

# CHAPTER 1

## REGIME CHANGES IN RUSSIA

### THE ROAD OF DISILLUSIONMENT

**AUGUST 22, 1991, WAS** a genuine holiday, when crowds of happy people occupied central squares in Moscow, Leningrad, and some other major Russian cities. Sometimes even those who were barely acquainted or had never met wholeheartedly congratulated each other. They celebrated the ultimate failure of the coup organized by certain conservative Communist leaders of the Soviet government and the victory of the new political actors led by the popularly elected president Boris Yeltsin and the Russian parliament, who had defended the ideals of freedom and democracy. At the time, this event was merely perceived as a successful completion of the democratization process launched in 1985 by Mikhail Gorbachev. Yet coup organizers were imprisoned, the authoritarian regime was broken down, the ruling Communist Party, which had monopolized political power over seven decades, was eliminated, many key figures of the past disappeared from the political scene—in other words, the previous political order completely faded away, seemingly paving the way toward political freedom.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, Francis Fukuyama’s highly popular argument about “the end of history” and the coming worldwide triumph of democracy<sup>2</sup> could be vividly illustrated by the numerous images of festivities in Moscow streets.

However, more than two decades later, during the winter of 2011–2012, some of the passionate supporters of political freedoms who had sincerely celebrated the end of Communism in August 1991, as well as their children or even grandchildren, have been forced to attend new rallies in Moscow over and over again, bearing the banners of fair elections and raising their voices against arbitrary authoritarian rule by the Russian authorities. During these two decades, Russia not only failed to approach democratic standards, but moved away from the ideals that had seemed so attractive and had almost been achieved in August 1991. Without looking into a crystal ball, only a few



witnesses of the Communist collapse could predict this shift of trajectory in Russia's political development. After a series of rapid and turbulent changes in the 1990s, and some element of shallow stabilization in the 2000s, Russian politics in the early 2010s was far from both a Soviet-type political order and from democratic political solutions. Not only did the economic system completely change over two decades, and state and nation building diverge from that of the Soviet empire, but even the available freedoms exhibited a distinctive pattern: Russian citizens enjoyed a wide array of individual freedoms against the background of a somewhat limited (and, of late, shrinking) set of civic freedoms, while the degree of political freedoms was reduced to almost nothing (although they did not disappear completely, remaining merely on paper). The list of troubling features of Russian politics in the 2010s included unfair and fraudulent elections, the coexistence of weak and impotent political parties with a dominant "party of power" (which was also weak and impotent), heavily censored (and often self-censored) media, rubber-stamping legislatures at the national and subnational levels, politically subordinated and shamelessly biased courts, arbitrary use of state economic powers, and widespread corruption. These assessments resonate with numerous critical evaluations of Russia's politics and governance by domestic and international agencies and experts:<sup>3</sup> despite the huge variety of their analytical frameworks and the use of diverse methodologies, techniques, and approaches, almost everybody agrees that the political regime in present-day Russia is genuinely nondemocratic (although for various reasons some observers, until very recently, hesitated to label it "authoritarian"). Similar statements are even more loudly expressed in both the international and Russian media, as well as in public discussions in Russia, which became more active, open, and heated during the wave of mass protests in 2011–2012 but then grew quieter during the Russian annexation of Crimea and the rising confrontation with the West over Ukraine in 2014.

A simple comparison between public expectations in Moscow's streets in August 1991 and Russia's political development over the following two decades (which was far from meeting these expectations, to put it mildly) provides grounds for discussing several critical issues. The great expectations of the recent Russian past have changed to bitter disillusionment and doubts about its political present, as well as major fears and concerns about its political future. Nevertheless, one must go beyond this disillusionment and these considerations, and posit key items for the research agenda: what is the logic underlying Russia's political regime's dynamics? What went wrong with the great expectations of August 1991? Why and how have more than two decades of post-Soviet political transformations moved Russia further and further away from democracy? What are the causes of its political trajectory, and how has



this country, which was able to put an end to its authoritarian Communist regime, turned to a great “flight from freedom”? What we can expect from the current trends of Russia’s political evolution and what are the chances of the country overcoming authoritarianism and moving toward democracy and political freedoms—or, alternatively, is this developmental path closed to Russia for many years or even decades, if not forever?

