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# Understanding how the Russian Government Works

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## Introduction

Understanding how the Russian government works is essential for anyone seeking to comprehend the intricate relationships that define power, authority, and governance within the world's largest country. Russia's vast landscape and diversity of peoples, cultures, and local traditions make the administration of such a state uniquely complex. This book sets out to unravel the structure and functions of the Russian government, from its centralized leadership to its regional and local institutions, illuminating both official frameworks and practical realities.

At the core of the Russian system is the Constitution of the Russian Federation, adopted in 1993, which established Russia as a democratic federal state with a republican form of government. The Constitution delineates three main branches of power: the executive, legislative, and judicial, each with designated responsibilities designed to ensure balance and accountability. However, over the years, the practical implementation of these principles has varied, shaped by historical experiences, political developments, and leadership styles.

The Russian government stands out among world political systems for its strong presidency, which wields substantial influence over the other branches, especially the executive and judiciary. The President's powers encompass foreign policy, defense, key appointments, and the issuance of binding decrees. Yet, the Government (or Cabinet), headed by the Prime Minister, plays a critical day-to-day role in managing the nation's policies and administration, working alongside a complex web of ministries, agencies, and services.

Legislative authority is vested in the Federal Assembly, a bicameral body comprising the State Duma and the Federation Council. The two chambers together adopt federal laws, oversee budgetary and political matters, and play a key part in appointments and oversight of the Government. Meanwhile, the judiciary, with its Constitutional Court and Supreme Court at the helm, aims to maintain legal order, civil rights, and the rule of law, while functioning independently from the political branches.

Perhaps less well-known, but equally important, are the layers of government below the national level. The Russian Federation consists of a multitude of federal entities—republics, regions, territories, cities of federal significance, and autonomous areas—each with certain powers and forms of government. Beneath them operate local self-government bodies, which handle matters of immediate public concern and represent the interests of local communities.

In the chapters that follow, this book explores each component of Russia's

government system, examining its functions, powers, and interrelationships. Along the way, we will consider both the intended constitutional principles and the ways in which political practice has shaped, strengthened, or strained them. By the end, readers will have a comprehensive guide to how authority is organized and exercised across Russia, providing valuable insight into its governance today and possibilities for the future.

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## CHAPTER ONE: The Historical Roots of the Russian Government System

To understand the intricate machinery of the modern Russian government, we must first embark on a journey through its long and often turbulent past. Like the deep, meandering rivers that crisscross its vast landscape, the roots of Russia's state system run far back into history, shaped by centuries of diverse influences, conflicts, and periods of profound transformation. The present-day structures and political culture did not emerge in a vacuum; they are the product of an evolutionary process, marked by enduring themes and recurring patterns of governance.

The story begins, as many historical narratives of Russia do, with the formation of the early East Slavic states, notably Kievan Rus', in the 9th century. This period saw the emergence of distinct political entities in a geographically challenging environment. Governance was often decentralized, influenced by tribal structures and princely rule, with important cities like Novgorod developing forms of assembly-based decision-making known as the "veche." While not a unified monolithic state in the modern sense, Kievan Rus' laid some foundational elements, including the adoption of Orthodox Christianity from Byzantium in 988 AD, which introduced a new layer of cultural and ideological unity and influenced the relationship between spiritual and temporal power.

However, this early period of development was dramatically interrupted and fundamentally altered by the Mongol invasion in the 13th century. The subsequent two-and-a-half centuries of Golden Horde dominance, often referred to as the "Mongol Yoke," had a profound and lasting impact on the trajectory of Russian statehood. While the Mongols did not directly administer all Russian lands, they imposed a system of tribute collection and control that fostered centralization and the rise of new power centers.

Moscow, initially a relatively minor principality, strategically navigated its relationship with the Golden Horde, gradually accumulating power and territory. Its princes gained the crucial right to collect tribute on behalf of the Mongols, a privilege they exploited to their own advantage, consolidating control over neighboring lands. This era is often cited as a critical period where traits of centralized, even autocratic, rule began to solidify, partly as an adaptation to the demands and administrative practices of the Mongol overlords. The experience left an indelible mark on the developing Russian state, shaping its administrative methods and contributing to a sense of distinctness, even isolation, from Western European developments.

The lifting of the Mongol Yoke in the late 15th century paved the way for the rise of the centralized Russian state centered in Moscow. Grand Prince Ivan III, often called "the Great," played a pivotal role in this period, significantly expanding Muscovy's territory, ending the tribute relationship with the Golden Horde, and laying the groundwork for a unified Russian state. His reign saw the adoption of Byzantine court rituals and symbols, reinforcing the image of Moscow as the successor to the Eastern Roman Empire and the center of Orthodox Christianity.

The trajectory towards autocratic rule accelerated under Ivan IV, "the Terrible," who in 1547 was the first Russian monarch to be officially crowned as Tsar. Ivan IV consolidated his power through brutal repression of the boyars (the traditional aristocracy) and further centralized the administration. His reign cemented the concept of the Tsar as an absolute ruler, answerable only to God, a notion that would profoundly influence Russian governance for centuries. The idea of the ruler being above the law, rather than subject to it as in evolving Western legal traditions, took deep root during this period.

