Late 2004 - 2005 is a year of civic activism revival in Russia after a long sleeping period. It was the Kremlin, which unintentionally or even contrary to its intentions did wake up this “sleeping beauty”. The whole avalanche of events can be mentioned in this regard starting from large-scale social protest caused by a bunch of reforms initiated by the Kremlin, rising activism of youth organizations of different kinds both Kremlin-backed and opposition ones, pro-Kremlin Civic Forum in Perm’ and alternative Civic Congress in Moscow, different Kremlin’s moves aimed at taking control over the civil society, the popular referendum, etc. All of a sudden even tightening of the Center’s control and growing authoritarianism at the federal level, which let the Freedom House to downgrade Russia to ‘non-free country’ status, resulted in weakening of governors’ monopoly in regions and in growth of competitiveness of politics there.

There are three major sources, three constituent parts in civil society: 1) Russian authorities, the Kremlin itself; 2) the West represented by different foundations and other institutions; 3) Russian society itself, grass roots civic activism. The Kremlin together with the ghost of ‘an orange revolution’ influenced decisively all of them.

Kremlin’s national projects

Demonstrative attention of authorities toward the civil society in Russia is of the same age as concept of managed democracy, pronounced by the Kremlin after Putin came to power.

Back in the fall of 1993, the Kremlin decided to thin the ranks of Russia's parties and established new rules for elections. The goal was achieved, and the parties that did not participate in the next round of elections quickly retreated from the political scene. Then, after a few more electoral cycles, the remaining parties suffered a similar fate. Now, with help from a new law on political parties, the Justice Ministry and the Kremlin's financial levers can easily be used to control political parties completely. There is just one small problem: Political parties in their current pitiful state cannot seem to control voters or public opinion. Much of Russia's political life has gradually shifted from its political parties to networks of nongovernmental organizations.

---

1 Being badly designed and badly implemented at the beginning (before being stopped later) they include first of all monetization reform, municipal reform, and communal reform. One could add post-Beslan political reform including the new system of governors’ appointments, which caused unrest in a number of regions.
Now, the Kremlin would like to get the NGOs under its thumb, too. After a long period of observation and after taking a few preliminary steps in the form of public forums, it has finally moved to a more active approach to the issue. It’s not by chance perhaps that this comes along with establishing its full control over political space in a form of laws on political parties and on elections.

In part to address the issues noted in the speech, the Council for Fostering the Development of Civil Society was discussed and finally founded in November 2004. Later, after the Beslan attacks, officials announced that they would initiate an alternative project, the Public Chamber.

In its current form, the recently created chamber resembles a strange mix of the "nongovernmental organizations" component of the Soviet Union's Congress of People's Deputies and the presidential council that existed under President Boris Yeltsin.

The chamber's functions are far from clear, and the way deputies are selected is only as democratic as the ruling regime at the moment. One-third of the deputies are chosen personally by the president, much like a presidential advisory council, and only then does this handpicked third establish how the second, federal third and the last, regional third of the chamber's deputies will be selected.

Regardless of how minor a role the Public Chamber actually winds up playing in Russian politics, setting up the chamber and choosing its deputies may present serious problems for the Kremlin. On the one hand, the chamber should be made up of authoritative people who are not directly connected to the state. On the other hand, the authorities would certainly like to avoid any vocal political protest movements emerging inside the chamber, which is precisely what happened with Yeltsin's council.

According to the law on the Public Chamber, which came into effect July 1, 2005 the president should form the chamber's avant-garde – initial 42 members, which in turn should provide another 42 federal and 42 regional members coming. While we may have to wait for a while before the president announces who the first 40 deputies to the federal Public Chamber will be, regional public chambers are already fully operational across Russia.

The public chamber boom hit the regions after the 2004 state-of-the-nation address. Chambers were set up in the Ryazan, Orel, Kostroma, Tver, Novosibirsk and Orenburg regions. Several other regions are currently in the process of setting up their own chambers, and public chambers have even appeared in some cities. At the municipal level, by the way, they tend to be livelier, as they spring up one by one and not as part of a broader campaign. With very few exceptions, the public chambers established by governors resemble expanded versions of the committees that oversaw party activities at Soviet enterprises, with representatives of NGOs thrown in for good measure.