I suspect that answering these questions is important not only for political observers of Russia, nor even only for Russia’s citizens and politicians, who have to respond to numerous challenges in a rather gloomy but ever-changing political and social environment. It is also important for understanding patterns of political dynamics in various states and nations from theoretical and comparative perspectives. From this viewpoint, Russia’s post-Soviet experience of transformation from a nondemocratic Communist regime to another form of authoritarianism, in a sense moving from the frying pan into the fire, is worth considering as a “crucial case”<sup>3</sup> of regime change, and its analysis might shed light on causes of the rise of a new nondemocracy despite the fall of Soviet authoritarianism. Yet as often happens in social and political science, these questions have no unidimensional and simple “correct” answer: the study of global politics presupposes the existence of different competing explanations for the same political phenomena, and I do not claim that my approach to these issues is the only possible way of explaining Russia’s political regime changes after the Soviet Union. What is presented in this book is based upon a vision of politics (I call it “realist”) that is less oriented around normative ideals and mostly related to positive analysis. I believe that for an understanding of the world of politics—in Russia and elsewhere—it is important to discuss less how things should (or even should not) go on, and more how they really are. This is the essence of the framework of analysis offered here. In this chapter, after highlighting major definitions, I outline key relevant arguments, and provide an overview of the book.

## **SETTING THE SCENE: CRITICAL JUNCTURES AND REGIME TRAJECTORIES**

Before discussing the book’s major topic—namely, regime changes in Russia—I have to set the scene: outline key terms, elaborate meanings, and clarify frameworks. Otherwise, the author is often at risk of facing misunderstandings from readers; the bitter statement that “two political scientists have three different opinions” is not always far from the truth.<sup>5</sup> Instead of offering new concepts, I try to adjust existing ones to serve as working definitions, more or less fine-tuned for purposes of this book (though other scholars might apply them in somewhat different settings and come to very

different conclusions). This exercise will save time and effort and make clear what I mean.

First and foremost, my understanding of politics as a struggle between various agents to gain, wield, and retain power is probably universal—it can be equally applied to a given country or a university department. However, Robert Dahl’s well-known concept of power (based upon his definition that “A has power over B to the extent that A can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do”)<sup>6</sup> is important in this context: not only is power a complex set of relationships based upon various means of authority (which, in turn, correspond to certain models of legitimacy), but there is also a limited set of those who participate in the struggle to take and hold power, both actual and would-be political actors. Usually, these actors represent different segments of the elite, or those who, according to John Higley and Michael Burton, “are able to affect political outcomes regularly and substantially.”<sup>7</sup> Whether members of the ruling groups or of the opposition (the counterelite), in this power game they use various resources and strategies, similarly to chess or tennis players. Actors can be both individuals and groups or organizations (e.g., political parties, companies, and even foreign governments), but they are the major (and sometimes even the only) participants in this power struggle, while the rest of society (i.e., the masses) are involved in this process on an occasional basis at best, when they are involved at all.

However, the essence of politics, the power struggle of political actors, relatively rarely looks like an endless bloody and deadly fight, or what Thomas Hobbes during the seventeenth-century English revolution famously labeled “the war of all against all” (*bellum omnium contra omnes*).<sup>8</sup> More often, similarly to competitive games, the conditions and (sometimes) outcomes of this struggle depend upon a set of formal and informal “rules of the game,” namely political institutions.<sup>9</sup> In fact, formal rules (e.g., constitutions and laws) might be very different from informal institutional arrangements, and sometimes even less important than the latter, as in the Soviet Union, which claimed its system of government to be a parliamentary republic in the 1977 Constitution, whereas in reality the Politburo, the highest body of the Communist Party, was in charge of adopting major decisions. Nevertheless, the basic meaning of institutions (both formal and informal) is straightforward: they determine the major rules of the game and the sanctions for their violation.<sup>10</sup>