Following the tumultuous "Time of Troubles" in the early 17th century, a period of dynastic crisis and foreign intervention, the Romanov dynasty came to power in 1613. The early Romanovs gradually restored stability and continued the process of centralization. While early Romanov rule saw some instances of convening the Zemsky Sobor, a type of national assembly, these gatherings became less frequent as the monarchy consolidated its power.

The 18th century ushered in the era of the Russian Empire, most notably under Peter the Great. Driven by a desire to modernize and Westernize Russia, Peter undertook radical reforms across administration, the military, and society. He replaced the old, often cumbersome, Muscovite administrative structures with a more streamlined, bureaucratic system, introducing the Table of Ranks in 1722 to create a service-based hierarchy open theoretically to all classes. This aimed to create a professional class of state servants loyal to the Tsar, although in practice, the bureaucracy often became characterized by inefficiency, corruption, and a focus on hierarchy and personal connections over merit and service to the state.

Peter's reforms significantly strengthened the central government and the power of the monarch, bringing the church under state control and further diminishing the influence of the old aristocracy. Subsequent rulers, such as Catherine the Great, continued some of these modernizing trends while maintaining the autocratic system. The vastness of the empire presented immense challenges for effective governance, often leading to a reliance on centralized control and a significant, albeit sometimes ineffective, bureaucracy to project state power across enormous distances.

The 19th century saw Russia grappling with internal pressures and the need for

reform, particularly after defeats in conflicts like the Crimean War, which exposed the country's economic and technological backwardness compared to Western European powers. Tsar Alexander II implemented significant reforms in the 1860s, including the emancipation of the serfs, the introduction of a more independent judicial system with elements like trial by jury and elected judges, and the establishment of local self-government bodies (Zemstvo). These reforms, while significant, were often inconsistent and faced resistance from the conservative bureaucracy.

Despite these reform efforts, the fundamental autocratic nature of the Tsarist system remained. The Tsar's power was still considered absolute, and there was no national-level representative legislature or constitution to constrain it effectively. This lack of meaningful political participation and the persistence of social and economic inequalities fueled growing discontent and revolutionary movements throughout the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

The early 20th century brought further challenges, culminating in the 1905 Revolution. This uprising forced Tsar Nicholas II to issue the October Manifesto, which promised civil liberties and led to the creation of the State Duma, a national legislative assembly. While the Duma represented the first attempt at a national representative body, its powers were limited, and the Tsar retained significant authority, able to dissolve it and rule by decree. Four Dumas were convened between 1906 and 1917, offering a nascent platform for political debate and legislative activity, but they ultimately failed to fundamentally alter the balance of power or address the deep-seated grievances within society.

The strains of World War I proved to be the final undoing of the Tsarist autocracy. Military defeats, economic collapse, and widespread suffering led to the February Revolution of 1917, which resulted in the abdication of Nicholas II and the end of over three centuries of Romanov rule. A Provisional Government was formed, but it faced challenges from various political factions, most notably the Soviets (councils of workers' and soldiers' deputies) that had sprung up across the country.

The power vacuum and political instability of 1917 culminated in the October Revolution, when the Bolsheviks, led by Vladimir Lenin, seized power. This event marked a radical departure in Russia's governmental history, leading to the establishment of the world's first socialist state. The Bolsheviks were inherently hostile to traditional forms of representative democracy and quickly moved to consolidate power in the hands of the Communist Party.

The subsequent Soviet period (1922-1991) was characterized by a highly centralized, one-party system. Although the constitution nominally established a federal structure and state bodies like the Supreme Soviet and Council of Ministers, real power resided with the Communist Party, particularly its top leadership (the Politburo). Decisions were made within the party hierarchy and then rubber-stamped by state institutions.

Under Joseph Stalin, centralization and party control reached unprecedented levels, creating a totalitarian regime that suppressed dissent and eliminated any semblance of independent political activity. The state bureaucracy expanded immensely, becoming a powerful instrument of party control, prioritizing loyalty to the party over independent governance or the rule of law. While the Soviet system formally included legislative and executive bodies, their function was primarily to implement party directives, not to act as independent branches of power.

The judicial system during the Soviet era was likewise subordinate to the party's will, serving as a tool to enforce its ideology and control the population. Concepts like the independence of the judiciary or the separation of powers were fundamentally incompatible with the monolithic power structure of the party-state.

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 brought an end to Communist rule and ushered in a new period of transition for Russia. The formation of the Russian Federation under Boris Yeltsin involved the difficult task of building a new political and economic system from the ground up. This period saw the adoption of the 1993 Constitution, which formally established a democratic federal state with a separation of powers.

However, the legacy of centuries of centralized, autocratic, and later one-party rule continued to influence the development of the new system. Some analysts argue that the transition was less a clear-cut move to democracy and more a temporary weakening of the state, allowing for the re-emergence of authoritarian tendencies rooted in Russia's historical experience. The powerful role envisioned for the presidency in the 1993 Constitution, for instance, can be seen, in part, as a reflection of Russia's long history of strong, centralized executive power.

Thus, the current Russian government system, while formally structured around modern constitutional principles, operates within a historical context deeply shaped by persistent themes: a strong inclination towards centralized authority, a powerful executive figure, the significant role of the state bureaucracy, and a complex, often challenging, relationship between central power and regional or local governance. Understanding this historical backdrop is crucial to appreciating the dynamics and characteristics of the Russian government today.

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