



RUSSIA'S PARLIAMENT: A 'RUBBER STAMP' ASSEMBLY?

Events: In November 2008, in his first annual address to Russia's Federal Assembly, President Dmitry Medvedev (who had recently replaced Vladimir Putin in office, the latter becoming prime minister) proposed a change to the Russian constitution, extending the president's electoral term from four years to six years. The reform allowed Putin, who had stood down after eight years in office due to the constitutional ban on presidents serving more than two consecutive terms, to return and, potentially, serve for a further twelve years as president. Some of his opponents warned that such a development created the prospect of a 'Putin dictatorship'. The constitutional amendment was, nevertheless, approved in less than two months. Needing a two-thirds majority in the lower chamber, the State Duma, the amendment was passed by 393 votes to 57. In the upper chamber, the Federation Council, where a three-quarter's majority is needed to pass a constitutional amendment, the measure was passed by 144 votes to just 1. In September 2011, Putin announced his intention to run once again for the presidency, which he successfully did in March 2012, Medvedev replacing him as prime minister. In the 2018 Russian presidential election, Putin won re-election for his second consecutive term in office, and his fourth overall.

Significance: Russia's Federal Assembly came into existence in dramatic circumstances. Following the break-up of the USSR, President Yeltsin was confronted by a parliament (the holdover Supreme Soviet of the Russian Federation) largely unsympathetic to the liberal reforms his administration attempted to advance. Growing tensions between the president and the parliament led in October 1993 to the military seizure of the White House, the site of the Russian Supreme Soviet, and the imposition of presidential rule. Under Yeltsin's new constitution, a semi-presidential system of government was established, and the Supreme Soviet was replaced by the bicameral Federal Assembly. The Federal Assembly is formally designated as the supreme representative and legislative body of the Russian Federation, and, on the face of it, the powers of the State Duma parallel those of the US House of Representatives. Both houses, for instance, can initiate the impeachment of the president and override the president's legislative veto. In addition, the State Duma is vested with the power to bring



the government down and to confirm the president's appointment of a prime minister, while, in return, the president can dissolve the State Duma.

However, Russia's semi-presidential system is highly unbalanced. Not only does the president have a wide-ranging ability to legislate by issuing decrees and executive orders, but the fact that only the executive, and not the State Duma, can initiate money bills, means that the president also controls the disposal of most of the government's resources. Nevertheless, the chief weakness of the Federal Assembly is its lack of meaningful political independence from the executive. Apart from the 1993 and 1995 parliamentary elections, forces opposed to the Kremlin have rarely been allowed to gain significant influence. Once Yeltsin stood down in favour of Putin in 1999, the success of the United Russia party, strongly aligned to Putin and Medvedev, has played a major role in ensuring the subordination of the State Duma to the Kremlin. United Russia achieved a peak of 64 per cent of the vote in the 2007 Duma elections, and, even though its vote fell to 49 per cent in 2011, the party retained majority control of the chamber. The latter elections provoked the first anti-Kremlin protests of the Putin era, giving voice to allegations of electoral irregularities, including ballot stuffing. Critics of Russia's 'superpresidential' system have argued that the weakness of its parliament has been a significant factor in the growth of arbitrary government, as insufficient checks have been placed on the drift towards corruption, the intimidation of opponents of the regime, and the manipulation of the Russian media.