

**Philippe Schmitter:
 The status of parties in the
 epoch of corporatism**

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RJ Dear Mr. Schmitter, can a system of the dominance of one ruling party contribute to a weakening of the influence of economic clans and power groups on politics within societies in transition? What are the social, economic and political conditions necessary for a weakening of the power factor?

Today, parties do not demonstrate their capacities for “channelling” corporate interests into state ones, as was previously the case. Powerful “class-based” organisations, such as trade unions, commercial chambers, associations, and social movements have replaced the strong party organisation. In Western Europe, this is called **corporatism**, whereby certain interest groups establish their own associations for the purposes of interacting with the state. And, subsequently, such associations can take on the responsibility of exercising important functions.

“RJ — Standpoint of the Week” presents an exclusive interview with **Philippe Schmitter**, a renowned American political scientist and a specialist on the problems of transition from authoritarian political regimes to democratic ones

In the past, these associations operated through parties, as was the case, for example, in Scandinavia or in Austria. But they became more autonomous over time. There are independent interest groups and associations in modern-day Russia, while the only question remaining is how powerful they actually are. Several former communist countries managed to emerge from their transitory path to democracy with rather powerful associations, while others failed to see such achievements.

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In the case of Russia, the influence of the party system remains quite insignificant, as everything is determined by one or two people who personify the supreme power. A multi-party presidential system facilitates the consolidation of democracy to a greater degree than the system that currently exists in Russia. The Russian case is a presidential system, in which the presidential establishment has almost completely edged out the institute of political parties. Such systems tend to inflict a great deal of damage to parties and party systems. As a rule, parties virtually do not exist under such conditions. In such systems, a party is a group of people, with whom the president has decided to surround himself, and eventually such a situation spells for not only the degradation of political society, but the degradation of society as a whole. This is reason that **it is really very important for Russia to strengthen the political factor and to eliminate the role of non-political clans and influence groups.** More often than not, countries that are experiencing their transition period also encounter the problem of the army trying to take the country under its control. However, as I understand the situation, in the case



Philippe Schmitter

is necessary to identify such a niche for the military, which avoids any notion of their participation in the persecution and punishment of the country's own citizens. The civil defence or transportation sector may also present a solution in this regard (it is on this basis that the airforce ended up managing Brazilian airlines for quite a long period of time). Another option is the military's participation in international peace-keeping operations. However, this policy is virtually ineffective in relation to the secret services. It is unlikely that the dispatching of a group of employees of the Russian FSB to a place like Congo on an international peace-keeping assignment would have an effect on Russian politics in any positive way.

Concerns about the problem of the secret services in Russia are understandable. People from these struc-

ture tend to possess a set of rather specific organisational skills. As soon as they enter the realm of politics, they begin to accumulate individual wealth and, in most cases, they do rather successfully.

RJ *The party had a leading role in the “party-government” tandem during the Soviet times. It is quite the contrary situation in modern-day Russia. What, in your opinion, should be the ideal distribution of roles between these institutions in order to ensure the democratisation of Russia?*

It is quite possible that, at present, the government dominates both the party and the state. In order to institutionalise Russian democracy, it is necessary to create relatively autonomous power institutions, which would be constantly keeping each other's operations in check. A system of checks and balances needs to be established. And the role of parties in such a process still remains important, though that role is not a crucial one.

RJ *In your opinion, what role should parties and party systems play in the process of the modernisation of a given country? In reference to the party, is it more of a driving element or a deterrent in the progressive transformation of a country?*

It is a correct position to make a distinction between parties and party systems in this context. Whether parties are a driver or a deterrent of transformation solely depends on the character of the parties that are being considered. It is much more important to understand the role that is played by the system in which they exist, for instance, whether it is a multi-party or a two-party system.

On the whole, parties and party systems are in decline today. The role played by parties in public life, as well as in social, educational and other processes is becoming increasingly less pronounced. In the 1950s and 1960s, political parties used to

Concerns about the problem of secret services in Russia are understandable. People from these structures possess a set of rather specific organisational skills. As soon as they enter the realm of politics, they begin to accumulate individual wealth and, in most cases, they do rather successfully.

of Russia it is a much more relevant move to reduce the influence of the secret services and their associated agencies on politics.

As for the army, the standard solution for countries in transition is to seek out a new role for its military. It

tures tend to possess a set of rather specific organisational skills. As soon as they enter the realm of politics, they begin to accumulate individual wealth and, in most cases, they do so rather successfully. Not only do they penetrate the govern-

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play a much more significant role in Western Europe and in other regions of the world. Russia has embarked on the path of modernisation at a moment when political parties are fading into the background all over the world. It is a lingering tendency, and this is one that needs to be taken into account.

However, as I said earlier, **party systems are more important than individual parties.** Party systems can be either a driver or a deterrent of development. In turn, what will be the case is ultimately dependent on a number of factors.

It is essential to understand how competitive this system really is. In systems characterised by a high level of competition, where it is virtually impossible to predict the results of the next elections, such factors as the number of parties involved and the specific areas where they are competing play a significant role. One example would be the classical American case, when two opposing and each rather competitive parties anchor their respective strategy on winning the support of those voters remaining in middle ground. This means that they are neither promising a movement nor a deceleration of any kind, but rather they are promising something more in the middle. As far as I understand things, the Russian system is not a highly competitive one — there is a dominant party, which is bound to win all the elections in the foreseeable future, and it means that there is minimal chance for a change of power.

Under certain circumstances, as was the case seen in the Scandinavian countries, as well as in Israel in the first years of the country's existence, the dominant party can indeed become a facilitator of successful changes.

It all depends on the distribution of social forces within the respective party system. Another important factor is which social classes support the dominant party. French political scientist Maurice Duverger distinguished political parties into “movement parties” and “stasis parties”. In his opinion, the movement parties (and historically it was exactly true) were the left parties that desired to bring in changes. The right parties, on the contrary, were eager to maintain the status quo. If everything had remained the same as it used to be, then it would be really easy to answer your question about modernisation: “The left parties are more inclined to change, they stand for innovation and they will be more successfully tackle modernisation and development.” However, this formula no longer works. In many



European countries, it is the case that right-leaning parties tend to be more dynamic and creative than parties that are left-leaning. I don't know whether this tendency applies within Russia and I don't even know whether we have the same understanding of distinct leftist and rightist ideas. In my experience working with students coming from Russia and from the former socialist countries, I cannot help but thinking that our respective understanding of these categories are different. We use similar notions, but it seems to me that Russia tends to apply a different meaning to them. ■

Philippe Schmitter was speaking to Nikita Kurkin and Yulia Netesova

Philippe Schmitter (born November 19, 1936) is an American political scientist, renowned as an expert on the political history of Latin America and on the problems of countries' transitions from authoritarian political regimes to democratic ones.

The first works of Schmitter, which brought him significant popularity, were devoted to investigating

the problems of regional economic integration in the Latin American countries. However, he soon turned to a broader theme, namely the opportunities and restrictions that arise in the evolution of authoritarian regimes towards becoming democratic ones. His most famous book, which Philippe Schmitter co-authored with Guillermo O'Donnell “Transitions From Authoritarian

Rule: Tentative Conclusions About Uncertain Democracies” (1986), was devoted to this very subject.

Corporatism is yet another scholarly subject that Schmitter has devoted a lot of his time to. The results of this particular research program were summarised by Schmitter in his two-volume work, entitled “*Neocorporativismo*” (1992).