

Dædalus

Journal of the American Academy of Arts & Sciences

Spring 2017

Russia Beyond Putin

George W. Breslauer & Timothy J. Colton,
guest editors

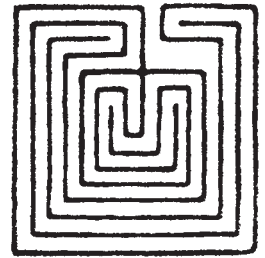


with Valerie Bunce · Henry E. Hale
Fiona Hill · Brian D. Taylor
Maria Popova · Elena Chebankova
Marlene Laruelle · Stanislav Markus
Samuel A. Greene · Keith A. Darden



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“Russia Beyond Putin”

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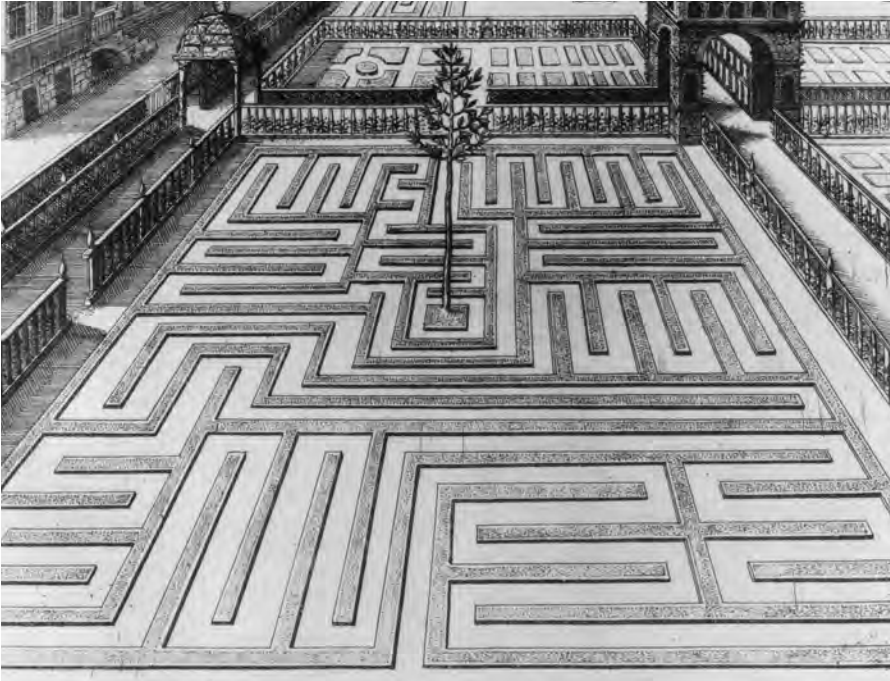
Inside front cover: (Top) A Russian military honor guard from the 154th Commandant's Regiment stands at attention during a wreath-laying ceremony at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Moscow, June 26, 2009. Photo by Petty Officer 1st Class Chad J. McNeeley, U.S. Navy. (Bottom) Russian Prirazlomnaya oil platform in the Pechora Sea, operated by Gazprom Neft, June 8, 2013. © by Max Avdeev.

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Design for the hedge maze is by Johan Vredeman de Vries, from *Hortorum viridariorumque elegantes & multiplices formae: ad architectonicae artis normam affabre delineatae* (Cologne, 1615).

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The Next Mr. Putin? The Question of Succession

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The Atlas That has Not Shrugged: Why Russia's

Oligarchs are an Unlikely Force for Change

© 2017 by Stanislav Markus

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Introduction

Timothy J. Colton

The current issue of *Dædalus* represents a collaborative effort to think afresh about Russia's political future. The long and eventful reign of Vladimir Putin, commenced in 2000, is well into its second half. The time horizon we work with in our discussion is roughly ten to fifteen years out. By then, Putin, if alive, will be in his mid-seventies (he turns sixty-five in October 2017) and will either be out of power or in his endgame as national leader.¹

Our shared goal in this collection is to reach for answers to a pair of linked questions about what will happen to Russia's increasingly arbitrary political regime as the Putin era winds down. First, what are the prospects either for a fundamental change that would realign the whole system, or for significant within-system change that would modify it or improve its functioning, without transforming it? Second, if change were to occur, what direction can it be expected to take? Will it be toward a more open and democratic political order, toward a more closed and authoritarian political order, or toward destabilization and disorder? These questions are easy enough to pose but not so easy to answer. Prediction, as the great physicist Niels Bohr famously put it, "is very difficult, especially if it's about the future."²

Two thousand seventeen marks the centenary of the Russian Revolution that toppled tsarism and eventually swept the Bolsheviks to power. The anniversary serves as a reminder that wrenching change has been the rule, not the exception, in modern Russia in all three of its successive forms – imperial, So-

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Introduction viet, and post-Soviet. Scholars have often been guilty of underestimating the potential for change in Russia. Yet it does not follow, of course, that with this next turn of the wheel meaningful change is inevitable, let alone that any change, massive or modest in scope, will be benign or of the sort Western observers would approve. Next door to today's Russia, the "Euromaidan revolution" in Ukraine, named after the square in Kiev where public protest led to the overthrow of President Viktor Yanukovich in 2014, is indicative of the possibilities of radical political change in the post-Soviet space. But Ukraine's patchy record with reforms since then shows the need to be cautious in forecasting lasting improvement, and the danger of equating stirring words with effectual deeds.

This issue of *Dædalus* begins with my brief exploration of some of the "paradoxes of Putinism" as a system. It concludes with reflections by my coeditor, George Breslauer. The meat in the sandwich is the set of ten essays probing what we speculate are the most plausible sources of stress and change in the politics of Russia. The approach is selective, not comprehensive, targeting phenomena that seemed to us to have the greatest potential as generators of change. These phenomena consist of objective factors and trends (in the economy, for example), subjective ideas and perceptions (about, say, religion or the family), and interested groups (such as business executives or nationalist agitators). Most of our authors, while anchoring themselves in one of these main categories, work with combinations of the three, reflecting the way the categories overlap and intermesh in real life.

The contributors are among the best and brightest in the field. They have all done creative and well-regarded work on the aspect of the question with which they have been paired, as well as on a range of other issues, related and unrelated. The es-

says are independently written, but were circulated for comment within the group and in draft form, and were the focus of a lively authors' workshop organized by the American Academy in June 2016.

Valerie Bunce, who has written extensively about the "color revolutions" against authoritarian and semiauthoritarian governments in Eurasia and Eastern Europe, opens the conversation broadly by addressing Russia's vulnerability to this kind of protest-based upheaval. Henry Hale peers at Russia through the lens of his concept of Russia's (and many of its neighbors') "patronal" political order, which has so far been remarkably resilient, and asks whether and for how long the arrangement can be extended.

The collection then bears down on political institutions. Fiona Hill takes on the institution at the heart of the status quo in Russia – the presidency – and considers the possibility that the personalization of power since 2000 has created a Kremlin succession problem not so very different from the one that haunted Soviet leadership. Brian Taylor, an expert on Russia's military and police establishments, writes about the possible role of the *siloviki*, or "men of force," from the security and military establishments, the very cadre from which Vladimir Putin emerged in the 1990s. Maria Popova, drawing on her research about courts and prosecutors in the region, ponders the chances of movement toward greater rule-of-law.

We then shift gears toward broader social constituencies outside the corridors of power. Elena Chebankova, a student of Russian ideas and political practice, explores the stabilizing role of what she calls "paradigmatic pluralism," in which a traditionalist ethos is ascendant but exists in tension with Western-type liberalism. Marlene Laruelle shines a spotlight on Russian nationalism, which she looks at through the behavior of three types of nationalists: non-

state, parastate, and state actors. Stanislav Markus brings into the picture Russia's "oligarchs," the super-rich beneficiaries of the redistribution of resources after Communism; he parses them also into three categories, which he identifies as the friends of those in power, "silovarchs" (oligarchs with connections to the security establishment), and outsiders.³ And Samuel Greene analyzes protest activity and the changing condition of the "social contract" between Russian society and the Putinist state.

In a final essay before the wrap-up, Keith Darden moves us to the international dimension. He takes the measure of external threats, real and imagined, as a driving force in Russian domestic affairs.

George Breslauer's conclusion pulls the threads, or a number of them, together and lays out in summary form some of the possibilities for Russia beyond Putin. Breslauer points out that none of our authors fore-

casts a change of political system in Russia, but notes that within-system change, short of a breakout from the status quo, is entirely possible in our time frame. Such change may be morally repellent or attractive to the outsider, depending on that person's point of view, and the same applies to the citizens whose lives are bound up with the current political order.

A note on transliteration: This issue generally adheres to the Library of Congress transliteration table for the Romanization of Russian words, with the exception that the soft vowels *ë*, *ю*, and *я* are rendered as *yo*, *yu*, and *ya*; *e* is rendered as *e* after a consonant and as *ye* after a vowel or to start a word. Exceptions are also made for several surnames for which a different version is in common use in English-language publications (Berezovsky, Guskov, Khodorkovsky, Navalny, Pavlovsky, Yeltsin, and Zhirinovskiy).

ENDNOTES

¹ Putin was acting president of Russia for the first few months of 2000, having been appointed to that position by Boris Yeltsin in his last act as president, and then was elected in his own right and inaugurated as president in May of that year. He held the second-ranking position of prime minister, while remaining the *de facto* leader, from 2008 to 2012, whereupon he was elected to a third presidential term. When that term expires in 2018, he is eligible to stand for reelection and serve until 2024. The Russian constitution limits a president to two consecutive terms but does not forbid him from seeking the office again after a hiatus doing something else, which is what Putin did in 2012. In 2024, if Putin is still in the political game and wants to remain there, he would need to either have the constitution amended or again sit out several years in a lesser position.

² The witticism is evidently based on a Danish proverb, and has taken several forms, one of the better known mouthed by the baseball savant Yogi Berra.

³ The term *silovarch*, a portmanteau of *siloviki* and *oligarch*, was originally coined by political scientist Daniel Treisman of the University of California, Los Angeles.

Paradoxes of Putinism

Timothy J. Colton

Abstract: Vladimir Putin's trademark since taking charge of Russia's government almost two decades ago has been stability. He has achieved much in terms of this master goal, including economic and demographic recovery. But development on the part of Russian society has been juxtaposed with growing rigidity and control-mindedness on the part of the state. The accumulation of economic, social, and foreign-policy problems in recent years naturally raises questions about the sustainability of the current regime. Paradoxically, Putin's personal popularity has not always been matched by confidence in his policies, although the 2014 annexation of Crimea from Ukraine gave that confidence a boost. Another paradox is that Russia bucks the global trend that seemingly links social and economic modernization to political democratization. The essays in this issue that follow will probe dimensions of this knot of puzzles.

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From day one, the declared priority of Russia's second president – it is no exaggeration to call it a sacred priority for him – was to engineer political and social stability. His chosen course reflected the instinctive embrace of control for control's sake of a career *silovik*, the Russian catchword for an associate or veteran of the security and military services. But Vladimir Putin also took a more philosophical view. Disorder was not only inherently undesirable, he affirmed in the “Millennium Manifesto” published in his name on the eve of his appointment as acting president on December 31, 1999, but was a stumbling block to normal life and development – and nowhere more than in Russia, given its tumultuous history. Although Communism had its accomplishments, on the whole, in Putin's estimation, it had proven a recipe for keeping the Soviet Union backward and out of the global mainstream. As the way out, Putin rejected the “shakeups, cataclysms, and total makeovers” that accompanied the Communists to power and defined Russia's twentieth century. The twenty-first century demanded a forward-looking “strategy for . . . revival and prosperity . . . based on all the positives created in the [world-

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wide] process of market and democratic reforms and implemented by evolutionary, gradual, and balanced methods.”¹

The key mechanism for inculcating all these good things was at the heart of Putinism: namely, rehabilitation and consolidation of the rump Russian state, so diminished by the jarring transition from Soviet power. The most-quoted passages of the 1999 manifesto left no doubts on this score: “Russia will not soon if ever become a second edition of, say, the United States or Britain, where liberal values have deep historical roots. For us, the state, its institutions, and its structures have always played an exceptionally important role.” “A strong and effective state” was not an anomaly or a nuisance in Russia but “the font . . . of order and the initiator and main driving force of change.” “Society wants to see the guiding and regulating role of the state replenished to the appropriate degree, in accordance with the traditions and present condition of the country.” “Our hopes for a worthy future,” Putin added, “will work out only if we prove capable of combining the universal principles of a market economy and democracy with Russian realities.”²

Time would tell that the devil was in the details and in the meaning of “to the appropriate degree” and “Russian realities.” Putin as savior of the state sank much of his presidential effort in the early going into buttressing its infrastructure. He installed fellow *siloviki* in high- and middle-level positions to keep a wary eye on civilians. The military rematch against separatist rebels in the North Caucasus republic of Chechnya, the Russian army having walked away from a first war in 1996, was prosecuted in gruesome fashion and won. Tax collection was tightened, the budget was brought into balance and then into surplus, and money surrogates gave way to robust rubles. The ranks of the governmental workforce swelled and its pay and morale were en-

hanced. There were faltering attempts to modernize the armed forces (a more serious wave started in 2008, after the army’s indifferent performance in a five-day conflict with neighboring Georgia). Stricter controls were exercised over the country’s revised borders. Outside of them, Russian foreign policy took a more assertive and a more risk-acceptant turn.

It was soon clear that Putin was as fixated on discrete parts of the state apparatus as on the state in general. Boris Yeltsin before him had negotiated with the eighty-odd constituent regions of the Russian Federation, granting them considerable leeway in exchange for loyalty and delivering the vote in national elections, and let their leaders be popularly elected. Putin fortified the central government and the “power vertical” binding the provincial governors to it,³ lessened though did not wipe out their autonomy, and sponsored legislation that made them in effect presidential appointees. In Moscow, Putin shored up the executive branch, above all the presidency and its administrative household, at the expense of the legislature. To accomplish this, he extended his reach into the State Duma, the lower and more significant of the two houses of parliament, through a “party of power,” United Russia, founded under his auspices in 2001. In the Duma election of 2003, United Russia won 38 percent of the popular vote and an even 50 percent of the seats; in 2007, it got 64 percent of the votes cast and 70 percent of the seats.

The bolstering of the machinery of state cannot be disentangled from purposive efforts to maximize state influence vis-à-vis Russian society at large. The party of power’s parliamentary majority enabled it to enact laws impeding the registration of new political parties and the survival of older ones. Parties and quasiparties were pared in number from more than two hundred in the late 1990s to seven. In the same vein, Putin’s government seized control of national tele-

vision in 2000–2001 and recast news programming on the big channels as one long infomercial on its behalf. Disobliging members of the emerging business elite were brought to heel, as Russia's wealthiest oligarch, Mikhail Khodorkovsky, was arrested in 2003 and put on trial for tax evasion and theft; he would remain behind bars until 2013.⁴ On the heels of the Orange Revolution in Ukraine in 2004, blamed by Moscow on the nefarious work of foreign-funded organizations, the Kremlin stepped up administrative oversight of Russian nongovernmental organizations and the harassment of the more politically attuned of them, and it chartered conformist mass associations for young people.

First elected president in March 2000 with 53 percent of the popular vote, Putin was re-elected in March 2004 with an overwhelming 72 percent of the vote. Even if falsification accounted for a portion of the tally (not a decisive one, so far as is known), there is no denying that he enjoyed abundant mass support. This was borne out time and again by public opinion polls conducted by pro-government and independent experts alike. Putin's favorability scores continued to sail along at impressive levels after 2004.

The reasons for this popularity were many, ranging from Putin's personal style and carefully groomed media image to his attractiveness to specific social groupings (women and non-Russian minorities, for instance) and his identification with a visceral reaction against the roller-coaster politics of the 1980s and 1990s. A muscular foreign policy delivered a measure of geopolitical deference and public awareness that Russia stood taller in Eurasian and world affairs than it had since the dissolution of the Soviet superpower. Whereas only 31 percent of Russians in one poll in 1999 felt Russia had the status of a great power (*velikaya derzhava*), that proportion reached 53 percent in 2007 and 65 percent in November 2015.

