

Why Russia's Democracy Broke

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Why did Russia's democracy break in the early 2000s? In the 1990s, after independent Russia emerged from the Soviet Union, the country had competitive elections to Parliament and the presidency that had substantial impact on public policy. Today the results of the country's most important elections are known in advance, and genuine opposition politicians are jailed or prevented from running for office. The political system changed in the early 2000s, as the Russian government eliminated the independent political power of the country's oligarchic business elite. In the 1990s oligarchs funded Russia's political parties, providing a genuine if deeply flawed type of political competition. Russia's politics in the 1990s failed to provide for stable living standards or responsive government, however, which many people blamed on the oligarchs. Putin came to power in 2000 promising to limit oligarchs' political power. The tools he used—abusing his legal authority, centralizing control over the media, and drastically expanding the power of the security services—succeeded in limiting the oligarchs' power, but also eliminated any space for political competition.

Russian democracy collapsed not under pressure from the political extremes but rather from the elite's and the security services' frustration with political competition. Many people, in the elite and the populace more broadly, believed that centralized authority would provide for more effective governance. There was hardly any ideological support for democracy per se, and the only groups that provided real political competition—the oligarchs—were self-interested and deeply unpopular. Putin's campaign against the structures that provided for political competition was therefore broadly popular, even if the stagnation and corruption that Russia's new political system have bred are not. The contrast between post-Soviet Russia and Ukraine is instructive: Russia used its security services to crack down on its oligarchs, eliminating most political competition in the process. In Ukraine, where the security services were always weaker, oligarchs have played a major role in politics, guaranteeing that they have shaped public policy—but also guaranteeing that no single force has monopolized control over the country's politics.

Weimar Syndrome, Russian-Style?

When Yegor Gaidar, the first prime minister of independent Russia, looked back on his country's politics in the fifteen years after it emerged from the wreckage of the Soviet system, he saw little cause for optimism. Gaidar had designed President Boris Yeltsin's program to cast off Soviet-style state Socialism. While in office, he believed that Russia was building a European-style liberal democracy. A decade and a half later, long after he had been ejected from power, Russian politics was on a different trajectory. By 2006, when Gaidar published his book *Collapse of an Empire*, Russia was clearly no longer Soviet. But nor was it democratic, by any definition of the word. Russia had built a functioning, independent state, which looked very different from its Soviet predecessor. But though the country had cast off state Socialism, Russia's political elite no longer aspired to a competitive political system. Nor, it seemed, did many Russian citizens. Coming to power in 2000, President Vladimir Putin ended open political competition, consolidated control over the media, and harassed opposition voices.

Gaidar sensed this shift in Russian politics and believed he knew the malaise from which Russia suffered: Weimar syndrome. Like Weimar Germany, Gaidar argued, post-Soviet Russia suffered from postimperial nostalgia. Most Russians looked back fondly on the days of Leonid Brezhnev, a growing number showing sympathy even for Stalin. "There was a fifteen-year gap between the collapse of the German Empire and Hitler's rise to power and fifteen years between the collapse of the USSR and Russia in 2006–07," Gaidar wrote that year, sensing that this was not a coincidence.¹ "Few remember," he continued, "that the imperial state regalia and symbols were restored in Germany eight years after the empire's collapse, in 1926, and in Russia, after nine years, in 2000. Not many more know that an important Nazi economic promise was to restore the bank deposits lost by the German middle class during the hyperinflation of 1922–1923," mirroring the false promises made by many Russian politicians.²

Gaidar was far from alone in sensing an impending Weimar-style authoritarian shift. Many Russian intellectuals, from journalist Yevgenia Albats to academics Irina Starodubrovskaya and Vladimir Mau, drew similar comparisons.³ Foreign observers also asked whether Russia was headed along a similar path. Academic journals in the 1990s were full of debate about similarities between pre-Nazi Germany and post-Communist Russia.⁴

¹ Yegor Gaidar, *Collapse of an Empire* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2007), xiii.

² Gaidar, *Collapse of an Empire*, xv.

³ Yevgenia Albats, "Bureaucrats and the Russian Transition: The Politics of Accommodation, 1991–2003" (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2004), 41, 68; Vladimir Mau and Irina Starodubrovskaya, *Challenge of Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 306–322.

⁴ Stephen Shenfield, "The Weimar/Russia Comparison," *Post Soviet Affairs* 14, no. 4 (1998): 355–368; Stephen E. Hanson and Jeffrey S. Kopstein, "The Weimar/Russia Comparison," *Post-Soviet*

Economists noted that both 1990s Russia and 1920s Germany experienced devastating hyperinflation that not only destroyed household savings but also undermined the popularity of democratic politics.⁵ Political scientists pointed out that both Weimar Germany and 1990s Russia had fragmented political parties, weak institutions, and large numbers of people who lamented the collapse of their countries' empires.

What is "Weimar syndrome"? In the 1990s, analysts who feared that Russia faced a Weimar-style slide into authoritarianism pointed toward the large chunk of votes received by overtly nationalist politicians. In 1993, the lead vote-winner in parliamentary elections was a party led by Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, a flamboyant, anti-Semitic populist who advocated extending Russian rule to the boundaries of the old Soviet state—and even beyond. Zhirinovskiy lamented the "zionization" of Europe and foresaw that "Islam—whether yellow or black—is rolling over Christian Europe."⁶ He saw only one solution: "Russia can be saved only with an authoritarian regime."⁷ "What is needed is a strict, centralized authority."⁸ Zhirinovskiy's party won the largest share of votes in the 1993 Duma elections, sparking fears that he would bring to power the authoritarian methods he thought necessary to govern Russia.

Zhirinovskiy remains a fixture on the Russian political scene today, but he was outmaneuvered in the mid-1990s by Communist Party leader Gennady Zyuganov, who rebranded Communism by melding it with Russian nationalism, religious conservatism, and reinvigorated sympathy for Stalin. "Two basic values lie at the foundation of the Russian idea," Communist leader Zyuganov explained in the early 1990s: "Russian spirituality, which is inconceivable without an Orthodox Christian outlook and a realization of one's true purpose on Earth, and Russian statehood and great-power status."⁹ "West European-style social democracy stands no chance in Russia," Zyuganov declared on a different occasion.¹⁰

Affairs 13, no. 3 (1997): 252–283; Andrei Melville, "Weimar and Russia: Is There an Analogy?," in *Currents* (Berkeley: Institute of International Studies, University of California at Berkeley, 1994); Leonid Luks, "Weimar Russia? Notes on a Controversial Concept," *Russian Politics & Law* 46, no. 4 (2008): 47–65; Marcel H. Van Herpen, *Putinism: The Slow Rise of a Radical Right Regime in Russia* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Alexander Yanov, *Weimar Russia and What We Can Do about It* (New York: Slovo-Word, 1995).

⁵ Neil Ferguson and Brigitte Granville, "Weimar on the Volga," *Journal of Economic History* 60, no. 4 (2000): 1061–1087.

⁶ Andreas Umland, "The Fascist Threat in Post-Soviet Russia," NATO, 57–59, accessed October 13, 2023, <https://www.nato.int/acad/fellow/96-98/umland.pdf>.

⁷ Umland, "The Fascist Threat in Post-Soviet Russia," 60.

⁸ Jacob W. Kipp, "The Zhirinovskiy Threat," *Foreign Affairs* 73, no. 3 (1994): 77.

