian Federation]

Institutions	Substitutes
State Duma	Presidential department advisory councils (2000–), Public Chamber (2004–)
Federation Council	State Council and its presidium (2000–), Council of Legislators (2001–)
Political parties	Political machines of state corporations and regions, United Russia
Independent mass media as sources of information	Public reception centers (2002–), secret sociological surveys (2004–), departmental data collection networks, citizens' complaints and appeals
Government as center for strategic decision making	Presidential administration, presidium of State Council, Security Council (2000–2001), Center for Strategic Calculations (2000–2002), Commission for Modernization? (2009–)
Government as body of current administration	"Small Security Council" (2000–), Council for National Projects (2005–7), presidential administration, state corporations (2004–)
Federal and regional executive agencies	Presidential representatives in the federal districts (2000–), chief federal inspectors
Directly elected governors and mayors	Presidential appointees confirmed by regional parliaments and hired city managers
Oligarchs—owners of private big business	Appointed "oligarchs"—heads of state corporations

is the emasculated institution, while Putin is both the substitute for the president and the prime minister.

The *substitutionalization of a political system* always makes it simpler and more primitive. It also places the system in a regime of manual management; this carries the risk of serious instability whenever the need arises to replace the "driver in chief," who holds all the reins of the substitutes in his hands.

Because substitutes replace not institutions but their functions, and because a democratic institution—parliament, for instance—may have many functions, a whole series of substitutes may correspond to a single institution. Certain functions of a given institution—those that the authorities either do not need or do not recognize that they need—however, may not be performed by anyone at all.

I illustrate this by discussing elections, one of the most important democratic institutions.

Elections and Substitutes for Elections

As means of *legitimizing state authority*, elections are replaced by the new procedure for presidential appointment of governors with subsequent confirmation by the regional legislature and indirect elections of mayors from among elected deputies. As means of *establishing feedback between the authorities and society*, elections are replaced by public reception centers and the revived system of "working people's complaints and proposals." As means of *citizens' appraisal of the results or effectiveness of the authorities' actions*, elections are replaced by the chief federal inspectors, secret sociological surveys, and multi-indicator systems specially devised by the Kremlin to monitor conditions in the regions.

For example, in 2006 the State Council set up a working group under the chairmanship of Governor Vladimir Iakushev of Tiumen to consider how to improve the mechanisms by which state bodies exercise their powers. The State Council commission proposed 127 indicators.

Initially, a presidential decree in 2007 established forty-three indicators for assessing the effectiveness of regional administrations. Current government instructions stipulate the use of 295 indicators. After the conflagration in Perm, Putin ordered the use of supplementary indicators to describe fire prevention work and its effectiveness. This is an attempt to encompass everything; it is also an attempt to arm the Kremlin with statistical data that can be used to discredit any governor.

More than half of the almost three hundred indicators that describe regional conditions for the next three years pertain to education (eighty-nine) or health care (seventy-three). The education indicators include forty for general education (including the proportion of students who have taken the Unified State Examinations by categories of student and types of examination; numbers of schools, classes, students, and teachers; wages and budgetary outlays; and even levels of juvenile delinquency) and forty-nine for initial and mid-level vocational training. The health-care indicators describe mortality by age and cause, the work of health-care establishments in physical and value terms, and physical culture and sports. Together with residential and municipal services (forty indicators), this accounts for two-thirds of all indicators. The remaining indicators cover housing construction and supply

of 2009 by Eduard Rossel', who nonetheless failed to win reappointment as governor of Sverdlovsk oblast). So, we might say, we have elections. But only one person votes (now perhaps two).

In terms of personnel, elections at various levels do not only determine the winner. Elections also involve the selection and training of worthy candidates. I examine below how the authorities try to compensate for this important electoral function.

The authorities' use of sociological surveys to reveal public demands and their populist response to such demands substitute for elections as a means of forming an agenda for a country or region.

Elections have various other functions, including two vital functions that the authorities find it difficult to replace. These are "letting off steam"—elections as a means of exposing and at the same time reducing social tension—and elections as a catalyst of political development.