In tangible terms, nothing did more to boost Putin's standing than the dramatic recovery of the national economy. The rebound was abetted by the delayed effects of Yeltsin's messy reforms; by a short neoliberal burst in the early 2000s, including streamlined regulation of small business in the name of reducing corruption, a cut in personal income tax to a flat 13 percent, and legalization of the private ownership of land; and by sound macroeconomic and fiscal policy under Putin and his finance minister, Aleksei Kudrin. Russia's economic health also gained massively from the serendipity of a bull market for its most precious natural resource, oil, the price of which soared from below \$10 per barrel in 1998 (the year Russia defaulted on its sovereign debt obligations) to \$50 in 2005 and \$100 in 2008. The economic boom actually got underway in 1999, with Yeltsin still ensconced, and continued unabated until 2008, by when consumer incomes had more than doubled and Russia's main stock-market index had quintupled. Petrodollars fueled a rapid expansion in public spending on education and public health, with the latter mitigating the nation's demographic crisis (as mortality decreased and fertility increased, Russia was to experience in 2013 its first natural increase – a positive difference between the birth rate and death rate – in decades). Rightly or wrongly, most Russians associated these improvements with the leader.

One paradox of this seeming progress was that, even as the strongman/chief executive was held in high esteem, the regime he embodied little by little grew more intolerant of elite dissent, oppositional activity, and unrehearsed expressions of grassroots discontent. The well-known democracy barometer put out by the American NGO Freedom House captures the trend, albeit with no great precision. In 1992, the Freedom House end-of-year report rated the newly independent Russian polity at 3.5

on a scale from 1 to 7, on which 1 is the most democratic (averaging subratings for political rights and civil liberties) and 7 the most undemocratic. In 1999, Russia scored 4.5, or a notch worse than the halfway point on the scale, and it continued to be reckoned in gross terms as “partly free.” The 2001 *Freedom Report*, stating findings for 2000, Putin’s first year in office, revised the rating for political rights from 4 to 5 and Russia’s composite rating from 4.5 to 5. The bulletin for 2004 recoded Russia from 5 to 6 on political rights, “due to the virtual elimination of influential political opposition parties within the country and the further concentration of executive power.” For the first time since Soviet days, the summary index of 5.5 placed Russia under the “not free,” or undemocratic, heading.

We can say, therefore, that by the onset of Putin’s second term as president, which lasted until May 2008, a Putinesque political system had taken shape, solidified, and been tested in battle. Like many if not all scholars of Russian and Eurasian politics, I would typify that system as a hybrid of autocratic and democratic features, and one in which the autocratic gained steadily on the democratic with the passage of time, to the point that it was debatable whether a threshold of out-and-out authoritarian rule had been crossed. Its operative goals were and remain multiple: state strength; limits on political contestation; economic and social development, in part to enable national competitiveness in the international arena; elite coalition building through co-optation, clientelism, and divide-and-rule; and popular legitimacy via managed elections, appeals to nationalism, and welfare spending.⁵

A marker of Putin’s status was the facility with which, abiding by the constitutional limit of two consecutive terms (which he could have overridden but did not), he conveyed his presidential mantle in 2007 –

2008 to Dmitrii Medvedev, a protégé from his hometown of St. Petersburg. Riding Putin’s political coattails, Medvedev hauled in 71 percent of the votes in the 2008 national election, a hair below his mentor in 2004. The transfer set up the so-called tandem of 2008 to 2012, with Putin as prime minister, de jure the second-ranking position, but de facto continuing as paramount leader. Secrecy about these goings-on is such that we still do not know what were the understandings, if any, between the two men at the outset. Medvedev, trained (like Putin) in the law, had no *siloviki* connections, is thirteen years younger, and is a fan of the Internet (which Putin does not use) and of the English rock band Deep Purple. The Moscow insider Gleb Pavlovsky has testified to Putin’s awareness at the time of the dangers of overpersonalization of the system and of handing over power to a clone of himself. “The country needs change,” is how Pavlovsky summarized Putin’s reasoning; “it can’t be ruled by generals.”

Unless future events force a reinterpretation, the tandem years may be relegated to historical footnotes. Medvedev talked a reformist game, though always within the bounds set by the prevailing political arrangements. He waxed lyrical about *modernizatsiya*, dropped in on Silicon Valley and played with electronic gadgetry, made gestures toward human rights and rule of law and averred a “war on corruption,” and worked out a “reset” of the U.S.-Russian relationship with Barack Obama. But he was undermined by a bookish personality, by a penchant for hobby projects (like fiddling with Russia’s time zones), and, most damagingly, by the lack of an opportunity to construct a political machine of his own, distinct from Putin’s. His accession coincided with the Great Recession in the world economy, which hit Russia hard and constrained his ability to innovate. Russian GDP declined by 7.8 percent in 2009 and barely recouped the loss with an anemic

recovery in 2010 – 2011. Medvedev initiatives such as his vaunted war on corruption brought few results, leaving Russia in roughly the same uncomplimentary position as before they started.⁶

Medvedev did not fight to keep his job. In September 2011, he announced at a United Russia convention that in the forthcoming presidential election he would stand aside for Putin, who was now eligible for two more presidential terms. Putin was duly elected (this time with 64 percent of the votes) and the pair switched places in May 2012.

And so Putin has again been at the undisputed helm as the Russian government took weighty and sometimes disruptive decisions these past five years. During the winter of 2011 – 2012, as he and Medvedev acted out their script for swapping positions, street demonstrations erupted in Moscow and a number of other cities against irregularities in counting the votes in the December Duma election, in which United Russia's reported tally slipped below 50 percent. Putin consented to modifications of the electoral rules, among them eased registration requirements for political parties, the return of territorial districts for representation in the Duma (they were abolished after the 2003 election), and a lower threshold for being seated in it. He simultaneously put a quick end to the Medvedev thaw in other respects. New codes levied stiff fines for unsanctioned gatherings and disturbing the peace, broadened the legal definition of high treason, forced all online blogs and social media sites with more than three thousand daily visitors to register as media outlets, and gave government bureaus the right to block politically objectionable online content. Anti-Western and anti-American messages saturated the official media as the Obama-Medvedev reset with the United States went into disuse. Plucking a socially tradition-

alist chord, government bills in 2013 proscribed the "propagandizing of nontraditional sexual relationships" to minors and set down fines and prison sentences for people who "offend the religious feelings of believers." Both met with approval from the Russian Orthodox Church. In 2014, five million employees in security and law enforcement were barred from visiting the United States, and any country that has an extradition treaty with it, without permission from superiors.

In its year-end report for 2014, Freedom House downgraded the Russian score for civil liberties to 6. "Russia's civil liberties rating," says Freedom House, "declined from 5 to 6 due to expanded media controls, a dramatically increased level of propaganda on state-controlled television, and new restrictions on the ability of some citizens to travel abroad." Russia's composite rating was now also 6, its worst score yet, putting it on the same shelf as Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Iran.⁷

On the world stage, Putin's prime choice after reinstatement was to intervene in the imbroglio surrounding the overthrow of the president of next-door Ukraine, Viktor Yanukovich, in early 2014. It culminated in a nimble Russian military operation in the Ukrainian province of Crimea, a referendum under the aegis of Moscow, and the annexation of the peninsula on March 18. The shocking decision on Crimea was applauded by the bulk of the Russian electorate, deluged by proannexation propaganda. Several months down the road, Russia's army provided protection, supplies, and firepower to an uprising by separatist insurgents in the Donbas area of eastern Ukraine. The imposition of American and European Union sanctions over Russian behavior in Ukraine gave Putin a chance to hold forth against an internal "fifth column" of sympathizers with the West. Turning to a different front, in September 2015, he ordered the air force to be-

gin a bombing campaign in Syria in support of the beleaguered government of Bashar al-Assad.

A paradox of Putinism is that the regime, for all its backsliding, has never transited to unambiguous dictatorship and to complete reliance on blunt repression. Individual liberties have been largely untouched by the authoritarian trend, and the sphere for exercising them is in some regards wider than before 2000 because of the effects of globalization and Russia's affluence in comparison with the Soviet and immediate post-Soviet past. The would-be democratizer of the 1990s, Yeltsin, was allowed a peaceful retirement, and Putin eulogized him in 2007 as "the rare person who is given the destiny to become free himself and at the same time to carry millions along behind him, and to inspire truly historic changes in his homeland."⁸ *Siloviki* hardliners have continued to populate many senior positions, but for whatever reason Putin has been unwilling to turn the whole show over to them. It is also clear that the *siloviki* estate is anything but monolithic and is given to infighting and turf wars. In the past year or two, the president has sent some prominent members of the secret services' old guard into retirement and promoted others. He has also retained the moderate Medvedev in the prime minister's office and found room in high places for "system liberals."⁹ When it occurs, loosening of the reins in one dimension often coincides with a tightening of the reins in another, usually done with some flexibility. A recent case in point would be electoral reform. Gubernatorial elections, for example, were restored, but with "filters" for candidates to keep radical critics of Moscow off the ballot. Also restored were local districts for choosing half of the membership of the Duma. In the Duma election of September 2016, the United Russia juggernaut went all-out to control the district

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races and was victorious in 203 of the 225 districts; in 2003, United Russia candidates had won in only 102.¹⁰

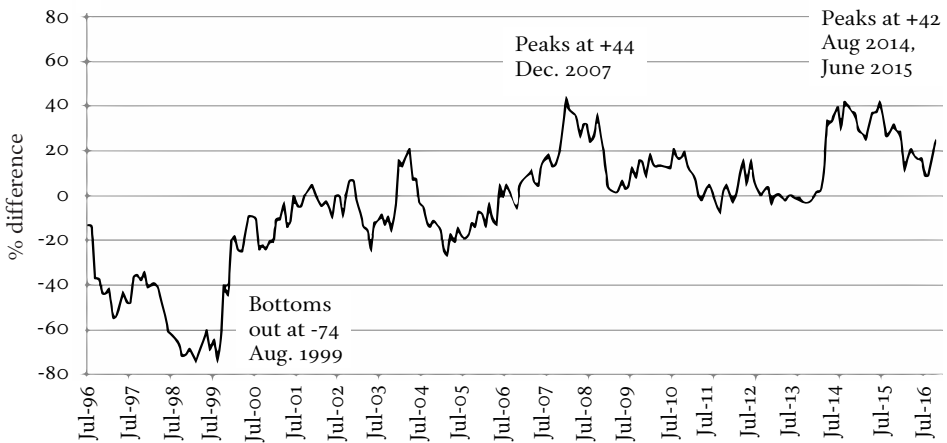
Paradoxes also abound in the outlook of the Russian masses. Putin has perennially basked in ratings that, even if discounted somewhat, would be the envy of politicians almost anywhere. In mid-2015, at the height of the *Krymnash* ("Crimea is Ours") euphoria, 89 percent of Russians aged eighteen and older approved of their president's work. As of October 2016, that figure was still a sky-high 82 percent.¹¹ His popularity has had its ups and downs, to be sure, but going back to his first inauguration in 2000, Putin's confidence scores have never dipped below 60 percent.

Nothing human endures forever. If we are to imagine a Russia beyond Putin, his persona and Teflon qualities as a politician will at some point no longer be determinative. To reason on a wider canvas, it is good practice to bear in mind some other evidence about how Russians think politically. It offers a more nuanced picture than the individuated approval ratings.

Russians, or most Russians, may be enamored of Vladimir Putin, but millions of them have over the years been less than enamored of his government's works and with how the country is doing overall. Figure 1 traces month-by-month data from national Levada Center monitoring surveys of the adult population since the mid-1990s. The survey question is about Russia's general trajectory: is it on the right track or the wrong track?¹² The graph line in Figure 1 shows the difference in percentage points between respondents who gave a positive answer to the question and those who gave a negative answer. The columns in Figure 2 average the monthly numbers by leadership period.

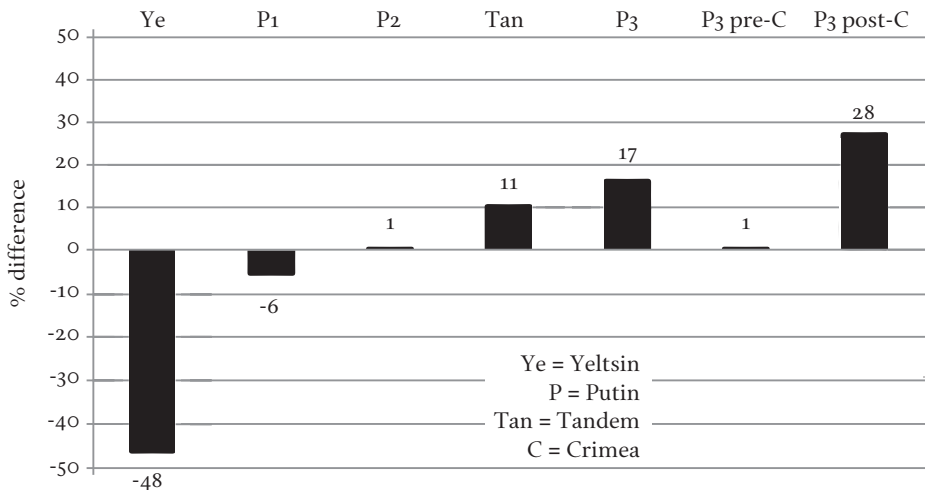
Consistent with the conventional wisdom about the Yeltsin era, up through 2000, the balance was very much in deficit, bottoming out at an abysmal -74 points in Au-

Figure 1
Public Opinion on Russia's Trajectory (% Difference between Those Who Think It is on the Right Track and Those Who Think It is on the Wrong Track), 1996 – 2016



Source: Data from Levada Center, "Assessment of Situation in the Country," <http://www.levada.ru/indikatory/polozhenie-del-v-strane/> (accessed November 28, 2016).

Figure 2
Monthly Averages of Public Opinion on Russia's Trajectory (% Difference) by Leadership Period



Source: Data from Levada Center, "Assessment of Situation in the Country," <http://www.levada.ru/indikatory/polozhenie-del-v-strane/> (accessed November 28, 2016).

gust 1999 (8 percent of Russians that summer believed Russia was on the right track and 82 percent believed that it was on the wrong track). The mean monthly balance in assessments between 1996 and the end of 1999 was -48 percentage points. On Putin's watch, the optimists began to gain on the pessimists, until in October 2001, Levada for the first time registered a positive balance to the tune of +2 points.¹³ It may surprise some readers to learn that, despite the uptick, citizen judgments remained in negative territory throughout Putin's first term, from 2000 to 2004 (a mean of -6 points). They were perceptibly better during his second term, 2004 to 2008, especially between mid-2005 and the end of 2007, when the plan to bring in Medvedev as president had been set in motion. Net assessment hit an all-time high of +44 percentage points in December 2007, although for Putin's second term altogether it barely crept into positive territory (+1 point average over the four years).

It is striking that soundings of the nation's condition were more flattering under the much-maligned Medvedev-Putin tandem of 2008 to 2012 (+11 points on average) than during either of Putin's first two terms. In other words, Russians thought better of their leadership when Putin was the nominal second-in-command and someone else was president than when Putin reigned solo before May 2008. And they did so at a time of economic setbacks that left the standard of living stagnant from 2009 through 2011.

Putin's third term, true, has provided better reviews (+17 points on average as of October 2016). The gain, however, is entirely the product of a post-Crimea bounce. Net assessments were +1 percentage point until February 2014, the same meager figure as in Putin's second term, when they thenceforth rose abruptly from March of 2014 to a mean of +28 points. In August 2014 and June 2015, the gap was +42 percentage points; very high, though 2 points less than

the crest of December 2007. Since mid-2015 (look again at Figure 1) there has been a noticeable tendency for less ebullient public evaluations.

Also of interest are Levada Center results for Prime Minister Medvedev, whose career has been intimately bound up with Putin and who is in charge of day-to-day management of government ministries and bureaucracy. Seventy-one percent of Russian citizens approved of his work in the Council of Ministers in September 2014, with 27 percent disapproving. Negative assessments of Medvedev have exceeded the positive since August 2016. As of this writing, the balance was 48 percent approval and 51 percent disapproval. The same downward drift applies to regional governors: from 66 percent approval and 32 percent disapproval in September 2014 to 46 percent approval and 53 percent disapproval in October 2016.

It is impossible to say how long the good feelings generated by the incorporation of Crimea will linger. Contrary to expectations in Washington and Brussels, they are for now being reinforced and prolonged by resentment of the sanctions and other policies seen as unjustly anti-Russian. In a Levada Center survey in August 2016, almost 60 percent of respondents professed concern at the impact of Western economic penalties and 70 percent favored an unyielding Russian policy in the face of them.

