

From failed democratization to the war against Ukraine: what happened to Russian institutions under Putin?

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Abstract This literature review unpacks the state of the art in Russian studies regarding regime dynamics and the functioning of authoritarian institutions. It covers three major fields of scientific debate in the discipline: 1) the role of structural and agency-driven factors in explaining failed democratization and complete autocratization in Russia; 2) the conceptualization of the Russian regime between electoral authoritarianism and personalist rule; 3) the development of authoritarian institutions under Vladimir Putin and the process of institutional degradation. It also outlines the promising research avenues of studying Russian authoritarianism, which can be relevant not only for the scientific community but also for the practitioners, especially in the context of the Russian war against Ukraine.

Keywords Russian studies · Structure-agency dilemma · Electoral authoritarianism · Personalist autocracy · Authoritarian institutions · Institutional regression · Russian war against Ukraine

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Von der gescheiterten Demokratisierung bis zum Krieg gegen die Ukraine: Was geschah mit den russischen Institutionen unter Putin?

Zusammenfassung Dieser Literature Review bietet eine Übersicht über den aktuellen Stand der Russlandforschung, die Regimedynamiken und Funktionsweisen der autoritären Institutionen untersucht. Der Review umfasst die drei wichtigsten Felder der wissenschaftlichen Debatte in diesem Fachgebiet: 1) die Rolle der strukturellen und akteurszentrierten Faktoren in der Erklärung von misslungener Demokratisierung und erfolgreicher Autokratisierung in Russland; 2) die Operationalisierung des russischen Regimes an der Schnittstelle zwischen elektoralem Autoritarismus und personalistischer Autokratie; sowie 3) die Entwicklung der autoritären Institutionen unter Wladimir Putin und den Prozess des institutionellen Rückganges. Zum Schluss werden einige gewichtige Problemstellungen für die weitere Forschung über den russischen Autoritarismus skizziert, welche nicht nur aus wissenschaftlicher, sondern auch aus der praktischen Perspektive vor dem Hintergrund der aktuellen Entwicklungen des Krieges gegen die Ukraine relevant sein können.

Schlüsselwörter Russlandforschung · Strukturen vs. Akteure im institutionellen Wandel · Elektoraler Autoritarismus · Personalistische Autokratie · Autoritäre Institutionen · Institutioneller Rückgang · Russlands Krieg gegen die Ukraine

1 Setting the stage: Russian studies and the war against Ukraine

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 appeared unexpected for many scholars studying political processes and political institutions in Russia. Despite the annexation of Crimea and active support of the separatist forces in Donbas, coercive foreign policy, and aggressive rhetoric of the Russian leadership, starting a full-scale war against its neighbor country seemed irrational, as it was connected with enormous uncertainty of the possible outcomes. In contrast, in the last decades, Vladimir Putin's regime was aimed at reducing the omnipresent uncertainty for the authoritarian ruler and put a lot of effort into maintaining stability, which also became one of the most important words in the vocabulary of *Putinism*. Russian studies focusing on authoritarian institutions might have failed to explain *why Putin started this war*, but they provide a good explanation of *why it was possible* in the context of unconstrained personalist rule and institutional degradation.

This literature review unpacks the current state of debate on the evolution of the Russian regime and political institutions under Putin. It covers three major issues discussed in the literature devoted to Russian politics: 1) the reasons for failed democratization in Russia and the subsequent consolidation of the authoritarian regime with a particular focus on how structural conditions and agency-based factors contributed to this process; 2) the nature and dynamics of the political regime from electoral democracy under Boris Yeltsin, via electoral authoritarianism, towards Putin's personalist rule; and 3) the rise and the fall of Russian authoritarian institutions, exemplified by the debates on the institutional regression in three main fields—legislature and parties, elections, and federalism. The review concludes with

an outlook regarding the most promising avenues of studying authoritarian institutions and the regime in Russia from both theoretical and practical points of view.