⁹ Stuart J. Kaufman, "The Russian Problem," *Journal of Conflict Studies* 16, no. 2 (1996): 8.

¹⁰ James P. Gallagher, "Communist Gennady Zyuganov Makes U.S. Nervous," *Chicago Tribune*, April 18, 1996, <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-1996-04-18-9604180081-story.html>.

He was not wrong. Against Russia's right-wing Communists and the openly fascist Liberal Democratic Party of Zhirinovskiy stood Boris Yeltsin, Russia's president throughout the 1990s. Unlike his two main opponents, Yeltsin vocally supported democracy in Russia. In practice, though, he was far from a flawless democrat. He inherited a deep recession, a collapse in the government's administrative capacity, and a separatist dispute in Chechnya. Yet when a clash with Parliament over the scope of presidential authority reached a stalemate in 1993, he ordered the military to shell Parliament and force fresh legislative elections.

At no point in post-Soviet Russia has civil society or the population at large played a major role in politics beyond participation in elections. There was a moment in the final years of the Soviet Union when civil society groups called *neformaly* organized in Moscow and other large cities and tried to implement politics.¹¹ But the shock of the Soviet collapse—and the social and economic upheaval that accompanied it—removed much of the impulse behind them. The post-Soviet Russian government and Parliament were barely influenced by such groups. More influential were regional elites and business managers, who had been in power during the late Soviet period and who largely remained in power in post-Soviet Russia.¹² These elites had ascended to power via a nondemocratic system and had no reason to support political competition unless they had a specific personal interest to do so. The “democratic” political coalitions that had mobilized in Moscow and St. Petersburg in the late Soviet period are better described as anti-Soviet rather than pro-democracy. When the Soviet Union collapsed, so too did these coalitions. A small share of the population—part of the intelligentsia in Moscow and other large cities, for example—remained ideologically committed to democracy as a form of politics. But most of society, and even much of the intelligentsia, had no particular attachment to democratic institutions such as free elections, independent courts, or competitive politics. A belief in the need for a strong hand, by contrast, had been promoted by the Soviet government and had deep roots in Russian political culture. The last Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, and the first Russian leader, Boris Yeltsin, were more commonly criticized for being too weak than for being too authoritarian.

When Yeltsin talked about democracy, moreover, it was never clear what he meant. Certainly Yeltsin-style democracy meant something different from the Soviet system. Returning to the Soviet era was never popular, even though Russians missed the social benefits the Soviet state provided. To Yeltsin, building democracy appeared to mean something like building a European-style society, wealthier and more “modern” than Russia's. His goal, he said, was to “jump from

¹¹ V. A. Pecheneva, ed., *Neformaly—Kto oni, kuda zovut* (Moscow: Politizdat, 1990); Carole Sigman, *Clubs Politiques et Perestroika en Russie: Subversion sans Dissidence* (Paris: Karthala, 2009).

¹² Grigorii Golosov, “Russian Political Parties and the ‘Bosses,’” *Party Politics* 3, no. 1 (1997): 5–21.

the gray, stagnant, totalitarian past into a cloudless, prosperous, and civilized future.”¹³ Because the prosperous West had elections and other democratic institutions, Russia needed them, too. Many Russians at the time believed there was a link between democracy, modernity, and prosperity. But the social instability of the 1990s in Russia discredited the idea that political competition would necessarily produce prosperity. Absent that, support for democracy per se was weak. The Soviet media and educational system had spent decades insisting that democracy was a fraud and that citizens' preferences did not matter. Russia's deeply flawed political system of the 1990s, in which average citizens were very weakly represented, appeared to many Russians to prove the Soviet critique correct.

Postimperial nostalgia, a weak party system, hyperinflation, unemployment, anti-Semitism, nationalism, and a violent struggle for executive power: the first decade of independent Russia replicated the ills of Weimar politics. It is easy to understand, therefore, why many analysts lived through the 1990s in constant anticipation of a coup, a revolution, a Reichstag fire, or a fascist electoral victory.

Yet Russian democracy did not end in a flash or a fire. It limped on for nearly a decade after Yeltsin's storming of Parliament, only to be snuffed out by the next generation of political elites. And rather than being overturned in a coup or a rebellion, Russian democracy was degraded steadily over time, via bogus court proceedings and a takeover of the media. Russian democracy did not end with the victory of nationalist parties. In elections today, Putin continues to face the nationalists of the 1990s, and he is far more popular than they, even though he presents himself as a moderate alternative. The Kremlin has used victorious wars—most notably, the annexation of Crimea in 2014—to bolster its popularity. But this nationalist shift in Kremlin politics followed rather than preceded the collapse of Russia's democracy, coming a decade after Putin consolidated power. The Russian government's use of alleged “fifth-columnists” to justify repression, a trend that intensified around the annexation of Crimea, also came well after Russia's democratic breakdown.

To understand why Russia's democracy broke, therefore, Weimar Germany provides a useful foil. Russians and foreigners in the 1990s feared that the country's democracy would be imperiled by a fascist putsch, facilitated by a far-right electoral victory, inspired by economic discontent, and justified by citing enemies at home and abroad. In fact, Russia's democracy was broken by a coalition of the center that was less ethnically nationalist than the country at large. Russian democracy broke at a time when Russia's economy was booming and when the country enjoyed relatively amiable relations with neighbors and other

¹³ Timothy Colton, *Yeltsin: A Life* (New York: Basic Books, 2008), 2.

great powers. Russia's democracy survived the "Weimar moment" of the 1990s, in other words, and broke at exactly the point that it should have consolidated.

Why did this happen? This chapter will first examine different metrics and definitions of Russian democracy, noting that even in the 1990s, Russia's political system was deeply flawed and can be considered democratic only under the loosest definition. Yet it was at least competitive, in a way it has not been since. There was a notable slump in political competition and media diversity in the early 2000s, following Putin's consolidation of power. Second, the chapter will examine three explanations of why political competition in Russia disappeared: structural hangovers from the Soviet period, the centralization of power in the 1990s under President Yeltsin, and the policies implemented by Russia's president after 2000, Putin. Third, the chapter examines the crucial years between 1999 and 2003, when Russian political competition ended and when control over the media was centralized.

Finally, the chapter will contrast Russia's experience with its neighbor Ukraine. Like Russia, Ukraine had a tumultuous and semi-democratic 1990s; like Russia, Ukrainian democracy was dominated by oligarchs and only occasionally responsive to popular demands. But in the mid-2000s, the two countries' paths diverged. Democratic competition in Russia ended during its 2003 parliamentary and 2004 presidential elections, neither of which was genuinely competitive. Ukraine's 2004 presidential election was also deeply flawed, because the first iteration of the election was rigged in favor of the incumbent's preferred successor. Yet because, unlike in Russia, the Ukrainian state had not crushed all competition, the rigged election sparked mass protests that succeeded in demanding a new, clean vote that brought the rival candidate to power. Russia's 2004 presidential election was rather different: Putin was reelected to a second term with 71% of the vote, in an election devoid of debate, substantive media coverage, or genuine competition. The end of political competition in Russia, in turn, left no check on the government's power when the Kremlin decided to begin restricting rights more broadly.

When Did Russian Democracy Break?