From this perspective, the very notion of “political regime” is worth reconsidering, given the dozens of definitions of political regimes. Different authors use them in various contexts—from the form of governance (e.g., presidential or parliamentary regimes)<sup>11</sup> to the particular type of politics (e.g., totalitarian or authoritarian regimes).<sup>12</sup> In this book, the term “political regime” is under-



stood as the regular and substantive arrangement of actors and institutions in a given polity. Drawing parallels with competitive games, if we need to explain to someone a distinction between, say, chess and tennis, we have to make at least two major distinctions: between those who play the games and use their resources and strategies (actors), and the sets of rules of these games (institutions).<sup>13</sup> However, victory (or maximizing power) is the ultimate goal of players in all competitive games as well as of actors in all political regimes. Of course, some political regimes (just like games) change their sets of actors and rules over time. But the logic of these changes is rather different—they might be evolutionary, slowly and gradually evolving over decades or even centuries, or revolutionary, implying sudden and radical breaks over not only years or months, but even days.<sup>14</sup> Imagine a routine chess game, which consists of moving pieces on the chessboard; applying blows to the opponent's head with the chessboard instead would constitute a major change of the game's regime. A consolidated political regime is in equilibrium,<sup>15</sup> and the process of regime changes, which is based upon changes of the sets of actors, or of institutions, or (often) both, is disequilibrium by definition. In other words, the process of political regime changes is similar to a movement from one type of equilibrium to another.

Since Aristotle, typologies of political regimes have been numerous. For the purposes of this book, however, I will use the most simple (if not the most primitive) one, and divide political regimes into two categories—democracies and nondemocracies.<sup>16</sup> A democratic regime is defined here along the lines proposed by Joseph Schumpeter: “the democratic method is that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people's vote.”<sup>17</sup> This definition of democracy, regarded as “minimalist,” or “electoral,” is sometimes criticized as a wild oversimplification of the real world. Indeed, most contemporary democracies include numerous essential elements, ranging from the rule of law to observation of rights of minorities. But despite intensive discussions on whether the minimalist approach is able to capture the essence of democracy,<sup>18</sup> one should take into account the red line of major distinction between democracies and nondemocracies: even if free and fair electoral competition might be perceived as an insufficient condition for democracy, no one denies that it is a necessary condition: there is no modern democracy without electoral contestation. This basic requirement is summarized in Przeworski's notion: “democracy is a system in which parties lose elections . . . there are periodic winners and losers.”<sup>19</sup> These “periodic” shifts between winners and losers might take a long time (in Japan, the ruling party, the LDP, remained in power for thirty-eight years despite competitive elections). One might even

argue that electoral competition serves as the cornerstone for maintaining political and civil freedoms as well as political accountability of rulers, not vice versa.<sup>20</sup>

Most of the modern political regimes that do not fit the criteria for electoral democracy in one way or another will be regarded in this book as nondemocratic or authoritarian (I use these two labels interchangeably). Although scholars sometimes refer to the term “dictatorship” as a logical opposition to “democracy,”<sup>21</sup> I will try to avoid its use in this respect. In everyday life, “dictatorship” is often associated with repressions and government-induced violence, but in fact many rulers in nondemocracies rely upon carrots rather than sticks as major tools of their dominance and control over fellow citizens, and post-Soviet Russia is one such case. As to the rules of the game, the world of nondemocracies is much more diverse than the world of democracies: to paraphrase Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina*, “democracies are all alike; every nondemocracy is undemocratic in its own way.” Among authoritarian regimes, one might find traditional monarchies (such as Saudi Arabia), military dictatorships (such as Latin America in the 1960–1980s), and one-party regimes (such as the Soviet Union and present-day China).<sup>22</sup> However, there is a minimal common denominator: if democracies are based upon electoral competition, nondemocratic regimes tend to avoid or at least restrain it, although political competition might flourish in authoritarian regimes in nonelectoral forms (ranging from hidden struggles among ruling cliques to brutal and violent coups).

The maintenance of equilibrium in authoritarian regimes is an even more difficult task than in democratic ones. Authoritarian rulers have to avoid two kinds of threat simultaneously. One is the threat of disobedience by their fellow citizens, and the other is the threat of disobedience by members of the elite. In reality, both threats are critical, but their avoidance requires different skills. Dealing with citizens requires careful and well-judged use of the combination of carrot and stick vis-à-vis society at large and/or its major groups and segments. But dealing with the elite also requires building and maintaining their loyalty: it should be successfully coopted into informal “winning coalitions” among dominant actors (i.e., the core leaders of the ruling groups, or sometimes the autocrat alone) and at least some of the subordinated actors.<sup>23</sup> A balanced use of carrot and stick is essential for these actors too, and this task is daunting for many authoritarian rulers, who have to survive under both of these threats. No wonder that in many nondemocracies the distinction between “regimes” and “ruling groups” is unclear both factually and analytically, and this is why I shall sometimes treat these terms as interchangeable.