Common sense and precedent suggest, though, that it is only a matter of time before this mood dissipates. When it does, there is reason to suppose that, barring changes in the equation, Russians will revert to the lukewarm assessments of the national condition that characterized Putin's rule prior to the spring of 2014.

This does not necessarily mean a shift toward a revolutionary frame of mind: receptivity to the "shakeups, cataclysms, and total makeovers" Putin bemoaned in his "Millennium Manifesto." A corrective to that notion would be the experience of the

1990s, when most Russians reckoned the nation's plight as dire but did not rise up in rebellion against the status quo. What reversion to the mean implies would be the presence in the not so distant future of tens of millions of Russians, a large minority or even a majority of the population, who are convinced that their country, under current management, is headed in the wrong direction. Such sentiment, it goes without saying, can in principle be mobilized by political agents for more than one purpose.

Before delving into particulars, readers should bear in mind several contextual variables that are sure to confront Putin and his confederates, and in due course their heirs, in the years to come.

One challenge is the condition of Russian society itself. Russia in 2017 is a richer, a more complex, and a more interconnected place – in short, a more modern place – than it was a generation ago under the Soviet Politburo. In 2013, the World Bank, applying a floor of \$12,616 in nominal GDP per capita, reclassified Putin's Russia as a high-income country, better off than three-quarters of the bank's member nations. Russia by now has all of the accoutrements of mature consumerism. Russians' pocketbooks today hold 150 million plastic cards, 30 million of them revolving credit cards, and they withdraw cash and pay bills at more ATMs per capita than any country other than Canada or San Marino. One-quarter of residential property acquisitions in Russia are completed through mortgages. Sales of new motor vehicles went through the roof after 1999, from 903,000 that year to 1,807,000 in 2005 and 3,142,000 in 2012, bringing with them atrocious traffic congestion. Forty-eight million Russians took vacations abroad in 2012, quadruple the number who did in 1999, and they went to more exotic destinations. Red tape and officious inspections notwithstanding, in 2015, Russia had 227,000 registered

NGOs.¹⁴ In 1999, there was 1 cellphone in use per 100 Russian citizens; in 2004, there were 51 cellphones in use per 100 Russians, in 2008 there were 139, and in 2012 there were 145. Only 1 Russian in 100 had regular access to the Internet in 1999. Thirteen did in 2004, 27 in 2008, and 64 in 2012. Fast-moving, nonhierarchical, and transnational, the Internet is an unrivaled agent of sociocultural globalization, a pervasive process about which Putin is deeply suspicious. Eighty percent of Russians with Internet access use social networks, which is 30 points more than the European Union mean.

Theories that posit a linear link between social and economic development as cause and political change as effect do not get us very far in the short term, since socioeconomic and political forces in Russia, contrary to prediction, moved in opposite directions after 1999: more development, less democracy.¹⁵ It is a fact, nonetheless, that developed societies are, statistically speaking, much more apt to possess democratic institutions than undeveloped or developing societies. Which brings us up against the most vexing paradox of them all. When the World Bank resituated Putin's Russia in its high-income category in 2013, 82 percent of countries in that bracket were democratically governed (free in Freedom House terms), while 46 percent of upper-middle-income countries, 30 percent of lower-middle-income countries, and only 8 percent of low-income countries were democratically governed. Russia is one of just eight nondemocratic outliers in the high-income group. All of the others are petrostates, hooked on oil and gas revenues that amplify the state's coercive capacity and autonomy from society. And six of the seven are hereditary monarchies; the seventh is Equatorial Guinea, the former Spanish colony in West Africa that Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo has governed since taking over in a coup in 1979. With large manufacturing and ser-

vice sectors, Russia has an incomparably more diverse economy than the other nations in this category; fossil fuels account for 16 percent of Russian GDP, but account for 40 percent of Saudi Arabia's and 83 percent of Equatorial Guinea's GDP.

Russia, in short, bucks a global trend, and it is an open question how long it can continue to do so, under Putin and beyond Putin. Either the received theoretical framings of the trend are wrong; there is something about Russia that exempts it from the trend; or there is a lag, after which Russia will conform to theory.

Most urgent in the here and now, and further blurring the picture, is the grinding to a halt of the economic advances of Putin's glory years. While the core gains of the boom are not lost, some are in jeopardy, and uncertainty once more clouds the horizon. Ukraine-related sanctions are merely a piece of the problem. Well before the "Euromaidan" in Kiev, Russia's economy was in a slump, with growth dropping from 4 percent in 2010 to 0.6 percent in 2014. The data, in short, were already testifying to an outdated economic model – a conceptual cul-de-sac of the regime's own making –

and to recalcitrant structural problems. Unlike the downturn of 2009, this one was not a local symptom of global trends, and it was not limited to one bad year. Then came the body blow of the collapse of world petroleum prices in the third and fourth quarters of 2014 and in 2015, slashing oil and gas revenues to a fraction of their peak levels. The economy was in recession in 2015 and 2016, with GDP down 5 to 6 percent, and the exchange value of the ruble has been halved. Policy-makers are squeezed on all sides, not least by commitments they made in the salad days – to indexed pensions, say, to infrastructural investment, or to rearmament. Will this perfect storm result in a push for a new model or to a hunkering down on the old? Will disagreements over economic stagnation and how to remedy it, which are legion in Russia in 2017, spill over into a power struggle, and what difference will they make for the agenda of political and institutional change?

These are some of the issues, some of the intellectual puzzles, and some of the contradictions lying in the background of the more specialized themes explored on the pages that follow.

ENDNOTES

¹ Translated from the original Russian by the author.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Governors* is used here in the generic sense, referring to the regional chief executives whose official titles have varied from place to place and year to year.

⁴ Khodorkovsky surely committed some of the offenses of which he was accused, but the trial was an obvious case of selective prosecution.

⁵ A medley of goals like these are addressed in the recent and extensive literature on comparative authoritarianism. See, for example, Jorge Castañeda, *Perpetuating Power: How Mexican Presidents Were Chosen* (New York: New Press, 2000); Jennifer Gandhi and Adam Przeworski, "Authoritarian Institutions and the Survival of Autocrats," *Comparative Political Studies* 40 (11) (November 2007): 1279–1301; Beatriz Magaloni, "Credible Power-Sharing and the Longevity of Authoritarian Rule," *Comparative Political Studies* 41 (4/5) (April 2008): 715–741; Dan Slater, *Ordering Power: Contentious Politics and Authoritarian Leviathans in Southeast Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Dan Slater and Sofia Fenner, "State Power and Staying Power: Infrastructural Mechanisms and Authoritarian Durability," *Journal of International Affairs* 65 (1) (2011): 15–29; and Milan Svoblik, *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

- ⁶ By way of illustration, the control-of-corruption statistic in the World Bank's Worldwide Governance Indicators puts Russia in the eighty-third percentile of the countries surveyed in 2013, indistinguishable from the eighty-fourth percentile where it sat in 1996. For a concise overview of these and related indices, see Timothy J. Colton, *Russia: What Everyone Needs to Know* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 210–215.
- ⁷ Such contemporary comparisons have their uses, and hence I cite them here and in other works, but in historical perspective, the exact Freedom House ratings toward the authoritarian extreme of the scale are absurdly compressed. The idea that Putin's Russia is six-sevenths as unfree as Stalin's Soviet Union or Hitler's Germany cannot be taken seriously.
- ⁸ Quoted in Timothy J. Colton, *Yeltsin: A Life* (New York: Basic Books, 2008), 447. Putin made similar remarks at the official opening of Yeltsin's presidential library and museum in 2015. The government-financed complex is located in the Urals city of Yekaterinburg, where Yeltsin made his career in the Communist Party apparatus.
- ⁹ Among the important *siloviki* to depart have been Sergei Ivanov (most recently chief of the presidential staff), Viktor Ivanov (who once headed the Kremlin personnel department), Mikhail Fradkov (former prime minister and chief of foreign intelligence), and Vladimir Yakunin (longtime head of the national railways). On the liberal side of the house, Sergei Kiriyenko (who was briefly prime minister under Yeltsin) has been given responsibility in the Kremlin apparatus for managing domestic politics, while Aleksei Kudrin, the former finance minister, chairs a commission preparing recommendations for economic reform.
- ¹⁰ The 2016 election also had fourteen political parties on the national party-list ballot, up from seven in 2011. United Russia increased its vote share here by 5 percentage points to 54 percent. The ruling party did much better in some regions than in others, with its officially reported share running the gamut from 35 percent to 96 percent. None of the newly registered parties took more than 2 percent of the popular vote country-wide.
- ¹¹ The Levada Center is registered as a nonprofit organization rather than a commercial firm. It regularly does polls on contract for non-Russian clients. In October 2016, the Ministry of Justice branded it a "foreign agent," presumably out of unhappiness with its political independence and openness to international transactions. It should be noted that the findings generated by government-friendly agencies (such as VTsIOM and FOM) diverge very little from those of the Levada group.
- ¹² Details taken from Levada Center, "Assessment of Situation in the Country," <http://www.levada.ru/indikatory/polozhenie-del-v-strane/> (accessed November 28, 2016). Variations on this question have been asked in countless polls in Western countries.
- ¹³ As with many Putin-era changes, this one was anticipated in the latter part of the Yeltsin period. The net score went up from -74 points in August 1999 to -20 points in December 1999, the month Yeltsin took early retirement.
- ¹⁴ Russian civil society organizations are legally defined as nonprofit organizations (the acronym is NKO) rather than nongovernmental organizations. An unknown number of registered NKOs are hollow shells or government-created fakes. The flip side of the coin is that there are thousands of other organizations that are not registered at all.
- ¹⁵ The archetypal statement of the development-begets-democracy thesis is Seymour Martin Lipset, "Some Social Requisites of Democracy: Economic Development and Political Legitimacy," *American Political Science Review* 53 (1) (1959): 69–105.

The Prospects for a Color Revolution in Russia

Valerie Bunce

Abstract: From 1998 to 2005, six elections took place in postcommunist Europe and Eurasia that led to the defeat of authoritarian incumbents or their anointed successors, the empowerment of opposition forces, and, thereafter, the introduction of democratic reforms. Because Putin's regime closely resembles those regimes that were successfully challenged by these dramatic changes in politics, Russia is a logical candidate for such a "color revolution," as these electoral turnovers have been termed. Moreover, the color revolutions have demonstrated an ability to spread among countries, including several that border Russia. However, the case for a color revolution in Russia is mixed. On the one hand, the many costs of personalized rule make Putin's Russia vulnerable. On the other hand, Putin has been extraordinarily effective at home and abroad in preempting the possibility of an opposition victory in Russian presidential and parliamentary elections.

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The global wave of democratization, which began in the mid-1970s and continued through the mid-1990s, had two effects. One was to significantly expand the number of democracies in the world. The other was to transform the nature of dictatorship. While military and Communist Party regimes served as the most common forms of autocratic rule during the Cold War, a relatively new type of dictatorship became the global norm after. This version of dictatorship has been variously termed "hybrid," "competitive authoritarian," or "electoral authoritarian."¹

These regimes originate in the failure of their predecessors to grow the economy and provide political order and national security.² Their defining feature is that they straddle democracy and dictatorship. On the one hand, they claim and appear to be democratic, given their liberal constitutions, representative institutions, and competition among parties and among candidates for political office. On the other hand, their leaders purposefully compromise

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democracy. For example, just as the regime uses both laws and informal actions to curtail civil liberties and political rights, it also conducts elections on an uneven playing field that strongly favors the regime over the opposition.

How sustainable is this marriage between democracy and dictatorship? The purpose of this essay is to address this question by assessing the likelihood that Vladimir Putin's regime in Russia will experience a "color revolution," joining the cross-national wave of elections in postcommunist Europe and Eurasia from 1998 to 2005 that led to the defeat of autocrats and the empowerment of opposition forces.³

I focus on the prospects for a color revolution in Russia because Putin and his allies see the color revolutions as an existential threat.⁴ Their fears are justified: Russia is a postcommunist Eurasian country and a competitive authoritarian regime, and it has been primarily in this region and invariably in such regimes that color revolutions have taken place. Moreover, with the exception of the collapse of the Yanukovich regime in Ukraine in February 2014, it has only been through elections – and not, say, through the more familiar mechanisms for deposing authoritarian rulers, such as foreign invasions, elite defections from the regime, mass protests, or military coups d'état – that authoritarian leaders have lost power in postcommunist Europe and Eurasia. Equally worrisome for Putin and his associates are two other aspects of color revolutions: they appear to be contagious, and they have been followed by not just the defeat of authoritarian incumbents, but also democratic reforms and closer ties with the West.

The analysis is divided into two parts. First, I offer some generalizations about the strengths and weaknesses of competitive authoritarian regimes and the conditions that support color revolutions. Second, I use these generalizations to evaluate

the likelihood that Russia will join the wave of color revolutions that began in Slovakia (1998), moved to Croatia and Serbia (2000), and then moved to Georgia (2003), Ukraine (2004), and Kyrgyzstan (2005).

Despite the apparent tensions between being both democratic and authoritarian, hybrid regimes have shown themselves to be remarkably durable.⁵ Their resilience is based on two factors. First, their leaders keep winning elections. Indeed, incumbent political leaders or their anointed successors have won an average of four out of every five elections that have been held in competitive authoritarian regimes.⁶

Electoral successes reflect, in part, the formidable resources these leaders have at their disposal. These regimes typically create fake opposition parties; harass the real opposition and make it hard for their candidates to run for office; use state coffers and their control over the media to promote regime candidates; manipulate electoral rules to ensure the electoral success of the regime; and control voter registration and the tabulation of the vote. At the same time, authoritarian rulers repeatedly win elections because voters have good reasons to support them. Their records often compare favorably with those of their predecessors, and the opposition is typically divided, politically compromised, and unpopular. Equally important is the impact of their string of electoral victories. In projecting an image of political permanence, the leaders of these regimes are able to marginalize the opposition, tempt some of their critics to collaborate with the regime, and discourage defections from the ruling circle.⁷ The second cornerstone of their power is their relationships with democratic institutions. By maintaining but undermining democratic institutions, political leaders in hybrid regimes carry out "nuanced" assaults on democracy; they can have their cake and eat it, too. While democratic insti-

tutions give these regimes a patina of legitimacy at home and abroad and reassure citizens that the deviations from democracy, while needed in a time of crisis, involve measures that are both temporary and reversible, their subtle subversion gives political leaders wide-ranging and largely unaccountable powers.⁸

In addition, holding competitive elections contributes in important ways to the survival of these regimes. Just as these elections confer an image of accountable government and periodically refresh the regime's mandate to rule, so they have the additional benefits for the regime of helping autocrats identify supporters, expose opponents, gain some useful information about the electorate, and calibrate the distribution of rents.

Competitive authoritarian regimes, however, are also vulnerable. Lacking constraints, authoritarian rulers can go too far in pursuing their agenda of domination: for example, when evidence mounts that elections have been stolen or when too many of their opponents die under suspicious circumstances, the regime resorts to extreme forms of repression, targeting what are widely viewed as innocent victims. As they violate widely held democratic norms and leave an impression that the regime is so insecure that it needs to take desperate measures to stay in office, these flagrant abuses of power can undercut the popularity of incumbent leaders and embolden opposition forces.

Despite their contributions to the survival of these regimes, moreover, competitive elections pose risks for authoritarian rulers.⁹ As we know from the color revolutions, oppositions can still win elections. Moreover, elections are scheduled ahead of time, their political stakes are high, and oppositions can in theory at least participate. As a consequence, competitive elections ultimately provide the opposition with three assets: opportunities to influ-

ence politics, time to plan their strategies, and focal points for political action.