The structure of Russian politics is different today than it was in 2000, when Putin was first elected president. Russia's Constitution today has no provisions that are incompatible with democratic governance. The country has political parties, a variety of candidates, and elections in which the votes are usually (though not always) tallied broadly accurately.¹⁴ If you don't look closely—and

¹⁴ Notable exceptions include the 2018 Primoriye gubernatorial contest; the 2011 parliamentary election; and nearly every vote in Chechnya. See Andrew Konitzer, *Voting for Russia's Governors: Regional*

Russia's government does not encourage anyone to do so—you could mistake the formal institutions of Russian politics for those of a democracy.

If you do look closely, however, you see that political institutions don't work in the same way as do similar institutions in democratic systems. The winner of Russian presidential elections, for example, is known in advance. The country's four major political parties compete for parliamentary seats, but they almost never criticize Putin.¹⁵ The parties run candidates for president, but only with the aim of winning second place. The state-controlled media covers presidential and parliamentary elections diligently but ensures that candidates with critical ideas get no airtime. Any politician who opposes Putin and has a chance of winning a medium-size following is harassed by the legal system and prevented from competing.

In the 1990s, before the Putin era, politics worked differently. To be sure, Russia's government in the 1990s was far from a model of democracy. It was unrepresentative, unresponsive, and at times authoritarian. It had deep and enduring flaws. Its only real political party was the Communist Party, which retained Soviet-era authoritarian instincts. Legislators sold their votes to the highest bidder, while judges sold court decisions and journalists sold favorable news coverage. A small class of oligarchs played an outsized role. There were few independent organizations, whether NGOs or labor unions, to mediate between the population and the government. By many tests of democratic governance, Russia in the 1990s would have failed. Yet there is one test that it would have passed: Russian electoral politics were competitive and unpredictable—a sharp

Elections and Accountability under Yeltsin and Putin (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005); “Russian Communist Hunger Strike over ‘Rigged’ Far East vote,” BBC, September 17, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-45546006>; “‘Miraculous’ Election Win for Kremlin-Backed Candidate Causes Protests in Russia’s Far-East,” *Independent*, September 17, 2018, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/russia-election-primorsky-krai-kremlin-communist-voters-fraud-a8541006.html>; “Ищенко сообщил о подаче исков по возможным нарушениям на выборах в Приморье,” *RIA*, September 17, 2018, <https://ria.ru/20180917/1528709563.html>; “‘Голос’ сообщил о массовой фальсификации на повторных выборах главы Приморья,” *Novaya Gazeta*, December 25, 2018, <https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2018/12/25/147911-golos-soobschil-o-massovoy-falsifikatsii-na-povtornykh-vyborah-glavy-primorya>; “Сказка об украденных выборах в Приморье,” *Golos*, December 25, 2018, <https://www.golosinfo.org/ru/articles/143130>.

¹⁵ Hans Oversloot and Ruben Verheul, “Managing Democracy: Political Parties and the State in Russia,” *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics* 22, no. 3 (2006): 383–405; Neil Robinson, “Classifying Russia’s Party System: The Problem of ‘Relevance’ in a Time of Uncertainty,” *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics* 14, nos. 1–2 (1998): 159–177; Jonathan Riggs and Peter J. Schraeder, “Russia’s Political Party System as an Impediment to Democratization,” *Demokratizatsiya* 12, no. 2 (2004): 265–293; Kenneth Wilson, “Political Parties under Putin: Party-System Development and Democracy,” in *Institutions, Ideas and Leadership in Russian Politics*, ed. Julie Newton and William Tompson (London: Palgrave Macmillan), 137–158; Henry E. Hale, *Why Not Parties in Russia? Democracy, Federalism, and the State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

contrast from today's Russia, in which all important political questions are decided before elections occur. In the 1990s, the winner of elections was not known in advance, and the government often lost. I will define democracy as a form of government that includes three aspects:

- Regular, free, fair, and competitive elections.
- Broad-based participation in political processes.
- Protection of individual and minority group political rights.

By each of these metrics, Russia was at best a partial democracy in the 1990s. It is substantially less of a democracy today.

Modern Russia has had only a handful of competitive elections for Parliament or the presidency. There have been none since current President Putin and his team consolidated control. Over the past two decades, not a single Russian election could have realistically caused a turnover in power. In today's Russia, elections serve multiple political purposes. They are most important as a tool for Moscow to test the competence of local elites, who are judged in part based on voter turnout.¹⁶ What elections have not done is offer voters a real choice. Instead, voters are given a fake choice, between President Putin (or, briefly, Dmitry Medvedev) and candidates from large parties that do not seek to oust Putin (e.g., the Communists, the far-right Liberal Democrats) or from small parties that will win at most several percentage points of the vote. Genuine opposition candidates who threaten to win a sizable vote share, such as Alexei Navalny, are not allowed to run. In addition to not offering voters a real choice, Kremlin-backed candidates have access to state resources to support their campaigns, while opposition candidates are all but barred from TV.

Russian elections were not always so stale. The vote that brought Yeltsin to power in 1991 was a surprise victory against the establishment candidate, Nikolai Ryzhkov.¹⁷ The 1996 presidential election, in which Yeltsin faced Communist candidate Gennady Zyuganov, surprised everyone—Yeltsin included—when Yeltsin won reelection. True, these elections were marred by widespread allegations of illegal campaign tactics, notably of businesses and oligarchs violating campaign finance laws and buying votes. Yet the votes were probably counted roughly accurately, and in providing voters a clear, policy-relevant choice between Yeltsin and Zyuganov, the election passed a low bar of basic

¹⁶ Stephen Holmes and Ivan Krastev, "An Autopsy of Managed Democracy," *Journal of Democracy* 23, no. 3 (July 2012): 33–45.

¹⁷ Stephen White, Ian McAllister, and Olga Kryshantovskaya, "El'tsin and His Voters: Popular Support in the 1991 Russian Presidential Elections and After," *Europe-Asia Studies* 46, no. 2 (1994): 285–303.; Viktor Sheinis, "August 1991: A Pyrrhic Victory," *Russian Politics & Law* 45, no. 5 (2007): 6–25.

democratic practice.¹⁸ In Russia's 1996 presidential election, for example, voters were given a choice, crude though it was, between retaining Yeltsin and his advocacy of private property or opting for the Communist Zyuganov, who promised to roll back capitalism.¹⁹ The result was unpredictable and had meaningful ramifications for government policy.²⁰ By contrast, Russia's most recent presidential vote, in 2018, had no policy ramifications, and candidates made no effort to stake out positions different from Putin's, especially on issues that mattered. In the 1990s, in other words, Russia had a deeply flawed political system, with limited popular participation in governance, few independent institutions, yet nevertheless competitive and unpredictable elections. Today's Russia has all the flaws of the 1990s, but it has dispensed with the competition.

