

## 'Make it look more democratic, Mikhail Mikhailovich!'

### *Potemkin parliamentarism and the project to redesign the Russian State Duma*

Michał Murawski and Ben Noble

#### Introduction

The Russian State Duma – the lower chamber of the country's national legislature – is often dismissed as an inconsequential body. Statements abound of it being a mere 'rubber stamp', entirely controlled by the Russian executive to realise the policy agenda of the government and the president (Noble and Schulmann 2018; Noble 2020). This accords with characterisations of Russia's political system as a form of non-democracy – and one decreasingly tolerant of dissent and increasingly reliant on coercion as a mode of governance (Dollbaum, Lallouet and Noble 2021).<sup>1</sup>

Despite its peripheral political role, the State Duma is *geographically* situated in the heart of Moscow, adjacent to Red Square and the Kremlin. The legislative body occupies a sprawling, haphazard complex in a 1930s post-constructivist building – formerly the headquarters of the all-powerful Soviet State Planning Committee (Gosplan) (Figure 15.1). The State Duma began operating in this building in 1994, following the shelling (and subsequent closure) of the previous Russian legislature – the Supreme Soviet – by President Boris Yeltsin in October 1993 (Figure 15.2). Around three decades since the Duma's opening, the building's increasingly bedraggled interiors – the work of veteran architectural grandee Mikhail Posokhin and the enormous 'Mosproekt-2' design studio that he has headed since 1993 – are still clad in the official style of the era: a hybrid of 1970s Soviet stagnation chic and 1990s restrained bureaucratic bling.



**Figure 15.1** The current headquarters of the State Duma, adjacent to Manezh Square in the centre of Moscow. Architect: Arkady Langman. Originally built in 1932–1935 as the seat of the Council of Labour and Defence. © Dmitry Ivanov, 9 July 2016. Source: Wikimedia Commons, reproduced on the basis of a CC BY-SA 4.0 licence. Available at: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Building\\_of\\_Council\\_of\\_Labor\\_and\\_Defense,\\_Moscow.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Building_of_Council_of_Labor_and_Defense,_Moscow.jpg) (accessed 25 July 2023)

This chapter provides an analysis of the politics, aesthetics and morphology – the procedures, styles and shapes – of the State Duma during the post-Soviet period. It surveys the (failed) projects to build a new, permanent, purpose-built home for the Duma, and focuses, in particular, on recent – so far inconclusive – discussions for the redesign of the existing Duma’s plenary chamber. In telling this story, we also provide a case study of reflexivity – between political form and content – highlighting the remarkably pivotal role played in the recent design debates by the book *Parliament* (XML 2017).

## The political morphology of Posokhin’s parliaments

Since the early 1990s, Mikhail Posokhin’s Mosproekt-2 has been responsible for the creation of dozens of structures throughout the Russian capital: from churches (and one cathedral) to stadiums and neo-Stalinist



**Figure 15.2** A view of the fire-damaged ‘White House’, the headquarters of the predecessor to the State Duma – the Supreme Soviet of the Russian Federation, located on Krasnopresnenskaya Embankment, Moscow – following shelling by tanks ordered by Russia’s President, Boris Yeltsin, on 4 October 1993. Architects: Dmitry Chechulin and Pavel Shteller. Built 1965–1981. © Bergmann. Source: Wikimedia Commons, reproduced on the basis of a GNU Free Documentation licence. <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:%E3%83%99%E3%83%BC%E3%83%AB%E3%82%A4%E3%83%89%E3%83%BC%E3%83%A0.jpg> (accessed 25 July 2023)

skyscrapers. In the knowledge that a brand new parliament building would necessarily one day be built – a decision to this effect had been made by Yeltsin in 1998 (Kozichev 2012) – Posokhin made sure to render himself indispensable for this project. Dozens of locations were considered – among them the (now disused) eighteenth-century Foundling House on the banks of the Moscow River, and the adjacent, Red-Square-abutting Zaryadye district (Bocharov and Sirenko 2015). And Posokhin played a prominent role in the design work on each of these locations (Bocharov and Sirenko 2015; Ivanov, Aminov and Pushkarskaya 2018).