Less obviously from the regime's perspective, stealing elections, too, can be a dangerous endeavor. It is not just that citizens, even in these compromised democracies, value free and fair elections, or that information about the quality of elections is widely available as a result of social media and the presence of domestic and, to a lesser extent, international election monitors. It is also that autocratic leaders depend upon lower-level officials to deliver their ideal outcome: that is, a margin of victory in the election that is high enough to demonstrate popular support of the autocratic incumbent and discourage the opposition, but not so large as to call into question the validity of the electoral process. The key problem is that it is *very* hard for the regime's lieutenants to hit that "sweet spot." Local officials tied to the regime act as individuals and cannot, in any event, easily coordinate their actions. They assume that their political future rests on their delivery of the vote, and they calculate how many votes they will steal based on their reading of the popularity of the regime and the opposition. Thus, if they think the regime is quite popular, they have strong incentives to win favor with the regime by delivering large majorities in their areas. Because each regime ally is likely to proceed with the same logic, the result is a landslide election. Lopsided election results are a big problem for the regime, however, because they feed suspicions about electoral fraud (while providing ample proof of various electoral irregularities) and increase the likelihood of postelection protests. Conversely, if local officials assume that the regime is unpopular and the opposition is a credible competitor, they may be tempted to take the opposite tack: deliver fewer "extra" votes for the regime and thereby protect themselves from allegations of electoral fraud in the event that the opposition wins. These cal-

culations produce several unappealing scenarios insofar as the regime is concerned. If the election is close but the regime's candidates win, the opposition has strong incentives to allege fraud in the short-term and mount more ambitious electoral campaigns in the future. At the same time, if the opposition actually wins, the regime is forced to choose between two unpalatable possibilities: leaving office or refusing to do so. In the first case, the regime loses power; in the second, it risks widespread protests.¹⁰

What laid the groundwork for the color revolutions? A comparison between the six elections that empowered the opposition and those elections that failed to do so, whether in these same countries or in other hybrid regimes in the region, reveals some surprising answers to this question.¹¹

One plausible explanation for the contrast between electoral continuity and change is that some regimes are more vulnerable than others. The logic here is simple: weak regimes invite strong challenges. The problem with this explanation is that none of the familiar indicators of regime weakness do a consistent job of distinguishing between elections that led to turnover in personnel and parties versus elections that maintained the authoritarian status quo. For example, one cannot predict a color revolution on the basis of distinctively high levels of corruption, unusually poor economic performance, or a noticeable and a dramatic fall-off in the ability of the state to do its job (such as controlling borders, providing political order, and implementing policies). At the same time, two other factors often used to measure regime weakness – that is, defections from the ruling circle and a significant shift in patterns of state coercion (whether up or down, depending on the theory) – also fail to distinguish between our two sets of elections.

Is the key factor, then, the character of the opposition? On the one hand, if we take a

long-term perspective on the development of the opposition, we find few differences between the opposition in these six countries and the opposition in the remaining hybrid regimes in the region. In every case, the opposition is divided, compromised, and unpopular, and it repeatedly fails to function as an effective challenger to the regime as a result. On the other hand, if we take a shorter-term perspective, we discover a sharp contrast between the oppositions that won power and those that did not. In five of the six color revolutions (Kyrgyzstan is the exception), but not in the remaining electoral contests in all of the competitive authoritarian regimes in the region, the opposition won an impressive number of local elections (primarily in large cities) in the few years leading up to the pivotal national election. These victories were significant because they punctured the regime's "aura of invincibility" and thereby encouraged the electorate to take seriously the possibility of an alternative to the regime.¹² By running a dress rehearsal before the national election, moreover, the opposition was able to test candidates, issues, and campaign techniques, and acquire some governing experience. As a result, opposition forces improved their case for winning national elections, while gaining stronger incentives to cooperate with one another in pursuit of national office.

The other key development that distinguishes our electoral breakthroughs from all other elections in the competitive authoritarian regimes in the postcommunist region is a dramatic change in the way the opposition conducted its national campaign. The opposition was able to mount a powerful challenge to the regime because it forged a coalition among opposition parties; put forward single candidates, whether for parliamentary or presidential elections; worked closely with civil society groups; organized successful voter registration and turnout drives (which, in

most cases, increased turnout in contrast with earlier elections); and created a youth movement or built on an existing one that opposed the regime. In addition, the opposition ran sophisticated campaigns that, among other things, played up the costs of the regime and the benefits of electing the opposition, made creative use of the media (even where the regime had extensive controls over it), and campaigned throughout the country (and not just the major cities). Also central to the opposition's new strategy was an ambitious program for monitoring the vote, such that regime violations of free and fair elections were duly recorded and broadly advertised.

In the more authoritarian countries that experienced a color revolution, such as Serbia, the opposition assumed that the regime would not leave power under any circumstances, and that the military and the security forces would back the regime. In anticipation of that scenario, they used electoral mobilization as the foundation for popular protests following the election. For this to work, they needed to establish some connections with the military and the security forces before the election – which they did.

How can we account for this remarkable shift in the behavior of the opposition? The answer is that the opposition was able to draw on the experiences of opposition groups in other competitive authoritarian regimes, such as the Philippines in 1986, Chile in 1988, Nicaragua in 1990, and, in the postcommunist region, Bulgaria in 1990, Romania in 1996, and, finally, Slovakia in 1998 (which began the wave of color revolutions). The model for winning power that was used in these countries had five advantages: it targeted elections as the site for change, it had a clear “to-do” list, it succeeded in its mission, it avoided violence, and it was easy to transfer across state boundaries.

But why was the change in opposition strategies so successful? One answer is ob-

vious: these electoral strategies were vastly superior to those that the opposition had used in the past. However, there is another consideration that will be especially important, once we turn to the Russian case. Prior to these pivotal elections, repeated confrontations between the regime and the opposition had produced multiple victories for the former and multiple defeats for the latter. As a consequence of this history, the regime had few incentives to learn or change, whereas the opposition had powerful incentives both to learn and change. This dual logic meant that the regime was vulnerable to the electoral model, because past successes led it to overestimate its power, underestimate the opposition, and recycle the actions that had worked in the past. The regime, in short, was taken by surprise – a victim of its past successes.

As the wave of electoral turnovers continued, however, it moved into more difficult political terrain, as evidenced by the fact that a turnover in political leadership came to require not just winning elections, but also carrying out postelection protests. Authoritarians began to update their strategies in accordance with these new threats, and oppositions began to assume that they could prevail without the hard and tedious work associated with the electoral model. Because the element of surprise was gone and the resources of the opposition and the regime began to even out, the color revolutions came to a seeming end in 2005. However, the success of these oppositions led to a contradictory impact on the political complexion of the postcommunist space. While early risers in this wave transitioned to democracy and later risers made more modest democratic progress, the competitive authoritarian regimes that were able to avoid a color revolution became more authoritarian. While Serbia after 2000 exemplifies the first dynamic and Georgia after 2003 the second, Russia under Putin exemplifies the third.

We can now use our generalizations about the conditions that support the electoral defeat of authoritarian rulers and the strengths and weaknesses of hybrid regimes to pose a final question. Is Russia ripe for a color revolution? At the outset, there appear to be good reasons to expect a color revolution in Russia's future.

Perhaps the most important is that Putin has used his sixteen years in power to build a system of personalized rule. Why is that costly? First, like his Communist predecessors, who also fused and centralized political power and economic resources, Putin has made it very easy for citizens to hold him personally responsible for both bad as well as welcome political or economic developments. This generalization, in turn, highlights the contradictory impact of crises on personalized rule. On the one hand, crises played a key role in the rise of competitive authoritarianism: they prime the support of any leader who seems to overcome crises and they legitimate that leader's assaults on democracy. In this sense, rulers like Putin have a vested interest in periodically "refreshing" the crisis button. However, because rule is personalized, citizens can also decide to hold the leader accountable for the crises that occur on his watch.

Another cost of personalized rule is that it goes hand in hand with a weak ruling party – a factor that figures prominently in some accounts of why authoritarian rulers fall.¹³ After the collapse of the communist system, Russia was slow to develop a ruling party, in part because Yeltsin was less interested in institutionalizing his rule than in promoting his personal power. When a ruling party finally did form, it lacked an ideological foundation and, as a result, the capacity to do what strong parties do: structure public debates, public opinion, and voting behavior; recruit and socialize members; and institutionalize the power of the leader such that the party and, thus, the regime can outlive the down-

fall or death of the leader. Instead, United Russia, the dominant party, has largely functioned as a parking lot for ambitious individuals pursuing power and money. As a result, if Putin were to weaken or leave power for whatever reason, United Russia would quickly disintegrate and, like the collapse of the ruling parties of both Tudjman's Croatia and Shevardnadze's Georgia, would make the regime an easy target for a color revolution.¹⁴ Moreover, Putin's success thus far in eliminating competitors does not alter this prediction. In most of the color revolutions, the leader that came to power was not, in fact, either a well-established leader of the opposition or a prominent defector from the regime. A seeming lack of alternatives to the leader, in short, does not foreclose a color revolution.

As is typical of personalized rule, moreover, Russia is, even by the low standards of hybrid regimes, unusually corrupt. Corruption is a problem for Putin, partly because public opinion surveys have demonstrated that a growing percentage of Russians are very concerned about corruption.¹⁵ Corruption is also a problem because, without secure property rights and rule of law, economic performance suffers and the state's ability to implement policies is impaired.¹⁶

The latter issue leads to a more general point: the weakness of the Russian state. It is true that, under Putin's tutelage, the Russian state has centralized, has become somewhat more effective in collecting revenues, and is less subject to challenges to its authority by oligarchs, regional governors, and secessionist regions than it was during the Yeltsin years. At the same time, however, Putin's power is nonetheless compromised by the weakness of the Russian state. A case in point is Chechnya. While Putin eventually succeeded in ending the war in Chechnya and installing Ramzan Kadyrov, a leader there who pledges fealty to Moscow, it is unclear whether he or Putin has the upper hand.

Indeed, their relationship is reminiscent of Soviet bloc politics during the Cold War when Eastern European regimes, dependent on Moscow for money, energy, and regime survival, converted their weakness into strength by blackmailing Moscow into providing significant subsidies. In the absence of such support, Eastern European leaders were able to warn that unrest would ensue and likely spread throughout the region, thereby destroying the entire bloc, including the Soviet Union.¹⁷

The spatial integrity of the Russian state is not the only area where Putin's record as a state-builder can be called into question. As Brian Taylor has argued, in comparative terms the Russian state is an "under performer," as indicated by, for example, widespread corruption, high murder rates, and citizens' anger about the ineffectiveness and the lack of accountability of the police and other state officials. Russia does not have a well-ordered, rule-bound, and, therefore, effective state; instead, "state employees act like bandits."¹⁸

Thus, personalized rule in Russia has been surprisingly costly for Putin: the regime depends on him for its functioning and very survival; he controls the state in theory, but not in practice; and personalized rule means that he has reneged on his promise to build political order. The dictatorship of law, a big theme in his rise to power, has proven elusive.

Putin is also vulnerable because he has failed in recent years to meet another standard by which he has argued he should be judged: delivering strong economic performance. As was mentioned earlier, only some of the color revolutions took place when the economy was on a downswing, suggesting that economic performance was not at the center of at least some of these electoral turnovers. That said, Russia presents a distinctive economic profile in the region given the striking contrast between an extended period of robust economic per-

formance (during Putin's first two terms in office) and an economic slowdown, beginning in 2008, and then an actual contraction of the Russian economy since 2014 (during Putin's third term in office).

This pattern brings to mind two theories about regime change. The first is the "rising expectations" theory of revolution, wherein strong economic performance for a number of years, followed by a sharp and sudden decline, leads to a gap between what people have come to expect from the economy and what they get.¹⁹ The result, according to this theory, is political upheaval. The other theory is of more recent vintage. As political scientist Kevin Morrison has argued, when autocratic governments rely on nontax revenues, such as energy exports, and thereby opt out of the democratic deal, wherein the regime trades accountable government for the right to tax the citizenry, a sharp decline in those nontax revenues leads to popular uprisings and often regime change.²⁰

Finally, there is some evidence, albeit limited, that the color revolutions are having some impact on Russian politics. For example, Golos ("vote" in English) is a Russian NGO founded in 2000 that, like similar organizations in Croatia, Serbia, and Ukraine on the eve of their color revolutions, supports free and fair elections and monitors the vote, albeit not as thoroughly as we saw elsewhere during the color revolutions. Another example is the protests that broke out, primarily in Moscow, in response to the fraudulent parliamentary elections in 2011. Third, in his ultimately unsuccessful but surprisingly effective campaign for mayor of Moscow in 2014, the opposition leader, Aleksei Navalny, ran against corruption and relied on exactly the kinds of strategies that define the electoral model.²¹ Finally and most recently, while the September 2016 parliamentary and regional elections led to an overwhelming victory for Putin's party, they also featured some important wins for the opposition in both

St. Petersburg and Moscow, as well as a significant decline in electoral turnout (as we also saw in the years leading up to the color revolutions).

If there are reasons to argue that the Putin regime is vulnerable, there are also reasons to see the Putin regime as a sustainable project. The strengths of this regime include several well-known assets. One is money: Russia is a much richer country than the countries that experienced color revolutions, and none of their leaders had the luxury, in contrast to Putin, of being able to use the “hydrocarbon sector as their personal bank.”²² Another is the sheer size of the Russian Federation and, in most of the country, its very low population density. If these characteristics get in the way of state capacity, they especially get in the way of a full implementation of the electoral model. Finally, there is Putin’s popularity. While his approval rating on the eve of the crisis in Ukraine in late 2013 was 64 percent, in August 2014, largely in response to the annexation of Crimea, it was 84 percent.²³ However, there is a more complicated story regarding Putin’s popular support. Rallies around the flag tend to be short-lived phenomena. Moreover, it is hard to gauge real popularity in the absence of alternatives to the leader. This is especially true given the fact that Russians express strong concerns about a variety of issues, such as corruption and the quality of their political institutions, that could easily migrate to their evaluation of Putin as a leader.²⁴

Less obvious, but equally important, is the very resilience of the regime. By resilience, I refer, first, to the fact that Putin has been in power for sixteen years and, second, to the fact that he has won three elections handily and avoided, unlike Yeltsin in 1996, a runoff election for the presidency. Resilience is a factor that divides and discourages existing and would-be challengers.

If resilience speaks to Putin’s ability to win elections and to maintain power, it also says a lot about two issues that are inextricably linked to one another in the Russian case: that is, Putin’s refusal to take his power for granted and the pattern of growing authoritarianism over the course of Putin’s rule. Put simply, the former has driven the latter. Thus, for reasons of safeguarding his power, Putin’s regime has over time stepped up its harassment of the opposition and civil society groups, founded new civil society groups that are closely tied to the regime, and carried out a successful campaign of ending the autonomy of the oligarchs, the regional governors, and the media. In a similar vein, Putin has been quick to change electoral rules in ways that serve his interests: for example, by extending the length of the presidential term and thereby allowing for the possibility that he could remain president until 2024. Finally, Putin has manipulated the public discourse in ways that divide and marginalize opponents while bringing new groups into his coalition. For instance, in his first two terms, as Russian scholar Gulnaz Sharafutdinova has persuasively argued, Putin successfully eliminated the Yeltsin era’s rhetorical emphasis on democratization and self-determination and substituted the value of centralization, dictatorship of law, and state-building.²⁵

More recently, he has fashioned a new script that uses Russian exceptionalism, Russian nationalism, the projection of Russian power in the international system, cultural conservatism, and criticisms of the United States as a destabilizing force in the international system as the touchstones for mobilizing political support. These rhetorical themes, and the policies that have gone along with them, have expanded his coalition to include extreme nationalists and have divided the Russian opposition by forcing them to choose between being patriots or traitors. This new framing of how Russia should understand itself is a familiar

ploy of dictators who want to stay in power but face economic difficulties. As one analyst recently argued in a comparison between contemporary Russian politics and Milosevic's rule in Serbia during the 1990s: "If Milosevic were alive today, he would sue Putin for plagiarism."²⁶

Putin, therefore, is the very model of a rational authoritarian ruler who knows that using rhetoric, policies, and invisible interventions to preempt threats is a far better strategy than relying simply on coercion or responding to threats after they materialize. Putin has not just "protest-proofed" and "defection-proofed" his regime, he has also "diffusion-proofed" his hold on power. It is not accidental, for example, that the trend toward growing authoritarianism in Russia began not just in response to Putin's decisive reelection in 2004, but also in reaction to the Orange Revolution in Ukraine in the same year; or that, in the wake of the Ukrainian color revolution, the Putin regime began to take steps toward making it harder for international election monitors to participate in Russian elections, the Russian media to be independent of the state, and NGOs in Russia to operate and to receive support from the West.