Three Explanations of Why Russia's Democracy Failed

Why did Russia abandon electoral competition? Scholars have put forth three major explanations. The first focuses on structural forces that delegitimized democracy, reducing Russians' willingness to defend it and increasing the number of people who saw no value in democracy. As Russia first abandoned Soviet authoritarianism in the early 1990s and forged new political institutions, multiple factors delegitimized competitive politics. First, the period of democratization was also a period of deep economic crisis, marked by social dislocation and falling living standards.²¹ Though this crisis was mostly a holdover from the final years of the Soviet Union, the population blamed economic pain on the new political system. In addition, the emergence of competitive politics coincided with a collapse in central state capacity and a rise in the influence of mafias and oligarchs. The Russian public blamed this shift, too, on the country's new democratic institutions. Finally, democratization in the late 1980s and early 1990s

¹⁸ David S. Mason and Svetlana Sidorenko-Stephenson, "Public Opinion and the 1996 Elections in Russia: Nostalgic and Statist, Yet Pro-Market and Pro-Yeltsin," *Slavic Review* 56, no. 4 (1997): 698–717; Mikhail Myagkov, Peter Ordeshook, and Alexander Sobyenin, "The Russian Electorate, 1991–1996," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 13, no. 2 (1997): 134–166; Erik Depoy, "Boris Yeltsin and the 1996 Russian Presidential Election," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 26, no. 4 (1996): 1140–1164; Michael McFaul, *Russia's 1996 Presidential Election: The End of Polarized Politics* (Stanford: Hoover Press, 1997); Daniel Treisman, "Why Yeltsin Won," *Foreign Affairs* 75, no. 5 (September 1996): 64–77; Yitzhak Brudny, "In Pursuit of the Russian Presidency: Why and How Yeltsin Won the 1996 Presidential Election," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 30, no. 3 (1997): 255–275.

¹⁹ Andrew Wilson's discussion of "virtual politics"—a common post-Soviet situation where voters are given fake choices—does not wholly apply to Russian politics in the 1990s, where at key moments such as the 1993 and 1996 elections voters were given real choices between far-right nationalists, Communists, and capitalist candidates; see Andrew Wilson, *Virtual Politics: Faking Democracy in the Post-Soviet World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005).

²⁰ Michael McFaul, "Russia's 1996 Presidential Election," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 12, no. 4 (1996): 344.

²¹ Peter Reddaway and Dmitri Glinksi, *The Tragedy of Russia's Reforms: Market Bolshevism against Democracy* (Washington, DC: U.S. Institute of Peace, 2001).

coincided with the collapse of the Soviet/Russian Empire, causing nationalistically inclined Russians to associate democracy with geopolitical weakness. All these factors reduced the popularity of democracy.

A second explanation for the failure of Russia's democracy focuses on the decisions of Russia's first president, Yeltsin. Some scholars argue that Russia's competitive politics would have been preserved if only Yeltsin's instincts were more democratic. For example, at a moment of constitutional crisis in 1993, Yeltsin ordered the military to storm Parliament and pushed through a new constitution by force, which set a precedent for resolving constitutional disputes violently and which substantially expanded presidential power. Second, during the 1996 presidential election, Yeltsin relied on illegal donations from oligarchs to fund his reelection campaign. Had Yeltsin not centralized power in 1993, and had he run a cleaner campaign in 1996 (a campaign that might have resulted in his defeat), many scholars argue, Russia would have entered the 2000s with a tradition of rotating presidential power via elections and with a stronger Parliament that would have been able to check executive branch excesses.²²

A third explanation focuses on the decision and policies of Yeltsin's successor, Putin. Even if the circumstances of Russia's democratization in the early 1990s were not favorable for developing deep democratic roots, and even if Yeltsin was a mediocre steward of the country's democratic institutions, Russia could have retained competitive electoral politics were it not for a slow-motion coup under President Putin. Upon becoming president, Putin centralized authority by extralegal means, accumulating far more power than Yeltsin ever had. He began by taking down news outlets owned by oligarchs who criticized him, such as Boris Berezovsky and Vladimir Gusinsky, exiling both oligarchs on trumped-up charges.²³ Then Putin jailed oligarch Mikhail Khodorkovsky, again on bogus charges, sending a message that unauthorized political action would be punished.²⁴ Yeltsin's main rivals were elected to Parliament; Putin's, by contrast, were jailed.

Putin had the power to take these steps because he mobilized security service networks in government and in the business world, drawing on his background in the KGB.²⁵ The number of current and former security services personnel in top Russian government positions increased markedly in Putin's early years.²⁶

²² For an argument that a strong presidency and weak Parliament facilitated the decline of democracy, see, e.g., Steven Fish, *Democracy Derailed in Russia: The Failure of Open Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2005).

²³ See, e.g., Peter Baker and Susan Glasser, *Kremlin Rising: Vladimir Putin's Russia and the End of Revolution* (New York: Scribner, 2005).

²⁴ For an overview, see Chris Miller, *Putinomics: Power and Money in Resurgent Russia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018), chs. 2–3.

²⁵ Nikolai Petrov, "The Security Dimension of the Federal Reforms," in *The Dynamics of Russian Politics*, ed. Peter Reddaway and Robert Ortung (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 2:7–32.

²⁶ Olga Khryshchanovskaya and Stephen White, "Putin's Militocracy," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 19, no. 4 (2003): 289–306.

With the support of the security services, Putin defanged the media and ended electoral competition. Yeltsin's allies lost every parliamentary election they contested during his presidential term. Putin's party, by contrast, won majorities in every parliamentary vote.

Contrasting Russia's 1999 and 2003 Parliamentary Elections

How do we know that the Soviet legacy, the economic collapse, and Yeltsin's centralization of power were not the key factors in undermining Russian democracy? One reason is that the last parliamentary election of Yeltsin's time in office was the cleanest and most competitive that independent Russia ever had. The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) has monitored each of independent Russia's presidential and parliamentary elections, studying whether the media environment was fair, incumbents and challengers had a level playing field, and votes were counted accurately. The OSCE monitors described the 1999 parliamentary elections—the last elections before Putin took power—as “a benchmark in the [Russian] Federation's advancement toward representative democracy.”²⁷ The subsequent parliamentary vote, in 2003, was assessed rather differently by OSCE monitors: votes were counted accurately, but “the election failed to meet a number of OSCE commitments for democratic elections, most notably those pertaining to: unimpeded access to the media on a non-discriminatory basis, a clear separation between the State and political parties, and guarantees to enable political parties to compete on the basis of equal treatment.”²⁸

This difference in electoral quality was visible in election results. Voters responded to a lack of competition in 2003 by voting “against all”—or by not voting at all. Turnout was lower in 2003, at 55%, compared to 61% in 1999.²⁹ In 2003, 4.7% of voters chose “against all,” compared to 3.3% in 1999.³⁰ The biggest change, however, was the distribution of parliamentary seats. In 1999, given real competition, the opposition Communist Party won the largest vote share, with 24% of the vote by party list.³¹ The Fatherland–All Russia Party, led by Yeltsin's rival Yevgeny Primakov, won 13%. Parties that were sympathetic to Yeltsin,

²⁷ Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, “Russian Federation: Elections to the State Duma 19 December 1999 Final Report,” Warsaw, OSCE, 2000, 3.

²⁸ Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, “Russian Federation: Elections to the State Duma 7 December 2003,” Warsaw, OSCE, 2004, 3.

²⁹ OSCE, “Elections to the State Duma 19 December 1999,” 26; OSCE, “Elections to the State Duma 7 December 2003,” 23.

³⁰ OSCE, “Elections to the State Duma 19 December 1999,” 26; OSCE, “Elections to the State Duma 7 December 2003,” 24.