As regards "letting off steam," the abolition of direct gubernatorial elections seems potentially dangerous for the Kremlin, as it closes off the possibility of localizing and absorbing public protest in the event of dissatisfaction with local authorities and redirects it against those at the top. The whole of the current electoral system—with its prohibitively high thresholds for entry to parliament, administrative suppression of candidates and parties that for any reason do not suit the federal and local authorities, exclusion of protest candidates, and elimination of the option of voting "against all"—also seems excessively rigid. By blocking the parliamentary, intrasystemic forms of public protest expressed through elections and pushing professional politicians out of the federal and regional parliaments, the authorities have created a serious problem for themselves—a problem that they are trying (again, inadequately) to solve through the use of crude police force and judicial prosecution.

It would be a mistake to underestimate this problem based on the relatively small size of "protest marches" at present. First, even today the authorities, who have no normal mechanisms to garner public feedback (in part because they themselves have undermined the ability of elections to provide such feedback), do not know what to expect each time and hugely overreact. Second, protest at present occurs in a socio-economic context of satiety and stagnation that benefits the authorities; but tomorrow, when the carrots are gone and the authorities, whether they like it or not, have to tackle the deferred tasks of modernization

(thirteen), length of roads (five, for different kinds of road), security (five—crime, including recidivism, level of public satisfaction, and budgetary outlays), and, finally, the organization of state and municipal administration (twenty-two indicators on budgetary revenues and outlays and the level of indebtedness).

Besides statistical indicators, for each of the nine main groups of indicators there are survey data on the level of public satisfaction.

Regional heads send reports in a set format to the government, which aggregates them and prepares summaries before the end of the year (for the preceding year). The government uses sticks and carrots. The carrots come through a system of government grants given to the most "successful" regions. In 2008, 2 billion rubles went to reward twenty leading regions.

A system of three hundred indicators that attempts to combine static and dynamic conditions seems excessively detailed. Manipulation of information from both sides, similar to that which took place in the Soviet period, is inevitable. Here we may also recall a practice that continues to this day in the system of the Ministry of Internal Affairs: every new chief appointed to a region depresses the report indicators for which his predecessor was responsible, to create for himself a favorable basis for comparison.

Besides statistics, the Kremlin assesses the effectiveness of regional authorities through a system that incorporates the results of periodic surveys conducted for this purpose as well as assessments based on citizens' letters and appeals, including those handled by the public reception centers.

Various kinds of consultations with influential groups and lobbying by such groups, including the use of corrupt means, substitute for elections as a mechanism for political competition and the selection of candidates and platforms.

How does this work in determining a gubernatorial candidate?

One American fantasy novel depicted a world in which general presidential elections gave way to a complex system for identifying an ideally average voter, who alone fulfilled the task of choosing among the candidates. With the new system for assigning governors (those in the Kremlin object to the word "appointing"), we have achieved something rather like this fantasy. Nowadays, the list of nominees for an office is announced in advance, and a real pre-electoral struggle takes place (it is

public politics and by the exclusion from it of professional politicians will become much more serious.

The question of elections graphically demonstrates the mechanism or law of the progressive primitivization of the regime: no elections—no problem. Insensitive to external impulses, the regime closes down the mechanism by which the system might evolve, leaving open only degeneration.

Evolution of Substitutes Using the Presidential Representatives as an Example

Most substitutes are characterized by a rapid initial ascent followed by a weakening. They are created in the depths of the bureaucratic system, as a rule, to perform a specific task; then, like trash in space, they remain in orbit even after their task is accomplished. Take, for instance, the Center for Strategic Calculations. In 1999–2001, under the directorship of German Gref, it was the country's leading analytical center and discussion forum. Then, when no one wanted reform plans any longer, the Center for Strategic Calculations fell into the stupor in which it remains to this day. This does not mean that at some point a substitute may not regain its importance. As an example, we can cite the Security Council, which acquired great importance, becoming a strategic government when Vladimir Putin was its secretary (because for the first time the holder of this post, who has great official powers but usually few real resources, was concurrently head of a powerful security agency—the Federal Security Service) and under his successor, Sergei Ivanov (2000–2001). An earlier temporary ascent of the Security Council in 1996 followed the appointment of General Aleksandr Lebed, who had won third place in the first round of presidential elections. Boris Yeltsin offered him an alliance.

The concentration of extensive powers in a single center and the weakness of institutions has given rise to a large number of commissars—the presidential representatives, whose mission is both to keep an eye on institutions and actors and to carry out certain important administrative tasks. The institution of presidential representatives arose when the system of federal districts was set up in 2000 and gathered strength in 2001–2.