Take, for example, the Orel region's public chamber, which was founded last year. The law establishing the institution describes it as made up of "representatives of artist unions; nongovernmental veterans', women's, student, charity and sport associations; organizations representing the disabled, victims of Chernobyl and Cossacks; as well as any other groups or structures that can act to transmit federal and regional laws to the public." When the chair of a regional chess organization, who found out from journalists that he had been appointed to the

---

2 The Council, which met with the president for the first time on July 20, 2005, and the Public Chamber are considered as competing projects led by different Kremlin’s officials: Dmitry Medvedev in first case and Vladislav Surkov in second. How do they relate to each other is not defined yet.
Orel chamber presidium, was asked why he had wound up there, he thought for a moment and replied that it was probably because the governor really loved chess.

The Kremlin seems to have made a big mistake regarding the Public Chamber. The problem is not that NGO leaders are often less obedient than politicians, or that NGOs have looser leadership structures than parties. The problem is that though public chambers could play a significant role in Russia's political development, this role can only be a brief and limited one, be it positive or negative.

Importantly, they cannot replace the parliament, no matter what some might wish. When the parliament is strong, an institution like the Public Chamber is not necessary. When the parliament is weak, the chamber is not capable of accomplishing anything. Yet it is possible that the most important thing is not the chamber itself, but the permanent process of setting it up, as its makeup will be reviewed every two years.

For NGOs, public chambers could prove to be both a blessing and a curse. On the one hand, public chambers could increase the transparency of some aspects of Russian political life and could bring new and respected people into politics. On the other hand, it could serve to discredit various people and organizations and open them up to muckraking, mudslinging, provoked splits and organization cloning of the kind frequently used in parliaments across Russia.

Much like King Midas, the Kremlin drains the life out of all that it touches, turning it not into gold, unfortunately, but into dust. Let's hope that Russia's young NGOs will successfully escape its deadly embrace.

**The election reform**

The second election reform under President Vladimir Putin has been completed by mid-2005 including the new law on electing State Duma deputies and a set of amendments to a long list of laws related to elections. The essence of this reform is to distance citizens from real participation in the electoral process and, more broadly, from any kind of governmental decision-making. It will further reduce the amount of the feedback the authorities get from the people, and it will lead to the further centralization of the political system.

The first set of reforms a few years ago brought about the wholesale revision of election legislation in order to increase the Kremlin's control over the electoral process. Now, the authorities have changed more than procedure. They have dismantled whole sections of the electoral system. The public no longer elects governors or -- in the majority of instances -- mayors, and there are no more single-mandate districts for the Duma.

A party now has to win at least 7 percent to make it into the Duma, and parties cannot form electoral blocs. Along with last year's changes to the law on political parties -- which raised the minimum number of members to 50,000 and requires parties to have organizations in at least half of the country's regions -- this change will allow the authorities to disqualify almost any political party on completely legal grounds. It has also become nearly impossible to hold a referendum, unless the government supports it.

The institution of election observers has suffered a particular heavy blow. Now, only observers from the parties participating in an election are allowed to watch the polls. Independent

---

3 This is of vital importance for regional elections first of all, where electoral blocs of very exotic composition sometimes were major opponents of the party of power. Acting separately each opposition party there is most of all too weak to compete for a reasonable share of seats in legislative assemblies.
observers are not allowed at all. The Kremlin learned its lesson from recent color revolutions and has tightened its control over elections at all levels, when it does not get rid of them altogether.

The so-called technical improvements the authorities are making to the electoral system fall into two categories. First, the Kremlin is making it easier to disqualify undesirable candidates and parties using biased courts and election commissions beholden to the center. An example of this is the increasingly strict approach to the signatures needed to register a candidate. This was one of the ways the authorities got rid of candidates in the past, but now it has become even easier. Second, the Kremlin is trying to get rid of all ways that voters can have a direct effect on elections, whether it is voting with their feet and staying away from the polls or voting "against all." It is merely a matter of time before they eliminate the "against all" option, but even now, though it will still appear on ballots, it no longer functions as it once did.

There are three main myths surrounding election reform. The first is that this reform has a direct connection to the troublesome presidential election in 2008 and that reform will kick in immediately before. The next myth is that election reform will increase the Kremlin's control over political life and make democracy more manageable. Finally, the third myth is that the Kremlin is flexible and will adjust its plans as it goes, including possibly restoring certain democratic elements that had previously been eliminated.

Yet election reform will have an immediate effect, not only on gubernatorial and mayoral elections and on referendums, all of which have been practically outlawed, but also on the seemingly distant State Duma elections coming up in 2007. The elimination of single-mandate districts will radically shift the loyalties of current deputies who are hoping for re-election in these districts. They will not depend on their governor or constituents to get a Duma seat. They depend on the Kremlin. Refusing to allow smaller parties to form blocs is also a profoundly significant move. These blocs did very well against United Russia in regional legislative elections.

