Accounting for the Failure of Russia to Consolidate Democracy

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It is the thesis of this paper that due to the behaviour of the political elite, Russia has not consolidated democracy. This paper contends that the impasse to democratic-consolidation in Russia is determined by structural factors, e.g. political culture, but also by what principal political actors do. Many scholars posit that actors, *inter alia* political elites, are *sine qua non* to democratic-consolidation. They can both enable consolidation, or vice-versa, as in the case of President Vladimir Putin's Russia, they can create authoritarian regressions, undermining consolidation. Through primary research into the rhetorical/policy position of key political elites, this paper posits that elite behaviour is accountable for the failure of Russian democracy, due in part to the development of the "managed-democracy". The paper is focused on Putin's Russia, due to limited space, but also as Russia has undergone a period of economic growth, which some scholars (Lipset,1966) postulate sustains democracy. However, this is not the case in Putin's Russia. It is the hypothesis of this paper, that the lack of democratic consensus amongst the political elite is accountable for the democratic impasse in Putin's Russia. The paper will first outline the discourse on democratic-consolidation, with particular reference to approaches applicable to this paper. These approaches will then be used to explicate the factors which account for the derailment of Russian democracy. The paper will focus on the role of the Russian constitution, Putin's personality, Russian political culture and the 'managed-democracy'.

First, there is significant semantic ambiguity surrounding the meaning of democratic-consolidation. Traditionally the term referred to the challenge of preventing authoritarian regressions and securing the survival of new democracies (Schedler, 1998, p.2). Schedler (1998) argues that scholars use it to describe; diffusion of democratic values; neutralisation of anti-democratic actors; the role of party building; and decentralisation of power (p.2). Pridham (2005) contends that democratic-consolidation involves "the gradual removal of the remaining uncertainties surrounding transition […] the way is then open for the institutionalisation of a new democracy [and] the dissemination of democratic values" (p.12). To add to the conceptual confusion, there are positive and negative rubrics; negative being the avoidance of authoritarian regressions; positive being the attainment of a superior level of democracy but positing much longer time horizons (Schedler, 2001, p.67). Democratic-consolidation has also been conceived as both a process and an end-state. However, Schedler (1998) restricts the terms focus to its classical preoccupation, that it is an analytical tool for "assessing prospects of democratic continuity" (Schedler, 1998, p.2). For the purpose of this paper, Schedler's definition is sufficient.

There is a school of thought in the literature which posits a positive linear relationship between economic development and democratic-consolidation. Martin Seymour Lipset outlines modernization theory, summarized by his famous dictum, that "the more well-to-do a nation, the greater the chances that it will sustain democracy" (1966, p.50). Modernization constitutes a variety of intertwined processes, including "productivity growth, urbanization, rising levels of income and prosperity, rising literacy rates, and levels of education" (Haerpfer et al., 2009, p.81). Adam Przeworski et al. contend that the "level of economic development has a very strong effect on the probability that democracy will survive" (1996, pp.40-41). However, in the case of Russia, the application of modernization theory is problematic. For example, Russia has undergone a period of sustained economic growth since 2000s, according to an OECD report "91% of adults aged 25-64 have earned the equivalent of a high-school degree […] life expectancy is 70 years […] average household- disposable income is 15,286 USD a year [and] 70% of people aged 15 to 64 have a paid job" (OECD, 2014). However, this does not correlate with the emergence of a functioning

democracy. Rather, economic-development has coincided with a notable authoritarian turn. There is a need, therefore, for an alternative approach.

Schedler outlines a framework for determining the extent of democratic-consolidation. His study pertains to behavioural and attitudinal consolidation. Schedler argues that by identifying antidemocratic behaviour amongst political elites, the analyst can ascertain the degree of consolidation, and the likelihood of "democratic-continuity" (2001, p.70). He contends that "if political actors engage in antidemocratic action, democracy is in trouble, [by contrast] democracy appears to be safe if all players conform to the basic rules of the democratic game" (Schedler, 2001, p.70). Antidemocratic behaviour is comprised of three facets. First, "the use of violence", including attacks against political adversaries, and intimidation of voters. Second, "the rejection of elections", if political parties refuse to participate, "actively deny others right to participate", or try to control electoral outcomes, then a significant deviation from "democratic-continuity" has occurred (Schedler, 2001, p.71). Third, "the transgression of authority", Schedler states that "democratic alarm bells go off when public officials start ignoring the legal boundaries of their office" (2001, p.72).Particularly when the president transgresses the constitutional separation of power. Schedler also accounts for democratic attitudes and loyalties, essential for consolidation (Schedler, 2001, p.72). If the attitudes and public sentiment of the *demos* and political elite are gravitated towards democracy, then democratic-continuity appears likely as democracy is propelled into a position of psychological ascendency *vis-à-vis* its alternatives. As Schedler notes, "no democracy embedded in 'democratic-consensus' has ever broken down", inferring that democracies will consolidate to the extent that they overcome "their cultural handicaps [and] democratic deficits" (Schedler, 2001, p.75). Schedler's methodology will be used by this paper to ascertain the degree of consolidation and account for the lack of success in Russia.