The presidential representatives are a universal substitute, capable of fulfilling the most diverse functions, both official and unofficial. This, incidentally, is an important property of substitutes, which although they live in the world of public politics do not belong fully to this world and

are subject to other laws. The presidential representatives have performed, consecutively and in parallel, the following functions: strengthening loyalty to Moscow among federal officials in the regions by urging that regional laws accord with federal law; seizing control over federal generals in the regions from either the regional authorities or certain excessively independent heads of federal agencies—above all, the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the tax police;¹⁰ establishing a rational chain of command and eliminating regional economic associations as a form of grassroots self-organization; inspecting federal agencies in the regions and systematically working with personnel, including initially overseeing gubernatorial elections and then, until the autumn of 2009, selecting and securing agreement on candidates for these posts; and exercising representative functions. Other, more specific tasks have been and are constantly added, such as preparing regions for the winter, stimulating the development of small and medium-sized businesses, monitoring the implementation of presidential decrees, working out umbrella strategies of development, and supervising work on large federal projects being carried out in a federal district.

In a personalistic system, the personal identity of the head of a structure (his political influence and level of integration into the system of top administrative elites) has great significance, for it largely determines the structure's impact on decision making. A presidential representative's personality may affect the role and importance of the institution that he heads within broad limits. Everyone recalls the new approach to personnel that Sergei Kirienko introduced as presidential representative in the Volga federal district (2000–2005), the clumsy and counterproductive interference of Konstantin Pulikovskii (renowned for his special relationship with Kim Jong Il) in elections in the Far East (2000–2005), and the active redeployment of chief federal inspectors practiced first by Leonid Drachevskii in the Siberian federal district (2000–2004), then by Aleksandr Konovalov in the Volga federal district (2005–8).

The Southern federal district offers a striking example. It has already had five presidential representatives since the creation of the federal districts less than ten years ago: General Viktor Kazantsev (May 2000–March 2004), Vladimir Iakovlev (March 2004–September 2004), Dmitrii Kozak (September 2004–September 2007), Grigorii Rapota (October 2007–May 2008), and Vladimir Ustinov (May 2008–).¹¹ Of the five, only Kozak was a real “viceroy” in the Caucasus; for the others—apart from Kazantsev, who was presidential representative during the war in

Chechnya—the job has been more like an honorable retirement. Like Putin at the Security Council, Kozak combined the high formal status of presidential representative and chairman of a special governmental commission for the Southern federal district with the informal ties and influence accumulated as head of the government apparatus and first deputy head of the presidential administration. A sixth and very high-status presidential representative appeared on 19 January 2010, when the mountainous part of the Southern federal district became a separate, eighth district—the North Caucasus federal district. The presidential representative appointed to the new district was Governor Aleksandr Khloponin of Krasnoïarsk.

If the president weakens, so do his representatives. How can we not recall here the ideas of 2000 about establishing a parallel institution of government representatives? A step in this direction may be the appointment of Khloponin as a “dual representative”—as presidential representative and as deputy prime minister. In this sense, Khloponin has become the first representative of the tandem [President Medvedev and Prime Minister Putin—Ed.], not only the president.

Individual elements of the system can be substitutes, but so can entire blocs. Personnel policy demonstrates this. Staffing is a rather serious problem, one that the authorities ran up against quite long ago. It is clear why. Until a decade ago, public politics and its associated mechanisms for mobilizing, recruiting, and training personnel generated a flow of new people into the state apparatus. The end of public politics brought an end to this flow. The authorities now face the problem full force. It is interesting to watch them try to solve it.

The Personnel Department of Corporation “Russia”

The authorities’ approach to the staffing problem illustrates how they have the capacity to find the simplest (to the point of primitive) solutions—solutions that often prove inadequate to the situation. If there are no employees, the first question that comes to mind is: “Why? Which mechanisms would reproduce this resource?” Instead, the authorities have proposed the idea of a personnel reserve list.

Work on the personnel reserve list—first for United Russia, then for the president—coincided with a sharp contraction of the space for public politics and an effort to strengthen the state’s position everywhere. What does this look like in practice? A splendid example is provided by the

hundred-person reserve list of President Medvedev, which produced such a good impression on experts both at home and abroad. The regime obtained the list as follows. The head of the presidential administration, Sergei Naryshkin, said that he and Vladislav Surkov prepared a list of two hundred experts—highly respected people whose names only Naryshkin and Surkov know. The group worked in absolute secrecy. Each of the experts compiled a list of best candidates. Then the presidential administration merged the lists.