2 From failed democratization to complete autocratization: structure vs. agency

The literature devoted to the political transformation of Russia usually draws on the classic dilemma of the role of *structure* and *agency* as explanatory factors for regime change. Structural conditions involve cultural, historical, and economic preconditions, as well as institutional legacies of the Soviet and even tsarist Russia, which shaped the context of the collapse of the USSR and the country's democratization in the 1990s. In contrast, agency-driven explanations focus on the strategic choices made by the key political actors and elites in their struggle for political power. Recent studies demonstrate that in terms of political culture, economic development and social structures Russia was not that different from other post-communist and post-Soviet transitional countries, which nevertheless managed to establish and consolidate democratic rule (Gel'man 2015; McFaul 2018; Melville and Mironyuk 2016; Gel'man 2017). The most challenging structural condition for democratization was the *simultaneity* of change, or *triple transition*: from a command economy to the market, from autocracy to democracy, and from empire to nation-state (McFaul 2018, p. 307). However, other countries in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union underwent a similar major transformation, which required not only the restructuring of political, economic, and social institutions but also state- and nation-building. The outcomes of this process in the region are strikingly different and range from consolidated liberal democracies in Czechia or Estonia to full-fledged dictatorships in Belarus and Tajikistan.

In the Russian case, structures were neither democracy-conducive nor democracy-preventing, the country was not doomed to become autocracy again by default. There is a strong argument in favor of overcoming the gap between the two approaches and rather combine them in a dynamic and *process-centered* approach (Green 2018; McFaul 2018; Melville 2020), closely intertwined with the rational-choice-institutionalist perspective. Although such integrative approaches in Russian studies are still missing (Gel'man 2022), it is a promising avenue of future research. Here, structural conditions and institutional legacies are considered to shape the context for the democratic transformation and impose constraints on the strategic choices of the rulers. After being made, these choices again change the institutional environment and thereby constrain the corridor of opportunities for the next choices, bringing the country closer to democracy or autocracy.

Gel'man (2015) counts several *critical junctures*—moments of strategic choices by the elites with far-reaching implications for further trajectories of the country's political transformation on Russia's road from one autocracy to another. Under first president Boris Yeltsin, the rejection to hold founding elections in 1991 paved the way for a power stalemate between the president and parliament, resulting in an armed conflict in 1993. The zero-sum solution of the conflict in favor of the president shaped the new constitution, which established a presidential-parliamentary system

with a very strong presidential rule that is sometimes called *super-presidentialism* (McFaul 2018). In 1996, the “loans-for-shares” privatization in the run-up to the presidential election ensured the support of business elites for Yeltsin but created a class of “oligarchs” and accelerated the process of *state capture* by business elites and informal patronal networks (Yakovlev 2006; Hale 2010; McFaul 2018). The selection of Putin as Yeltsin’s successor in 1999 is considered one of the most decisive moves on the way towards autocracy, as it put an end to any attempts to democratize Russia. Since then, the story of Russia’s political transformation is no more a story of failed democratization, but a story of successful consolidation of authoritarian rule.

Putin’s success in autocratizing Russia can be best explained through a combination of agency-driven and structural explanations. On the one hand, he continued making authoritarian strategic choices to eliminate any challengers in Russia, restricting civil rights and liberties, curbing the opposition, and expanding the dominant position of his ruling coalition (Gel’man 2015). On the other hand, several institutional legacies from the Soviet time simultaneously propelled the authoritarian consolidation. Among them are strong security apparatus, politically controlled judiciary, politicized bureaucracy, the dominant role of the state in the economy, the concentration of wealth in the national capital and enormous cross-regional disparities (Soldatov and Borogan 2011; McFaul 2018; Rutland 2018). As a result, Putin managed to build up an authoritarian *administrative regime* without making significant changes to the formal democratic constitutional order (or *normative state*), which were long considered competing political orders within the same *dual state* in Russia (Sakwa 2010). However, the regime dynamics after 2010, and especially the 2020 constitutional amendments, which further strengthened the presidency and enabled Putin to stay in power until 2036 (Pomeranz and Smyth 2021; Wedde 2020), vividly demonstrate the outcome of this competition. In Russia, the administrative regime seems to have captured the normative state and used its organizational and infrastructural capacity to satisfy the needs of Putin and his ruling coalition.