Schedler (1999; 2001) posits that political actors are central to consolidation. He emphasizes the dichotomy between "conservatives", attempting to preserve the democratic status quo, and "agents of change", striving to subvert democratic institutions (Schedler, 1999). Schedler (2001) contends that the goal of consolidation "lies in the gradual transformation of the conflictual two-player-game [where democrats fight antidemocrats] into a consensual one-player-game [where only democrats are left]" (p.76). Many scholars demand a democratic consensus to be established between all prevalent actors, in which "all politically significant groups […] adhere to the democratic rules-of-the-game" (Gunther et al. 1995, p.7). Diamond (1996) argues that consolidation requires "no significant collective actors' challenging the legitimacy of democratic institutions" (p.67). From this perspective, consolidation is contingent upon the support of actors.

In a similar vein to Schedler, Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan (1996) specify three essential dimensions within a political system undergoing democratic-consolidation, elite behaviour, public attitudes and constitutional structures. They consider a democracy consolidated when no relevant political/economic actor is able to mobilize resources against the democratic regime to "achieve their objective by creating a nondemocratic regime" (1996, p.6). According to the perspective of public attitudes, a democratic system is considered consolidated when a "strong majority" of the population believe that democratic institutions and methods are the "best way to govern collective life in a society [and] when the support for anti-system alternatives is quite small" (Linz, Stepan, 1996, p.6). Constitutionally, a democratic regime becomes consolidated when "all the actors in the polity become habituated to the fact that political conflict will be resolved according to the established norms" (Linz, Stepan, 1996, p.5). In short, with consolidation, "democracy becomes routinized and deeply internalised in social, institutional, and psychological life" (Linz, Stepan, 1996, p.5). This paper will now turn to the factors which account for failure to consolidate democracy.

First, the nature of the constitution adopted in 1993 is not conducive of democratic-consolidation due to the imbalance of power with the president, leading some (Fish, 2005) to describe the Russian system as "super-presidential". Edward Walker (1993) postulated that "unfortunately, the power concentrated in the presidency will also mean that the declining popularity of the president will probably be accompanied by declining support for democracy" (p.119). This was problematic as Boris Yeltsin, an individual widely regarded as 'democratic', was as widely regarded as incompetent and his tenure resulted in political chaos and poverty (Fish, 2005, p.248). Putin's tenure contrasts markedly. He has instigated a program of authoritarian reforms, a notable shift from democratic-continuity. For example, Putin has centralised control in the "power vertical", removing gubernatorial elections, he has overseen the manipulation of political parties, and a crackdown on civil society, leading some scholars to

describe Russia as a "managed democracy" (Colton, McFaul, 2003). However, the conceptual birth of the managed democracy has coincided with increased stability within the polity and economic growth (OECD, 2014).This accounts for sustained support for Putin's incumbency, with public approval not dropping below 60% (Forbes, 2013). It also accounts for a lack of attitudinal consolidation (Linz, Stepan, 1996), as many Russians have come to identify democracy with incompetency and rather, correlate Putin's authoritarian turn with national recovery.

Due to the concentration of power in the presidency, the personality of the incumbent becomes paramount to the nature of the polity. Easter (2008) posits that through a process of cognitive development, Putin's intrinsic character pertains to a strong state, not democratic pluralism. For example, he spent his adolescent years in Leningrad, a city subsumed by post-war patriotism (Sakwa, 2004, pp.3-4). As a 'Chekist' in the KGB, Putin would have been enmeshed in an organisation with an institutional ethos that perceives the state as "protector of the Russian people", defining his perception of state-society relations (Easter, 2008, p.205). Furthermore, the collapse of the East German regime and the coloured revolutions, shaped Putin's perceptions of political opposition, and the adverse effects of liberalism on regime perpetuation (Easter, 2008, pp.205-206). Putin's predisposition towards a strong state is evident in his rhetorical position. For example, in his 'state of the nation' speech (2000), Putin focused on the need to "strengthen the state" and to establish "a vertical line of executive power […] capable of protecting civic, political and economic freedoms of the Russian people" (Putin, 2000). He further exhibited his sceptical stance towards liberal reform in his address to the Federal Assembly, "it would be inadmissible to allow for the destruction of the state to satisfy [the] thirst for change […] the whole history of Russia screams about it" (Putin, 2012). Schedler (2001), Linz and Stepan (1996) identify 'behavioural/attitudinal-consolidation' as essential to democratic-consolidation. However, Putin's personality is not conducive of democratic-consolidation; compounding this is the executive power invested in him, which together are accountable for Russia's authoritarian turn and the development of the managed democracy. This in turn accounts for the lack of successful democratic-consolidation.