Posokhin’s career suffered a slump, however, following then-President Dmitry Medvedev’s dismissal of the architect’s patron, Yury Luzhkov, as mayor of Moscow in 2010. Mosproekt-2 had no discernible part to play in the 2012 competition for the replanning of Moscow, which followed the Medvedev-decreed annexation of an enormous chunk of the

neighbouring Moscow Oblast (region) and its incorporation into the city limits. Shortlisted concept designs for a new Russian ‘Federal Centre’ – incorporating both houses of parliament and parts of the federal government – in Kommunarka, at the heart of the annexed territory, included those by numerous global superstar bureaus, among them Rem Koolhaas’s OMA and Ricardo Bofill Taller de Arquitectura (Chubukova 2016; Argenbright 2018). In summer 2014, however, an announcement was made that Russia’s legislative chambers would finally have purpose-built homes (Interfax 2014). A grandiose (350,000 square metre) new parliamentary centre – bringing the State Duma and the Federation Council together in new, proximate buildings – would be built in the north-western suburbs of Moscow (Revzin 2015).

A closed-door competition was held (in apparent violation of new rules governing such processes passed in the Moscow City Duma in 2013 by the then-new chief architect, Sergey Kuznetsov); and the results were announced during a secretive press conference in July 2015, to which few journalists were invited (Revzin 2015). Surreptitiously snapped phone images of the shortlisted designs were leaked by a few of those present at the announcement (Belov 2015). Only three projects were admitted to the (never concluded) second round: a pastiche of the Capitol in Washington DC by the St Petersburg veteran Evgeniy Gerasimov; another Capitol replica by Lanfranco Cirillo (architect of the so-called ‘Putin’s Palace’ in Gelendzhik on southern Russia’s Black Sea coast); and – no prizes for guessing – a submission by Posokhin’s Mosproekt-2. The latter took the form of a multi-winged hybrid of the Berlin Reichstag and a Brezhnev-era ministry building, with an inverted pyramid appended to it. Posokhin won the most votes among all the entries (Revzin 2015).

Critics were up in arms. ‘Luzhkov is back’, cried the influential urban blogger Ilya Varlamov (2015). Mocking the scale of the complex, leading architecture critic Grigoriy Revzin pointed out that the proposed edifice would be big enough to fit the Palace of Westminster – built at the height of the British empire’s global reach – 19 times over:

[T]he situation of conducting a competition for the main public building of the country in a closed regime, via the non-transparent procedure of inviting architects to participate, is simply sickening and shameful ... it’s like conducting a closed presidential election. Our parliamentarians are revealing their disgracefully low qualifications in mastering the basics of ‘managed democracy’ – even comrade Stalin, designing the Palace of the Soviets, was capable of simulating the procedures of an open international competition (Revzin 2015).

Over the coming months and years, Posokhin's '19 Westminster's' project – and the very idea of creating a parliamentary centre on the fringes of Moscow – was delayed and, eventually (by October 2018), quietly abandoned (Surnacheva et al. 2016; Kuznetsova 2018). But the desire to redesign the Duma was not dead.

## The state of the Duma, personalism and the power of the book

Quite independently of these processes, two Dutch architects – Max Cohen de Lara and David Mulder van der Vegt, founders of the Amsterdam-based architecture office XML – were also thinking about the design of legislatures. Their 2017 book *Parliament* presents plenary hall floorplans for all 193 United Nations member states. Not only do they find that the design of these chambers can be categorised into five basic types – 'opposing benches', 'semicircle', 'horseshoe', 'circle' and 'classroom' – but they also suggest that there is a relationship between these types and the level of democracy in particular states. According to their typology, Russia provides a textbook example of legislative architecture expected in non-democracies: the State Duma's plenary hall has a classroom design (XML 2017: 308) (Figure 15.3).

