

## From a Normal Country to Normal Authoritarianism

### THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE POLITICAL REGIME IN RUSSIA<sup>1</sup>

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In order to maintain Vladimir Putin's hybrid political regime, it is constantly necessary to reconcile the interests and conflicts of various subsystems "by hand." If this is not done, internal conflicts can accumulate until they reach the surface, potentially destroying the entire system.

The weak point of any hybrid regime is the juncture between the real and the decorative, with elections serving as the best example of this. The overpowering of the semi-democratic component of the system by the authoritarian component is driven by the mechanism of self-preservation: the hybrid system seeks to preserve itself against the "corrosive" effects of democratic elements on authoritarian ones. As the regime gets weaker, so does its ability to maintain its hybrid balance. This is what is happening with Putin's regime in its second decade.

The key problem of the Putin regime is a crisis of legitimacy. Putin won the presidential elections of March 2012 but was unable to reinforce his legitimacy. His 63.6 percent of the vote (47 percent in Moscow), which would be good for any democratic leader, does not add anything to the authority of a "father of the nation" who picks his own opponents. The very emergence of the first mass political protests under the Putin regime, with tens of thousands of people in Moscow chanting "Russia without Putin," diminishes his legitimacy as a leader.

In July 2013, Putin's ratio of approval-to-disapproval stood at around 65:35—a significant shift from its peak of 88:10 in September 2008.<sup>2</sup> About half of Russia's population does not want Putin to be president after 2018,<sup>3</sup> and a growing number of

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<sup>1</sup> This memo uses some thoughts from the initial draft of Maria Lipman and Nikolay Petrov, "The Stalinization of Putinism: a Doomed Effort," in *Russia in 2025: Scenarios for the Future* (Palgrave MacMillan, forthcoming 2014).

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.levada.ru/25-07-2013/iyulskie-reitingi-odobreniya-doveriya-i-polozheniya-del-v-strane>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.levada.ru/07-05-2013/obshchestvennoe-mnenie-o-vlasti-i-4-m-sroke-putina>

Russians see him as representing the interests of big business, power agencies, and the bureaucracy, not the interests of common people.<sup>4</sup>

In the face of this political crisis, the Kremlin, afraid to repeat the fate of Gorbachev's *perestroika*, has chosen heavy-handed methods rather than compromise. In December 2012, Russia set out on a path of increasing authoritarianism. By the beginning of 2013, it was clear that Putin had no strategy for his third term except consolidating power.

### **Putin's Three Fronts**

The first year of Putin's new presidency has been marked by a Kremlin campaign on three fronts, which opened one-by-one:

#### *The struggle with protesters and politically-active segments of society*

The trial of Pussy Riot, the arrest of Bolotnaya Square protestors, and the continued harassment and investigation of the most visible figures of the protest movement, Sergei Udaltsov and Aleksei Navalny, are particularly noteworthy. Navalny, who has the best claim to leadership of the protest movement, received a prison sentence of five years in July 2013 based on fabricated accusations. A guilty verdict for Udaltsov is also predetermined and the probability of prison sentences for both (even after Navalny's mayoral run) is high.

#### *The containment of the elites*

In fall 2012, the Kremlin launched an anticorruption campaign and imposed a ban on state officials holding assets abroad. The campaign was designed to fulfill several functions at once:

- To demonstrate that legal investigations can threaten *any* member of the elite so that nobody feels secure, and to preempt the risk of disobedience and minimize the risk of a schism among the elites.
- To create a system of "soft purges," a necessity for maintaining a minimal level of administrative efficiency.
- To carve out a portion of the "pie" for new elites.
- To "isolate" the system, lessening its vulnerability to and dependence on the West.

This strategy of purges cannot help overcome the crisis within the administrative system—one that constitutes a hybrid of Soviet-style *nomenklatura* and new elites and is incapable of reproducing itself. At the same time, an increase in public competition has been blocked.