However, the most recent example of the influence of the color revolutions on Putin's behavior and his use of preemptive actions to ward off domestic and international popular protests began in late 2013 and continued with the implosion of the Russia-friendly Yanukovich regime in February 2014, the quick Russian annexation of Crimea a month later, and, thereafter, Russian destabilization of eastern Ukraine. One could argue that these events can be explained by the threats to Russian national security posed by a Ukraine that was moving toward Europe and away from Russia. However, this intervention also reflected Putin's fears that the unrest in Ukraine and the collapse of its Putin-friendly regime, with both of these developments coded by Putin and his

advisors as yet another Western-directed color revolution, would destabilize Russia. As a result, while he had lost his man in Kiev, and thereby lost his ability to steer developments in Ukraine, Putin could at the least intervene in Ukraine in ways that would derail Ukraine's democratic experiment, reduce the appeals for Russians of the Ukraine scenario, and limit the ability of the West to respond forcefully to his covert violations of Ukraine's territorial sovereignty (for example, by manipulating international norms regarding minority rights and the responsibility to protect). Finally, aggression in Ukraine could mobilize Putin's popular support at home by playing up a "fascist" threat in Ukraine and reminding Russians that, with Putin at the helm and Crimea a new "subject" of the Russian Federation, the Russian state was finally in a position to expand – rather than, as in the recent past, contract – in both its physical size and its international influence.

The annexation of Crimea, in short, was very popular at home, while covert interventions in eastern Ukraine made sure that Russians would not be interested in following the precedent of Euromaidan. At the same time, Putin's repertoire of intervention served other domestic purposes, such as legitimating more energetic attacks on the media, civil society, and opposition groups.²⁷ Putin's fears of a color revolution, therefore, led him to carry out a complicated version of diversionary war: that is, wars launched by authoritarian rulers (in Putin's case, largely through covert means) to shore up their political support at home.²⁸

There are two conclusions that we can draw from this assessment of the prospects for a color revolution in Russia. First, both Putin and the regime he has fashioned are vulnerable. This is largely due to several contradictions that lie at the heart of Putin's political project. One is the holding of regular and competitive elections, which

works for but also against Putin and his regime. The other is that personalized rule both expands and limits Putin's power. While he promised rule of law, political order, and economic growth, he has been unable, especially in the past few years with respect to the economy, to deliver on these goals. In appearing to be hegemonic, moreover, he makes himself the target for opposition groups and disgruntled publics. Putin, in short, faces a difficult trade-off. The actions that enhance his personal power are precisely the actions that prevent the consolidation of his regime.

The second conclusion is that the vulnerability of authoritarian rulers and their regimes is one thing, and a color revolu-

tion quite another. At this point, Russia lacks the necessary and sufficient conditions for a color revolution; for instance, significant opposition success in winning local elections and subsequent adoption by the opposition of the electoral model in its quest to win national elections. The failures of the Russian opposition in these respects reflects both the difficulty of winning power, given the authoritarian environment within which they operate, and the stringent demands of the electoral model. However, the most important constraint on opposition forces is Putin's continuing commitment to proofing his regime from color revolutions and other challenges to his rule.

ENDNOTES

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Russian Patronal Politics Beyond Putin

Henry E. Hale

Abstract: Russian politics from the tsars through Vladimir Putin has been shaped by patronalism, a social equilibrium in which personal connections dominate, collective action happens primarily through individualized punishments and rewards, and trends in the political system reflect changing patterns of coordination among nationwide networks of actual acquaintances that typically cut across political parties, firms, nongovernmental organizations, and even the state. The “chaotic” Yeltsin era reflects low network coordination, while the hallmark of the Putin era has been the increasingly tight coordination of these networks’ activities around the authority of a single patron. In at least the next decade, Russia is unlikely to escape the patronalist equilibrium, which has already withstood major challenges in 1917 and 1991. The most promising escape paths involve much longer-term transitions through diversified economic development and integration with the Western economy, though one cannot entirely rule out that a determined new ruler might accelerate the process.

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While its seventy years of Communist rule often steals the limelight, Russia’s weightiest political legacy is arguably something even older and more stubborn: *patronalism*. Russian political actors experience patronalism as a particular kind of social environment in which they operate. In this environment, direct personal connections are not just useful, but absolutely vital to succeeding in politics and actually accomplishing anything once one secures office. These interpersonal connections can involve long-term relationships of diffuse exchange, as between close friends and relatives, but also elaborate systems of punishments and rewards that are meted out to specific individuals. The rule of law is typically weak, and what many call “corruption” or “nepotism” is the norm. People can and sometimes do rally for a cause with others with whom they share no personal connection, but this is the exception rather than the expectation. Indeed, when push comes to shove for individual actors in the system, personal connections tend to trump issue positions, ideology, or even identity. This is a world of

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patrons and clients, patronage politics, and the dominance of informal understandings over formal rules – all features well documented by historians of Russia from its very origins.¹ The rare disruptions in these patterns have been just that: rare disruptions of an enduring normality. And the implications have been powerful for Russian politics. These include cycles of authoritarian consolidation punctuated by “chaotic” moments of openness and competition that are widely understood locally as “breakdowns.”² True liberal democracy always seems out of reach somehow.

But just because something has endured for a millennium does not mean it can never change. Vladimir Putin has proven to be a master practitioner of patronal politics, but is it possible that he or a successor will eventually break Russia’s legacy of patronalism? We must concede that this is possible. Even those states that are today seen as paragons of the rule of law, impersonal politics, and liberal democracy emerged out of patronalistic origins not so long ago, arguably only in the last century or two.³ A few countries, such as Singapore, appear to have made such a transition much more quickly in recent times. Could Russia in the late Putin or post-Putin era chart a similar course?

The following pages discuss the implications of patronalism for Russian politics and explore different pathways through which change is conceivable. The conclusions are sobering, at least in the near term. Transforming society in the way that would be required takes not only the right conditions, but also a great deal of time, at least a generation or two. Patronalism, it would seem, is likely to remain a powerful environmental condition shaping Russian politics for the rest of the Putin era and likely well into the next.

In precise terms, patronalism is “a social equilibrium in which individuals organize their political and economic pursuits pri-

marily around the personalized exchange of concrete rewards and punishments, and not primarily around abstract, impersonal principles such as ideological belief or categorizations that include many people one has not actually met in person.”⁴ The centrality of personalized, as opposed to impersonal, exchange explains why phenomena like patron-client relations, patronage politics, weak rule of law, nepotism, and corruption all tend to be common in highly patronalistic societies. Highly patronalistic societies also tend to feature patrimonial (or neopatrimonial) forms of rule and low levels of social capital in the sense popularized by political scientist Robert Putnam.⁵ It is unsurprising that Russia features these things in generous measure, as generally do all post-Soviet states outside the European Union.⁶

One central implication of patronalism for politics is that the primary collective political “actors” are usually not formal institutions like political parties or interest groups, but rather extended networks of actual personal acquaintances. That is, collective political action occurs mainly through chains of people who directly interact with each other – regardless of whether the interaction occurs in a formal or informal framework – with each link largely activated through expectations of personal benefit or sanction. These arrangements need not be *quid pro quo*. In fact, actors can benefit by establishing extended networks of trust and long-term mutual benefit bound by close personal relationships. In Russia, such relationships commonly involve family bonds (including marriage and godparentage), growing up or living in the same neighborhood, being classmates in school (*odnokashniki*), regularly working together, friendship, or introduction by individuals who share such relationships with both parties. These relationships matter in all societies, but they assume overwhelming importance in highly patronalistic societies, typi-

cally trumping formal rules or convictions about policy issues as sources of expectations for how someone else will behave politically when the stakes are high. The long-term bonds by no means feel mercenary; instead, individuals tend to feel them very deeply, considering them a source of great personal enrichment and satisfaction (or great emotional distress when they sour or rupture).

Russian politics can appear unstable, including oscillations toward and away from authoritarianism and democracy, because a coordination problem governs how the major power networks in a society relate to one another. As personal connections are paramount, political-economic networks need direct, personal access to power to obtain the resources they require to survive and thrive. Indeed, because they are unable to rely on the rule of law or the impartial application of state power to protect their interests, it becomes imperative for them to extend their own personal connections to key centers of power or, at the very least, to avoid being on the losing side of any struggle for supreme power and to avoid alienating whichever other network wins. Of course, these networks' chief patrons do have preferences for different coalitional arrangements, and the decisions of the biggest networks regarding which coalition to join or how to hedge their bets impact each coalition's chances of winning and the distributional arrangements within that coalition. The coordination problem occurs, therefore, because all major networks are facing this same situation simultaneously.

One very important implication, then, is that the factors that facilitate networks' coordinating around a single patron tend to promote political closure. Would-be regime opponents will find it hard to obtain financing or media coverage since the most powerful networks are likely to avoid activities that might irritate the patron even without being explicitly told to do

so. This is the hallmark of a *single-pyramid system*, in which a country's most prominent networks are generally coordinated around the authority of a single patron or become marginalized (or are liquidated). At the same time, factors that complicate network coordination around a single patron tend to promote a robust but highly corrupt pluralism as networks jockey for position and compete with each other for influence, each interested in providing political cover for critics of their rivals – that is, a *competing-pyramid system*.⁷

While myriad factors might complicate or facilitate networks' coordinating around a single patron's authority, two appear particularly important in the post-Soviet region. First, a presidentialist constitution facilitates network coordination around a single patron by creating a symbol of dominance (the presidency) that only a single network can hold at any one time. Such single-pyramid systems can be expected to break down, however, when succession looms and different networks in the pyramid start jockeying to influence the succession in the direction they most prefer. Second, networks that wield the most popular support are likely to have special advantages in a succession struggle because they can potentially mobilize more (and more ardent) supporters both at the ballot box and in the streets. Recognizing this, networks trying to decide where to place their bets are more likely to support popular networks and less likely to support unpopular ones. In other words, high popularity promotes network coordination around an incumbent chief patron while low popularity tends to undermine such coordination. Periods when unpopularity coincides with succession struggles are likely to be most conducive to the breakdown of single-pyramid politics.

Macrolevel Russian political history since the breakup of the USSR can largely

be understood as successive periods of movement toward and away from single-pyramid and competing-pyramid systems. From this bird's-eye perspective, Putinite Russia is not fundamentally different from Yeltsinite Russia; the country during these two periods just happened to be at different stages of regime cycles that are typical of countries with presidentialist constitutions and varying degrees of public support for the incumbents.

Overall, the dominant dynamic in post-Soviet Russia's regime, ever since Boris Yeltsin defeated his parliament in the violent clashes of fall 1993 and then installed a presidentialist constitution in the December 1993 referendum, has clearly been a slow, net slide toward greater political closure. Russia's most powerful networks, all well represented in the spheres of both business and politics and cutting across formal institutions like parties or branches of government, have generally come in three types: "oligarchs" (those growing mainly out of the corporate world), regional political machines (typically led by governors), and state-based networks (extending primarily out of state structures). These were highly uncoordinated in the aftermath of the USSR's demise,⁸ but Yeltsin pulled out all the presidential stops to cobble together a (barely) winning coalition for his 1996 reelection, persuaded to do so rather than cancel the election by "privatization tsar" Anatolii Chubais.⁹ This coalition included a motley mix of state-based networks, some key regional machines (such as vote-rich Bashkortostan and Tatarstan), and most oligarchs (who supplied slanted media coverage that gave Yeltsin a major advantage). Indeed, this feat was arguably the first to demonstrate the power of the patronal presidency to generate an electoral win through network coordination because he had so little else upon which to rely, with his support in the single digits just months before the election and the

betting money favoring Communist Party leader Gennadii Zyuganov. *Henry E. Hale*

After Putin was elected president in 2000, Russia entered a new period of gradual closure of the political space. This involved not only eliminating some networks that had initially opposed his rise (as with oligarch Vladimir Gusinsky's network), but also by co-opting others (such as Yurii Luzhkov's Moscow machine) and then steadily finding them all niches in the system that simultaneously gave them room to prosper while also limiting their ability to engage in unwanted spheres of activity (for example, Putin's reported 2000 deal with the oligarchs and the elimination of direct elections for governors in 2004–2005, while reappointing most of them). By 2007, when Putin announced he would leave the presidency for the prime ministership, his Kremlin had developed an elaborate system to regulate oligarch participation in elections and had brought the three most influential television stations almost entirely under de facto state editorial control. Putin's return to the presidency in 2012 resumed the trend of political closure, with an expansion of his own personal networks' role in controlling mass media and more aggressive use of the criminal justice system to selectively persecute those who dared oppose him. With the seizure of Crimea and the start of the war in the Donbas in 2014, the political screws tightened still further. His 2016 decision to create a National Guard reporting to him personally, and binding to it the brutal network of Chechnya strongman Ramzan Kadyrov, is perhaps the latest major step in this process of increasingly tight coordination of Russia's major networks around Putin as chief patron.

That said, the gaps in the chronology just presented (in particular 1997–1999 and 2007–2012) belie the notion that Russia's path to political closure has been monotonic. Indeed, these periods all reflect moments when uncertainty regarding presi-

dential succession underpinned periods of pronounced political ferment in Russia that involved certain sorts of political opening. The period leading up to the 1999 – 2000 election cycle was a classic competing pyramid situation brought about by Yeltsin’s expected departure from politics, with the primary battle being fought by two roughly equal coalitions of oligarchs, regional machines, and state officials angling to succeed Yeltsin: the Fatherland-All Russia coalition led by Luzhkov and former prime minister Yevgenii Primakov versus the Kremlin’s coalition in support of Putin. It is important to remember that Putin was not initially considered a favorite in this race. He became the presumptive winner only after his strong military response to a series of deadly apartment building bombings in September 1999 led to a surge in his popularity, and after the pro-Putin Unity bloc’s strong second-place finish in the December 1999 Duma election proved that he could convert his popularity into officially counted votes.

Acute tensions among networks again emerged with the 2007 – 2008 election cycle, when Putin fostered expectations that he would leave the presidency without giving a clear idea as to whether the succession would lead to a real transfer of power. The key difference between this first “succession” from Putin and the succession from Yeltsin is that Putin (unlike Yeltsin) was in robust health and at the height of his popular support. Because polls throughout 2007 – 2008 showed that large shares of the electorate would vote for whomever Putin endorsed, Russia’s political-economic networks had little incentive to mobilize popular opposition and push for more democracy, instead struggling both overtly and covertly to influence Putin’s decision and to better position themselves for whatever new arrangement would emerge. It was during this period, for example, that competing networks with roots in rival securi-

ty services resorted to tactics that included arresting each other’s representatives and exposing each other’s misdeeds in media outlets.¹⁰ Once Putin made clear that he would retain a hold on formal power as prime minister and leader of the United Russia Party but cede the presidency itself to a close associate with a more “liberal” reputation, Dmitrii Medvedev, the resulting uncertainty as to where future power would rest fostered a noticeable opening of the political space (some called this period a “thaw”)¹¹ even as Medvedev presided over a continued contraction of ballot-eligible alternatives, replaced some of the most powerful governors, and lengthened presidential terms from four to six years effective in 2012.

When Putin and Medvedev once again put succession on the table by declaring they would switch positions for the 2011 – 2012 election cycles as their popularity was weakening in the wake of the 2008 – 2009 financial crisis, a new political opening emerged when slapdash efforts to boost the United Russia Party’s vote through fraud and crude pressure in the December 2011 Duma election sparked massive protests in Moscow and other major cities. The regime’s initial response, interestingly enough, was not an immediate crackdown but instead a retreat. Controls on media were relaxed, and opposition figures previously denied coverage appeared as commentators or even the subjects of neutral news coverage. Video cameras were installed in virtually all polling places for the 2012 presidential election. Direct contested elections, at least of some sort, were restored for governors. And rules for registering parties were relaxed, resulting in many opposition forces gaining official recognition. Once Putin was safely reelected and the “new” old patron once again firmly in place, the regime took a decidedly more authoritarian turn. Those who had ventured the furthest in flirting with op-

position politics from 2008 to 2012, such as oligarch Mikhail Prokhorov, increasingly found themselves under pressure to fall more firmly back into line, especially after 2014, when Putin's popularity soared into the stratosphere.

It is not impossible for Russia to escape the social equilibrium of patronalism in the foreseeable future. What might a non-patronal or "low-patronalism" Russia look like? In general, it would be a country where individuals coordinated their activities around formal rules and laws as a matter of course; where violators would routinely suffer either legal or social sanction regardless of their personal connections; where people's personal convictions on broad policy issues would normally trump the interests of their networks; where merit according to formalized criteria would typically overrule personal or family ties when a valued position is at stake; where revelations of corruption are shocking rather than wryly accepted as the norm; and where people would frequently join and contribute money to organizations led by people to whom they have no extended personal connection but with whom they share certain values or valued characteristics.