One would think that managed democracy had thus become even more manageable and even less democratic. The Kremlin seems to think that elections are only good for the opposition and that the fewer options available on the ballot, the better. Undoubtedly, democracy is not perfect, and direct election, as one of its most important institutions, is no exception. However, Winston Churchill’s famous assertion that democracy was still better than anything humanity has managed to come up with applies not just to humanity in general, but also to the leaders in the Kremlin. They have done more than block all the possibilities for opposition members to take part in government decision-making. They have also plugged up all the outlets for the public to let off steam. The Kremlin is turning the political system into a pressure cooker. At the same time, the authorities continue to dismantle the last traces of the system that protects the public from the corrupt and incompetent. They keep turning up the heat underneath the cooker by instituting badly planned and badly executed reforms with unpredictable consequences.

The re-democratization myth springs from a recent statement by the president that it may be appropriate to adjust the system of appointing regional leaders by allowing the parties that won regional legislative elections to nominate candidates for governor. The president also called for broader rights for Duma factions.

These elements of so-called political liberalism that the president included in his annual state of the nation address are made utterly pointless by the election reform on one hand, and on the other, without election reform they would not have been brought up by Putin. In other words, first the Kremlin will build a fence keeping undesirables out of the Duma and regional
legislatures, and only then will the government volunteer to expand the rights of those who are already on the inside.

This would all be rather amusing, if it were not so terribly dangerous.

The only basis of the whole political regime construction and thus of the political stability at the moment is not institutions but the president and his high approval rating. It is a matter of life and death that the authorities increase the flexibility and stability of the political system by decentralizing and re-federalizing it. The government needs to re-establish communication with the public and break the giant monolith of the power vertical into three flexibly connected "power horizontals" at the federal, regional and local levels. The Kremlin also needs to open Russia's legislatures to the political opposition at all levels in order to send the energy of social protest flowing into parliamentary channels. It needs to shore up the democratic institutions that have been undermined by five years of the Putin regime. These institutions include the representative branch of government and the electoral process. Otherwise, the risk that the political system will collapse completely will become too great.

However, the Kremlin continues to roll mindlessly in precisely the opposite direction. Russia's leaders keep throwing up new barriers barring opposition parties from the Duma. They have turned the elections that remain into a farce.

**Governors: appointing vs electing**

With "managed democracy" on the rise, the authorities are not so concerned about election results as they are about presenting a facade of decorum. This, however, becomes more problematic as elections increasingly become an instrument for legitimizing a choice that has already been made behind the scenes, rather than offering voters a real choice; as a consequence of which, voters are losing interest in elections.

The Kremlin intervened little in this last round of gubernatorial elections -- it had better things to do. Incumbent governors also had less opportunity to manipulate local election commissions. You'd think this would be cause for celebration -- democracy in action and all that -- but in fact there is little reason to cheer.

The problem lies in the new regional leaders themselves. In the absence of an established opposition, we have seen the rise of random parvenus eager to test their luck at the polls. The real story of these elections was not, for example, that the new Altai governor Mikhail Yevdokimov benefitted from a slick, well orchestrated campaign, but that in race after race there were no real politicians capable of mounting a serious challenge. As a result a retired colonel general is governor in Ryazan, a dairy magnate prevailed in Arkhangelsk and a stand-up comedian triumphed in Barnaul. Is this a process of depoliticization or deprofessionalization? Whatever the case, we know what comes next from Krylov's fables: "You've got trouble when the baker starts stitching boots and the cobbler's baking pies."

In a dozen or so regions of Russia, the governor has emerged from the ranks of the siloviki. The March election continued this trend. In Ryazan, a retired colonel general of the airborne forces defeated a retired colonel from the GRU. A prosecutor supported by the siloviki took 40 percent of the vote and nearly won the day in the Koryaksky autonomous district by making full use of the powerful law enforcement machine.

These regional elections compel us to recognize that the stabilization of Russia under President Vladimir Putin has triggered a process of political desertification in the regions and the absence
of real public political competition. This new aspect of managed democracy involves not so much intervention in the electoral process or pressuring voters as the voters' fundamental lack of choice. Voter turnout remains healthy, and in regions where there is at least a hint of drama, turnout can be quite high. Sixty-nine percent of voters cast their ballots in the second round of the election in the Koryaksky autonomous district, for example.

