

**Research Report
IREX STG**

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Research Topic & Country Visited

This grant supported travel to Moscow, Russia to permit the grantee to further his research into the institutional development of the Russian State Duma, the country's national legislature. Specifically, the grantee was interested in gaining a fuller appreciation of the State Duma as an institutional actor within the larger political system. To that end, electoral and organizational aspects of its functioning were of particular concern.

Relevance and Contribution to the Field

The Russian case of institutional development in the aftermath of the collapse of the communist system is of particular importance in political science and related fields. The sudden and revolutionary changes in politics, economics, and society in Eastern and Central Europe, carrying with them the creation from scratch of new democratic and capitalist systems, have provided scholars an opportunity to examine first hand the nature of institutional choices (e.g., adopting presidentialism versus parliamentarism, plurality versus proportional electoral systems, checks and balances among actors versus the concentration of authority in one office, etc.) and the impact of these choices in the success or failure of post-communist transitions. More pointedly, the academic literature has argued that "institutions matter" in the successes and failures in previous attempts to build democracy on the rubble of previous authoritarian regimes (e.g., in Latin America in the 1970s and 1980s), and the simultaneous attempts in the European post-communist setting to create and maintain democratic institutions has provided a set of cases to test the universality of the previous findings.

Russia is of central importance in a certain sense because the stakes are so high. Russia is the largest, most populated, and most militarily powerful of any of the post-communist states. The success or failure of the liberal project in Russia, therefore, carries rather profound consequences for the entire region. Within this general argument about democratization is the more specific concern within the academic literature of the institutional balance between the executive and legislative branches of national government. As has been well chronicled, this important debate within the early Russian post-communist government (i.e., 1992-1993) took place in the absence of a new democratic constitution; the political system during this time was very unstable and resulted in an abortive insurrection, the forced dissolution of the legislature by President Yeltsin, and the adoption via a national referendum of a new executive-dominated constitution in December 1993. It was at this point that the State Duma, the new national bicameral legislature was born.

Approach and Methodology

The goal of this particular research trip to Moscow was to be able to go beyond the formal academic literature on the subject and to be afforded the chance to speak directly with interested and knowledgeable experts on the State Duma. Of special interest were those who actually work or have worked in the legislature (deputies or staff), those who work in non-governmental organizations that monitor the State Duma and its activities, and those who are

involved with the numerous political parties that are motivated to win seats in the Duma and to influence its institutional development through their platforms.

To these ends, I was able to visit and speak with a number of individuals in a non-formal, “off the record” setting. I was interested in gaining from these experts a sense of where the Duma stood presently as an institution in the political system and how it was developing, what its future role might be. This type of research is important to be able to avoid an overly formalistic understanding of the Duma. That is, inasmuch as there is in almost any political system (and especially in those that are not consolidated) an important gap between the formal or legal powers of political actors and those powers that are actually exercised, a strict reliance of the formal rules and regulations of the system (e.g., constitutional or legal documents) threatens to present a false or incomplete picture of the actor in question. For the State Duma, understanding how “in fact” the institution behaves, how its committees work, what accommodations it makes and expects, how it interacts with the executive, and so on, is critical in developing a mature and nuanced understanding of the institution.

With these goals in mind, I spoke with individuals at the following organizations: The Institute for Election Systems Development (*Institut razvitiya izbiratel'nykh sistem – IRIS*), The Carnegie Moscow Center (*Moskovskii tsentr Karnegi*), The Central Election Commission of the Russian Federation (*Tsentrāl'naya izbiratel'naya komissiya Rossiiskoi Federatsii*), The Foundation for the Development of Parliamentarism in Russia (*Fondom razvitiya parlamentarizma v Rossii*), The Center for Political Technology (*Tsentr politicheskikh tekhnologii*), and the political parties *Yabloko*, the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (*Kommunistticheskaya partiya Rossiiskoi Federatsii*), and Unity (*Edinstvo-Medved'*).