³¹ OSCE, “Elections to the State Duma 19 December 1999,” 26.

including Unity and the Union of Rightist Forces, won 23% and 8%, respectively. Per Russian electoral law, half of parliamentary seats were distributed by party-list and half by single-mandate districts. In the districts, many candidates ran as independents, so neither the opposition nor the pro-presidential parties had a majority in Parliament. Yet the opposition held the largest bloc, and with 40% of seats had a strong voice in parliamentary affairs.³²

The results of the 2003 vote were quite different. A new party—United Russia—was created with the aim of backing President Putin. It won 37% of the party-list vote, and thanks to strong performance in single-mandate districts won a total of 223 seats in the Duma—nearly a majority. Opposition parties were crushed. The Communists lost over half their seats, declining from 113 to 52. Liberal parties were all but ejected from Parliament, with the right-liberal Union of Right Forces winning only 3 seats, down from 29, and the left-liberal Yabloko winning 4, down from 20. A new political party, Rodina, was created by Putin allies to attract voters who previously supported the Communists.³³ It won 36 seats, enough to give pro-Kremlin parties a decisive majority.³⁴

What explains the difference between the 1999 and 2003 parliamentary vote in Russia? One explanation might be the country's strong economic performance in the early 2000s or approval of Putin's policies in Chechnya and his efforts to centralize power. Putin was genuinely popular in the early 2000s, but the electoral success of his allies relied on more than presidential charisma. Some of the irregularities noted by OSCE observers in 2003 were visible in previous parliamentary votes. For example, both the 1999 and 2003 elections were criticized by OSCE monitors for failing to meet international best standards in polling and counting, but this does not appear to have significantly affected either set of results.³⁵

Yet the 2003 parliamentary election was far more biased in favor of pro-presidential parties than previous votes had been, a bias which made real competition impossible. The media was significantly more centralized in 2003. To be sure, the 1999 parliamentary election included biased and tendentious media coverage, which was shaped by the oligarchs who owned the country's national TV channels. The OSCE described the 1999 TV environment as a "media war," noting that TV station ORT, influenced by oligarch Boris Berezovsky, had coverage highly favorable to the pro-government party Unity, while "TVcentre showed obvious support for [Yeltsin's rival] Yuri Luzhkov."³⁶

³² This 40% figure counts the Communists and Fatherland—Our Russia as opposition.

³³ Tom Parfitt, "Racist Russian TV Advert Investigated," *Guardian*, November 10, 2005, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2005/nov/10/russia.tomparfitt>.

³⁴ OSCE, "Elections to the State Duma 7 December 2003," 24.

³⁵ OSCE, "Elections to the State Duma 7 December 2003," 20–23; OSCE, "Elections to the State Duma 19 December 1999," 20–25.

³⁶ OSCE, "Elections to the State Duma 19 December 1999," 16.

The 2003 parliamentary election was also structured by undemocratic media practice—but unlike in 1999, which saw oligarchs competing via their control of TV stations, in 2003 all the TV stations parroted the government line, a line that was established in a centralized fashion, via meetings in the Kremlin.³⁷ There were no competing points of view. “Throughout the campaign,” OSCE monitors reported, “the majority of media coverage was devoted to reports on the activities of President Putin. . . . Most media coverage was characterized by an overwhelming tendency of the State media to exhibit a clear bias in favour of [pro-government] United Russia and against the [opposition] CPRF [Communist Party of the Russian Federation].”³⁸ Private broadcasters were more balanced, but this could not balance out the pro-government bias on state channels. The OSCE reported:

First Channel provided 19 per cent of its political and election news coverage to United Russia, all positive or neutral; the CPRF received 13 per cent of mostly negative coverage. *TV Russia* devoted 16 per cent of its prime time news to United Russia, with an overwhelmingly positive tone; in contrast, while the CPRF received a comparable amount of time, the tone of its coverage was mainly negative. *TV Centre*, a television controlled by the Moscow City administration, allocated 22 per cent of its prime time news coverage to United Russia, with an overwhelmingly positive slant, while the CPRF received 14 per cent of mainly negative coverage. State-funded broadcasters also produced a number of prime time news items discrediting the CPRF.³⁹

The government's control of media coverage in the 2003 parliamentary vote encouraged even more aggressive media control during the 2004 presidential election, during which the OSCE observed that “state-controlled media comprehensively failed to meet its legal obligation to provide equal treatment to all candidates, displaying clear favouritism toward Mr. Putin.”⁴⁰ Russian government control of the media has only tightened since.

³⁷ Vasily Gatov, “How the Kremlin and the Media Ended Up in Bed Together,” *Moscow Times*, March 11, 2015, <https://themoscowtimes.com/articles/how-the-kremlin-and-the-media-ended-up-in-bed-together-44663>; Maria Lipman, “Media Manipulation and Political Control in Russia,” Chatham House, January 2009 <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/public/Research/Russia%20and%20Eurasia/300109lipman.pdf>.

³⁸ OSCE, “Elections to the State Duma 7 December 2003,” 15–16.

³⁹ OSCE, “Elections to the State Duma 7 December 2003,” 16.

⁴⁰ Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, “Russian Federation: Presidential Election 14 March 2004,” Warsaw, OSCE, 2004, 15.

The End of Political Competition

How was Putin's government able to consolidate control over the media and the electoral process and thereby end political competition? There was no coup, no crisis, no substantial change in legislation. The key change in Russian politics between 1999 and 2003 was Putin's assault on the oligarchs who had played a dominant and disruptive role in Russia. To do so, Putin turned to the security services to pressure the oligarchs, sending several into exile and jailing Russia's richest man. Those who remained got the message: they were not to participate in politics, nor to disagree with anything Putin did. Without the oligarchs, there were no remaining political forces who could contest elections, fund political parties, support media outlets—or compete with Putin.

On July 28, 2000, Putin held a meeting with twenty-one oligarchs in the Kremlin's Ekaterinsky Hall. "No clan, no oligarch, should come close to regional or federal authorities," he declared. "They should be kept equally far from politics."⁴¹ "I don't really like the world 'oligarch,'" he explained. "An oligarch is a person with stolen money, who continues to plunder the national wealth using his special access to bodies of power and administration. I am doing everything to make sure this situation never repeats in Russia."⁴² Yet not all the oligarchs listened. Putin decided to send a message.

The first oligarch to fall was Vladimir Gusinsky. Just months after Putin took power, Gusinsky, a banker turned media magnate, was arrested. Gusinsky was later released on the condition that he sell NTV, his television station that had been critical of Putin, and leave Russia. He promptly complied. Four months later, a second oligarch was attacked. Boris Berezovsky, whose businesses spanned automobiles to airlines, announced while traveling abroad that he would not return to Russia, fearing that the government would press charges against him, too. The exile of Gusinsky and Berezovsky was a devastating blow for Russian media, as these two oligarchs had each invested heavily in newspapers and TV stations. True, these media outlets usually parroted their owners' opinions, but they at least provided a point of view different from the government's.⁴³

Not all oligarchs got the message from the exile of Gusinsky and Berezovsky. "These people who fuse power and capital: there will be no oligarchs of this kind as a class," Putin threatened, alluding to Stalin's campaign of eliminating kulaks—rich peasants—as a class. Many thousands were killed in Stalin's

⁴¹ Thane Gustafson, *Wheel of Fortune* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2017), 292, translation adjusted; cf. Maura Reynolds, "Putin Reaches Out to Oligarchs," *Los Angeles Times*, July 29, 2000, <http://articles.latimes.com/2000/jul/29/news/mn-61087>.