The process raises questions. How far did the administration go in merging the lists, and how much did it adjust them to match someone’s personal list? Either way, the merger resulted in a list of a thousand names. From these a hundred of the most positive and most attractive people were selected, and they became the personnel reserve list of the president. Other levels of the state apparatus later drew up similar lists. The group did not manage to present the whole thousand; instead a supplementary list of five hundred appeared at the end of the year.

Hence in place of a public mechanism we have the public result of a secret mechanism. For what purpose? The latest declaration of intentions? An ineffective system cannot select personnel effectively—it is like Baron Munchausen pulling himself up out of the swamp by his own hair. Strictly speaking, the problem is not that no selection mechanism exists. It does exist, but it is ineffective, even counterproductive.

Why will this approach not solve the problem? Let us suppose that we can find decent people. The problem with the system is not that people are ill suited to their jobs. We can examine the faces of people in authority today and agree with the idea that they all belong to the intelligentsia. But the organization of the system prevents these people from forming an effective mechanism. As yet, we detect no signs that anyone recognizes this circumstance, let alone wants to adjust the mechanism.

How does this work? Let us consider recent gubernatorial appointments. In 2008, after the appointment of Boris Ebzeev in Karachai-Cherkessia and Nikita Belykh in Kirov oblast, some people entertained the illusion that we are seeing a new system of selection and appointments in which such criteria as public political experience and youth play a role. The appointments made in 2009 were quite different. They continued not the new but the old bureaucratic line. The initial premise depicts the country as an enormous corporation. It has various sections and departments, including the regions. A person can easily be transferred from a sectoral department to a regional department and be expected to

cope. Hence a deputy minister of agriculture may be appointed governor of an agrarian oblast with which he is unfamiliar, while a minister may be appointed governor of another, larger oblast. In seeking a gubernatorial candidate for Murmansk oblast, a more balanced approach leads to the proposed nominee having experience working in submarines and chairing the Committee for Fish; this experience is important for Murmansk oblast. These two qualifications make a person absolutely suited to head the region, even in a crisis.

In 2009 the nomination of gubernatorial candidates by presidential representatives gave way to their nomination by the dominant party. The nomination procedure did not become more effective, but it did become more public and transparent. By the end of 2009, United Russia had nominated fifty-one candidates in fifteen regions. Only five of these nominations went through before the end of the year—those in Sverdlovsk, Astrakhan, Kurgan, and Volgograd oblasts and in the republic of Mari El. The number of candidates on regional lists varies from three to five. Everywhere except in the Jewish Autonomous Oblast, these lists include the acting regional head (appointed in three cases out of five). The lists also include (1) deputy governors and heads of regional governments (in nine regions out of fifteen; in one—Volgograd oblast—the new governor came from this group); (2) Speakers of regional parliaments (six regions); (3) deputies of the Federal Assembly (five regions); (4) officials of the federal government (four regions, including Sverdlovsk oblast, where one obtained the governorship); (5) mayors (two regions); and (6) university deans (two regions).

Substitutes and Decision Making

In addition to problems associated with personnel, who cannot obtain systemic training in the absence of working institutions and vigorous public politics, substitutes cause problems with decision making. Because no institutions or institution-based decision-making mechanisms exist to take into account the interests of various elite groups, alternative means of decision making must be invented, and the quality and timeliness of decisions will deteriorate.

Increasingly frequent lapses in decision making indicate the declining effectiveness of the system and the growing dysfunctions within it. The most striking cases are those in which a completed, announced decision undergoes substantial adjustment or even annulment—for example, the replacement of the Unified Social Tax with insurance payments, the

substitution of the Customs Union for World Trade Organization membership, the law on the regulation of trade, and the cancellation of a recently introduced increase in the transportation tax. In all these cases, capricious decisions by the prime minister in the absence of a functioning system to harmonize interests proved insufficient and were subsequently changed or annulled under the pressure of circumstances, again in a capricious manner. We could cite many other episodes: the prime minister's harsh comments about [the mining/metallurgy company] Mechel in the summer of 2008, causing a run on the market—as well as the “Chichvarkin affair,” Cherkizon (the Cherkizovskii Market), and many lesser cases in which ill-considered and clumsy interference by the authorities, often in response to some corporate, departmental, or even personal interest, has seriously damaged the country's image and economy. Above all, there was the strange and, on the whole, counterproductive gas war with Ukraine in January 2009. It not only badly damaged Russia's image and caused direct financial losses from shortfalls in gas deliveries but also contributed to the substantial weakening of Gazprom's positions in European markets in 2009.