Furthermore, the instruments of achieving legitimacy in nondemocracies



are quite diverse, and this is why the role of elections in these regimes is varied, from complete lack thereof to genuine participation by various parties and candidates. If one were to place post-Communist Russia onto the world map of authoritarian political regimes, it would fit into the global category of “electoral” or “competitive” authoritarianism (further in this book, I will use these labels interchangeably).<sup>24</sup> These regimes, although authoritarian, incorporate elections that are meaningful; they stand in contrast to various “classical” or “hegemonic” versions of authoritarianism, which are best known for their “elections without choice”<sup>25</sup> (among post-Soviet countries, Turkmenistan fits this regime type most vividly).<sup>26</sup> However, in electoral (or competitive) authoritarianism, and in contrast to electoral democracies, elections are marked by an uneven playing field, based on: formal and informal rules that construct prohibitively high barriers to participation; sharply unequal access of competitors to financial and media resources; abuses of power by the state apparatus for the sake of maximizing incumbent votes irrespective of voter preferences; and (often but not always) multiple instances of electoral fraud. The uneven playing field serves as a defining distinction between electoral authoritarianism and electoral democracy.<sup>27</sup> Although electoral authoritarian regimes existed in various countries for many years (Mexico under the PRI [Partido Revolucionario Institucional] might serve as a prime example),<sup>28</sup> it became a widespread, even ubiquitous phenomenon after the Cold War in many regions of the globe including the post-Soviet area, with Russia certainly no exception in this respect.<sup>29</sup>

The recent proliferation of electoral authoritarian regimes and their replacement of “classical” versions of authoritarianism result from the effects of two different, although not mutually exclusive forces. First, the regular holding of elections under tightly controlled and limited competition allows rulers of authoritarian regimes to effectively monitor their country’s elite, the state apparatus, and the citizenry, thus averting the risk of the regime’s sudden collapse due to domestic political conflicts.<sup>30</sup> Second, authoritarian rulers across the globe often hold elections due to their need of means to legitimize the status quo regimes in the eyes of both domestic and international actors.<sup>31</sup> However, the practices of authoritarian elections are risky: although many nondemocratic regimes resolve these tasks more or less successfully, elections in and of themselves, as well as protests following unfair elections, can often become challenges to a regime’s survival, as the experience of the Arab Spring and of the color revolutions in some post-Communist states demonstrates. The variety of these outcomes raises an important question: why is it that in some countries, electoral authoritarian regimes persist for decades (as in Mexico under the PRI or in Egypt until the Arab Spring), while in other

cases this proves either to be a temporary developmental stage in the wake of democratization (e.g., Serbia),<sup>32</sup> or to result in the replacement of one electoral authoritarian regime with another (as in Ukraine before the Orange Revolution and under the rule of Viktor Yanukovych)?<sup>33</sup> An analysis of regime changes in post-Soviet Russia may shed light on the sources of strength and/or weakness of electoral authoritarian regimes.

Finally, the term “regime changes” also requires some clarification. In recent decades, the study of democratization—the process of transition from nondemocratic regimes to democracies—has become very popular among scholars.<sup>34</sup> In a broader perspective, democratization is the major (although not the only) element of political modernization, which assumes that various countries in the world pursue the transfer, adoption, copying, or invention of Western-type political institutions.<sup>35</sup> However, this process is far from universal and straightforward: sometimes, the slogans of democratization in different parts of the world serve as smokescreens for the shift from one format of authoritarian regimes to other formats of nondemocracy: this applies to post-Soviet Russia as well.