The protest vote is also on the rise. In the republic of Udmurtia and the Arkhangelsk, Voronezh and Kaluga regions some 15 percent of voters cast their ballot for "none of the above." In Krasnodar, Kaluga and Murmansk, "none of the above" actually came in second. This strong showing can only be partially explained as a protest against the compulsion to vote for a gubernatorial candidate when voters really only wanted to vote for president. At base it represents a protest against the problem of "elections without choices."

In a way, the current situation recalls the non-election of regional Communist Party committee secretaries in the first relatively free elections held in 1989. Back then the Kremlin chose to interpret the outcome as a vote of no confidence in individual regional leaders, not in the system as a whole. Time will tell if the Kremlin has learned from its mistakes.

Since the beginning of the year, 32 regional leaders have been reconfirmed or fired by Putin. This is more than a third of Russia's regions. Only eight leaders have been dismissed, which is to say, one out of every four -- fewer than the number who were not reelected in the past. Only eight governors have been reappointed in a way that corresponded in full to the process stipulated by law, when a list of alternative candidates in addition to the current head is drawn up and publicly announced.

Everywhere else, governors went directly to the president and asked to be reappointed one or sometimes two years before their terms were up. Their requests were always granted.

Despite what many were expecting, the number of leaders who take the initiative and go to the president has grown over time. On one hand, this means that there is very little conflict in the process, yet on the other, it means less public accountability and transparency than was possible even under the original appointment scheme.

The president has reappointed everyone who has asked to be reappointed. This means that regional leaders have only to earn the right to ask for presidential approval. A certain kind of ritual has evolved, in which a governor first ties to get a positive signal from the president, usually by meeting with him personally.

The conditions under which this occurs are shrouded in mystery, as are the names of the gatekeepers who open the pearly gates to presidential approval. This service, some insiders have estimated, may cost as much as several tens of millions of dollars, which can be paid off gradually, in return for key lucrative posts for the gatekeepers' close associates in the region. Then the governor brings his request for reappointment to the Kremlin in person.

No one has been turned down yet, though one governor was told to withdraw his request as the Kremlin purportedly was too busy to consider it in a timely fashion. And no one knows exactly how much this cost the petitioner morally and materially, but he was soon reconfirmed.

For now, this enlightened feudalism has had its problems, but only for certain individuals. These problems have never threatened to undermine the system as a whole.

Nonetheless, it is not hard to imagine that the less transparent and efficient the appointment process becomes, the closer it will bring Russia to political crisis.
Managed democracy and civil society

Elections serve a role of stimuli and at the same time a test. In December 2003 and March 2004 Russia passed through parliamentary and presidential elections. Being the first in conditions of Putin’s political stabilization, they were the nation-wide test of “the managed democracy” model, which was publicly proclaimed by Russian president’s assistants. Last elections shed additional light on both “management of democracy” by authorities and reaction of the society onto this management. It was the Kremlin’s play with Civic Forum after the previous electoral cycle and the new one — with public chambers etc. after the most recent one.

Let’s formulate several theses regarding the managed democracy in elections:

1. The managed democracy (MD) built in Putin’s Russia is a complex echeloned system, which makes it possible for authorities to avoid control of the society while keeping the vision of democratic procedures. It’s possible to speak about triple control system including control over actors, over institutions and over rules of the game. The basic elements of Putin’s MD are: (1) strong presidential system of state management along with weakening of all other institutions including both houses of the parliament, judiciary, business, and regional elites; (2) state control over media, which is used to measure out information in doses, to shape the public opinion, and to govern it; (3) control over elections, which turns them from being power of people tool toward a mean of legitimization of decisions made by elites;

2. Weakened institutions no more can fulfil functions within the system in full and are being replaced by substitutes, which are absolutely controlled by the president and do not have independent legitimacy. Resulting reductionist system being too mechanical is avoided of 1) flexibility with regard to changing environment; and 2) capability for self-development.

3. MD in elections is the most technically refined and considered ingredient of the MD. It includes the electoral system with a number of mines put there; forbiddingly high thresholds for participation and the possibility to select/define candidates; mechanisms of control over keeping to the rules, of tracing violations and of operative reacting represented by election commissions controlled by the Center, by law enforcement agencies and by courts – all in one hand.