⁴² Richard Sakwa, *Putin: Russia's Choice* (London: Routledge, 2007), 149.

⁴³ "Under Yeltsin, we 'oligarchs' helped stop Russia from reverting to its old, repressive ways," Berezovsky bragged; see Boris Berezovsky, "Our Reverse Revolution," *Washington Post*, October 16, 2000.

anti-kulak campaign. Putin wanted the oligarchs to understand: he was tough too. “The state has a club, the kind that you only need to use once: over the head,” Putin explained. “We haven’t used the club yet. But when we get seriously angry, we will use this club without hesitation.”⁴⁴ Russia’s richest man, banking and oil magnate Mikhail Khodorkovsky, was uniquely unwilling to play by the new rules. Khodorkovsky remained involved in politics, buying the support of Duma members and even getting his firm’s executives elected to the Duma.⁴⁵ One legislator in Khodorkovsky’s pay once made a speech on the floor of the Duma with a cell phone pressed to his ear, reciting words fed to him by Khodorkovsky’s staff.⁴⁶ On top of this, Khodorkovsky meddled in Russian foreign policy, opening talks to build an oil pipeline to China, in direct contradiction of the government’s wishes.⁴⁷ And he accused Putin’s ally Sergei Bogdanchikov, the chair of the state-owned oil firm Rosneft, of corruption.⁴⁸

In 2000, Putin allowed Gusinsky and Berezovsky to leave Russia and live in exile (though Berezovsky died under suspicious circumstances in 2013). Yet Khodorkovsky refused to submit, aiming to play a major role in the 2003 parliamentary vote, and—many suspected—planning to run for president himself in 2004.⁴⁹ The threat of exile was not enough, so Putin opted for tougher measures. When Khodorkovsky’s private jet landed to refuel in the Siberian city of Novosibirsk on October 25, 2003, it was surrounded by troops from the FSB’s Alfa Brigade, the country’s most elite security force. Khodorkovsky was thrown in jail. His business was seized and resold to one of Putin’s allies at a knockdown price. Khodorkovsky himself spent a decade behind bars.

How was Putin able to take down the oligarchs? Above all, by drawing on security services networks and strengthening their role in Russian politics. The means Putin used to trap opposing oligarchs, including trumped-up legal cases and arrests by elite special forces personnel, were facilitated by his KGB background. It let him mobilize the security services in a way that Yeltsin, for example, could not.

Putin appointed a slew of current and former security services personnel to top positions.⁵⁰ Of the seven officials initially appointed to head federal districts, for

⁴⁴ Miller, *Putinomics*, 1.

⁴⁵ Gustafson, *Wheel of Fortune*, 295.

⁴⁶ Gustafson, *Wheel of Fortune*, 295.

⁴⁷ Gustafson, *Wheel of Fortune*, 290–291.

⁴⁸ Gustafson, *Wheel of Fortune*, 286, 290–292.

⁴⁹ Seth Midans and Erin A. Arvedlund, “Police in Russia Seize Oil Tycoon,” *New York Times*, October 26, 2003, <https://www.nytimes.com/2003/10/26/world/police-in-russia-seize-oil-tycoon.html>; Alex Rodriguez, “Push into Politics Cited for Russian Tycoon’s Fall,” *Chicago Tribune*, November 16, 2003, <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-2003-11-16-0311160141-story.html>; Richard Sakwa, *Putin and the Oligarch: The Khodorkovsky-Yukos Affair* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2014).

⁵⁰ The subsequent paragraphs draw on Miller, *Putinomics*, ch. 2.

example, two were KGB officers, two were army generals, and one was a police general. Only two of the seven were said to be civilians, and even one of these was alleged to have KGB ties.⁵¹ Chief federal inspectors in each region were drawn from the ranks of the security services.⁵² Putin solidified his personal control over the security services, naming Sergey Ivanov as defense minister and Boris Gryzlov as interior minister. Meanwhile, Mikhail Fradkov was put in charge of the tax police. Both Ivanov and Fradkov are believed to have a background in the KGB, while Gryzlov was a St. Petersburg politician and a former classmate of FSB director Nikolai Patrushev.⁵³ The security forces increasingly answered to Putin personally.⁵⁴

The expansion of Russia's security services in politics that occurred during the early 2000s was not inevitable. Putin's predecessor as Yeltsin's prime minister, Sergey Kiriyenko, had no deep security services ties.⁵⁵ When Kiriyenko tried to confront gas company Gazprom over its nonpayment of taxes in 1998, the firm's leader asked, "Who do you think you are? . . . You're just a little boy."⁵⁶ The Gazprom boss faced no punishment. By contrast, the only three oligarchs who dared to treat Putin in such a way met very different fates: Gusinsky was exiled, Khodorkovsky was jailed, and Berezovsky was exiled and possibly murdered. To pressure the oligarchs, Putin used a full range of tools—legal pressure, media criticism, police raids, and the threat of assassination—to ensure that they stayed out of politics. By the 2003 parliamentary elections, all those who remained in Russia understood the message. As the oligarchs withdrew from politics, however, they were not replaced by civil society, independent media, or real political parties. They were replaced by centrally controlled media and fabricated political parties, all puppets of the Kremlin.

Why Ukraine and Russia Diverged

The end of political competition between 1999 and 2003 was the goal of the anti-oligarch campaign. Many Russians celebrated the demise of the independent

⁵¹ Masha Gessen, *The Man Without a Face: The Unlikely Rise of Vladimir Putin* (London: Penguin Random House), 181.

⁵² Petrov, "The Security Dimension of the Federal Reforms," 7–8.

⁵³ Petrov, "The Security Dimension of the Federal Reforms," 7–8; Miriam Elder, "Fradkov Named Foreign Spymaster," *Moscow Times*, October 8, 2007, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/archive/fradkov-named-foreign-spymaster>; see also Andrei Soldatov and Irina Borogan, *The New Nobility: The Restoration of Russia's Security State and the Enduring Legacy of the KGB* (New York: Public Affairs, 2011).

⁵⁴ This paragraph draws on Miller, *Putinomies*, ch. 2.

⁵⁵ Kiriyenko's grandfather, however, had been an agent. Victor Yasmann, "Russia: Sergei Kiriyenko—Russia's 'Kinder Surprise,'" RFE/RL, February 15, 2006, <https://www.rferl.org/a/1065790.html>.

⁵⁶ Andrei Shleifer and Daniel Treisman, *Without a Map* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), 153.

political influence of the country's corrupt and self-interested oligarchs. Though some of the oligarchs had real business acumen, many had bribed and stolen their way to wealth and influence. But in their pursuit of self-interest, they provided electoral competition which Russia's political system has since lacked. In the 1990s, anti-Yeltsin political parties relied on oligarchs and businesses for financing and logistical support. After the defeat of the oligarchs, Russia's government did not become more responsive to popular demands. Civil society and labor groups, which never played a major role in post-Soviet politics, did not fill the gap. The media did not become more objective or more constructive. The defeat of the oligarchs did not make space for democracy; it ended political competition. Indeed, this was the goal: Russian elites—and not only those in the security services—believed that politics in the 1990s had been too tumultuous. The solution, they believed, was more centralization and less competition, which they thought would provide better governance.

