# Building an Authoritarian Polity

Graeme Gill shows why post-Soviet Russia has failed to achieve the democratic outcome widely expected at the time of the fall of the Soviet Union, instead emerging as an authoritarian polity. He argues that the decisions of dominant elites have been central to the construction of an authoritarian polity, and explains how this occurred in four areas of regime-building: the relationship with the populace, the manipulation of the electoral system, the internal structure of the regime itself, and the way the political elite has been stabilized. Instead of the common "Yeltsin is a democrat, Putin an autocrat" paradigm, this book shows how Putin built upon the foundations Yeltsin had lain. It offers a new framework for the study of an authoritarian political system, and is therefore relevant not just to Russia but to many other authoritarian polities.

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*Russia in Post-Soviet Times*

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# Preface

One of the constants of political life is change. In contemporary democracies, individual politicians need to remain alert to the emergence of new issues and new political forces, to the erosion of old loyalties, and to the impact of random and unprecedented events. The politician who tries to ignore such developments is a politician who is likely to have only a short career. At the broader systemic level, the political system too must remain flexible and able to adapt to changing circumstances. Such adaptation may be a result of conscious action by leading political figures, but it may also result simply from the political dynamic of the system itself. One of the strengths of democracy has been that the system has generally been able to adapt to new circumstances, although there have been some spectacular failures in this regard, with Weimar Germany a prominent example of this.

The challenge of change applies to all types of political systems, not just the democratic. But there is a fundamental difference in the situation facing the authoritarian polity compared with the democratic. While the latter gives free rein to autonomous political activity, and therefore to the capacity of political forces other than the regime to operate independently and thereby to help shape the political system itself, one of the essential characteristics of authoritarian rule is the restriction of autonomous political activity. The rulers of authoritarian regimes seek to prevent autonomous political forces from having any influence in the political system. By confining such forces to established regime-sponsored channels of political activity, authoritarian leaders seek to isolate the effect of oppositional activity and prevent it from playing a major part in the unrolling of political life. To the extent that this sort of neutering of potential opposition forces is successful, the authoritarian regime's position is strengthened. But this also underlines the fact that the major political player in an authoritarian system is the regime (or its leading actors) itself. The principal (but not only) influence upon the way in which the political system develops in an authoritarian polity is the regime and the decisions it makes about how to respond to both real and potential

challenges. The role the regime plays in shaping the contours of the political system is therefore generally much greater in authoritarian than in democratic polities, where that role is shared with non-regime forces.

This role played by the regime means that a useful way of understanding authoritarian polities is to see them as being constantly under construction. The most successful authoritarian regimes are those where the leaders have been best able to adjust structures and processes of rule to meet the challenges that arise. What this means is that as autocrats take measures to meet challenges, those measures will, they hope, effectively continue to build the political system. Of course they may take initiatives that are not prompted by the perceived need to meet a challenge, and these too can contribute to the building of the system (although of course some initiatives may actually backfire and undermine that system). Whatever their motivation, the actions of authoritarian regimes are central to the shaping of an authoritarian polity, and this process is one that is likely to continue throughout the life of that polity. This notion of the building of the system by its rulers provides a useful perspective to the question of how to explain the longevity of some authoritarian regimes, and it is particularly useful for an explanation of why post-Soviet Russia has taken an authoritarian political trajectory. The utility of this approach is demonstrated in this book.

The argument in this book has been taking shape for more than a decade, principally in response to developments in Russia itself, but also to the way in which both at the time and now, many in the West have argued (put baldly) that Yeltsin's democracy has been displaced by Putin's autocracy. I think this is a profound misunderstanding of what has gone on and that the authoritarian trajectory widely attributed to Putin was embarked upon under Yeltsin. Certainly Putin has extended and altered some aspects of this, but the essential path was set in the 1990s. This argument came under considerable attack in various international fora in the late 1990s and early 2000s, and I want to thank those critics for forcing me to think again and to sharpen my thoughts on this question. Also important in helping me to crystallize my thoughts have been two groups within the Department of Government and International Relations at the University of Sydney. The first is the authoritarian politics research cluster. Through a number of meetings, the members of the cluster – including Minglu Chen, Ben Goldsmith, Ryan Griffiths, Justin Hastings, John Keane, Diarmuid Maguire, Lily Rahim, Jamie Reilly, Fred Teiwes, and Yelena Zabortseva – forced me to rethink some of the theory and to be clearer about what I was arguing. The second group is the Electoral Integrity Project run by Pippa Norris. Although the focus of this project is different from that of my own work, participation in the

seminars sharpened my appreciation of some issues, particularly those discussed in Chapter 3. Both groups have considerably improved this work, and for that I give them heartfelt thanks. Such thanks are also due to Yelena Zabortseva, whose diligent research assistance has contributed so much to this project, and to the Australian Research Council, who generously funded it. I would also like to acknowledge that some material in the book has already appeared in "The Stabilization of Authoritarian Rule in Russia?" in *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties* 25 (1), 2015, pp. 62–77, and in "The Decline of a Dominant Party and the Destabilization of Electoral Authoritarianism?" in *Post-Soviet Affairs* 28 (4), 2012, pp. 449–71. And finally, without the love and support of Heather, this, like everything else, would have been impossible.