4. As the MD in elections is followed by the MD after elections, which is the key to understand the electoral MD effectiveness, its purpose is to prevent from negative results rather than to provide positive ones – just to cut off unaffordable options if any. To illustrate this pint one can take gubernatorial elections, where the victory for the Kremlin is not necessarily connected with one particular candidate backed by the Kremlin. Its strategy can be not linear and more flexible, avoiding different options except perhaps one or two particular ones. Thus,

4 As Peter Rutland points it out, ‘Voloshin [the chief of staff] was the architect of a system of “managed democracy”, which meant that the formalities of electoral democracy would be respected while the Kremlin made use of its “administrative resources” to ensure loyal cooperation from elected officials” (Rutland, 2004). For more about the managed democracy as understood by the Kremlin see Markov, 2004.
5 The book «Popular Choice and Managed Democracy» published recently by Timothy Colton and Michael McFaul was based on materials of the previous electoral cycle.
6 When replacing institutes by substitutes Putin didn’t leave them any space for maneuver, any freedom of action; thus nodes of this system are connected in a very rigid way.
7 They are: gathering of signatures and checking them; candidates’ reporting on their profits and property; the volume and technicalities of a campaign financing; rules of agitation. There is a side-show in Petrodvorets in Saint Petersburg outskirts, where children are running at a paved place. A stream of water/fountain can appear anytime under any of bricks and nobody knows when and where. There is unnoticeable old man who knows, sitting aside and switching on this or that fountain time to time. Something similar is going on with mines mentioned: the rules are established in such a way, that each candidate violates them here and there. Authorities turn a blind eye toward these violations until certain moment, but anytime they are ready to punish disagreeable candidate absolutely legally. It’s about selective use of law, thus.
experts when making conclusions based on pre-MD logics like “win-loose” game, can make a mistake.

5. Negative selection by Putin generally speaking is cheaper than the positive one (it’s cheaper for the one who manages, not for the society), although more damaging because it eliminates the competition as such instead of providing artificial benefits in competitive.

6. Technical-procedural side of elections and their meaning/role connected with the importance of elective offices and the influence of elections over further development of a country go together. In Russia’s case the gap between the two is increasing, which makes elections far more vulnerable of general political development than of procedural improvements.

7. In conditions of more or less free voting, which do exist in a lot of regions, elections look as a balanced system with all elements being interconnected. A kind of a “law of conservation” (or the second Newton law?) acts in conditions of democratic procedures and institutions, which were relatively well developed during last decade. According to it managing democracy causes side effects negative for authorities. With regard to elections they are: growing protest feelings and actions in a form of absentheism, negativism, and voting for protest forces.

8. The basic MD contradiction is the contradiction between predetermined results of elections and keeping their democratic decorum is insoluble. It makes the MD unstable, and its transformation toward either management or democracy inevitable. In other words, to improve MD model, which showed its insufficient efficiency, authorities need to add either manageability or democracy.

9. Managing democracy from the single center being almost no differentiated by regions causes rather different reaction there, which can lead to desirable consequences in some cases and to undesirable in others. Thus, there is another serious contradiction of the MD – the one between undivided authority and rigid centralism in management and varying reaction in the society, which differs a lot along regional, “urban-rural”, by status, ethnic, and other lines.

10. There is functional contradiction in an electoral MD model, which results from the fact that elite – the subject of management is split onto federal and regional as well as along departmental lines. There are pronounced conflicts of interests between different elite fragments with each fragment being interested in demonstrating its loyalty and effectiveness rather than in getting common result. Besides the fact that federal elite is much stronger now including ‘siloviki’ (the ‘men of force’) in regions, who represent its interests, regional elite efforts appear and overacting of the whole MD system becomes inevitable.

11. 2003-2004 Russian elections, the first federal ones to be held in conditions of built MD model, give a general impression about its general outlook and a way of operation. However, its potential capabilities were not demonstrated in full because the situation in common was rather favorable for the party of power and didn’t force to use all levers and technological possibilities, built into the MD construction. The general result of the test can be summarized as follows: the MD model worked well although it didn’t look well.

12. The MD all the time has been tested/tried in different elections and it is capable for self-adjustment, self-perfection. The feedback mechanism works, which possesses to get information about how campaign is going on and to react if needed in operative way. The MD model can be adjusted and modified during a campaign as well.
13. MD doesn’t reproduce itself. It needs thus manual management, constant intervention from outside. Combining disadvantages of both command and democratic systems it needs huge and complicated overseeing bloc. Otherwise there is strong temptation of medium-level elite to overmanage elections and to misuse existing opportunities in its own favor.