Furthermore, there is a paucity of checks on presidential power, giving Putin relative autonomy over the legislative process. For example, due to the manipulation of Russian political parties, and the lack of genuinely competitive elections, the Duma cannot effectively hold the president to account (White et al. 2010, p.268). The media might have represented another check on executive power, but ownership was increasingly in the hands of Kremlin friendly oligarchs or through the proxy of state-owned Gazprom. The judiciary is 'independent' and inviolable according to the 1993 constitution. For example, article 10 declares "state power […] is exercised on the basis of the separation of legislative, executive and judicial powers" (Constitution-of-the-Russian-Federation, 2014). However, the constitutional court, tasked with regulating the behaviour of the executive, was appointed on the nomination of the president himself (White et al. 2010, p.269). Remington (2012) refers to this as "hollowed out democracy" (p.73). Due to the lack of checks and balances *vis-à-vis* the president, Putin has steadily restored authoritarian rules, undermining democratic-consolidation.

It is worth noting that geographically proximate states in Eastern-Europe, which adopted parliamentary constitutions characterised by a balance of power, such as Slovenia, Poland and Slovakia, were more susceptible to democratic-consolidation (Merkel, 2008, p.15). This contention pertains to the broader debate, of parliamentarism vs. presidentialism. Stepan and Skach (1993) contend that in parliamentary systems, there is lower propensity for executives to "rule at the edge of the constitution" (p.22). However, even this debate is not binary, in the sense that one set of institutions will necessarily produce a different result for consolidation. Many states have moved closer to consolidation, even with a presidential/semi-presidential system (e.g. Portugal). There is a need, therefore, to look beyond constitutions to ascertain the contributing factors to democratic impasses. Russia, despite a similar past to Eastern-European states, has a *sui generis* political culture, which in part accounts for the lack of success in consolidating democracy.

When accounting for the lack of successful democratic-consolidation in Russia, it is necessary to explicate the role of political culture. In Russia, political culture is attributable for a lack of attitudinal consolidation. Russian has tradition of absolutist and centralised rule, from Tsarism to Soviet totalitarianism, its cultural predisposition is gravitated towards a strong state, and Russian society has been traditionally weak in independent sources of political expression (White et al., 2010, p.277). This cultural predisposition permeates state and society. For example, Dimitri Medvedev insisted in 2008 that parliamentary democracy was simply not appropriate for Russia, and could only be

considered in "two or three hundred years' time", stating that Russia has "always developed around a strong executive authority [and] cannot be governed any other way" (Medvedev, 2008). Furthermore, from investigating Kremlin online archives, Putin's rhetorical position is replete with reference to the "strong state". In his Millennium Address, stating that he was "alarmed by the obvious weakening of state power", contending further that, "from the very beginning, Russia was created as a super-centralised state […] that's practically laid down in its genetic code, its traditions and its mentality of the people" (Putin, 2000). Furthermore, Remington (2012) indicates that post-soviet political culture was detrimental to democratic-consolidation as most "Russians are willing to trade-off democratic rights for political order and stability" (p.125). For example, in a 2005 poll, 47 percent of Russians favoured stability over freedom of the press (Levada, 2005). Schedler (2001), Linz and Stepan (1996) identify attitudes, of key actors and the *demos*, as essential to democratic-consolidation. However, a "strong majority" of Russians do not perceive democratic methods as "the best way to govern" (Linz, Stepan, 1996, p.6) and democracy is not embedded in "democratic consensus" (Schedler, 2001, p.75). "Psychological consolidation", from the perspective above, may be difficult due to Russia's limited experience with democratic pluralism. This in part accounts for the failure of consolidation. The paper will now turn to the managed democracy.

The development of Putin's managed democracy represents a notable deviation from "democratic-continuity". Essential to the managed democracy is the subversion of the media. Putin eliminated independent sources of media power. For example, the case of Vladimir Gusinsky's Media Most, following critical coverage of the second Chechnya war, Gusinsky was forced into exile and Gazprom bought a commanding stake in Media Most, making it a parastatal media outlet (Lipman, McFaul, 2001, pp.121-122). Furthermore, there are frequent threats to the psychical integrity of journalists who repudiate the Kremlin. For example, there have been a number of high profile murders, such as Anna Politkovskaya, and 32 other journalists since 2000 (Guardian, 2009). The role of the media in the managed democracy is summarized in Putin's rhetorical position, as he stated in 2012 that "while we understand that the media operate in the market environment, they must not sell the objectivity of their information to the highest bidder […] their efforts must be based first and foremost on the interests of the entire society and on high moral principles" (Putin, 2012). The absence of independent media is problematic for democratic-consolidation, as it places Kremlin favoured parties at an advantage *vis-à-vis* the opposition through bias news coverage and as stated previously it removed a check on presidential power (McFaul, Stoner-Weiss, 2010, p.79). Furthermore, "the use of violence" (Schedler, 2001), against journalists suggests that Russian democracy is not consolidated. It is evident that Putin has not "adhere[d] to the democratic rules-of-the-game" (Gunther et al. 1995, p.7), which accounts for the failure to consolidate Russian democracy.

