History of the Russian Parliamentary System

Editor: Dr. Tatyana Moisseenko
Recent radical economic and political changes in the territories of the former Soviet Union have stimulated interest in the history of relations between 'state and society' in Russia. IDC is therefore launching a project devoted to the history of the Russian parliamentary system.

At the beginning of the 20th century, Imperial Russia remained one of the few absolutist monarchies, with the Russian Emperor holding all the legislative and executive power. An authoritarian regime, a strongly centralized state and a huge and almost uncontrolled bureaucracy long remained the principal characteristics of its political system. The first attempts at constitutional reform, which had the task of trying to push Russian society in the direction of liberalism and 'parliamentary life', were made at the beginning of the twentieth century. The Fundamental Laws of 1905-1906, which appeared in the wake of the first Russian Revolution, provided the framework for a new political system. The Manifesto of 17 October 1905 gave the country certain political freedoms, and numerous political parties came into existence. The electoral system, despite its complexity and limitations, transformed the Tsarist empire from a country with no popular representation to one which was eventually to have its own legislative assembly - the State Duma. Many of the rights and functions of the first Russian Parliament were, however, heavily circumscribed. There were four convocations of the State Duma. The fourth of these lasted until the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution.

The decades that followed 'the Great October', when the Bolsheviks seized power, witnessed the transformation of Russian society into Soviet society. The USSR nonetheless remained, in its essentials, a highly centralized state. The Communist Party of the Soviet Union, for long the only permitted political party, served as an especially important foundation and guarantee of that unity. Totalitarianism was the essence of the Soviet system, especially of Stalinism. However, the system of 'Soviets' (councils of deputies elected by the whole population and operating at different levels) served as a 'democratic facade'. Institutions such as the Supreme Soviet of the USSR and the Supreme Soviets of the fifteen Socialist republics had legislative and control functions.

Perestroika helped turn a new leaf in Russian history. In 1991, the Supreme Soviet of the Russian Federation and the Congress of People's Deputies were replaced by a Federal Assembly with two chambers: the Council of Federation and the State Duma. The old Communist Party ceased to exist, and different political parties once again appeared on the scene. The most recent years have witnessed the first free parliamentary and presidential elections in Russia. The country continues to drift towards 'parliamentarism' and democracy.

This catalogue includes monographs and series of documents relating to the history of the 'representative bodies' in different periods of Russian history.

The first part of this catalogue which is devoted to the first Russian Parliament, includes books and series ranging from the stenographic records and decrees of the State Duma, reports of the parliamentary factions of different political parties - such as the Constitutional Democrats and others - and biographies of its deputies, to the archival collections, which cover the Duma's files in the Russian archives. Most of these books were published at the beginning of the twentieth century.

The second part of this catalogue is devoted to the Soviet period. IDC has filmed the publications of the main 'representative bodies' of the time - the hearings in the Supreme Soviet of the USSR and the Supreme Soviet of other Soviet republics (Zasedaniia Verkhovnogo Soveta ...), the official gazettes of these legislative bodies (Vedomosti Verkhovnogo Soveta ...), collections of laws determining the status of their deputies, and many other documents.

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