Discussions on regime change began to shift from structure to agency in the 1980s, against the background of collapse of authoritarian regimes, and this fact greatly contributed to a “prodemocratic bias” in this research field.<sup>36</sup> Many scholars preferred to concentrate mostly on “success stories” of democratization and paid less attention to other varieties of postauthoritarian transformation, to the risks of the process of regime change that lead to non-democratic outcomes. It is not surprising that in the 1990s, after the sudden collapse of many Communist regimes and the successful democratization of East European countries, actor-centered analyses of regime change to some extent resembled the paradigm of a Hollywood film. According to that paradigm, the “good guys” (prodemocratic actors) are confronted by the “bad guys” (antidemocratic actors) and the film invariably has a happy ending (the victory of the “good guys”).<sup>37</sup> Later on, when the failure of democratization in post-Soviet countries in the 2000s became apparent, this Manichean vision of regime change shifted to another movie-based paradigm, one known as *film noir*. According to this vision, post-Soviet politics is dominated only by “bad guys,” who represent the world of evil and tend to resist democracy for various reasons (mostly related to their personal preferences).<sup>38</sup> Thus, the “bad guys,” who are often able to seize and/or usurp power, are responsible for their countries’ descent into the hell of authoritarianism. But politicians in the real world are somewhat far from these movie characters, and this is why neither the paradigm of Hollywood film nor of *film noir* is always useful for explaining the process of regime change.



My understanding of the logic of political changes (including those of political regimes) is rather different from that of movies. To put it bluntly, it is useless to blame Yeltsin or Putin for being “bad guys” and ruining Russia’s democratic hopes. In fact, their personalities are not much worse than those of many democratic politicians in various countries. But democracy does not emerge simply as a result of the good intentions of “good guys,” as many people tend to believe. Rather, most politicians across the globe (including Yeltsin and Putin) are rational power maximizers and these labels are inappropriate. They are neither good nor bad guys—as we might say about most ordinary people. They simply pursue their own self-interest, which under certain conditions might be aligned with democracy or oppose it, depending upon their own perceptions, resources, and strategies in the struggle for power vis-à-vis other actors (who have similar intentions).<sup>39</sup> Undoubtedly, institutions play a major role in choosing a prodemocratic or antidemocratic side in making political choices in the process of regime change. Moreover, the same politicians can serve both prodemocratic and antidemocratic goals at different moments in this process, given the high level of uncertainty and the background of changes in the arrangement of actors and/or institutions.

In other words, during the process of regime change any major (or even minor) strategic choice made by political actors and by society at large can result in unintended consequences, and some of these might affect further directions of regime change—similarly to what often happens in chess or in arcade games. Which constitutional proposals should be chosen or rejected? To call or not to call for elections, and, if so, which electoral rules should be applied? Which candidates are worth voting for? Should one join protests against certain political and policy decisions by the authorities or abstain from these collective actions? These strategic choices, made at certain “critical junctures,”<sup>40</sup> can impose certain constraints on further trajectories of regime change in a path-dependent manner. And if once the choice leads to a dead end, then the return to a turning point becomes quite difficult, and the costs of this long and winding road can be prohibitively high. The analysis of the process of regime change in Russia offered in this book will focus on critical junctures, choices made at these turning points, and the trajectories and dead ends that resulted from them.

## **TOWARD POST-SOVIET AUTHORITARIANISM: THE ARGUMENT IN BRIEF**

My explanation of the authoritarian trajectory of Russia’s political regime after the Soviet collapse is based on the assumption that the country had no structural, cultural, or historical preconditions for becoming a nondemocracy

in the late twentieth century. Even though the background, traditions, and recent experiences of Russia were not greatly conducive to democratization, they were less problematic than those of many successfully democratized states and nations. And even the complex nature of post-Communist transformations in Russia (which included not only regime change but also simultaneously market reforms and state and nation building)<sup>41</sup> was not much different from some other countries of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. What was really different in Russia was that the struggle of political actors and their power maximization faced rather weak institutional and political constraints, and they were able to pursue their goals much more successfully than their counterparts in various parts of the globe.