3 Regime type and regime dynamics: shades of Russian authoritarianism

To understand the way Russian authoritarianism functions under Putin, it’s important to define the particular type of regime he established, as different regime types imply different logics of maintenance and survival of the autocrats. In general, the widespread view on post-Soviet polities suggests that regime dynamics in the region can be best explained not through the classic transitional approach, which analyses the political transformation from autocracy towards democracy (Carothers 2002; Levitsky and Way 2002, 2010, 2020). The developments are rather cyclical, with regimes managing to maintain a *dynamic equilibrium*, moving back and forth between phases of more open and competitive politics and subsequent authoritarian turns (Hale 2010, 2014). Russia followed this pattern as well.

There is a disagreement about how to classify Russia’s political regime in the 1990s and whether the country ever managed to meet the minimal requirements of

democracy. While some scholars ranked Russia under Yeltsin as competitive authoritarianism, or a regime with dominant power politics (Carothers 2002; Levitsky and Way 2002), others suggested that the country crossed the democratic cut-off point—as *partial*, *electoral*, or *defective democracy*—but failed to consolidate the democratic regime (McFaul 2001; Robinson 2003). The common determinant between different conceptualizations of the Russian regime in the 1990s is that the country witnessed unprecedented political competition, with the 1999 federal parliamentary election being the freest in its history (Colton and McFaul 2003; Golosov 2011).

After coming to power in 2000, President Putin reversed the previous democratic practices and strengthened the authoritarian ones. Hale (2010), Petrov et al. (2014) and Treisman (2011) used the concept of a *hybrid regime* to classify the political system in Putin's Russia as a combination of democratic and authoritarian institutions. Worthy of note, however, that this term tends to conceptual stretching, as it places the hybrids into a “gray zone” (Carothers 2002) between democracy and autocracy and fails to differentiate between flawed, electoral, but democratic regimes and autocracies that use some democratic institutions—elections, legislatures, parties—to legitimize their rule. Needless to say, the logic of staying in power in electoral democracies like Croatia or Moldova is different from that in authoritarian Russia.

The most influential operationalization of the regime under Putin was *electoral authoritarianism* (Schedler 2002, 2013; Bogaards 2009; Golosov 2011; White 2014; Gel'man 2014; Smyth 2020). These regimes use elections as the main source of legitimation. In the continuum of political regimes, they differ from both closed autocracies and electoral democracies (Schedler 2013). In contrast to the former, electoral autocrats hold regular multi-party elections, which are considered *meaningful*, as they are at least minimally open and competitive. Yet, unlike in electoral democracies, in electoral authoritarian regimes elections are constantly (and severely) manipulated in favor of the incumbents, so that the opposition has practically no chance of winning them. To win elections, the electoral-authoritarian regime ensures the so-called *uneven playing field* with the opposition (Levitsky and Way 2002, 2010). Since the mid-2000s, in Russia, one of the most important tasks for officials at all levels was to deliver votes to Putin, his party of power United Russia and their candidates in local, regional, and national elections of all kinds (Sharafutdinova 2010; Golosov 2011). Nevertheless, elections, even if manipulated and controlled, can still lead to unexpected results and undesired consequences, such as the 2011–2012 mass protests in many Russian cities against the rigged parliamentary elections (Dollbaum 2017). The ultimate reaction to the challenge of holding (and winning) minimally competitive elections by the Kremlin was the subsequent closure of the regime towards a more *hegemonic* version both at the center and in the regions (Gel'man 2014; Ross and Panov 2019).

Recent literature argues for a different view on the Russian political regime and puts special emphasis on its *personalist* nature, with the regime stability being closely interlinked with Putin's popularity (Baturu and Elkink 2014, 2016; Smyth 2014; Kendall-Taylor et al. 2017; Frye 2021; Tolstrup and Souleimanov 2022). In these regimes, political institutions can still exist but fail to constrain the rule of the incumbent (Geddes 1999; Geddes et al. 2014). In Russia, President Putin is

seen as the major patron heading a single-pyramid system of informal patron-client relationships, which ensures subordination within the elite and the broader mass support (Hale 2010, 2014; Baturo and Elkink 2014, 2016). Personal loyalty to the leader becomes the main criterium of obtaining key positions in state and economy, while the decision-making powers are held in the hands of Putin himself and a small group of his close associates (Hill and Gaddy 2015). A personalist ruler seems to prefer loyalty to competence by the subordinates with negative outcomes in terms of economic performance and the provision of public goods (Egorov and Sonin 2011; Zakharov 2016). To be sure, the increasing personalization of the regime can be considered a reasonable strategy for autocratic survival, as it reduces the possible threats of elite defection, yet it makes the regime more vulnerable to challenges from outside of the ruling coalition (Grundholm 2020).

