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The Politics of Russia

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Introduction

The political landscape of Russia is complex, shaped by centuries of autocratic rule, the Soviet era, and the tumultuous transition to a post-Soviet state. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Russia has faced significant challenges in establishing a stable political system. While its 1993 constitution declared Russia a federal semi-presidential republic, the practical balance of power has evolved into a highly centralized system dominated by the presidency. This centralization, combined with Russia's historical legacies and socioeconomic transformations, makes understanding its political system a challenging yet crucial task.

At the heart of Russian politics is a rich and often turbulent history. From the early days of Kievan Rus and Muscovite autocracy to the imperial rule of the Romanovs and the revolutionary upheavals of the twentieth century, Russian governance has consistently reflected a tension between central control and regional autonomy. The Soviet Union's seventy-year experiment in socialist rule established new traditions of party dominance, state security, and ideological conformity, many of which continue to exert influence in modern times. The chaos of the 1990s, the rise of economic oligarchs, and the reassertion of state power under Vladimir Putin have all left indelible marks on the nation's political trajectory.

Russia's contemporary political architecture is defined by its constitution, but also by the de facto operation of its institutions. The formal separation of powers among the legislative, executive, and judicial branches is often overshadowed by the dominance of the president, whose actual authority extends far beyond what is written in law. The presidency not only sets the tone for domestic and foreign policy but also plays a central role in appointing officials, overseeing security services, and arbitrating disputes among political elites and regional leaders. As a result, the real mechanics of Russian government sometimes diverge substantially from the ideals and frameworks set forth in official documents.

The dynamics of Russian politics cannot be fully appreciated without considering the roles of political parties and the electoral process. Although Russia technically has a multi-party system, the landscape is characterized by the overwhelming strength of the United Russia party, which consistently commands majorities in the State Duma and dominates regional legislatures. Opposition parties, particularly those that challenge the Kremlin's direction, face obstacles ranging from bureaucratic barriers to outright repression. Elections, both presidential and legislative, remain important mechanisms for demonstrating legitimacy, but allegations of manipulation, media bias, and suppression of dissent cast doubt on their fairness and competitiveness.

The social and legal environment in Russia also reflects broader political trends. Civil society organizations, independent journalists, and advocates for human rights operate in a climate of increasing state intervention and control. Legislation targeting “foreign agents” and “undesirable organizations” has narrowed the space for independent activity and limited avenues for political participation and advocacy. Meanwhile, the media, particularly television, is largely state-controlled and serves as a crucial tool for shaping public opinion and disseminating official narratives.

Understanding Russia’s politics requires not only a focus on institutions and actors but also an appreciation for the deep historical patterns, strategic interests, and challenges the country faces both domestically and internationally. This book seeks to provide readers with a comprehensive guide to Russian politics, offering insights into its historical evolution, formal structures, principal actors, civil society, media, and key policy challenges. As Russia continues to play a prominent and sometimes controversial role on the world stage, a nuanced grasp of its political system is more important than ever.

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CHAPTER ONE: Historical Foundations of Russian Politics

The story of Russian politics is a long and winding road, stretching back over a millennium and shaped by a unique blend of internal dynamics and external pressures. To truly grasp the present, we must first delve into the mists of time and explore the foundational elements that have sculpted the Russian state and its political culture. It's a journey through forests and steppes, through the rise and fall of empires, and through the enduring tension between centralized power and regional aspirations.

Our starting point is Kievan Rus', a loose federation of East Slavic tribes that emerged in the 9th century. This early political entity, centered around the city of Kiev, was influenced by both Slavic traditions and the arrival of Norse traders and warriors, known as Varangians. The Rurik dynasty, of Varangian origin, came to rule over these disparate groups. While often described as a federation or even a chiefdom, Kievan Rus' saw a complex interplay of power between the Grand Prince in Kiev and local princes and boyars who held significant autonomy. Succession within the Rurikid dynasty was often governed by a complex system of lateral inheritance, which could lead to internal conflict and fragmentation.

The economy of Kievan Rus' was largely based on trade along river routes, particularly the "Route to Greece," connecting the Baltic Sea to the Byzantine Empire. This economic activity influenced the political structure, as control over these routes was crucial. The adoption of Orthodox Christianity from Byzantium in 988 by Prince Vladimir the Great was a pivotal moment, providing a unifying cultural and religious force and strengthening ties with the Byzantine world.

However, Kievan Rus' was not destined to endure in its initial form. Internal strife among the princes, coupled with external threats from nomadic groups like the Pechenegs and Cumans, weakened the federation. The final blow came in the 13th century with the Mongol invasion. The Mongol armies, led by Batu Khan, a grandson of Genghis Khan, swept through the Rus' lands, devastating cities and bringing the principalities under the control of the Golden Horde.

The period of Mongol rule, lasting for over two centuries, had a profound and lasting impact on the development of Russian statehood and political culture. While destructive, the Mongol yoke also inadvertently contributed to the rise of a new center of power. The Mongol requirement for Russian princes to pay tribute and their system of taxation and control favored those who were adept at collecting revenue and

navigating the complex relationship with the Golden Horde. This environment allowed the relatively minor principality of Moscow, situated in a strategically advantageous location, to gradually consolidate power.