Indeed, why is it that in 1993 Boris Yeltsin was able to fire on the opposition-dominated parliament with tanks, yet none of the presidents of the United States ever considered such a method of dealing with Congress during the periods of divided government? Why is it that in 2004 Vladimir Putin was able to eliminate more than three hundred hostages alongside the terrorists in the school in Beslan, North Ossetia, without serious criticism from Russia's political elite or the general population? The answer is very simple: both Yeltsin and Putin met negligible resistance to these actions, and their costs were much lower than the benefits they gained afterward. Unlike United States presidents, who would be at risk of impeachment or at least losing support among the elite and the masses if they proposed dissolving Congress, Russia's leaders were able either to ruin institutions (as happened with the Russian parliament in 1993) or rearrange them to serve their own interests<sup>42</sup> (as happened with the abolishment of popular elections of regional governors after the Beslan affair in 2004). In addition, the elite's resistance to the actions of dominant actors has been either damaged (as in the case of firing on the Russian parliament in 1993) or limited by efficient coopting (as in the case of the post-2004 gubernatorial appointments). And in both cases society at large remained largely indifferent and passive, playing virtually no role in these events. Thus, after firing on the parliament, Yeltsin was able to impose the constitution, which granted him a wide array of powers, and Putin was able to impose *de facto* presidential appointment of regional governors irrespective of popular vote, because neither other actors nor any institutions were able to prevent them from doing so. Given this lack of constraints, rational power maximizers were able to achieve their goals in "pure" forms without major concessions. Following the maxim of the historian Lord Acton ("power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely"), one can assess the nondemocratic consequences of these choices—not only in terms of corruption as such, but also in terms of the



trajectory of regime changes, which in both cases leaned further toward an authoritarian direction.

Contrary to these and other stories of unconstrained power maximization at critical junctures of regime change in Russia, almost all success stories of democratization result from the constraints imposed on would-be dominant actors (who are, in fact, rational power maximizers) by institutions, or by other actors, or sometimes even by themselves. I focus on four possible sources of these constraints: *the domestic elite conflict* as major competition for would-be dominant actors, *international influence*, *society at large*, and the *ideologies* of dominant actors. These sources in one way or another contribute to the limits of authoritarian drift of dominant actors during the process of regime change in various political and institutional settings. However, none of these sources played an important role in post-Communist Russia. All open political conflicts among the domestic elite (namely, the Communist coup of 1991, the presidential-parliamentary clash of 1993, and the “war of Yeltsin’s succession” of 1999–2000) were resolved as zero-sum games, and the winners of these conflicts had no incentives to limit maximization of their powers. International influence on Russia in terms of both linkages and leverages (identified by Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way)<sup>43</sup> was and still is relatively insignificant. The role of society at large in Russian post-Communist politics has been secondary at best, at least until very recently. And, finally, irrespective of the contents of any specific ideas, ideology as such has probably been the least meaningful factor in Russian politics since the Soviet collapse.<sup>44</sup>

One might compare the process of regime change in Russia with inefficient market building in two major respects. First, the demand side of politics, or the political preferences of the general population, was more or less latent during the two post-Soviet decades, and the elite, who did not face any serious challenges from this angle, did not have their hands tied to any meaningful extent. Popular opposition to the status quo was limited to words rather than deeds.<sup>45</sup> Even in the 1990s, when mass surveys demonstrated low public support for the existing political regime and its leaders, any alternatives to the status quo (such as tough dictatorship, return to the Soviet political order, or full-fledged democratization) were either unattractive or unrealistic to the eyes of Russian citizens. This “resigned acceptance” of the status quo regime by the masses was a kind of suboptimal equilibrium.<sup>46</sup> In the 2000s, the rapid economic growth, which contributed to a rise in the well-being of many Russian citizens, as well as the disappearance of some alternatives to the status quo, played a major role in the increase of public support for the regime.<sup>47</sup> Yet in the early 2010s the rise of public demand for change, which occurred simultaneously with the generation shift (as the first post-Soviet generation

became adolescent), resulted in the turbulent although rather shallow wave of mass protests in 2011–2012, the decrease of public support for the status quo regime, and the search for new alternatives.<sup>48</sup> More recent developments, after Russia's annexation of Crimea and the beginning of the major ultimate conflict with the West over Ukraine in 2014, reversed this tide of public mood and suppressed dissent at least for a while. However, the demand for change might become the decisive factor in Russian politics in coming years, thus affecting the further trajectory of regime change.