In general, both the electoral-authoritarian and personalist perspectives on Russia's regime point to the relevance of institutions in authoritarian regimes in terms of enabling the incumbent to successfully consolidate his rule and dominate the country, as well as constraining the behavior of the ruler himself. Twenty years of Putin's rule provide evidence for the functioning and limits in the efficiency of authoritarian institutions, and the possible institutional degradation and deinstitutionalization of the political system.

4 What happened to Russian institutions?

Russian and post-Soviet studies offer a very profound analysis of how authoritarian institutions work in practice. Agency-centered approaches demonstrate that the emergence and development of institutions during the transformation in the 1990s depended on the will of the ruling coalitions. From this perspective, rulers and elites are interested in establishing institutions and raising the state capacity to the extent that ensures their dominant power position and maximizes the extraction of political and economic rents, making them “*kings of the mountain*” (Hellman 1998; Melville and Mironyuk 2016). After a saturation point in institution-building is achieved, however, any further reform aimed at making state institutions—bureaucracy, legislatures, courts, etc.—strong, independent, and autonomous from the control of the ruling elites will lower the opportunities for rent extraction and thus be blocked by them. Being on the top of the hill presents the desired *authoritarian equilibrium* for the rulers: state institutions are effective enough to allow for rent extraction but are weak enough to be controlled by the autocrat at the same time.

Putin inherited imperfect institutions from the Yeltsin era. Russian institutions suffered from the typical weakness of the formal state in transition, as state capacity in regimes undergoing political transformation is generally lower than in established autocracies and consolidated democracies (Bäck and Hadenius 2008). Moreover, the formal state in Russia was also severely corroded by the omnipresent informality (Ledeneva 2013; Vasileva-Dienes 2019). Powerful informal institutions—shadow economy, nepotism, patronage, corruption—competed with the weak formal ones and sometimes played a substitutive role (Helmke and Levitsky 2004). The latter was especially evident in the situations when the formal state failed to provide

the minimal order, security of property rights and welfare, accidentally outsourcing these functions to informal patronal networks.

To establish a strong authoritarian rule, Putin had first to restore the state capacity and strengthen the formal state bringing it simultaneously under the control of his ruling coalition. Schedler (2013) differs between two types of institutions—institutions of domination and institutions of representation in autocracies. The former enables the ruler to dominate politics through a combination of repression, co-optation, and legitimation (Schedler 2013; Gerschewski 2013). For instance, strong security apparatus allows to deter potential challengers, effective distribution of rents fosters compliance among the members of the ruling coalition, while propaganda, ideology and output legitimacy ensure mass support with the population. Guriev and Treisman (2019, 2022) convincingly demonstrate that modern autocrats are *spin dictators*: they only seldom rely on mass repression and official ideologies, instead they legitimize their rule and engineer popular support through the manipulation of information.

In contrast, institutions of representation—e.g., legislatures, courts, decentralization, elections, parties, media, and civil society—establish at least formal constraints on the power of the ruler. The ultimate solution to the problem of institutional constraints would be their complete elimination. Instead of this costly and risky strategy, connected with the possible losses in legitimacy both within the country and abroad, the more efficient way is to manipulate them and thereby bring them under control without the unnecessary turbulences of a full-fledged constitutional change (Schedler 2013). This was exactly the strategy chosen by Putin and his allies. They established control over Russian institutions of representation through *parapolitics*, undermining the formal institutions by informal practices, and *para-constitutionalism*, creating custom-made and fully subordinate *substitutes* concurrent to the constitutional institutions but lacking any independent legitimacy (Sakwa 2010; Petrov 2011). As a result, institutions of representation became fully subordinated to Putin's ruling coalition and failed to constrain the behavior of the authoritarian leader.

In the following, we present the state of the art in the analysis of dynamics in three major institutional fields—legislature and parties, elections, as well as federalism and decentralization—to assess what happened to these theoretically powerful institutional constraints to the authoritarian regime.