This would certainly be a very different Russia, though it would not necessarily be a democratic one. Nazi Germany, to take perhaps the most extreme example, was not organized on patronalistic principles. And to offer a much more benign example, Lee Kuan Yew successfully broke Singapore's patronalistic equilibrium, making it one of the least corrupt countries in the world, but the regime he created shows how formal rules and policy commitments can underpin authoritarianism. The majority of low-patronalism countries from Canada to Sweden, however, are liberal democracies. Indeed, to be a fully liberal democracy surely requires that formal procedures trump the politics of person-

al connections and personalized rewards and punishments.¹² Thus, if Russia were to make such a transition from patronalism, its prospects for full democratization would radically improve.

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What are the chances that Russia could realize such a transition? The chief problem is that patronalism is not simply a habit that a good media campaign could get people to kick. Instead, it is much better understood as a complex, deeply entrenched equilibrium in how people relate to one another when it comes to political activity. Accordingly, it can be very difficult to shift the realm of politics to a different equilibrium.

Let us reflect a little more on why this is the case. People everywhere generally oppose things like "corruption" and "nepotism" and want to be able to rely on the law to protect them. But what drives the equilibrium is the pervasive *expectation* that these behaviors are the norm rather than the rare exception in important spheres of life. And when they expect virtually everyone to practice corruption and nepotism and believe that they cannot rely on others to obey or enforce the law, then they face very strong incentives to engage in the very same practices themselves if they want to get anything done – even good things.

A few examples help illustrate the force – and morality – behind patronalism's endurance. A mayor who completely eschews such practices – refusing to make any pay-offs, to maintain a "favor bank" with powerful higher-ups, or to pressure the right people using the resources at her disposal – might well find herself unable to get a company to build a factory in her city that would create much-needed jobs. Without some connection to the mayor, this factory would likely just go to another city where the mayor "plays ball." While the honest mayor might be considered a hero in Western societies for standing up to her corrupt surroundings, to her constituents who de-

pend on her to land jobs for their city, she would likely be considered ineffective and even incompetent. Ironically, these same constituents might all the while feel angry at the rampant corruption in their society. Moreover, when people do not expect others to observe the rule of law, appointing one's relatives as your deputies or awarding a state contract to a close friend makes sense as a way of ensuring you are not cheated, which can better position you to do your job effectively. Or, at least, it guarantees that if you are cheated, the lost resources go to someone you like who might do you a solid later. Bribe-taking can also be useful for something other than satisfying greed since participation in elaborate rent-seeking schemes can signal one's loyalty to the system, while also giving its practitioners resources that can be used to achieve whatever goals that individual needs to achieve, including the goals of the organization the person represents.¹³ Of course, coercion is also frequently part of such arrangements, and a weak rule of law has long been argued to facilitate companies' turning to mafias to enforce contracts. These mafias, of course, are also widely known for generating their own demand for "protection."¹⁴ Overall, in highly patronalistic societies, such things are frequently seen as "just the way things work here," words often accompanied by an ironic smile and a sigh. And so the equilibrium is continuously reproduced.

This helps explain why patronalism has been so tenacious in Russia over centuries, not just decades. Arguably emerging with the first human communities that were small enough for everyone to know each other and in which the most natural way to govern was through personal connections, patronalism is best thought of as the world historical norm, with the West being a highly contingent exception.¹⁵ Even a cursory look at works on politics and society in precommunist Russia makes quite clear that patronalistic practices, including

pervasive patron-client relations, were the norm centuries before the Bolsheviks came to power in 1917; so this cannot be blamed on Communist rule.¹⁶ The 1917 Bolshevik Revolution can, in some sense, be understood as an antipatronal revolution, an attempt to replace the old "corrupt" politics with a new future governed by socialist principles and formal organization, treating people not according to who they knew but who they were and what they believed and valued. But it was not long before a new leader emerged who realized he could undermine the true reformers like Nikolai Bukharin and Leon Trotsky by resorting to the old, hard practice of patronal politics, crushing them with the Communist Party machine he constructed based on personal connections in the 1920s and 1930s. Hope was likewise dashed with the defeat of Mikhail Gorbachev's effort to create a democratic and prosperous socialism, and the choices that post-Soviet leaders made to consolidate power through the temptingly available tools of patronalism; this was essentially the lesson that Chubais taught Yeltsin in the course of winning reelection in 1996.

The key to successfully and significantly reducing the degree of patronalism in politics is to somehow create a pervasive and durable expectation across the whole of society (though especially elites) that people will no longer engage in the same practices as before. And this belief must be sustained not only during a moment of revolution, but throughout the initial years of a new regime when disillusionment can arise and a leader can be sorely tempted to resort to patronal politics to stay in power. For this reason, not only have very few leaders anywhere in the world seriously tried it, but even fewer have stuck with it and succeeded.

Only in Georgia after the Rose Revolution did a post-Soviet leader make a notewor-

thy effort to reduce the scope of patronalism in politics. But most now agree that despite certain impressive reforms, including ridding the traffic police of corruption, Mikheil Saakashvili's efforts did not go nearly far enough, with his regime retaining and vigorously engaging a solid (if less outwardly visible) patronalistic core. One can also find a few limited spheres where patronalism is firewalled out in a highly patronalistic society, as political scientist Juliet Johnson has shown occurred with Kyrgyzstan's central banking system under the pressures and incentives supplied by the international financial community. Johnson also shows, however, how difficult such bubbles of formality can be to sustain.¹⁷ In a country where it dominates the highest levels of politics, patronalism abhors a vacuum. For such reasons, Lee Kuan Yews – and even Mikheil Saakashvilis – are rare.

Russia's prospects for true antipatronal transformation, therefore, seem slim indeed in the next decade or two. Its direct involvement in conflicts from Ukraine to Syria could create pressures to improve effectiveness by reducing the degree of patronalistic practices in the military.¹⁸ But history suggests it would be unlikely to spread to other spheres without concerted leadership effort. Perhaps Putin could one day wake up and decide to use his immense authority to truly remake Russian society.¹⁹ But it is hard for leaders to break up and rebuild anew the very boat on which they float, and there are strong arguments that he would face a great risk that an impartial legal system could put him (or at least his close friends) in danger of imprisonment.²⁰ If his successor comes from inside his system, he or she would likely face the same risks.

An antipatronal transformation, therefore, may be most likely if oppositions come to power who are somehow credibly committed to thoroughgoing reforms, either in an actual revolution or in an election victo-

ry that feels revolutionary (the latter being less painful for Russians). There is a strong case to be made that this is what happened in Georgia, with Saakashvili's party-building strategy being key to his credibility as a reformer.²¹ But too many revolutions have had their patronalistic Thermidors to inspire much optimism in Russia.

It is at least conceivable that certain more gradual changes could begin and accumulate in the next decade or two that could weaken patronalism. One could be robust economic growth, as has arguably facilitated the transition from the strongest forms of patronalism in much of Western Europe and North America. Economic development holds the potential to help individuals feel less dependent on more powerful patrons for their well-being, encouraging them to engage in more activities based on their beliefs in spite of pressures that might be applied to them. The rebellion of Russia's "creative classes" that was part of the massive street protests against election fraud and Putin's return to the presidency indicates that this path is not completely unrealistic for Russia. Indeed, these protesters were not simply expressing their dislike of a particular individual or even their objection to a particular instance of election fraud. They were also expressing their hope for a new kind of future for Russia, one without corruption or political manipulations.

For economic development to bring that kind of change, it would have to come not simply from a rise in energy prices, which would leave individuals as dependent as before on higher-ups linked to the state, but from a broad diversification of the economy that empowers something like an independent middle class. The problem is that those who hold resources today have incentive to prevent this from happening, primarily by seeking to control any "diversification" themselves either from the outset or through predatory "raiding" practices.

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Whether emerging independent economic actors will be able to form the alliances necessary to protect themselves from such encroachment on a large scale remains to be seen, and will be difficult given the strength of their foes. At best, it would probably require more than a generation for this process to take a sufficiently sturdy hold to create expectations of a new social norm emerging.²² The path of economic development may in fact be Russia's most promising, but it is a very long and contingent one at best.

It is also possible that patronalism could become overwhelmed by the emergence of strong political partisanship or the development of deep ideological commitments that could start to overpower the pull of patronal networks. That is, perhaps people in Russia will start to buy into certain belief systems so deeply that they become (*en masse*) more willing than before to break with the demands of their own friends and family and withstand individualized rewards and punishments. Political scientist Stephen Hanson, for example, shows how initially marginalized ideologues have often gone on to create the most powerful parties, since their deeply held personal commitments lead them to adopt a long time-horizon until the point at which their time arrives and they expand their base to transform society. To be sure, almost since the beginning, Russia could boast brave individuals willing to take on enormous risks and pay the highest of personal prices in order to stand up for their beliefs, ranging from tsarist-era revolutionaries to Soviet dissidents to hard-core street protesters in the late Putin era. They have rarely, however, managed to get the buy-in of large numbers, remaining marginalized and sometimes even ridiculed by average citizens. It would seem likely to take a major national trauma to generate the kind of competing belief-systems necessary to completely restructure politics away from

patronalistic practices. And even when such an effort initially succeeds, as was arguably the case one century ago when the Bolsheviks seized power and attempted to impose ideological rather than patronalistic practices of rule, history suggests that it is likely to succumb before long to the temptation to resort to patronalism, as with Stalin's rise to power.

We should also not rule out that Russia could chart a path away from patronalism through democracy. For example, if Russia were to experience some kind of reform that systematically complicated the coordination of its highly patronalistic networks around a single chief patron, the resulting political competition could over time provide at least some incentive for politicians actually to follow through on campaign promises to combat corruption. One such reform could be a shift to a nonpresidentialist constitution, a shift that sometimes occurs when an outgoing president does not trust his or her likely successors and thus tries to weaken the office they would inherit, or when a coalition takes power and decides to cement a power-sharing deal with constitutional change. One problem is that research into the causes of corruption indicates that it can take many decades for democratic competition to noticeably dampen corruption.²³ And other research has found that democratic competition in highly patronalistic societies can actually increase demand for corrupt practices as politicians seek to use every tool in their arsenal to win struggles for power.²⁴

One final possibility deserves mention. Russia might one day integrate far more strongly into the international political economy than it has so far. Since this international political economy is still dominated by the West, such integration could gradually serve to weaken Russian patronalism by providing increasingly important and lucrative environments for surviving and thriving without patronalistic practices.

And even if this integration primarily goes not through the West but via Asia-Pacific centers of growth where patronalism is the norm, this could still mean that Russia's biggest patronal networks would gain strong interests outside of Russia. In this case, even if these international centers of growth do not insist on democratization, the effect could be liberalizing because it would weaken the dependence of Russia's chief economic actors on their patrons back at home. From the vantage point of 2017, however, this seems very unlikely to happen in the next decade. Russia has been sanctioned by the international community for its seizure of Crimea and support for an insurgency in the Donbas, and the recent trend has been toward Russia's isolation from, rather than integration with, the world economy. While reversal is quite possible in the next ten years, the process is likely to be slow and nowhere near extensive enough in the next decade to translate into a significant reduction in Russian patronalism.

Overall, at least for the next decade or two, it would appear that the Russian Federation is unlikely to escape the social equilibrium of patronalism that has shaped politics in that part of the world for centuries. By no means does this imply Russian politics will be static. To the contrary, while patronalism itself is stable, its politics are highly dynamic and sometimes volatile, with seeming authoritarian stability often masking a deeper fragility. Where exactly Russia will be in its regime cycles at any given moment ten or twenty years down the road is hard to say. But a conservative prediction based on the signs as of 2017 would hold that Russia is likely to continue to experience the same patterns of constant change in how its political-economic networks are arranged, with specifics governed by lame duck syndromes, the ebbs and flows of public support, and leaders' own innovations in how to manage the whole process in a changing environment.

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The Next Mr. Putin? The Question of Succession

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Abstract: Vladimir Putin, the person and the president, is the wild card in Russian politics. After what could be a quarter of a century in power by 2024 (either as president or prime minister), Putin's departure could prove utterly destabilizing. Russia's principal political problem is determining who or what replaces Putin as the fulcrum of the state system in the decade ahead. This essay considers the question of whether "Putin's Russia" – a hyperpersonalized presidency supported by informal elite networks – can transform into a depersonalized system that is rooted in formal institutions with clear, predictable mechanisms to mitigate the risks of a wrenching presidential succession.

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Since the beginning of his third presidential term in 2012, Vladimir Putin has moved to shield himself against challenges to his authority, using his presidential prerogative to sap power from bases outside the Kremlin. State institutions, like the Office of the Prime Minister, the Cabinet of Ministers, the Constitutional Court, the Russian State Duma (the lower house of parliament), and local government structures have been systematically downgraded. The presidential administration and the Russian Security Council now function simultaneously as Putin's personal staff, the core of critical decision-making, and the apparatus for overseeing affairs of state. Russian political parties have been eviscerated – their political platforms appropriated and repropagated by the Kremlin.¹

The increased preponderance of power in the Kremlin has created greater risk for the Russian political system now than at any other juncture in recent history. Theoretically, at least, the Russian constitution offers a formal process to safeguard the presidency and the presidential person. If Putin suddenly dies in office, the sitting prime minister (and for-

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mer president), Dmitrii Medvedev (as of this writing), would act as temporary head of state. New elections would take place within a three-month period. However, the institutions intended to produce presidential candidates and oversee the succession process during these critical three months have been hollowed out. If Putin eventually leaves office, the Russian constitution guarantees him immunity from harm and prosecution. It cannot guarantee against extralegal actions like a coup or assassination.

Putin has the capacity to designate a successor – the “next Mr. Putin” – to maintain the personalized nature of the current Russian presidency and secure his legacy, but even this could prove a heavy lift for the system. The Russian media is dominated by news of President Putin and his exploits at home and abroad. Few political figures, either close to the Kremlin or in the nominal Russian opposition, get airtime. Only a candidate from among Putin’s close associates could gain traction at the national level. This was the case in 2008, when, as mandated by the constitution, Putin stepped aside from the presidency after serving two consecutive terms. He hand-picked Medvedev, one of his most trusted and loyal lieutenants, as his successor.

In 2008, Medvedev was Putin’s first deputy prime minister. Putin switched places with Medvedev (although taking the higher prime minister slot) to create the so-called tandem power arrangement. He prepared the ground for the tandem well in advance, beginning in 2007, by repeatedly stressing the dangers of having too much political power concentrated in the hands of one man and calling for system modernizations and modifications. Putin presented Medvedev as the representative of a new professional generation of Russian politicians – a child of the mid-1960s, rather than Putin’s early 1950s, who had em-

braced new technology with gusto. Medvedev was offered to the Russian electorate as the kinder, gentler, socially networked version of Putin, more in tune with the Russian zeitgeist of 2007 – 2008, which, against the backdrop of high and rising oil prices, was perceived as a time of domestic prosperity and political stability.²

Recreating the tandem with Medvedev, or a different protégé, remains an option for Putin at the end of his fourth presidential term. But having already done this once, is it really politically feasible or desirable to do it again? Medvedev returned to the position of prime minister in 2012. He knows what role he has to play, if and when necessary, and seems to have been kept in place as a tried and trusted “executor of the will” for emergency purposes. The circumstances of Medvedev’s departure from the presidency, however, cast doubt on his future suitability for anything more than a transitional role in a new power configuration. Since 2012, Medvedev has become a scapegoat for criticism, undercutting whatever independent popularity he gained during his tenure as president.³

Even though Putin and Medvedev had worked in lockstep since the 1990s, when they both served in the mayor’s office in St. Petersburg, the tandem was fraught with difficulty. The tandem’s dual-power mechanism created deep uncertainties about who was really in charge of what in Russian politics. Once he was head of the Russian government rather than head of state, popular dissatisfaction with the government’s performance was transferred onto Putin personally.⁴ From 2008 to 2011, Putin’s poll ratings declined, with a notable drop in 2010 – 2011.⁵ Rumors circulated of a potential “coup” against Putin by groups around Medvedev.⁶ International security crises – from Russia’s 2008 war with Georgia to the 2011 Arab Spring upheavals – and the impact of the global financial and Eurozone crises on the Russian economy

changed the relatively benign environment in which the tandem had been conceived. In speeches, Putin talked of a more uncertain world and further shocks ahead. Medvedev himself spoke of the surprising turn of events in such a relatively short period of time.⁷ In September 2011, Putin appears to have been convinced that he had to end the ambiguity of the tandem right away to forestall being ousted from the premiership. He had seen a risk to his personal position and moved to reassert his authority over the political system.⁸

Putin's fears were compounded by the December 2011 Duma elections. United Russia, the ruling party, failed to reach its predicted number of votes in many Russian regions. Footage of heavy-handed efforts to stack the vote in the party's favor was captured by election observers and circulated on social media, provoking street protests in Moscow and other major cities. The protests occurred against the backdrop of past crises and changes of government following electoral upsets in so-called color revolutions in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan; and shortly after the toppling of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi during the Arab Spring.⁹

The electoral results and protests weakened Putin's authority and destabilized the system. Putin's declining ratings even raised the possibility that he could be defeated in the 2012 presidential election. Putin and those around him were convinced that the United States and the West were encouraging a "color revolution" in Russia. As it turned out, there was no Russian opposition movement or set of leaders who could organize themselves sufficiently to take advantage of the situation. Nonetheless, Putin had been dealt a blow. He took back the presidency in May 2012, but with far less of a resounding victory than he would have liked.¹⁰ Diluting his personal

power by transferring the presidency had proven a mistake. Putin's succession plans still needed some work. Dmitrii Medvedev and the tandem were not yet the man and mechanism to ensure Putin's person.