The increasingly frequent lapses in decision making reflect a decline in the total volume of resources and harsher competition for those that remain, the need to make nonstandard decisions within stricter time limits, the limited efficiency and notorious hands-on management of insufficiently qualified administrators, and the absence of filters and “failsafe” mechanisms. Moreover, the replacement of institutions with substitutes has caused discussions of vital questions to recede from public space into the depths of the administrative system, where subordination prevents officials from speaking freely and only interdepartmental squabbles are possible. If such squabbles occur, there is only one arbiter to whom the warring groups can appeal—Putin.

Let us note that the real horizontal and vertical division of powers means that no decision can be regarded as final until the person in charge expresses support for it. At the same time, the mere making of a decision does not automatically lead to its implementation.

Deinstitutionalization separates real decision-making mechanisms from formal, prescriptive legislation.

Just as television no longer broadcasts live, so is direct action disappearing from institutionalized decision making. Whereas “managed democracy” requires ad hoc intervention in the work of democratic institutions, “highly managed democracy” excludes direct action even

by controlled institutions: it restricts institutions to auxiliary roles and turns mechanisms into opportunities for consultation.

Such practices as the “zero cycle” and primaries “à la United Russia” become widespread. The first practice means that major agreements are reached not, let us say, after the government has submitted a bill to the Duma but before (zero readings). In the second, the results of preliminary voting are not final and may be corrected.

The same thing happens with gubernatorial appointments. The formal procedure requires the federal leadership of United Russia to present a list of candidates to the president, from which the president makes his selection. In reality, the procedure has greater complexity and more stages: the Kremlin proposes candidates and tests them in the regions; the official announcement comes only after all sides have agreed. Outsiders cannot discern errors in this procedure. In essence, it replaces public negotiation with backroom bargaining—which undermines the quality of decisions, lessens the responsibility of participants, and stimulates the growth of political corruption.

Often decisions are altered to fit answers demanded by politicians. Expert analysis takes place before decisions are presented to the public, not when decisions are prepared and adopted; in essence, the authorities have turned expert analysis into propaganda supporting their actions.

Instead of the democratic “clear procedure—unclear results” we get “unclear procedure—clear/predetermined results” with rising costs as the inevitable consequence.

Insufficient publicity accompanies decision making. Instead, decisions are prepared in secret, an atmosphere comparable to a special operation. Putin amply demonstrated this fundamental stance early in 2000: asked about the content of his presidential platform, he announced that he would not disclose it prematurely, before the election, lest others borrow from it.

In the absence of public debate, named authors, and responsibility, everything “hangs” on the approval rating of the person in charge. We do not know who designed Putin’s first large-scale reform—the federal (in fact, antifederal) reform. Analyzing it in terms of subjects and objects, we can only guess that it was developed in the depths of secret analytical institutes attached to the Federal Security Service.

This distorted system of coordinates motivates actors to seek to optimize not overall results but personal and corporate advantage, even if this means pushing through a decision that they know to be incorrect or ineffective. The opaqueness of the procedure, the lack of personal

responsibility for decisions, and the lack of strict quality control over outcomes facilitate such behavior.

As a result, any new large-scale project requires special managerial structures to implement it. This happened with the national projects, and now the story is being repeated with the Presidential Commission for the Modernization and Technological Development of the Economy.¹² Even the implementation of items in the president’s annual address employs a “special” administrative model, with working groups in the presidential administration (now also in the Ministry of Regional Development) and in each region.

I mentioned the primitivization of decisions and administrative models. On the whole, this statement is true, although in each specific case the administrative model constructed by HMD may be more unwieldy and appear more complicated than the “natural” model—just as a mechanical model of living nature is more complicated than its natural prototype.

In July 2009 the Federation Council rejected a bill that would have set up small, innovative firms attached to universities. The idea had the support of President Medvedev, but the Ministry of Finance opposed it. The president responded by demanding the recall of both houses of the Federal Assembly, which had already gone home for the summer, and after a reconciliation commission had tinkered with the bill, it passed. Conflicts between the presidential administration and the government had occurred earlier, although not always in so public a manner, over such matters as the law to insure bank deposits, the law on economic zones, and amendments to the Budgetary Code for the Investment Fund. The apotheosis was the fight over the law on trade.