4.1 Legislature and parties

After years of permanent conflict between President Yeltsin and the lower chamber of the Russian parliament, the State Duma, bringing the parliament under control became one of the top priorities in Putin's agenda. The creation of the *party of power*, United Russia, with its subsequent success in national and subnational elections, produced comfortable majorities in federal and regional legislatures and ensured the necessary support for presidential initiatives (Remington 2008; Kynev 2018). The overall control of the president over parliamentary politics is guaranteed by the *dominant party system*, with United Russia being surrounded by three “systemic” oppositional parties—the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF), the

Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR), and “A Just Russia—For Truth” (Bader 2011; Smyth and Turovsky 2018, p. 185–186; Wilson 2016).

The literature on the role of the State Duma and its regional counterparts in the stability of Putin’s authoritarian regime indicates three research strands. First, in line with the previous research devoted to authoritarian institutions and regime survival (Gandhi and Przeworski 2007; Gandhi 2008; Svolik 2012), it shows that legislatures in Russia allow for effective co-optation of the potential opposition, by providing it with reserved seats in the parliament, and strengthens compliance of the members of the ruling coalition, by rewarding them for loyalty (Golosov 2014; Reuter and Turovsky 2014; Reuter and Robertson 2015; Krol 2017). In addition, the very threat of losing the privileges and status of being an individual member or party faction in a parliament creates strong incentives for MPs from United Russia as well as its satellites to support the president. Golosov et al. (2021) show that by regulating access to the parliament, the regime can react to changing conditions and, for instance, permit the entrance of a new, and progressive, systemic party “New People” to mobilize and co-opt the votes of a more liberal and younger electorate.

Second, a promising research avenue deals with the debate of whether the State Duma in Russia is a *rubber-stamp* parliament that only formalizes the decisions of the executive and the president without substantial discussion and amendments (Baumgartner et al. 2017; Krol 2017; Noble and Schulmann 2018; Noble 2020). This literature argues for departing from a “mad printer”¹ or “conveyor belt” view of the Russian parliament towards a more nuanced picture. In particular, the scholars suggest differing between political legislation, which concerns the core interests of the Russian regime and Putin’s personal initiatives and priorities, also known as issues of the president’s *manual control* (Ananyev 2018), and regular legislation, concerning matters where the Kremlin doesn’t have any strong opinion and no decisions have been made by the president. While the former requires fast procedures and all-parties support with supermajorities in the parliament, in the latter, the State Duma serves as a stage for policy conflicts between different powerful members of the elite, which results in executive bill failures and amendments, as well as increasing non-executive sponsorship of the bills (Noble and Schulmann 2018).

Finally, the literature demonstrates that by having a fully controlled parliament, the president obtains an opportunity to boost his legitimacy and popularity (Sirotkina and Zavadskaya 2020; Köker 2020). Putin often shifts the blame for unpopular decisions to the State Duma and other state institutions. Moreover, the president also plays the role of the savior for ordinary people by vetoing bills, which produce large public discontent, and suggesting necessary popular “corrections” during the legislative process, as was the case with the recent and controversially debated pension reform. In parallel to the State Duma, with its undermined institutional strength, Putin also launched a substitute for it—the Public Chamber (Evans 2010; Richter 2009; Petrov 2011). This advisory body, fully dependent on the presidential administration, is aimed at enhancing the legitimacy of the regime by serving as

¹ The “mad printer” notion primarily refers to the period between 2012 and 2017, when the State Duma used to rapidly pass repressive and illiberal bills directed against political opposition, civil society actors and sexual minorities (see also Waller 2021).

a tool for dialogue between state and civil society, instead of the State Duma which practically has lost its representative function.