In 2012, Putin had to prove he was back in charge of the presidency. He clamped down on those who had initiated and participated in the street protests and moved to emasculate Russia's already weak opposition parties. The Kremlin decapitated the leadership of the nascent opposition outside the formal political party structures, steadily harassing, marginalizing, and then picking them off with individually targeted lawsuits and court convictions.¹¹ The February 27, 2015, assassination of Boris Nemtsov – the last Russian opposition leader with national name recognition, who had a test run as Yeltsin's heir apparent in the 1990s – prohibitively decreased the odds of any authentic Russian opposition movement or party emerging to challenge Putin.¹²

The Kremlin pushed legal prohibitions against street protests through parliament, raised the costs for parties and their candidates to campaign in big cities, replaced the head of the Central Election Commission, and imposed constraints on election monitoring.¹³ All of these efforts ensured that the next Duma election, on September 18, 2016, produced a low voter turnout in previous big-city trouble spots like Moscow and St. Petersburg, no significant demonstrations, and a very comfortable electoral result for United Russia. Regaining the super or constitutional majority of two-thirds of the parliament's seats, which it had lost in 2011, meant United Russia's position as the ruling party was secure once more.¹⁴

In the Russian political system, security considerations are always paramount. In addition to the fears about his own personal security, one of the determining factors for Putin's return in 2011 – 2012 was the negative shift in Russia's internal and external

security environment. The political, economic, and international conditions that shaped Putin's decision then have only deteriorated since. As a result of Russia's military interventions in Ukraine in 2014 and Syria in 2015, security elites gained considerable traction at the top of the Russian political system. The security sector is traditionally the area of greatest risk in any political setting: security elites literally call the shots and are the power base for potential coups, like the attempted putsch against Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev in August 1991. That episode propelled the USSR into the abyss and Boris Yeltsin into power as president of a new Russia.

In 2016, Putin moved to consolidate Russia's military and paramilitary structures and to weaken the power bases and independent authority of individual agencies by putting in place a smaller cadre at the top of the security elite who directly report to him. In April 2016, Putin issued a decree on creating the new National Guard – essentially his own personal army – appointing Viktor Zolotov, the former head of his Presidential Security Service (SBP), to lead it.¹⁵ In September 2016, sources around the Kremlin floated the idea of reviving the Soviet-era KGB or Committee of State Security as a mega ministry of state security, the “MGB,” which would bring together the Federal Protective Service that houses the SBP, as well as domestic and foreign intelligence operations.¹⁶

Over the course of several months, Putin steadily installed loyalists in key positions in Russia's regions and in Moscow. In February 2016, Putin named Aleksei Dyumin, a member of his personal bodyguard, as acting governor of Tula, an important manufacturing region close to Moscow.¹⁷ Dyumin's selection raised eyebrows and questions when the new governor was interviewed by Putin-sanctioned biographer and journalist Andrei Kolesnikov, who pointed out that Dyumin seemed almost

like a younger “Putin clone.”¹⁸ In July 2016, Putin appointed a new head of the Russian federal customs service, four presidential envoys to federal districts, and four governors; in August, he removed a well-respected peer and Kremlin veteran, Sergei Ivanov, from his post as presidential chief of staff.

More reshuffling of top cadres came after the September 18 parliamentary elections, including transferring Duma Speaker Sergei Naryshkin to head the foreign intelligence service and putting close presidential political aide Vyacheslav Volodin in his place. All these appointments ensured that people in charge of important state institutions and functions would have close individual relationships with Vladimir Putin. Many of the replacements were, like Dyumin, younger figures from the security services and Putin's bodyguard corps.¹⁹ Given their age and relative lack of experience, in contrast to their predecessors, they had not (yet) achieved the independent standing or built a power base to challenge him.²⁰

Vladimir Putin already faces the challenge of how to preserve the system he has built, as do those around him. In 1999, Putin's mandate from Boris Yeltsin was to prevent a political vacuum and attempts to usurp state power, and to guarantee Yeltsin and his family immunity from prosecution. Yeltsin's team expected Putin to maintain the political and economic structures they had put in place and to continue the thrust of Russia's domestic and foreign policy. Putin has done this in his own inimitable way. At some point, someone (or something) else will have to do the same for Putin.

One commonly held view of Putin is that he is a kleptocrat whose actions are dictated by how much he and his friends and family can steal.²¹ Putin and his immediate circle may well have enriched themselves on an impressive scale, but, as president, Putin

has taken actions, such as launching wars in Georgia, Ukraine, and Syria, that have had negative consequences for the personal businesses and freedoms of those around him, including his own family.²² He has not immediately changed course to reverse them.²³ In speeches and articles throughout his tenure, Putin has also repeatedly fused the micro history of his family – especially the loss of a brother and his parents’ near-death experiences during World War II – with the macro history of the state.²⁴ These narratives, along with his momentous decision to annex Crimea in March 2014, indicate that Putin wants to leave some indelible mark on Russian history, not just a gigantic hole in its state coffers.

“Putin’s Russia” is more than just Putin the person. The Russian political system is large and complex. Power in the sense of the ability to exert traction inside the system, or to transmit ideas and lobby for benefits or changes in course, is rooted in networks of connections, not in institutions and job titles. The sheer size of these networks, however, provides a base for reconfiguring power and managing the future succession. The elites who have clout have been recruited from a network of personal relationships spanning Putin’s youth in Soviet Leningrad and his entire career. Putin has actively encouraged system renewal by bringing in not only the sons (and infrequently the daughters) of the men from his inner circle, but also members of youth movements and wings of political parties that they create, support, and mentor, and a new generation of security personnel.²⁵ Although they may not have a direct link to him, these system entrants essentially owe their positions to Putin.

“Putin’s people” or Putin loyalists are embedded throughout the Russian power complex in all the groups that bring collective weight to the political, economic, and security bargaining table. These groups include those with special skills that the sys-

tem relies on: top economists at the Central Bank and in the finance and economic ministries, intelligence operatives in the Federal Security Service, and members of the uniformed military. Putin has, for example, retained a first-rate economics team in the finance ministry and at the Central Bank, almost without any significant changes in spite of purging similarly minded people at the political level since 2012. Millions of people, not just Putin’s closest associates, are either directly vested in the current political system or see their livelihoods as dependent on it.²⁶ Although Russian polling indicates considerable dissatisfaction with the performance of the Russian government and concern about the future trajectory of the country, there is no evident demand for a different system, or, as yet, a different president.²⁷

In any future configuration of political power, those who work within the system will want to retain their positions and opportunities for advancement. With so many people standing to lose if the system is upended, the challenge is how to formalize the informal networks to create robust power structures to carry the system beyond the next set of presidential elections, and beyond Vladimir Putin. The most logical, and low (political) cost, way of doing this is to amend and adapt existing constitutional and institutional frames for the purpose. In the Soviet period, the Communist Party took care of the business of succession and system renewal. In the earlier phases of Putin’s presidency, and during the tandem, the Kremlin paid considerable attention to political party development and consolidation. The men in the Kremlin could do so again with United Russia obtaining a constitutional majority in the September 2016 parliamentary elections.

Putin is not currently the leader of United Russia, although the party and other political movements, like the All-Russian

Peoples Front, operate in support of him.²⁸ Unlike the Soviet period, there is currently no defined collective leadership in a formal politburo or political party around the Russian president.²⁹ Instead, the Russian constitution and the Russian presidency are fused together. Each guarantees the other, standing above any other state institution, entity, or individual. Putin's relationship with the Russian people is direct and unmediated. Russia thus has a "Putin problem." The longer he is in office, the more he becomes the constitutional source of both stability and instability.

Putin and those around him need to remedy this without rupturing the constitution, given its role in underpinning the legitimacy of the presidency. In 2008, when his first two consecutive terms as president ended, Putin was careful not to insist on a parliamentary or popular referendum to remain in office. It was Dmitrii Medvedev who introduced a constitutional amendment extending each presidential term from four to six years.³⁰ Indeed, Putin has a personal obsession with the idea of Russia as a "dictatorship of the law," where law is an instrument of the state that directs and constrains political and individual behavior.³¹ The Russian constitution is the law above all laws. It was drafted by a team led by Putin and Medvedev's mentor at Leningrad University Law Faculty – and their boss as mayor of St. Petersburg – Anatolii Sobchak. The team drew on Sobchak's work on nineteenth-century Russian legal and constitutional thought. So, in this respect, the Russian president is the first Russian constitutional monarch, albeit in an elected monarchy.³²

In the constitution, elections reaffirm the president's relationship with the Russian public. They serve the same functional purpose as a coronation. The Russian president is not an autocrat like the tsar with divine right to rule. Nor is the president a dictator, who can simply give orders from

above and be sure that things will get done outside the Kremlin walls. The president's legitimacy depends on proof, in both electoral results and opinion polls, that he is *genuinely* popular. After Putin's rough re-entry in 2012, the next presidential election will be an important pivot point for the system, as will the subsequent Duma elections, and the projected end of Putin's presidential terms in 2024. Putin and the ruling party will have to clear each electoral hurdle with a resounding victory and significant majority of the votes.

During his long years in office as president and prime minister, Putin's popularity has become closely tied with the idea that he is the decisive factor at all levels of Russian politics. Putin is the locus of power *and* the agent of continuity or change. Every problem, large or small, has to come to Putin's attention. This generates considerable tension around the presidency, and nervous scrutiny in the Kremlin of Russian public opinion.³³ If Putin is seen by the population to be ineffective or weak, if he is incapacitated in some way, and if public opinion polls indicate that the Russian people have lost their faith in Putin as president, then this changes the system's operating context.

In large part, this is a problem of Putin's own making. Early in his first presidency, Putin initiated an annual televised town hall with the Russian public, Direct Line with Vladimir Putin, to showcase his efforts to address their questions.³⁴ These have ranged from banal issues, like how to tackle inadequate social services and fix bad roads in remote rural areas, to affairs of high state and foreign policy, such as his relations with the U.S. president. Through the medium of the town halls, the Russian population watches Putin micro-manage immediate responses to personal appeals. During Putin's April 14, 2016, session, for example, officials in the city

of Omsk tweeted pictures of roads being repaired in real time after an on-air complaint about their conditions.³⁵

By making himself the country's "fixer-in-chief," Putin has generated high and entirely unrealistic expectations that even he does not want to meet. Putin himself frequently complains that presidential decrees are not fulfilled and that he has to exert too much manual control, or direct oversight, of Russian affairs. Yet, in the Russian public's assessments, Putin's perceived ability to fix specific problems has become as important as his fitness to rule, his health and mental capacities, and his skill in juggling competing political interests. If the onus is always on Putin to get things done, who will play this role when he is gone? To survive without Putin, the society and system need to move away from these spectacles of presidential micromanagement.

Putin's placement of loyalists at all levels of the system in 2016 and his swapping out of older "lieutenants" for younger "guards" suggests that he, and others in the Kremlin who are vested in the continuation of the system, may already be thinking along these lines. Putting youthful Putin clones like Aleksei Dyumin in regions like Tula may facilitate an eventual devolution, or transfer of some of the powers now focused in the presidency. In 2008, when Putin spoke about the risks of too much power in the hands of one man, he used the tandem to divide executive authority and responsibility between two men. Putin stated that after he had switched places with Medvedev, he would take some presidential powers with him to strengthen the position of prime minister, the role of the government, and the functions of the cabinet of ministers.³⁶ In the next decade, given the sheer size of the country, Russia needs to move beyond one man, or two men, to many men (and also a few women) if it is to find a more stable configuration for executive power.

In some respects, to facilitate a system transition, Russia needs to emulate the USSR of the late Soviet period, when the state was institutionally and politically complex. Each individual Soviet republic had its own party and government structures. Their intralite politics contributed to the leadership dynamics of the central Communist Party and the politburo. The different levels and layers of political machination pluralized the Soviet system. The politburo and upper echelons of the Communist Party provided the mechanics for leadership selection, producing new people to step forward and move up the ranks. The party's cadres, traditions, and rituals, including regular congresses, ensured system continuity and renewal. In the 1980s, when Leonid Brezhnev and two successors, Yuri Andropov and Konstantin Chernenko, died in a three-year period, the party ensured they were all replaced without any ostensible conflict.

Over the next decade, the existing framework of United Russia, or movements like the All-Russian People's Front and Kremlin-sponsored youth organizations, could be drawn on to create a new structure with bureaucratic instruments to carry the system forward. This would, in essence, be a holding mechanism for powerful people, and one powerful person in particular. One potential model, which could address the many facets of the "Putin problem," might be the moderately conservative Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) of Japan. The LDP is a pragmatically motivated power structure that serves as a frame for collective bargaining among major power-brokers to avoid ruinous factional battles. Since its creation in the 1950s, the LDP has provided a "home" for former powerful prime ministers between elections and at the end of their terms.³⁷ Russian officials have periodically shown considerable interest in the creation and structures of the LDP in bilateral meetings with Japanese counter-

parts, and notably returned to this theme in 2016.³⁸

The Chinese Communist Party plays a similar role to the LDP in regulating term limits and managing major changes of personnel on a ten-year rotation basis. Party rules and structures have enabled even historic, transformative leaders like Deng Xiaoping to leave the center of the political system and still wield clout over a successor or set of successors.³⁹ In China there has been no need, to date, to invent a new power arrangement like Putin did during the tandem.

Absent a formal power arrangement, choosing a successor is a risky business in a political culture like Russia's. Name a successor too early in the process and he, or his supporters, may be emboldened to accelerate your departure. Pick a weak successor and all bets are off. Imperial Russia saw its fair share of palace coups. After the 1917 Russian Revolution, Vladimir Lenin's death in January 1924 resulted in a bloody jockeying for power among his close associates that Joseph Stalin eventually won. Stalin's own death in March 1953 also created a systemic crisis. The vacuum at the center was ultimately filled by a collective leadership around Nikita Khrushchev, who was then ousted from the prime leadership spot by his colleagues in 1964. Mikhail Gorbachev was forced into "retirement" in 1991 by the combination of a coup followed, in its aftermath, by a group of other Soviet leaders, led by Boris Yeltsin, conspiring to dissolve the USSR behind his back.

The year 2024, Putin's constitutionally designated departure date, will be the one-hundredth anniversary of Lenin's death. In a country where anniversaries frequently frame contemporary events, the prospect that Putin also plans on dying in office will become the topic of commentary. Putin's predecessor, Boris Yeltsin, suffered a major heart attack on the eve of his reelection

to a final term in 1996. Putin's selection, first as prime minister, then as acting president in December 1999, was the end result of three frenetic years of cycling through deputy prime ministers and prime ministers – dubbed "Operation Successor" by the media.⁴⁰ Yeltsin's decision to resign while he was still physically standing was hailed as a "brilliant move."⁴¹

The ailing Yeltsin lived on for another seven years. Mikhail Gorbachev celebrated his eighty-fifth birthday in 2016, twenty-five years after resigning as the last leader of the Soviet Union. Putin may still have decades of natural life ahead of him; he will need his own "brilliant move" to ensure continued influence in Russian politics and a safe retirement. Given the number of examples of party-based power and succession mechanisms, including past Soviet and Russian precedents, shifting to a party rather than a personalized presidency for system management could be one move.