The quality of Russian governance did improve during the 2000s, and the economy grew rapidly. Economic growth was caused in part by rising oil prices, in part by the recovery after the country's 1998 financial crisis, and in part by better administration. Governance improvements were the result largely of projects begun in the late 1990s, as technocrats reshaped the post-Soviet administrative structure, adapting it to a new society and new economy. One positive effect of the defeat of the oligarchs was an increase in tax revenue, as the government managed to extract more tax from energy companies in the 2000s.⁵⁷ Yet in the medium term, Russia's government tax take is probably lower today than it would be if Russia were a democracy. Russians have no means of demanding higher-quality public services, which polls suggest they would like and which competitive elections might have made possible. And to speak of the "defeat" of the oligarchs is only partially correct: they were tamed politically, but in economic terms they are as dominant as ever. They can still break laws, and often do—but only when the president backs them, which he often does. The defeat of the oligarchs did not, in other words, cause an evident improvement in the quality of governance.

A second argument made in favor of Putin's crackdown on the oligarchs is that oligarch-driven political competition offered no benefits over the uncompetitive system that Russia has today. There is little doubt that a political system based on oligarchic competition is far from optimal. It is perhaps the worst type of competition. But the divergent experiences of Ukraine and Russia after 2000 suggest that the worst type of competition is better than no competition at all.

The structural argument for Russia's democratic failure—the economic collapse, the weak institutions, the postimperial syndrome—at first glance appears to be a powerful explanation of why Russian democracy broke. It is difficult to

⁵⁷ See Miller, *Putinomics*, chs. 2–3.

imagine a less auspicious environment for solidifying a nascent democratic system. Yet many of Russia's neighbors faced a similar array of challenges, and not all ended up with a political system as autocratic as Russia's. The post-Soviet country that began its independence in a position most like Russia's is Ukraine. True, thanks in part to energy riches, Russia always was and remains significantly wealthier than Ukraine.⁵⁸ By most other metrics, however, the two countries looked similar in 1991. In both countries, roughly 70% of the population lived in cities. The two countries had similar tertiary-school enrollment rates (45% in Ukraine versus 49% in Russia) and similar life expectancies (sixty-nine and sixty-seven, respectively).⁵⁹ Both are multiethnic countries, and Ukraine is to a large extent bilingual. Both countries saw political mobilization and fracturing along ethnic, linguistic, and regional lines. Both faced recurring disputes over borders and competing demands for centralization and autonomy. Neither country had a clearly defined and universally accepted sense of political community.⁶⁰

Both Russia and Ukraine had contested, unpredictable, and substantive elections during the 1990s. Control of the presidency and Parliament was decided by elections. Parties represented different political ideologies, interest groups, and regions. Opposition parties often defeated incumbents, as in 1994 in Ukraine, when President Leonid Kravchuk was unseated by Leonid Kuchma, and in Russia, where opponents of President Yeltsin repeatedly won majorities in Parliament. Results were often unpredictable, as in Russia's 1996 presidential election, when Yeltsin surprised most analysts by defeating Zyuganov. In both Russia and Ukraine during the 1990s, opposing political forces sought power via the electoral system, and voters could express preferences about policy regarding economics and identity by voting for rival parties.

Russia and Ukraine also shared many similar problems in their democracies in the 1990s. In both countries, media outlets such as TV stations and newspapers were controlled by competing oligarchs, with few quality or objective sources of information.⁶¹ In both countries, a small group of oligarchs played an outsized role in the political process. They stole funds, they bought members

⁵⁸ International Monetary Fund, "IMF DataMapper," accessed January 23, 2019, <https://www.imf.org/external/datamapper/NGDPDPC@WEO/UKR/RUS>.

⁵⁹ World Bank Group, "Data Bank World Development Indicators," accessed January 23, 2019, <https://databank.worldbank.org/data/reports.aspx?source=2&country=RUS>.

⁶⁰ The only post-Soviet country that comes as close to Ukraine in its similarity to Russia is Belarus—a country which today is governed as autocratically as Russia. Yet to understand why Russia's democracy broke, comparison with Belarus is less insightful than comparison with Ukraine, for a simple reason: Belarus never had democracy. Only two and a half years separated the collapse of the Soviet Union from the establishment of an autocratic government under Aleksandr Lukashenko, the dictator who rules Belarus to this day. In 1992 and 1993, before Lukashenko consolidated power, the country's government was de facto controlled by the old Soviet-era regime, which had no interest in democracy and did everything possible to prevent it from emerging.

⁶¹ Laura Belin, "The Russian Media in the 1990s," *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics* 18, no. 1 (2002): 139–160; Olena Nikolayenko, "Press Freedom during the 1994 and 1999

of Parliament, and they corrupted the media. Yet Russia's crackdown on the oligarchs—and Ukraine's lack of a crackdown—demonstrates that oligarchs were the main force for political competition in both countries.

Russia was not the only post-Soviet country in the early 2000s in which the ruling elite tried to squash electoral competition. In Ukraine's 2004 presidential election, outgoing president Leonid Kuchma backed candidate Viktor Yanukovich, who was supported by the oligarchs Rinat Akhmetov and Viktor Medvedchuk.⁶² Behind in the polls, Yanukovich and his backers tried to rig the electoral process, blatantly changing the vote count in certain regions. Yet unlike in Russia, where the population accepted the end of electoral competition in the 2000s, the Ukrainian population did not. The middle classes of Kyiv and other cities took to the streets demanding a new vote, free of manipulation. The protests could not have succeeded without the anger of the Ukrainian population, their persistence in mobilizing, or their bravery in confronting the government despite the risk that it would crack down violently. Yet the protests for a clean election in 2004—which came to be known as the Orange Revolution—succeeded only because Ukraine's oligarchs and regional elites were also divided.

Consider, first, the political coalition that backed the orange candidate, Viktor Yushchenko. Yushchenko himself was a technocratic former head of the country's central bank. He made a name for himself by pushing economic and governance reforms and was supported by many small and medium-size businesses.⁶³ Yet key to Yushchenko's coalition was a political party leader named Yuliya Tymoshenko, who had come to prominence in a partnership with politician and oligarch Pavel Lazarenko, who played a major role in Ukraine's gas sector, from which he is reported to have stolen huge sums.⁶⁴ Tymoshenko would play a major role in Ukraine's deeply corrupt energy sector over the subsequent decade.⁶⁵ Yushchenko's political coalition, in other words, depended on oligarchic support. Had Ukraine's government pushed the oligarchs out of politics, as had Russia's, Yushchenko could not have succeeded in challenging a candidate backed by an incumbent president.

Ukraine's media landscape was also different in 2004 than Russia's. As in pre-crackdown Russia, Ukraine's TV channels were largely owned by oligarchs, who

Presidential Elections in Ukraine: A Reverse Wave?" *Europe-Asia Studies* 56, no. 5 (2004): 661–686; Natalya Ryabinska, "The Media Market and Media Ownership in Post-Communist Ukraine," *Problems of Post-Communism* 58, no. 6 (2011): 3–20.

⁶² Anders Aslund, *How Ukraine Became a Market Economy and Democracy* (Washington, DC: Peterson Institute for International Economics, 2009), 181.

⁶³ Anders Aslund, "The Economic Policy of Ukraine after the Orange Revolution," *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 46, no. 5 (2005): 327–353.

⁶⁴ Aslund, *How Ukraine Became a Market Economy and Democracy*, 94–97.