The viability of substitutes is directly connected with the leader’s approval rating. In essence, substitutes exemplify that rating, shooting out in various directions. When the rating declines, so does the function of substitutes—the “length and firmness of our crutches.”

Ratings Mean Everything to Us

In a surprisingly frank article on the “secret service wars,” Police General Viktor Cherkesov, who at one time served as presidential representative in the Northwestern federal district (2000–2003), said that the secret police is the hook on which post-Soviet society hangs, preventing it from falling into the abyss and smashing to smithereens.¹³ If the secret police is the internal hook, then the leader’s approval rating

is the external hook. In the absence of strong institutions, confidence in the leader is the sole basis of legitimacy—a basis that gives the system relative political stability and prevents it from “falling into the abyss and smashing to smithereens.”

Putin’s approval rating is currently around 80 percent.¹⁴ In a crisis, however, it is logical to expect his popularity to decline. The American researcher Daniel Treisman has shown a direct relationship between the popularity of the Russian president (Yeltsin and Putin) and income growth, both in the economy as a whole and of citizens.¹⁵ The health of the economy is now precarious, but the government stubbornly continues to pursue a populist course—no longer thanks to but despite the economy. Clearly, it cannot continue this tactic for long. If the crisis lasts longer than the government anticipates, at some point it will have no way to prop up its approval rating. Then the rating, which all this time has been maintained at an artificially high level (in part by the cheerful view of the crisis conveyed by bureaucrats and the official media), may collapse. The political consequences of its sudden collapse will be considerably more serious than those of a gradual slide.

The problem of the rating, which occasionally falls, and the fear of a repetition of the “monetization” protests of 2005 compel the government to spend colossal sums on populist measures like anticipatory increases in wages and pensions. The gap between economic support for a populist course and its political expediency in view of the approaching elections, however, will only widen over the next two years.

All this makes not only Putin but also the entire system hostages to his approval rating. At a certain point, the rating will cease to work for the system and the system will start to work for the rating.

The Crisis and the Window of Opportunity

The picture that I have sketched here gives few grounds for optimism. A year and a half ago, we could argue that substantial modernization of the political system from within was inevitable. We did not anticipate political liberalization initiated from above to bring about a thaw; rather, reactive liberalization of the political system would have let the regime survive in the face of new challenges and impulses from below. Some time ago, in the first half of 2009, the authorities, frightened by the crisis, undertook a series of steps aimed at relaxing electoral restrictions, introducing certain elements of political competition, if only within United

Russia, and opening a dialogue with the regions. Now, however, all this seems to have come to an end: the authorities believe the worst is behind them and they need not make life more difficult for themselves. Apparently, hopes for an accelerated political evolution may be abandoned, and developments will occur through crisis.

A crisis is possible for at least three reasons: (1) the exhaustion of resources for maintaining the current paternalistic model of relations between the state and the citizenry and between the center and the regions; (2) administrative errors introduced by the system itself, which may give rise to serious political conflict; and (3) a local technological, economic, or other crisis—such as an ethnic or clan conflict that escalates into a political conflict due to the inability of the system to resolve or neutralize it in a timely fashion.

What will happen under these circumstances?

First the tandem will go, then Putin, and with him the system of highly managed democracy.

The disappearance of a highly popular leader (whether the leader himself goes or his approval rating declines) will transform the entire political landscape, like Cinderella at midnight. The extinction of the magical power of the rating will strip all substitutes of their luster: the carriage of United Russia will turn into a pumpkin, the coachman into a rat, and so on. Weaker actors will build coalitions; and the role of institutions—the government, the Federal Assembly, the higher courts, political parties—will grow in a natural manner. In their current form, unfortunately, they are hardly ready to play a more independent role, but it is important for the mechanism to be set in motion. Then political development will acquire its own impetus and proceed naturally. The role of such a mechanism, uniting the actions of various parts of the political system, must be played by elections, which in the absence of an inflated rating will become more competitive. Our task will be to strengthen and stabilize this situational, spontaneous institutionalization.

Notes

1. Such attempts may be far from harmless. Instead of increasing manageability, they may destroy it—as happened, for instance, in the Ukrainian presidential elections of 2004.