Research Findings and Preliminary Conclusions

In the aftermath of the violent end of the first post-communist system, the new Russian legislature has been less assertive (both by virtue of the circumscribed powers ascribed to it in the constitution as well as the institutional memory of its forced military dissolution) and has sought to find its role within the new political system in a more patient and careful way. Many scholars and politicians have criticized the State Duma for its perceived weakness, its tendency to defer to the Kremlin (i.e., the executive), and have seen it especially in the past year as being dominated by the executive branch. This theme was consistently put forward by those not officially tied to the Duma or with the major power brokers in the chamber. In many ways this assessment is accurate, yet several people (primarily those formally associated with the Duma) stressed that the State Duma has become increasingly professionalized, seasoned, and has carved out an important role in the political decision making process. At the same time, it has been forced to choose its fights carefully (e.g., over the Prime Ministerial appointments in 1998 of Sergei Kirienko – which the Duma lost – and Viktor Chernomyrdin – which it won) and not to waste political capital on secondary or tertiary issues.

This research on the State Duma, then, is of a new legislature in an executive-dominated political system that is slowly moving away from its authoritarian past and toward at least a more pluralistic – if not avowedly democratic – politics. Adding another layer to the challenge it faces, the State Duma has so far been unable to rely on that which has been indispensable in advanced democracies to the normal functioning of legislatures, both electorally and in their internal organization: a developed and stable political party system. This second issue has also weakened the legislative branch in Russia and made it doubly difficult to act as a check on executive power. Virtually all those interviewed stressed that a strong political party system that could strengthen the organization of the Duma was not in the interest of the president. Studying

how the legislature is developing as an institution in such a setting, then, is at the heart of the issue of democratization in Russia.

The information garnered from this diverse group of observers, however, contained significant variation. Those entities formally connected with the State Duma (e.g., staff) or the government in general (e.g., those affiliated with party organizations) seemed less critical of the Duma, less willing in discussions to provide anything other than the “company line” on the Duma or their organization. The message from these groups and individuals was much more positive relative to the current and future role of the Duma in the political system (while admitting that the Duma was formally at a significant disadvantage vis-a-vis the presidential apparatus). On the other hand, the non-governmental organizations that monitor elections, legislation, and the activities of the Duma in general were much more willing to provide information on the record, information that had a decided opinion, and were much more willing to spend time with the researcher. I found interacting with these organizations to be very positive, comfortable, and informative.

Suggestions for Further Research

As most scholars who have studied the Duma already know, gaining access to the internal activities of that institution is very difficult. Access to the building is very tightly restricted and outsiders may not observe the floor debates. At bottom, it is not a hospitable institution for outside researchers. To be sure, the Duma puts out a steady flow of documents that may be examined and one can get a rather good sense of the formal processes of the chamber. However, and perhaps this point is doubly significant in a culture like Russia’s, the informal practices and activities of the deputies, staff, and parties are equally important. Getting a sense of these behaviors is not an easy endeavor. It seems to me that research on the Duma needs to be balanced between the standard approach of investigating the formal rules, regulations, and processes relevant to the Duma’s operation, on the one hand, with strategies aimed at getting to the informal “rules of the game” in legislative politics.

Recommendations to the US Policy Community

A very significant role in the democratization process in Russia is being played by non-governmental organizations: they act as watchdogs and attempt to ensure accountability. They are involved in grassroots citizen training, encourage transparency, monitor elections, and perform other critical tasks. Any help the US government could provide in aiding appropriate NGOs would provide a rather bigger bang-for-the-buck in our efforts to facilitate democratization in Russia. Very often it is the smaller and less famous NGOs that operate out of rented apartments in the less glamorous section of town (e.g., *IRIS* mentioned above) that have an impact a sizeable multiple of their budget and manpower, and that seem more worthy of admiration than their more famous and well-heeled colleagues in plush office buildings.