On the political supply side, the building of monopolies by Russia's rulers became the essence of regime change.<sup>49</sup> When the dominant political actors in Russia faced weak constraints to power maximization, they opted to guide further regime changes along the road of disillusionment toward the rise of authoritarianism. At the same time, they could not completely abandon certain democratic institutions (first and foremost, elections) not only because of the legacy of late-Soviet democratization (when these institutions emerged) but also because of the need for legitimation of their powers. Instead, they attempted to adjust these institutions to their own interests and purposes—very much in spite of Sobchak's above-mentioned understating of democracy. Boris Yeltsin was highly imperfect at carrying out this adjustment in the 1990s, against the background of the deep and protracted transformation recession of the Russian economy, the weak coercive capacity of the Russian state, the heterogeneity of informal winning coalitions, and inconsistent and controversial institution-building efforts. But his successor, Vladimir Putin, corrected a number of Yeltsin's errors in the 2000s, when impressive economic growth and the restoration of state capacity allowed him to implement successful reshuffling and strengthening of the winning coalition, and conduct major institutional changes. He effectively used elections, political parties, and the parliament as instruments of his dominance. By the end of Putin's second term in office, the political regime, which he built so carefully, consistently, coherently, and consciously, seemed to achieve a state of equilibrium. After the preservation of the status quo authoritarian regime became the major strategic goal of the ruling groups, some observers expected no further disequilibrium, and considered Putin to likely deserve as much as an A+ grade in the global college for dictators. But electoral authoritarian regimes are often vulnerable to disequilibrium from within, and this is what happened in Russia during the wave of protests in 2011–2012, when the monopolist political supply met the rise of demand for political changes. Such regimes are even more vulnerable to disequilibrium from the top, and this is what might be the case for Russia after 2014, when the leadership of the country launched a major confrontation with the West, "tightened the screws" in domestic politics,



targeting public dissent and brainwashing their fellow citizens by using lies and exploiting fears, and conducted an increasingly irresponsible economic policy. This controversy drives the current political agenda in Russia and will probably define the possibilities and conditions of the further trajectories of regime change.

## **AN ANALYSIS OF CRITICAL JUNCTURES**

To summarize, over two decades of regime changes in post-Soviet Russia, when at certain critical junctures Russia's political actors faced the choice between moving in an authoritarian or a democratic direction, they opted for the former option almost every time. Democracy was not eliminated completely from their political agenda but served as a smokescreen for the project of authoritarian regime building: rather, democratic elements were deliberately and successfully utilized for antidemocratic purposes. As a result, almost every further step in the process of regime changes in Russia since 1991 became a movement away from democracy, if not a total "flight from freedom." The logical chain of these steps became a path-dependent consequence of the previous choices made by political actors, and this regime's evolutionary trajectory over time turned into a road of disillusionment in a more straightforward and consistent way. Among these critical junctures, I focus on the following:

**1991**—the rejection of adoption of the new Constitution of Russia and of new "founding" elections; partial preservation of previous institutional arrangements in Russian politics, inherited from the Soviet period;

**1993**—a sharp conflict between the Russian president Boris Yeltsin and the Russian parliament, which resulted in violent dissolution of the parliament; the zero-sum game of the resolution of this conflict contributed to the adoption of the new Russian constitution, which granted broad unchecked powers to the president of the country and accumulated a significant authoritarian potential;

**1996**—the crucial Russian presidential elections; the incumbent Boris Yeltsin was reelected after an unfair campaign accompanied by a number of abuses; however, Yeltsin refused to implement initial plans to cancel the elections, which included the dissolution of parliament and banning some opposition parties;

**1999–2000**—the struggle of various segments of the Russian elite for political leadership on the eve of presidential turnover; Yeltsin's chosen successor, Vladimir Putin, defeated his rivals in this struggle, won the elections to become the new president of Russia, and was finally able to maximize his own power by compelling the loyalty of all significant

political, economic, and societal actors (the mechanism of “imposed consensus”);

**2003–2005**—the elimination of real and even hypothetical obstacles to monopolist dominance of the ruling group; major institutional changes, aimed at securing this political monopoly (the abolishment of elections of regional governors, changes in laws on political parties and elections, and the like);

**2007–2008**—due to the expiration of the two terms of his presidential powers, Putin picked a loyal successor, Dmitry Medvedev, to take the presidential post in the absence of serious political competition, while Putin held the post of prime minister; Medvedev then implemented constitutional amendments on extension of the terms of both the president and the parliament of Russia;

**2011–2012**—Putin initiated a “second substitution,” a job swap between himself and Medvedev, and returned to the presidency after a cycle of unfair parliamentary and presidential elections; accusations of large-scale electoral fraud provoked a wave of protests in Moscow and other Russian cities; these protests contributed to the rebirth of the prodemocratic political opposition in Russia and to the rise of mass demands for political changes;

**2014**—against the background of the ousting of Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovich, Russia annexed Crimea and initiated a bloody conflict in the southeast regions of Ukraine, claiming that it was fundamentally opposing the rise of Western influence in post-Soviet Eurasia, if not the West as the eternal and existential enemy of Russia. These major events fueled the Kremlin’s attacks on the domestic front in terms of further perversion and demolition of democratic institutions, and imposition of more strict constraints on real or imagined public discontent, as well as increasingly arbitrary decisions in policy making and militarization of the country. The consequences of this shift are (and will continue to be) unquestionably devastating for the country, but the process of deterioration is far from complete as of yet.