⁶⁵ M. E. Sharpe, *The Challenge of Integration* (New York: East West Institute, 1998).

shaped news coverage in their personal interest. In Ukraine's 2004 vote, most of the oligarchs who owned TV stations supported Yanukovich, creating a relatively uniform media landscape. Yet unlike in Russia, where the media was purged following the exile of the media barons, Ukraine's TV stations still included journalists with a diverse array of political views. As it became clear that Yanukovich had stolen the election, journalists on Ukrainian TV stations openly revolted. On one prominent station, 1 + 1, "the entire news team of producers, reporters, and editors walked out, forcing the station's news director and government loyalist Vyacheslav Pikhovshek to hold multi-hour talk marathons by himself."⁶⁶ Such moves kept the opposition from the airwaves—but made it impossible for pro-Yanukovich forces to pretend that the country was unified behind him.

The competing forces in Ukrainian politics made it easier for Yushchenko to negotiate with his opponents for a new election to replace the one that Yanukovich had rigged. One of Yushchenko's strategies was to peel off parts of Yanukovich's oligarchic coalition by promising oligarchs that their interests would be respected under a Yushchenko presidency.⁶⁷ Yushchenko was able to make commitments that interlocutors found credible because the competitive nature of Ukraine's political system meant that no election was winner-take-all. Yushchenko would be constrained by a disparate coalition, by regional governments that he would not control, security services that were themselves politically divided, and by a fractious Parliament.⁶⁸ There were many different parties and factions in Parliament, with membership amorphous and parliamentarians often selling votes to the oligarch willing to pay the most that day.⁶⁹ An optimal democracy this was not—but nor was it a system conducive to consolidating authoritarian power. When, a decade and several election cycles later, Yanukovich won the presidency and tried to create a more authoritarian system, he was ousted after the Maidan protests in 2014—again by a coalition of Kyiv's middle classes and self-interested oligarchs. Yanukovich cycled in and out of power, despite his best efforts at establishing an authoritarian regime. Putin, by contrast, has proven impossible to dislodge.

Had Ukraine's government pushed its oligarchs out of politics in the early 2000s, stealing the 2004 election would have been far easier. In Russia, potentially popular opposition candidates such as Yushchenko are often barred from

⁶⁶ Adrian Karatnycky, "Ukraine's Orange Revolution," in *Crisis in Ukraine*, ed. Gideon Rose (New York: Foreign Affairs, 2014).

⁶⁷ Taras Kuzio, "Ukrainian Economic Policy after the Orange Revolution," *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 46, no. 5 (2005): 359.

⁶⁸ On political divisions in the security services and among regional governments, see Andrew Wilson, *Ukraine's Orange Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 135.

⁶⁹ Aslund, "The Economic Policy of Ukraine after the Orange Revolution," 340.

running for office on trumped-up charges. Had Russia not cracked down on the political role of its oligarchs, the 2003 parliamentary election and the 2004 presidential vote would almost certainly have been more competitive. One of the reasons Putin is said to have decided to arrest Khodorkovsky in 2003 is that the oligarch planned to play a role in the parliamentary vote and was considering running against Putin in the 2004 presidential race.⁷⁰

“Consolidating Society” versus Consolidating Democracy

The argument that Russia lost electoral competition because the country's oligarchs were pushed out of politics is not a comfortable conclusion for those who believe that oligarchy is an antidemocratic form of governance. Putin himself claimed that his crackdown on the oligarchs was a move to bolster Russian democracy, and in the early 2000s many genuine democrats agreed with him. They feared a Weimar-style putsch, a victory of the far right, or a return of the Communists, this time in authoritarian-nationalist garb. Many observers, Russian and foreign, saw a “red-brown” coalition between fascists and Communists as the key threat to Russian democracy in the 1990s and early 2000s. Did Weimar Germany not face similar divisions, both the Nazis and the Communists attacking the center-left and center-right, degrading not only the popularity of those parties but popular faith in democracy itself? Surely the lesson of Weimar was that the centrist parties needed more backbone and more authority in the face of antidemocratic opponents? When oligarchs attacked the political center—often using illegal means to do so—surely a forceful response to their meddling was needed to uphold democracy against its opponents? Surely the center needed to be bolstered against the fascist and Communist-authoritarian parties that threatened the political center in the 1990s? What better way of limiting their influence than by cutting off their ability to raise funds from oligarchs?

The oligarchs were certainly an easy target. In the 1990s, Russian politics had been dominated by oligarchs and failed to provide for popular well-being. Many people's living standards fell. The quality of public services declined. The collapse of the Soviet system upended society, but the new system of the 1990s, in which oligarchs and mafias played a large role, hardly seemed more just. Russia needed a strong hand to discipline the oligarchs, reestablish state authority, and reorient government toward the public interest, many Russians believed. In his final years in office, Yeltsin had spoken of the need for leaders who were “democratic

⁷⁰ Sergei Guriev and Andrei Rachinsky, “The Role of Oligarchs in Russian Capitalism,” *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 19, no. 1 (2005): 131–150.

and innovative yet steadfast in the military manner.”⁷¹ When he selected Putin as his successor, Yeltsin predicted that Putin would have the skills needed for “consolidating society”—which meant something different from consolidating democracy.⁷²

Coming to power in the early 2000s, Putin promised stronger central authority that would better provide for the public interest. The promise of consolidating society underpinned the crackdown on the oligarchs, which everyone knew was made possible not by the rule of law but by force mobilized by Putin and his security services allies. For a moment in the early 2000s, it seemed plausible that the newly empowered government might prove more responsive to public interests. But its method of centralizing power, destroying the media, bending the courts to its will, and ending political competition eliminated the institutions by which the public can force governments to address their concerns.

It is possible to imagine a different method of limiting the oligarchs’ power that could have bolstered rather than degraded democracy in Russia. Such a campaign would have used genuine legal cases and higher taxes rather than police raids and show trials. Yet this option was not on offer. There were no popular political parties that could have promoted or executed such a policy. Parties such as Yabloko advocated popular measures such as legal restrictions on oligarchic influence, but they never had the resources to win a large following, regularly taking less than 10% of the vote. The most powerful forces in Russian politics were not parties but oligarchs and the security services. In the 1990s, Yeltsin and the Duma had balanced these forces off each other, and they in turn provided competition between Yeltsin and his opponents. In the 2000s, Putin leaned heavily on the security services, using them to marginalize the oligarchs, and in exchange giving the security services the dominant role in politics.

In contrast to Russia, Ukraine’s oligarchs remained politically influential. In the process, they have provided funding and administrative support to different political parties, guaranteeing electoral competition of a sort. At key moments when Ukraine was on the verge of sliding into single-party authoritarianism, as in 2004 and 2013, competing oligarchs provided support for street protests and opposition parties, without which these popular movements would likely have failed. Ukraine’s political system, despite flaws, is far more competitive than Russia’s. Russia, by contrast, has marginalized its oligarchs but sunk into authoritarian rule that might continue for the remainder of Putin’s life. In the early 2000s, Russia and Ukraine faced a similar, unappealing choice: unchecked oligarchs or unchecked central authority. It is better to have no oligarchs in politics. But it is worse to have only one.

⁷¹ Colton, *Yeltsin*, 431.

⁷² Colton, *Yeltsin*, 432.