4.2 Electoral arena

Elections and parties in Russia build together a machinery of mobilizing popular support, delivering votes for the regime, redistributing seats among the party of power and its satellites, and channeling potential protest. In fact, elections in Russia display almost the full menu of electoral manipulation (Schedler 2013): from restricting civil and political liberties, suppressing and controlling opposition before the election takes place, to permanently changing electoral rules, large-scale falsifications and ousting elected officials from offices. The research shows how the regime strategically uses elections at all levels to fragment and discredit the opposition, co-opt potential rivals, and manage intra-elite conflicts, as well as enhance the legitimacy (Wilson 2016; Smyth and Turovsky 2018; Szakonyi 2022; Reuter and Szakonyi 2021). Changing legislation, the regime deliberately adjusts the electoral and party law to the environmental challenges: from the very limited number of parties and proportional representation in the 2000s aimed at consolidating the dominant party system and subordinating the satellite parties (Reuter and Remington 2009; Kynev 2018), to *authoritarian pluralization* in the 2010s with liberalized party law combined with a mixed member majoritarian electoral system aimed at dispersing the support of satellite parties and reaching supermajority for United Russia (Wilson 2016). To mobilize support, the regime strongly relies on regional and local clientelist networks and political machines controlled by the governors, mayors, and companies loyal to the Kremlin (Frye et al. 2014; Reuter 2017). In addition, massive electoral fraud is statistically evident, with the so called “Putin’s peaks”—even numbers (70%, 75%, 80%)—appearing in both voter turnout and United Russia results (Kobak et al. 2018, 2020).

Another strand of research on elections and parties in Russian authoritarianism focuses on the strategies of the opposition to resist the electoral manipulations of the regime through anti-regime voter coordination. There are several analyses of the rise of the protest movement around the Russian politician Alexey Navalny with its extensive network and considerable capacity across the country (Dollbaum 2020; Dollbaum et al. 2021). The promotion of *smart voting* by Navalny and his supporters is subject to a new but growing body of literature (Lyubarev 2020; Turchenko and Golosov 2021, 2022; Golosov et al. 2021). Being banned from running, the opposition replied to the electoral engineering of the regime with a call for strategic voting for non-regime candidates², based on their chances to win rather than on the political or ideological preferences of the anti-regime voters. In fact, the research on smart voting demonstrates that it boosted the results of non-regime candidates and lowered the results of the regime candidates. Golosov et al. (2021) show that the regime reacts to this coordination effort by crushing Navalny’s network, banning the

² These can be candidates from systemic parties-satellites who were registered to run, but are not supported by United Russia, the Kremlin and regional incumbents, thereby challenging the official candidate of power.

smart voting website, as well as new forms of electoral manipulation: it expanded the elections to three days and introduced electronic voting to facilitate electoral fraud.

The results of the elections in Russia are considered highly artificial (Smyth and Turovsky 2018, p. 198), which poses a two-fold challenge for the regime. On the one hand, fully manipulated elections deprive the regime of an important bottom-up feedback mechanism, so it must rely on its substitutes—closed public opinion surveys, ratings, and other tools for getting information (Petrov 2011; Petrov et al. 2014). On the other hand, too much electoral fraud makes even the core regime supporters feel that elections are unfree and unfair, reducing their trust and readiness to further support the ruling party (Reuter and Szakonyi 2021). The logic of electoral authoritarianism implies that elections should be meaningful to legitimize the regime (Schedler 2013). Yet the literature on elections in Russia rather shows that due to the scale of manipulating practices they are continuously losing the necessary touch of competition, which questions their appropriateness to serve as a credible source of legitimacy for the regime.

4.3 Federalism and decentralization

Russia is often considered a *federation without federalism* (Rogoza 2014). The formal federal structure of the country, guaranteed by the constitution, is undermined by the *power vertical* established by President Putin. Klimovich (2023) argues for labelling this system as *federal autocracy* and use the term *authoritarian federalism* to explain the logic of the co-existence of formal federal nature and authoritarian regime in Russian politics. The bulk of the literature on Russian federalism studies the massive centralization and, as a result, *defederalization*, or *federal regression*, of the country under Putin (Ross 2010; Kropp 2019; Klimovich and Kropp 2022). The research vividly demonstrates how Putin's reforms switched off the Federation Council, as a chamber representing regional interests, subordinated regional elites through the introduction of an additional para-constitutional level of government between the center and regions, as well as eliminated the political autonomy of the regions by replacing the direct election of governors with their practical appointment³ (Goode 2007; Sharafutdinova 2010; Ross and Turovsky 2013). Golosov (2011), as well as Reisinger and Moraski (2017) provide a bottom-up explanation for the successful authoritarian consolidation in Russia pointing to the role of *subnational authoritarianism* in several of Russia's regions which was complementary to the autocratizing efforts of the federal center. Regional autocrats running efficient political machines were soon co-opted by Moscow and provided the necessary electoral results to Putin and his party of power. Nowadays, Russian federalism tends to paradoxically function in an *autocracy-sustaining* way: only a couple of strong and autocratic regional bosses retain at least limited bargaining leverage vis-à-vis the powerful federal center (Obydenkova and Swenden 2013; Tosltrup and Souleimanov 2022).