It is well established in the literature on democratic-consolidation that political parties are *sine qua non* to successful democratic-consolidation (Pridham, 1990; Morlino, 1995). However, political parties in the managed democracy have a largely diminished role. Andrew Wilson (2005) draws attention to the manipulation of parties during Putin's tenure, in particular the development of Kremlin sponsored "spoiler" and "scarecrow" parties, which actively siphon votes from the opposition (p.19). For example, Rodina was created by the Kremlin in 2003 to siphon votes, and subsequently weaken the oppositional communist party (Sakwa, 2011, p.16). In addition, Russian party politics is stifled by the presence of hegemonic-parties. Schedler (1997) contends that "the rise of hegemonic-parties suffocates electoral competition", undermining the process of consolidation (p.17). For example, in contemporary Russia, Kremlin sponsored United-Russia has ascended into a position hegemony *vis-à-vis* other parties through a supermajority in the Duma enabled by access to "administrative resources". This is problematic for democratic-consolidation as it gives the Kremlin relative autonomy over the legislative process, which Sakwa (2011) argues enabled Putin to implement his authoritarian agenda. For example, the Kremlin was able to pass the 2004 Law on Political Parties, which disadvantaged smaller parties by introducing a 7 percent threshold and a minimum of 50,000 members as prerequisites for Duma accession (Remington, 2012, p.172).

The Law on Political Parties, *inter alia*, was particularity detrimental to democratic-consolidation, as it actively stymied the accession of democrats to the Duma. For example, the democratic liberal faction, comprised of Yabloko and the Union-of-Right-Forces, was unable to pass the stringent registration requirements or the threshold, leaving the Duma the preserve of pro-kremlin, and in comparison, undemocratic parties (Remington, 2012, p.174). By "actively deny[ing] others right to participate" (Schedler, 2001, p.71), constitutes antidemocratic behaviour, indicating that Russian democracy is not consolidated, and the manipulation of parties in part accounts for this. Furthermore,

as Stepan and Skach (1993) note, parties are weaker in presidential, than say, parliamentary systems. Consequently, parties and democratic institutions are not the main avenue for accession to power, due to the nature of "super-presidentialism", rather the polity is characterised by personalized networks. This is detrimental to democratic-consolidation, as Svasand and Randall (2003) posit, parties and democratic institutions more generally, through a process of habituation, shape the elites behaviour and define political conflict within the parameters of a democracy. Due to the manipulation of parties, there is a lack of behavioural consolidation amongst the political elite.

Furthermore, civil society has been undermined in the managed-democracy. Larry Diamond (1994;1999) contends that civil society aids democratic-consolidation in a number of ways. For example, in checking the exercise of power, habituating the *demos* and political elite to the "democratic-rule-of-the-game" through the dissemination democratic norms and stimulating political participation within the "parameters of a democracy" (Diamond, 1999, pp.239-240). However, Putin has implemented an agenda to stymie the proliferation of civil society organisations. For example, the 2012 "Foreign Agents Law", which fines foreign assisted NGOs which take part in "political activity" (Guardian, 2013). Putin justifies this, stating that "anyone who receives money from abroad for his or her political activities [is] thus serving certain foreign national interests" (Putin, 2012). However, democracy cannot take hold (or consolidate) if the political elite do not "conform to the basic rules of the democratic game" (Schedler, 2001, p.70), including a commitment to an independent civil society.

To refer back to the title of this paper, it is evident that when accounting for the lack of successful democratic-consolidation in Russia, the role of the political elite is *sine qua non*. Using Schedler's methodology this paper can posit that due to antidemocratic behaviour and attitudes, Russian democracy is not consolidated and it fails to satisfy both the positive and negative conceptualisations of the term. From the perspective of elite behaviour, there was a lack of "democratic consensus". Rather, the Kremlin led by Putin, has actively subverted democratic institutions to "achieve their objective by creating a nondemocratic regime" (Linz, Stepan, 1996, p.6), embodied in the managed democracy. This is accountable for the lack of successful democratic-consolidation, and substantiates the hypothesis of this paper. It is worth noting, however, the trajectories of Putin's managed democracy are less certain. Due to the concentration of power in the presidency, should Putin's popularity attenuate, then support for his managed democracy will likely wane concurrently, producing conditions more conducive of democratic-consolidation, which may create a democratic challenge to Putin's "managed democracy" (Fish, 2005, p.248).

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