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.levada.ru/11-04-2013/vladimir-putin-god-posle-izbraniya-prezidentom>

### *The struggle with civil society*

NGOs have been under government pressure since at least the mid-2000s, but in 2012, when the government realized that civic awakening was eroding the regime's legitimacy, the Kremlin switched to a policy essentially to eliminate foreign-funded NGOs. Russia's eviction of USAID, a source of funding for many prominent NGOs, dealt a severe blow to the latter's activities. This was followed by across-the-board inspections of almost all foreign-funded NGOs by a variety of government agencies. Autonomous watchdogs are being replaced by GONGOs (government organized "non-governmental" organizations) that imitate genuine civil society organizations. This process of replacement has been happening since the middle of the last decade but was given a boost in 2012-2013 when government funds allocated for the purpose were significantly increased for trusted individuals connected to the Kremlin.

In all the above cases, scare tactics and demonstratively harsh punishments have been employed. The Kremlin's objective has been to avoid a fragmentation of the elites and the unification of "splinter groups" among them and dissatisfied citizens.

### **Emasculated Political Reform**

Russia's political system, built on centralization and a monopoly of power in the federal center, restricts development and requires reform. However, the variation that was announced in December 2011 has been following the pattern of "one step forward -half-step back" accompanied by counter-reform. Examples of this are:

- In Russian parliamentary elections, the new draft law abandons the proportional electoral system in favor of the former mixed system, with half the seats filled on the basis of party slates and the other half by single-mandate districts. A new "criminal filter" forbids the nomination of candidates who were convicted of certain crimes (letting the regime exclude unwanted candidates, such as those who have participated in political protests).
- Gubernatorial elections abolished in 2004 have been formally restored, but they are also accompanied by a system of "municipal filters," allowing the incumbent to win anyway. A 2013 scheme of indirect gubernatorial elections has already been adopted in the North Caucasian republics.
- The creation of almost a hundred new parties lacks any real effect in the absence of changes to the political system. Parties have almost no place in the current political system. Instead of being transmission belts between government and the public, they are elements of political show. Even the strongest of them are unable to seriously affect political decisionmaking. This is true more generally of Russia's legislative branch, including United Russia, the so-called "party of power."

By betting on a fragmented party landscape and by forbidding parties from uniting in coalitions, the government is basically sawing off the branch it is standing on. In the event of a serious crisis, it will be impossible to transfer power from one party to another, and it will be necessary to change the entire political system. The very survival of the Russian political system will be in question.

### **The Growing Influence of the *Siloviki***

The growth of *siloviki* influence over the course of Putin's third presidential term is not only the result of the aforementioned fight against three fronts but also the consequence of Putin's efforts to marginalize the creative minority that forms the liberal social base. The balance between major elite clans appears now to have been changed too radically to be restored in the near future.

The *siloviki* as a whole are no less fractured and heterogeneous than Putin's elite more generally. There have been some large-scale shifts among them, first undertaken by Putin in 2007-2008 on the eve of realizing the tandem scenario and again in 2011-2012 when switching back to singular rule. Both times shifts occurred among different law enforcement bodies, as well as among the individuals who lead them.

The main point of tension in the internal *siloviki* relationship has also shifted. Five years ago, the real conflict was between the Federal Security Service (FSB) and the Federal Drug Control Service (FSKN). Now conflict lies between the prosecutor general's office and the investigative committee. In addition, Putin was dissatisfied with the FSB's inability to prevent the mass political protests of 2011-2012. He has thus diminished its role as coordinator of all law enforcement activities and has strengthened the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) under his personal control. MVD reform was first undertaken by Dmitry Medvedev, who replaced both its federal and regional leaderships. Formerly provincial cadres became generals under the command of Vladimir Kolokoltsev, former chief of the Orel and Moscow regional branches. There was also a large-scale horizontal rotation, in which about half of all regional police chiefs shifted places, decreasing their connections to regional elites while increasing their loyalties to the center.

Putin's return to the Kremlin has been marked by the renewal of its law enforcement and personnel departments, with Yevgeny Shkolov, Putin's comrade-in-arms from Dresden, becoming a kind of grey cardinal. His role and the role of his protégé, Vladimir Kikot, former chief of personnel at the MVD and now head of the presidential administration's personnel department, are especially important due to the fact that Putin now seems much more distant from operational management. The general trends in the *siloviki* landscape over the last few years can be described as *de-FSB-ization* and *police-ization*.