³ Between 2004 and 2012 regional governors were effectively appointed by the President. In 2012 direct gubernatorial elections were reintroduced, yet with a system of filters, which enables the federal center to control the process and make the desired candidates win (see also Blakkisrud 2015).

Studies on subnational politics in Russia highlight different features of electoral authoritarianism in the regions, showing how the Kremlin-backed incumbents and candidates win gubernatorial elections, as well as how regional legislative elections help manage intra-elite conflicts and strengthen the co-optation of the systemic opposition (Golosov 2018; Smyth and Turovsky 2018; Ross and Panov 2019). In general, compared with the significant variation of the subnational regimes in the 1990s, ranging from electoral democracies to hegemonic autocracies, the authoritarian turn produced a more homogenized field of subnational regimes limited to the different shades of autocratic rule (Golosov 2011; Ross and Panov 2019; Libman and Rochlitz 2019). Subnational variation was further limited by ethnic and territorial standardization and simplification, as well as the practical destruction of internal borders and imposed mergers of several regions in the 2000s (Chebankova 2007; Busygina 2017). Libman and Rochlitz (2019) therefore argue for focusing on the role of individuals—regional governors—rather than on subnational regime dynamics in the research on subnational politics and governance in Russia.

Recent research based on the principal-agent approach to the center-regional relations in Russia focuses on the explanation of recruitment patterns, task assignment and mechanisms of control that the center applies to make regional elites and governors loyal servants of the regime (Rochlitz et al. 2015; Libman and Rochlitz 2019; Remington et al. 2021). Libman and Rochlitz (2019) argue that they are primarily tasked with delivering votes for United Russia and Putin, maintaining socio-economic stability, and implementing federal initiatives on-site. However, the center fails to establish a system of incentives, such as career perspectives, rewards and punishments, for the governors to stimulate efficient task implementation. Moreover, studies show that the federal center actively installs governors-outsiders, lacking any connection to the regions they are going to govern (Kynev 2019; Remington et al. 2021; Klimovich 2023), with ambivalent outcomes in terms of performance and possible policy failures (Schultz and Libman 2015; Tkachenko and Esaulov 2020; Sharafutdinova and Steinbuks 2017). Fitting the theoretical expectations (Egorov and Sonin 2011; Zakharov 2016), in the trade-off between having competent or controlled (loyal) regional agents the regime in Russia rather tends to prefer loyalty.

Another important dimension of the research on Russian federalism concerns the distribution of resources and responsibilities between federal and regional levels (Rochlitz et al. 2015; Busygina et al. 2018; Starodubtsev 2018; Zubarevich 2017; Libman and Rochlitz 2019). In Russia, political and fiscal centralization, which concentrated political power and financial resources at the federal level, is combined with administrative decentralization, which assigns the regions additional tasks to implement. The proliferation of the so-called '*unfunded mandates*' further strengthens the dependence of the regions on federal financial support. In a combination with strong authoritarian rule in the center, this provides the Kremlin with almost unlimited opportunities to *shift the blame* for unpopular measures and suboptimal policy outcomes, as well as the burden of fulfilling costly tasks to the regional administrations (Bednar 2009, p. 1–16; Busygina and Klimovich 2022).

4.4 Institutional degradation and deinstitutionalization

The state of the art in research devoted to the functioning of political institutions in Russia in the three fields discussed above suggests that parliament, parties, elections and federalism do not present any constraint for Putin's regime. At first glance, they function exactly as an authoritarian ruler would want: the legislature serves as a tool to co-opt regime supporters, divide the opposition, and maintain the dominant party system; elections bring the desired results and legitimize his rule; undermined but still present federal structures allow for vertical control of the subnational politics and the blame-shifting onto the regions. On the other hand, keeping manipulated elections meaningful turns out to be not an easy task; weak parliament without any opposition that rubber-stamps the president's decisions can lose the rest of its legitimacy; regional agents of the Kremlin—the governors—lack incentives and the necessary resources to perform their tasks paving the way for policy failures and social unrest in the regions.