The Duma's leadership became aware of *Parliament* – and drew on its findings in their project to redesign the chamber, planning to move from a classroom to a semicircle configuration, which they regarded to be more democratic, in line with the patterns reported by XML (2017). In other words, parliamentary leaders hoped by means of architectural fiat to imply democratic substance through democratic form; and a book noting a possible relationship between democracy and design looked likely, itself, to shape part of the reality it described.

We can reconstruct an unbroken chain from the book's publication to the Duma redesign plan. Following *Parliament's* publication, David Mulder published a blog post on 7 February 2017 on the book's central findings for the Hansard Society – a research organisation focused on the Westminster Parliament (Mulder 2017). On reading this post, one of this chapter's authors (Noble) posted a link to the blog entry on Facebook on 22 February (Noble 2017a). This Facebook post was seen by Ekaterina Schulmann – a Russian political scientist, expert on legislative politics and prominent public intellectual – who commented 'Aah! What a beauty!', and then posted a YouTube video on the topic on 23 February (Schulmann 2017a). After receiving a copy of *Parliament* from a benefactor who had seen the video, Schulmann then made a second



**Figure 15.3** Plenary hall of the State Duma, consistent with the ‘classroom’ type noted in *XML* (2017). © XML Architecture Research Urbanism

video about the book (Schulmann 2017b).<sup>2</sup> And this second video was, in turn, seen by a senior official of the State Duma.<sup>3</sup>

The Duma’s leadership was at this moment particularly receptive to redesign and renovation ideas for the plenary hall for at least three reasons. First, the long-running plan to build a parliamentary centre had stalled, as noted above. Second, the Duma plenary hall was showing its age. According to various reports, hazardous voids were discovered underneath the building, the offices were cramped and the roof was leaking (Golovanov 2017; BBC News Russian 2017; *Kommersant* 2019; News.ru 2020). In June 2017, a debate was held in the Duma’s plenary chamber concerning the planned so-called ‘renovation’ of Moscow’s Khrushchev-era mass housing, considered by many Muscovites – and especially by Moscow property developers – to be substandard and in need of replacing (Gunko et al. 2018; Mizrokhi 2021). Following the conclusion of the debate, the (now deceased) veteran Duma deputy and leader of the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR), Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, brought up the pitiful state of the plenary hall. That same day, another LDPR deputy had seen



**Figure 15.4** A screenshot from Ekaterina Schulmann’s 14 March 2017 video. © Ekaterina Schulmann. Source: YouTube, reproduced under YouTube’s fair use policy and with the permission of Schulmann. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qbcBoRVIAaA> (accessed 17th July 2023)

his own chair collapse beneath him during a debate in the chamber. Zhirinovskiy said:

[E]ven our own chairs cannot bear the weight of our tireless work! When will the renovation of the State Duma happen? ... We are sitting in the worst building in the world. This is a room for the cleaners and security guards of Gosplan, this is where they had movies put on for them, the cleaners. So, let’s also do a renovation of the State Duma, finally. We’ve been here for 26 years, we’ve been helping the country, but we ourselves are in this here building (Kochetkov 2017).

Zhirinovskiy’s appeal was responded to by the Duma’s speaker, Vyacheslav Volodin:

You’re quite right to say this, we are working for the country, but we’re not making our own conditions any better. And that’s why you’re elected. If you were to improve your own conditions, they wouldn’t elect you (Kochetkov 2017).

In fact, the third reason senior Duma officials were keen to explore renovation options for the chamber relates to Volodin himself. Elected in October 2016, Volodin had previously held a much more powerful position in the Presidential Administration, as its first deputy chief of staff. Deciding to make the most out of what many regarded as a demotion, Volodin set about transforming the State Duma into his own fiefdom (Noble 2017b). Redesigning the Duma's main hall fitted nicely, therefore, into this broader and intensely ambitious 'empire-building' plan.