Why and how were these political choices made, and what are their causes and consequences? What kind of steps can be made at the next critical junctures of Russian politics and might they affect further changes in the regime’s trajectory? And, finally, to what extent will the road of disillusionment lead Russia to a dead end? Or will some alternative path of regime change toward democratization be chosen instead? These issues will be discussed in more detail in the following chapters of this book.



In my analysis of post-Communist regime changes in Russia vis-à-vis recent theoretical and comparative discussions in the field, I outline three major scholarly trends in chapter 2: “pessimists,” who perceive Russian political developments through the lens of path-dependency because of its history and culture, in the manner of genetically inherited illnesses; “optimists,” who consider Russia’s authoritarian tendencies as a partial and temporary deviation from its pathway of political modernization, similar to growing pains; and “realists,” who focus on regime changes as byproducts of power struggles, and tend to analyze authoritarian regime building as a result of political “poisoning” caused by special interests. My position is on the side of the “realists,” based on a synthesis of rational choice and historical institutionalist theoretical frameworks. I point out the major reasons that Russia made nondemocratic choices at every critical juncture of its post-Soviet political development from 1991 to 2014, and the reasons for the preservation of the current status quo political regime in the country, as well as the risks of its disequilibrium. Major crises and choices in Russian politics during critical junctures in 1991–1999 include the avoidance of major constitutional and political reforms for the sake of economic transition in 1991 (the “triple transition” issue, also known as “the dilemma of simultaneity”), the presidential-parliamentary conflict of 1993 and its aftermath, the attempt to postpone or abolish the presidential elections of 1996, and the “war of Yeltsin’s succession” of 1999. Chapter 3 explores the interests, resources, and strategies of major political actors, the political and institutional constraints they faced during this period, and the outcomes of Yeltsin’s reign in terms of regime changes in Russia.

The political consequences of authoritarian regime building under Putin are discussed in chapter 4, with attention drawn to changes in the rules of the game regarding the separation of power, center-regional relations, and electoral and party systems. The chapter examines the major incentives and strategies of the political actors, as well as the factors that contributed to the successful consolidation of electoral authoritarianism in Russia and the maintenance of its persistent yet inefficient equilibrium (known as the “institutional trap”), which was reached in the 2000s. Vladimir Putin and his entourage’s successes and failures in terms of authoritarian regime building, and what lessons students of the global college for dictators and of the global college for democratizers might learn from Russia’s experience of the 2000s, will also be considered.

The challenges of disequilibrium in Russia’s authoritarian political regime emerged after the wave of protests in 2011–2012 and have become more acute since 2014, when the aggressive turn both in foreign policy and in domestic affairs resulted in the regime’s increased vulnerability, under the influence of

numerous factors ranging from the impact of the international environment to economic troubles. Chapter 5 focuses on strategies of regime survival at any cost, and on the regime's attempts to use fear and lies as major political instruments. In such a climate, discussion of the possible paths of Russia's future political development is difficult.

The tentative conclusions and major lessons of Russia's political evolution after the Soviet collapse are explored in chapter 6. What are the differences between electoral authoritarianism in Russia and in many other countries in the post-Soviet arena and beyond, and what are its strengths and weaknesses? Why are the incentives for major political reforms still relatively weak despite rising discontent with the status quo among Russia's elite and society at large? What factors influence the possible continuity and change of current trends? What can we learn from the Russian experience to help understand political developments across the globe? To what extent are these lessons country-specific and context-bound and to what extent do they reflect a more general logic of regime change? Given the rising demand for political changes in Russia and the continuous supply of the status quo, how can the current trends toward deterioration be overcome? Finally, opportunities for the emergence of democracy, good governance, and the rule of law in Russia, and possible mechanisms of transition in this direction, are also discussed.