2. It is also important to note that many changes of the Putin period were reactive in nature. Above all, the rapid strengthening of the center relative to the regions was a response to the “regional anarchy” of the late 1990s.

3. The special mindset of the “new management team,” most of whom had no prior experience in either public politics or work at the federal level, exhibited a habitual preference for rigid patterns of subordination and closed decision making, an atmosphere of distrust even inside departments, announcements and decisions without alternatives or the possibility of appeal, and a general propensity for simplified decisions and models.

4. See, for example, M. Lipman and A. Riabova, eds., *Puti rossiiskogo postkommunizma* (Moscow: R. Elinin, 2007); Lilia Shevtsova, *Putin's Russia* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2005); and Stephen K. Wegren and Dale R. Herspring, eds., *After Putin's Russia: Past Imperfect, Future Uncertain* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2010).

5. G.V. Golosov, *Rossiiskaia partiinaia sistema i regional'naia politika, 1993–2003* (St. Petersburg: Izdatel'stvo Evropeiskogo universiteta v Sankt-Peterburge, 2006); V.Ia. Gel'man, ed., *Tretii elektoral'nyi tsikl v Rossii, 2003–2004 gody* (St. Petersburg: Izdatel'stvo Evropeiskogo universiteta v Sankt-Peterburge, 2007); *Ezhegodnyi doklad InOP “Otsenka sostoiianiia i perspektiv politicheskoi sistemy Rossii”* www.inop.ru/page529/page484/ [this and all Web addresses accessed 21 January 2011—Ed.]; Henry E. Hale, *Why Not Parties in Russia? Democracy, Federalism, and the State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Cameron Ross, *Local Politics and Democratization in Russia* (London: Routledge, 2009).

6. It seems to me that despite extraordinarily active use of the term “managed democracy” (MD), with either positive or negative connotations (by apologists for and critics of the regime, respectively), people (whether apologists or critics) generally do not understand that MD is a distinct system, not simply a distortion of certain elements of a different, democratic system. MD is a complex system in which all elements are interconnected, and willful change of one will necessarily affect other elements and the system as a whole.

7. The following changes reduced the number of regions of the Federation from eighty-nine to eighty-three: in 2006 Perm oblast and the Komi-Permiak autonomous okrug merged to create Perm krai; in 2007 the Taimyr and Evenk autonomous okrugs were incorporated into Krasnoiar'sk krai, while Kamchatka oblast and the Koriak autonomous okrug merged to create Kamchatka krai; and in 2008 Irkutsk oblast absorbed the Ust-Orda Buriat autonomous okrug, while Chita oblast and the Aga-Buriat autonomous okrug merged to create Zabaikal krai.

8. N. Petrov, “Substituty institutov,” *Otechestvennye zapiski*, 2007, no. 6.

9. While Putin was president, all this was understandable. Now it is not.

10. Let us note that the Federal Security Service (FSB) has never fallen under the jurisdiction of the presidential representatives and the chief federal inspectors. Moreover, the FSB is one of the few agencies that has no structures at the level of the federal districts.

11. Second after the Southern federal district in attracting especially close attention from the center is the Far Eastern federal district, which has had four presidential representatives: Konstantin Pulikovskii (May 2000–November 2005), Kamil Iskhakov (November 2005–October 2007), O. Safonov (October 2007–April 2009), and Viktor Ishaev (April 2009–). In all the other federal districts the turnover of presidential representatives has been lower; in the Central federal district, Georgii Poltavchenko has been presidential representative since the beginning.

12. Medvedev himself formulated the commission's task as follows: “The com-

mission's chief task is to squeeze out difficult solutions, and I feel no embarrassment in saying this. Otherwise there would have been no reason to set up a commission: we have the government, with many ministries and departments that are obliged to perform their own tasks. But because we cannot cope with all our tasks and have an enormous number of routine duties weighing us all down, the commission must do precisely that kind of work” (<http://news.kremlin.ru/transcripts/5647>).

13. V. Cherkesov, “Nel'zia dopustit', chtoby voiny prevratilis' v torgovtsev,” *Kommersant*, 2007, no. 184.

14. www.levada.ru/press/2009112600.html.

15. D. Treisman, *The Popularity of Russian Presidents* (www.hse.ru/data/351/229/1237/paper-Treisman.pdf).