In December 2017, Volodin convened a closed-door meeting in the Duma complex at which Posokhin presented his designs for a restored Duma chamber, which saw the classroom-shaped layout replaced by a semi-circular amphitheatre. Some of those present gushed over Posokhin's design, which was described (to Murawski in a personal communication) as a 'bad attempt at a copy paste' of the assembly chamber at St Petersburg's Tauride Palace – the meeting place of the Tsarist-era Imperial State Duma.<sup>4</sup> Volodin was, however, less impressed. Clutching a copy of XML's *Parliament*, Volodin berated the veteran architect: 'Can't you make it look more modern, more democratic, Mikhail Mikhailovich?' And, by early 2018, a decision had been made by the parliamentary leadership to redesign the plenary hall in the shape of a 'forum', on the basis of the 'experience of other countries' (Ivanov et al. 2018).

Following Volodin's intervention, Posokhin retained only nominal control over the project; the design work itself was handed to two younger architects, one of those being Moscow's chief architect, Sergey Kuznetsov. Following a tussle over symbolism – Kuznetsov was allegedly fixated on an unworkable ambition to install a giant replica of Norman Foster's Reichstag dome above the debating chamber – the project appeared to stall. Some concept drawings, however, were made by Kuznetsov and submitted to Volodin. These drawings were described by Kuznetsov as representing the 'spirit of openness' which the Russian Duma should exude.

In December 2018, however, it transpired that Posokhin somehow was still in the running. Although the first tender with Mosproekt-2 (on the strength of which Posokhin had made his initial drawings) was torn up, a new one – for an even more wide-ranging or 'global' reconstruction of the Duma – was drawn up instead, again on the basis of a secret internal procedure rather than an open architectural competition (Interfax 2018). The Duma speaker was photographed displaying printouts of Posokhin's new designs, which appeared to draw heavily on the concept drawings made by Kuznetsov some months before (Pozdeeva 2019). Even the layout of the page and placement of the logos mimicked that of the portfolio



submitted by Kuznetsov. Volodin announced that the renovation of the Duma would be completed by spring 2020 – but the project appeared to stall yet again ([Gazeta.ru 2020](#)).

As one Moscow architect told Murawski, whatever form the Duma ends up taking, it may have little to do with any of the above-discussed visions:

[F]irst they wanted to move the Duma somewhere else ... and then they wanted to inscribe into this rectangle all that they wanted from democracy; but what they will get ... will be the result of all sorts of compromises. It will only really be interesting to see ... what happens after the project is completed. To see what manages to squeeze its way into this box, that is the Duma. And I think this is the sense, the meaning, of Russian democracy, too.

## Vertical intimacy, architectural design and the determinants of democratisation

This has been a tale of complex reflexivity – of how commentary on architectural design and its relationship with democracy can itself become part of the story and influence design choices. By drawing out patterns suggestive of the ways in which politics shapes, and is shaped by, architecture, XML's book *Parliament* became an actor in its own right in the project to redesign the Russian State Duma, seized upon by an ambitious new speaker to raise the prestige of his new domain. More broadly, the story provides an opportunity to reflect on the relationship between politics (including the difference between the procedures of parliamentary democracy and of architectural competitions) and aesthetics or morphology (understood to refer to the style, shape and appearance, not only of buildings or their representations, but also of procedures themselves).<sup>5</sup>

The case also provides insights into the nature of politics in modern-day Russia. The links in the chain between the publication of *Parliament* and the Russian State Duma's redesign debate speak to what we might call the 'intimacy' of authoritarian power in Russia – that is, of a system in which a Facebook post by a foreign academic about a book by Dutch architects, amplified by two YouTube videos filmed by an influential Russian intellectual from her kitchen, could end up influencing the choices of senior politicians. Indeed, this resonates with a perennial theme in analysis of Russian politics: that personal connections and the attitudes of well-placed actors can sometimes (apparently) easily outweigh the

effects of formal institutions and rules – but that these effects are sometimes unintended, unexpected and their precise trajectories difficult to predict.