The princes of Moscow proved particularly skillful in cooperating with their Mongol overlords, acting as tax collectors and expanding their territory through a combination of purchase, colonization, and conquest. This process, known as the "gathering of the Russian lands," saw Moscow absorb other principalities, increasing its wealth and influence. Unlike the earlier system of lateral succession in Kievan Rus', the Muscovite princes increasingly favored primogeniture, ensuring a more stable transfer of power and contributing to centralization.

Ivan III, later known as Ivan the Great, was a pivotal figure in this period. Reigning in the latter half of the 15th century, he significantly expanded Muscovite territory and is credited with laying the foundations for a centralized Russian state. Crucially, Ivan III also defied the Golden Horde and, after a standoff at the Ugra River in 1480, effectively ended Mongol dominance over a significant portion of the Rus' lands. This marked a turning point, asserting Moscow's growing sovereignty.

Ivan III's reign also saw the adoption of Byzantine symbols, such as the double-headed eagle, and the development of the idea of Moscow as the "Third Rome," a successor to Constantinople and a center of Orthodox Christianity and universal Christian authority. This ideology provided a powerful sense of divine mission and legitimacy for the burgeoning Muscovite state. Ivan also implemented legal reforms, such as the Sudebnik of 1497, which aimed to unify the legal system and strengthen centralized control.

The consolidation of power continued under Ivan IV, better known as Ivan the Terrible. His reign in the 16th century was marked by further territorial expansion and the strengthening of autocratic rule. Ivan IV's methods were often brutal, employing a period of terror known as the Oprichnina to suppress perceived enemies among the boyars and further centralize power. While effective in breaking the power of the old aristocracy, his reign also sowed seeds of instability.

Following Ivan the Terrible's death, Russia entered a period of political and social turmoil known as the Time of Troubles. This era, characterized by disputed successions, civil war, and foreign intervention, highlighted the fragility of the centralized state despite the efforts of the preceding rulers. The Time of Troubles eventually ended with the election of Mikhail Romanov as Tsar in 1613, establishing the Romanov dynasty that would rule Russia for the next three centuries.

The early Romanovs focused on restoring stability and consolidating their power. The 17th century saw further territorial expansion and the development of a more formalized autocratic system. The state apparatus grew, and the power of the Tsar

became increasingly absolute, often at the expense of the remaining vestiges of regional autonomy and the influence of the old boyar class.

Peter the Great, reigning in the late 17th and early 18th centuries, dramatically reshaped Russia and its political system. Driven by a desire to modernize Russia and assert its place among European powers, Peter implemented sweeping reforms across various aspects of life, including the military, administration, and culture. He centralized the government further, created a new capital in St. Petersburg, and established a system of colleges (ministries) to oversee different areas of governance.

Peter's reforms were often implemented with a heavy hand, reflecting his belief in the absolute authority of the monarch. He sought to create a meritocratic system based on service to the state, challenging the traditional power of the nobility. While his reforms propelled Russia onto the world stage, they also reinforced the autocratic nature of the regime and widened the gap between the Westernized elite and the largely traditional peasantry.

Catherine the Great, an empress of the late 18th century, is often associated with the concept of "enlightened absolutism." She corresponded with prominent European Enlightenment thinkers and introduced some reforms aimed at modernizing the legal system and promoting education. However, her commitment to autocratic rule remained unwavering, and her reforms often served to strengthen the state rather than empower the populace. The Pugachev rebellion, a massive peasant uprising during her reign, demonstrated the deep social tensions that simmered beneath the surface of the seemingly absolute state.

The 19th century saw the Russian Empire grapple with the challenges of modernization and the growing calls for reform. Alexander I's reign began with some liberal aspirations, but the Decembrist revolt of 1825, an attempt by a group of army officers to introduce constitutional reforms, was brutally suppressed, ushering in a period of conservatism under Nicholas I.

Alexander II, in the mid-19th century, introduced significant reforms, most notably the emancipation of the serfs in 1861. These "Great Reforms" aimed to modernize Russia and address some of the systemic issues plaguing the country. However, they also had unintended consequences, contributing to social unrest and the rise of revolutionary movements.

His successor, Alexander III, reacted to the growing radicalism by implementing a policy of "counter-reforms," rolling back some of the liberal changes and strengthening autocratic control. This period saw increased censorship, repression of dissent, and a focus on Russification.

The reign of the last Tsar, Nicholas II, witnessed the culmination of these tensions.

Economic hardship, social unrest, and military defeats, particularly in the Russo-Japanese War, weakened the autocracy. The 1905 Revolution forced Nicholas II to grant some concessions, including the establishment of a legislative assembly, the State Duma, but he retained significant power.

Ultimately, the strains of World War I proved too much for the teetering empire. Mounting casualties, economic collapse, and widespread dissatisfaction with the Tsar's leadership led to the February Revolution in 1917, which overthrew the monarchy and brought an end to centuries of Romanov rule. This dramatic event opened the door to a new and even more tumultuous chapter in Russian political history.

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