The Russian case shows that authoritarian institutions are subject to institutional regression and degradation. Indeed, personalist politics and personalization of the regime can go together with regime deinstitutionalization (Baturu and Elkink 2014). The authoritarian equilibrium of being on the top of the mountain is vulnerable, especially to *external shocks*, which can massively affect rent redistribution among the members of the ruling coalition thus jeopardizing the stability of the whole system (Melville and Mironyuk 2016). The tragic irony is that unconstrained personalist leaders are more likely to pursue aggressive foreign policy and even start international conflicts (Geddes et al. 2014, p. 328; Kendall-Taylor et al. 2017, p. 12). They are vulnerable to external shocks, and at the same time, they tend to produce these shocks on their own. The decision to start the war against Ukraine made by President Putin perfectly illustrates the *self-destructing nature* of personalist regimes.

5 Conclusion

This review of the state of the art in Russian studies thematized three major debates in the literature concerning the country's failed democratization and subsequent consolidation of authoritarian rule, the nature and dynamics of the political regime under Putin, as well as the rise and fall of authoritarian political institutions. These research strands indicate two main developments, which can be relevant for studying other institutional fields in Russia, or for the broader comparative studies of authoritarianism. *First*, there is evidence that Putin's regime underwent significant personalization and has been moving away from the logic and institutional setting of electoral authoritarianism towards that of a personalist autocracy. *Second*, authoritarian political institutions enabling unconstrained personalist politics are vulnerable to erosion and degradation, which results in a process of deinstitutionalization. Russian legislatures, parties, elections, and federalism—all these authoritarian institutions powerful in theory—have ultimately failed to constrain the behavior of the president, even in the vital matter of war and peace.

To be sure, the war against Ukraine and its political, economic, and social consequences present major external shock not only for Russia and Putin's regime but also for Russian studies. A recent special issue in *Post-Soviet Affairs* deals with empirical and theoretical issues and argues for reframing the research agenda of the discipline by adjusting it to the changing conditions and getting rid of some outdated analytic approaches (see for example Gel'man 2022). In terms of the role of authoritarian institutions, personalization and deinstitutionalization of the regime in Russia, discussed in this Literature Review, the promising avenues of further research can be as follows:

First, it will be subject to substantial scientific interest to analyze how the personalist ruler, Putin, maintains the status quo of his regime in the unfavorable context of large-scale warfare and economic hardships, coupled with the overall deterioration of authoritarian political institutions. To put it bluntly, Russian studies will continue to trace the regime dynamics searching for evidence on whether Putin will manage to find a new authoritarian equilibrium, after having ruined the previous one in February 2022 and what this new equilibrium can look like. Here, the theoretical view of personalist rule seems to be a suitable tool for further regime research.

Second, of particular interest is the problem of succession, which is the central dilemma for any authoritarian leader (Hale 2010), but hardly resolvable under personalist rule (Geddes et al. 2014). Personalist autocracies rarely survive personalist autocrats who established them, as it is extremely difficult to prevent intra-elite defection and pick up a successor who will be powerful enough to maintain the regime stability but weak enough to remain loyal to the leader. Russian studies can analyze the given conditions for regime succession and elaborate on the role of authoritarian institutions in facilitating this process.

Third, a closer look at the degenerating but still existent Russian institutions will be helpful to assess the possible trajectory of Russia's political development *after Putin*. On the one hand, the *residual autonomy* is always attributed even to undermined authoritarian institutions (Schedler 2013), thus enabling them to challenge the dictator, particularly if the regime starts cracking. On the other hand, the notion of *sleeping institutions* suggests that in the changing environment previously almost non-existent institutions can "wake up", restore their autonomy and start functioning properly. In sum, the valuable input of Russian studies for the scholarship of comparative authoritarianism and practitioners around the globe would be in deepening our understanding of when and how Putin's regime can collapse. And whether the collapse of Putin's regime would mean the collapse of Russia or its resurrection.

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