*De-FSB-ization* can be seen in a number of ways:

- The arrival of Shkolov and Kikot to the presidential apparatus with the MVD as their base, instead of the grey cardinal tandem of Igor Sechin and Victor Ivanov from the FSB.
- The liberation of the MVD from FSB commissars and external managers, such as Rashid Nurgaliyev and Konstantin Romodanovsky (the same goes for the Justice Ministry).
- Reliance on Sergey Ivanov (and Shkolov and Kikot) for “the fight against corruption” to control elites, instead of on Sechin and Rosfinmonitoring (the Federal Financial Monitoring Service).

At the same time, the FSB’s formal powers have been widened significantly and the FSKN, often referred to as the FSB-2, hopes to follow. One cannot exclude that what has taken place is that the FSB has been unburdened from its non-core functions in order to concentrate on its main priorities, including the fight against terrorism (and security at the Sochi Olympics), nationalism, and extremism.

*Police-ization* can be seen in the following:

- The MVD along with the investigative committee and prosecutor general’s office have become the principal tools to control society and elites. Kolokoltsev is considered to have been effective in handling both the nationalist protests in Moscow in December 2010 and the political protests on Bolotnaya Square in May 2012.
- Use of the police model of cleansing regional elites in Orel in 2008, Moscow in 2010 (with Kolokoltsev at the helm in both cases), Kabardino-Balkaria in 2011, and Dagestan in 2013.
- The growing influence of the Federal Migration Service – a kind of MVD-2.

At the same time, there were large-scale purges of MVD generals first during the 2011-2012 reform and then over the course of the counter-reform led by Shkolov and Kolokoltsev.

Although the roles of particular *siloviki* and agencies can change in different ways, the role of the *siloviki* as a whole is increasing, in a process we might call the *etatization* of Putin’s aging hybrid regime. At the same time, the process by which the *siloviki* engage in the “privatization of the state” is changing. Along with controlling law enforcement and power agencies in the pursuit of corporate or group interests, we see attempts to control juicy pieces of the state-controlled economy, be it Rosneft under the control of Igor Sechin, Rosselkhozbank under the control of Dmitry Patrushev, or other economic entities directly affiliated to the state.

## Evolution vs. Revolution

Russia in 2013 is on the threshold of serious changes that could occur at any moment, with or without sanction from the top. In fact, these changes already began with the political crisis of 2011/2012. The interests of the principal actors—the regional elites, the business sector, and civil society—are more frequently coming into conflict with the interests of the federal government, which in turn has conflicting interests within itself. There are no institutions or even accepted frameworks for reconciling these different interests.

Putin's evident bet on a policy of maintaining the status quo cannot possibly pay off in the long run. The system has almost completely exhausted its resources from the Soviet period (transportation and engineering infrastructure, industrial potential, education and health care systems), the Boris Yeltsin period (renewed elites), and the early Putin years (first-term economic liberalization and an increase in resources). Putin's system is impotent and incapable of reproducing itself. Its effectiveness is plummeting as external conditions change all around it.

Megaprojects, both completed and planned, serve as perfect examples of the system's colossal ineffectiveness. The 2012 APEC summit in Vladivostok and the Sochi Olympics have proven many times more expensive than originally projected, despite the extremely poor quality of the work. A similar fate awaits all other costly projects, including the overhaul of the military, the 2018 World Cup, grand resorts in the North Caucasus, and the development of Siberia and the Far East. Whatever is not stolen is shoved into the ground with minimal benefit for the economy or people's lives.

Rather than maintaining the status quo, Russia must modernize. However, economic modernization is impossible without political modernization. The Kremlin is capable of blocking development (for a while longer at least), but it is unable to provide alternative scenarios or mechanisms. The longer it stalls and plays for time, the more turbulent and unpredictable the inevitable changes will be in the end. Revolution can provide an alternative and accelerated path of evolution. Either the regime decides to lead the process of political and economic modernization, or it will lose control of the situation and be replaced by a regime that is potentially worse—more authoritarian, repressive, and isolationist—and more effective at maintaining power.

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