The perils of ‘personalism’ are well known and much analysed (see, for example, [Wright 2010](#)). But, perhaps converging with insights provided by ethnographic studies of informal governance and its aesthetic and material manifestations ([Ledeneva 2013](#)), the ongoing saga of the Russian Duma’s redesign might help us to conceive of some of its unintended *potentials*. Does the informal, unpredictable and intimate operation of power also possess within itself some capacity to subvert the operations of the ‘power vertical’ – that is, the supposed direct line of command from Putin to all lower levels of the state and society – which it is ordinarily seen to undergird?<sup>6</sup> In contrast to naive images of authoritarian top-down control, there is ample space for uncertainty, messiness and serendipity – dynamics that pervert or readjust our scholarly (and popular) perceptions of a seemingly well-oiled, pyramidal machinery of governance and decision-making, where power and decisions flow from top to bottom ([Noble and Schulmann 2021](#)).

The details of the story we have told are also relevant to critiques of Russian politics implying that any suggestion of democracy or democratisation is merely rhetorical, a sham or ‘virtual’ ([Wilson 2005](#)). There is more to ‘Potemkin parliamentarism’ than mere falsehood. Political personalism – and informal, ad hoc processes – may end up having democratic effects, whether intentional or unintentional. However, the experiences of other experiments in what might be called architectural ‘vertical horizontalism’ realised recently in Russia do not bode well on this front ([Murawski 2019b](#)). Most notable among these are the Kremlin-abutting Zaryadye Park or the numerous exercises in the transformation (*blagoustroistvo*) of public space in Moscow in recent years ([Murawski 2022](#)). The procedures by which these spaces are brought into being and managed are (often brazenly) top-down and vertical; the spaces themselves are saturated with surveillance cameras and security personnel and with more subtle mechanisms of disciplining their users. Notwithstanding the obsessively overstated rhetorical emphasis on their ‘unscripted’ nature, ‘wildness’ or their potential for ‘desacralising power’ and ‘enabling freedom’, spaces like Zaryadye are, in fact, much more regimented, controlled, commodified and exclusive than ‘traditional’ parks and public spaces ([Lähteenmäki and Murawski 2023](#)).

We are not suggesting, then, that the State Duma’s new plenary chamber – if it is ever realised – will transform Russia’s deputies into earnest practitioners of democracy. It would be naive and even dangerous to assume that a mere redesign of the Duma’s plenary chamber could bring

about democratisation in Russia. There are other, far more plausible – even if not currently likely – routes to liberalisation, including changes to the formal rules and informal practices shaping elections. And yet, in line with the idea that democratic form can nurture democratic content – however obliquely or minutely – could it be that an initiative apparently driven by Vyacheslav Volodin’s concern for the *optics* of democracy might, perhaps, increase the chances of greater pluralism in parliamentary debate?

In Russia, however, the legislature is as much – if not more so – a space of *exclusion* as of representation. The political opposition is divided between the ‘systemic’ and the ‘non-systemic’: the former co-opted by the Kremlin and allowed to take part in elections (and win legislative seats); the latter facing repression and formidable hurdles when trying to take part in traditional forms of politics. Unscripted, autonomous, ‘real’ politics involving the non-systemic opposition takes place, therefore, *outside* of the State Duma’s walls – in the streets, in courtrooms and online, although the space for dissent continues to shrink (Dollbaum et al. 2021). As long as democratic rights are trampled on in Russia, questions about democratic parliamentary design – albeit interesting – will remain of peripheral practical importance.

## Notes

- 1 This chapter was originally submitted on 23 February 2022 – that is, the day before Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine.
- 2 The benefactor has not given their consent to be named.
- 3 The senior official has not given their consent to be named.
- 4 The individuals cited in this section have consented to being cited but not to being named.
- 5 For a theorisation of political morphology, see Murawski (2019a) and Bach and Murawski (2020).
- 6 For more on the ‘power vertical’, see Monaghan (2012) – and for more on perversions of the ‘power vertical’, see Maksimov et al. (2022).

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