A formalized ruling party-like structure, in which Putin as Russian president becomes the titular head, could pave the way for Putin to eventually assume "president emeritus" status while retaining a leadership role. In the meantime, a more robust bureaucratic structure would groom new cadres for a range of executive positions and could provide an anchor for security elites by also drawing them into its membership. The party would coordinate elections and govern the legislative branch. In the next decade, Putin could redistribute power and pass on the presidential baton to an anointed heir, all within the frame of a party or leadership convention at an appropriate and propitious moment. The job of figuring out how to modernize the Russian political system would then be in others' hands.

- ¹ The analysis of the nature of the Russian presidency and political system in this essay draws heavily on Fiona Hill and Clifford Gaddy, *Mr. Putin: Operative in the Kremlin* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Press, 2015).
- ² *Ibid.*, 193 – 194, 201 – 202, 216 – 217. Author notes from Valdai Discussion Club meeting with Vladimir Putin in Sochi, Russia, September 14, 2007.
- ³ See, for example, Natal'ya Vasileva, "Tens of Thousands Call for Russian PM's Dismissal," Associated Press, August 5, 2016, http://midco.net/front_controller.php/news/read/category/Europe%20News/article/the_associated_press-tens_of_thousands_call_for_russian_pms_dismissal-ap.
- ⁴ Russian pollsters frequently point out that, as president, Vladimir Putin has become inseparable from the Russian state in public opinion. Expressing a favorable view of Putin is similar to attesting patriotism and affection for the state irrespective of any deficiencies in Putin's conduct or his inner circle's. See Aleksei Levinson, "Reiting i korruptsiya: dlya bol'shinstva rossiyan president – ne chinovnik," *Vedomosti*, May 24, 2016, <https://www.vedomosti.ru/opinion/columns/2016/05/24/642141-reiting-korruptsiya>.
- ⁵ Hill and Gaddy, *Mr. Putin: Operative in the Kremlin*, 230. Russia's leading independent polling agency, the Levada Center, has maintained a monthly index of Putin's approval rating since he first became president in 2000, as well as indexes on public attitudes toward the state of the country and the performance of the government. These can all be found at <http://www.levada.ru/old/indeksy>.
- ⁶ See Tom Parfitt's January 2012 interview with Gleb Pavlovsky for *The Guardian*, published in full as Gleb Pavlovsky, "Putin's World Outlook," *New Left Review* 88 (July/August 2014), <https://newleftreview.org/II/88/gleb-pavlovsky-putin-s-world-outlook>.
- ⁷ Comments made by Dmitrii Medvedev to author and small group on the side of a formal presentation at the Brookings Institution, Washington, D.C., April 13, 2010.
- ⁸ Will Englund and Kathy Lally, "Medvedev Confirms He Will Step Aside for Putin to Return to Russia's Presidency," *The Washington Post*, September 24, 2011, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/dmitry-medvedev-asks-putin-to-run-for-president-of-russia/2011/09/24/gIQAXGwpsK_story.html. The timing of Putin's decision was linked to the schedule for the December 2011 parliamentary elections.
- ⁹ For a more detailed discussion of these developments see Pavlovsky, "Putin's World Outlook"; and Hill and Gaddy, *Mr. Putin: Operative in the Kremlin*, 227 – 259. Putin expressed an extremely negative reaction to Muammar Gaddafi's death, in Libya in October 2011, just a few weeks later at the November 11, 2011, session of the Valdai Discussion Club meeting (from author notes).
- ¹⁰ Hill and Gaddy, *Mr. Putin: Operative in the Kremlin*, 231 – 232.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, 249 – 251.
- ¹² See Sergei Aleksashenko, "Period poluraspada: god posle ubiistva Borisa Nemtsova," *Forbes.ru*, February 26, 2016, <http://www.forbes.ru/mneniya-column/vertikal/313657-period-poluraspada-god-posle-ubiistva-borisa-nemtsova>.
- ¹³ Kathrin Hille, "Russia: How to Exercise Political Control," *Financial Times*, September 7, 2016, <https://www.ft.com/content/94c679fc-7418-11e6-b60a-de4532d5ea35>.
- ¹⁴ Matthew Bodner and Mikhail Fishman, "Elections 2016: An Overwhelming Victory for the Kremlin: The Ruling United Russia Party Dominates the 2016 State Duma Elections," *The Moscow Times*, September 19, 2016, <https://themoscowtimes.com/articles/duma-election-wrap-up-55383>.
- ¹⁵ Roger McDermott, "Countering Color Revolution Drives Russia's Creation of National Guard," *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 13 (71) (April 12, 2016).

- ¹⁶ See Timofey Timofeychev, "Russia to Resurrect Soviet-Era Ministry of State Security," *Russia Beyond the Headlines*, September 20, 2016, http://rbth.com/politics_and_society/2016/09/20/russia-to-resurrect-soviet-era-ministry-of-state-security_631663. See also Pavel Baev, "Younger Crowd Will Not Rejuvenate Putin's Court," *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 13 (158) (October 3, 2016), <https://jamestown.org/program/younger-crowd-will-not-rejuvenate-putins-court/>.
- ¹⁷ Andrei Kolesnikov, "'V kontse kontsov, zhizn' ne raz kruto menyalas': Aleksei Dyumin rasskazal 'B,' kak on doshel do Tuly," *Kommersant*, February 9, 2016, <http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/2911780>.
- ¹⁸ Kolesnikov, along with two other journalists, Nataliya Gevorkyan and Natal'ya Timakova, produced Putin's first presidential campaign biography. See Nataliya Gevorkyan, Natal'ya Timakova, and Andrei Kolesnikov, *Ot pervogo litsa: razgovory s Vladimirom Putinom* (Moscow: Vagrius, 2000).
- ¹⁹ Daria Litvinova, "Putin's Game of Thrones: The Men in Epaulets Take Over," *The Moscow Times*, July 29, 2016, <https://themoscowtimes.com/articles/game-of-thrones-russian-regions-and-districts-get-new-leaders-in-epaulets-54782>; Tom Balmforth, "Putin Reshuffles Regional Leaders Ahead of Vote: Russian Customs Chief Out," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, July 28, 2016, <http://www.rferl.org/content/russia-putin-reshuffle-balyaninov-zurabov/27886343.html>; and Andrew Monaghan, "Putin's Removal of Ivanov as Chief of Staff is More About Rejuvenation," Chatham House Expert Comment, August 15, 2016, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/expert/comment/putins-removal-ivanov-chief-staff-more-about-rejuvenation>.
- ²⁰ Mark Galeotti, "Putin's Incredible Shrinking Circle," European Council on Foreign Relations Commentary, August 17, 2016, http://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_putins_incredible_shrinking_circle_7099; Andrei Kolesnikov, "Out With the Old, In With the New for Russia's Political Elite," *Moscow Times*, August 25, 2016, <https://themoscowtimes.com/articles/out-with-the-old-in-with-the-new-for-russias-political-elite-55110>; and Mike Eckel, "Putin Taps Duma Speaker as New Foreign Spy Boss in Latest Kremlin Shakeup," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, September 22, 2016, <http://www.rferl.org/a/russia-putin-naryshkin-svr/28007297.html>.
- ²¹ See Karen Dawisha, *Putin's Kleptocracy: Who Owns Russia?* (New York: Simon and Shuster, 2014).
- ²² After Russian-backed rebel forces shot down Malaysian airlines flight MH17, flying from Amsterdam to Kuala Lumpur over Ukraine on July 17, 2014, it was revealed that Putin's oldest daughter and her Dutch husband had a residence in The Hague. Reports suggested that the couple were subsequently forced to relocate to Moscow. Similarly, members of Putin's inner circle were hit with personal sanctions and visa bans by the United States and European Union after the annexation of Crimea and the outbreak of war in eastern Ukraine. See, for example, Philip Oltermann and Shaun Walker, "MH17: Dutch Mayor Wants Vladimir Putin's Daughter Maria Deported," *The Guardian*, July 23, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jul/23/mh17-dutch-mayor-vladimir-putin-daughter-deport>; and Stefan Wagstyl, "U.S. Targets Vladimir Putin's Inner Circle: EU Takes New Steps to Punish Russia," *Financial Times*, March 21 2014, <https://next.ft.com/content/635bf2b4-b013-11e3-b0d0-00144feab7de>.
- ²³ Author's private discussion with former senior U.S. Treasury and White House official on the U.S. government's expectations that Putin might reverse course in Ukraine after the imposition of sanctions on his associates, April 13, 2016.
- ²⁴ Fiona Hill, "Putin kämpft den Krieg seines Vaters," *Die Zeit*, May 6, 2015, <http://www.zeit.de/politik/ausland/2015-05/gedenken-zweiter-weltkrieg-wladimir-putin-tag-des-sieges>.
- ²⁵ See Julie Hemment, *Youth Politics in Putin's Russia: Producing Patriots and Entrepreneurs* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015); and Andrew Monaghan, *The New Politics of Russia: Interpreting Change* (Manchester, United Kingdom: Manchester University Press, 2016).
- ²⁶ A July 2015 report, produced by the Russian Academy of Economics and State Service, concluded that the bulk of the Russian middle class was now primarily composed of state bureaucrats and employees of the Russian security services. See "Srednii klassom v Rossii stanovyatsya siloviki i chinovniki," *Ekho Rossii*, August 4, 2016, <http://ehorussia.com/new/node/12724>.

- ²⁷ Andrei Kolesnikov, *Russian Ideology after Crimea* (Moscow: Carnegie Moscow Center, 2015), *Fiona Hill* <http://carnegie.ru/2015/09/22/russian-ideology-after-crimea/ihzq>. See also presentation by Kirill Rogov, “The Authoritarian Bias: Measuring Public Opinion in Russia,” Kennan Institute, Woodrow Wilson Center for Scholars, Washington, D.C., April 20, 2016, http://www.globalinterests.org/2016/04/19/the-authoritarian-bias-measuring-public-opinion-in-russia/?mc_cid=f699005c47&mc_eid=d22f87d69d; and Leon Aron, ed., *Putin’s Russia: How it Rose, How it is Maintained, and How it Might End* (Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute, 2015).
- ²⁸ Hill and Gaddy, *Mr. Putin: Operative in the Kremlin*, 68, 231.
- ²⁹ In late September 2016, several Russian commentators discussed rumors that the Kremlin was considering the establishment of a “state council” to create a more “collegial administration” to shepherd the presidential succession. See, for example, Paul Goble, “A State Council Would Be a New Politburo Designed to Make Succession Easier, Solovey Says,” Window on Eurasia Blog, September 26, 2016, <http://windowoneurasia2.blogspot.com/2016/09/a-state-council-would-be-new-politburo.html>. But as another prominent Russian commentator noted shortly afterward, at an off-the-record meeting at the Brookings Institution on October 3, 2016: “This is the job of some people in the Kremlin to spread rumors to see how they are received.” Other similar rumors at this juncture included the possibility that the Kremlin would bring forward the presidential election from 2018 to 2017 to take advantage of the postelection “boost” to United Russia from the September 18, 2016, parliamentary election.
- ³⁰ Philip P. Pan, “Russia’s Medvedev Signs Constitutional Amendment to Lengthen Presidential Terms,” *The Washington Post*, December 31, 2008, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/12/30/AR2008123000839.html>.
- ³¹ Hill and Gaddy, *Mr. Putin: Operative in the Kremlin*, 51 – 53.
- ³² The only foreign reference point the constitutional scholars considered, in the words of one member of the Sobchak team, Sergei Shakhrai, was the “British Queen.” See *ibid.*, 196. For a broader discussion of Sobchak’s role and the legal theory underpinning the constitution, see *ibid.*, 51 – 55.
- ³³ For a detailed discussion of this issue and how the Russian political system functions, see *ibid.*, 190 – 224.
- ³⁴ Literally millions of questions are solicited and fielded by an advance team, months ahead of the Direct Line. *Ibid.*, 173 – 174.
- ³⁵ Neil MacFarquhar, “Vladimir Putin’s Vulnerable Side is at Fore in Call-In Show,” *The New York Times*, April 14, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/15/world/europe/vladimir-putin-russia.html>; and Lucian Kim, “Vladimir Putin Feels Your Pain: The Surreal Spectacle of the Russian President’s Annual Call-In Show,” *Slate*, April 14, 2016, http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/foreigners/2016/04/vladimir_putin_promises_to_fix_po_holes_in_annual_live_call_in_show.html. See also Vladimir Putin, “Otvety na voprosy zhuranlistov po itogam ‘Pryamoi linii,’” April 14, 2016, <http://special.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/51718>. The transcript for the full event is on the Kremlin’s official presidential website at <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/51716>.
- ³⁶ Hill and Gaddy, *Mr. Putin: Operative in the Kremlin*, 216 – 217. Author notes from Valdai Discussion Club meeting with Vladimir Putin in Sochi, Russia, September 14, 2007.
- ³⁷ The LDP’s website provides a fairly detailed history of the establishment and goals of the party; see <https://www.jimin.jp/english/index.html>.
- ³⁸ Author notes from interview with the Deputy Director General of the European Affairs Bureau at the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Washington, D.C., June 30, 2016.
- ³⁹ See Ezra F. Vogel, *Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011).
- ⁴⁰ Ben Judah, *Fragile Empire: How Russia Fell In and Out of Love with Vladimir Putin* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2013), 26 – 28.

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⁴¹ Celestine Bohlen, "Yeltsin Resigns: The Overview; Yeltsin Resigns, Naming Putin as Acting President to Run in March Election," *The New York Times*, January 1, 2000, <http://www.nytimes.com/2000/01/01/world/yeltsin-resigns-overview-yeltsin-resigns-naming-putin-acting-president-run-march.html?pagewanted=all>.

The Russian *Siloviki* & Political Change

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Abstract: The siloviki – Russian security and military personnel – are a key part of Team Putin. They are not, however, a coherent group, and there are important organizational and factional cleavages among the siloviki. Compared with some security and military forces around the world, Russian military and security forces generally lack the attributes that would make them a proactive and cohesive actor in bringing about fundamental political change in Russia. In the face of potential revolutionary change, most Russian military and security bodies do not have the cohesion or the will to defend the regime with significant violence. Russian siloviki are a conservative force supportive of the status quo. Future efforts by the siloviki to maintain the stability of the existing political order are most likely to be reactive, divided, and behind the scenes.

The Russian elite under Vladimir Putin, according to conventional wisdom, are dominated by men in uniform. The Russian sociologist Olga Kryshtanovskaya was one of the first experts to make this claim, dubbing Putin's regime a "militocracy" dominated by people with backgrounds in the secret police, the military, and law enforcement organs: the *siloviki*. Average Russians agree; in polls they have consistently stated that, most of all, Putin represents the interests of the *siloviki*. A related approach, although partially at odds with the militocracy scheme, contends that Putin's Russia is a "neo-KGB state," maintaining that the KGB evolved from being "a state within the state" in the Soviet Union to "the state itself" under Putin. Thus, in this narrower conception, it is not just any man in uniform, but only *chekisty* (from the name of the early Soviet secret police, the *Cheka*) who run Putin's Russia.¹

If Russia is a militocracy or a neo-KGB state, it logically stands to reason that *siloviki* or *chekisty* will likely play an equally prominent role in a post-Putin political system. A powerful faction within the elite, with special access to both power (guns) and knowledge (state intelligence), the *siloviki* are well positioned to

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maintain their position. For example, political analyst Kimberly Marten has argued that even if Putin is no longer in charge, the system is unlikely to change, because of the dominance of “KGB/FSB [Federal Security Service] networks,” that can use their control over secret information and financial assets to squash any potential rival.²

This essay challenges this view of the likely trajectory of future political change in Russia. In particular, I explore what role the *siloviki* might play in fundamental political change in Russia over the next ten years, arguing that their ability to dictate the future direction of Russia is by no means assured. To the extent that representatives of the *siloviki* play a role in political change over the next decade, whether of a constitutional or extraconstitutional variety, they are likely to be reactive rather than proactive and divided rather than unified. Marten is correct that *chekisty* are likely to support the continuation of the status quo, but neither the *siloviki* in general nor the *chekisty* in particular are a coherent or unified team. The *siloviki* are internally divided along both organizational (formal) and so-called clan (informal) lines. Furthermore, the Russian *siloviki* do not possess the organizational or ideological characteristics that often lead men in uniform to decisive action in other parts of the world.

I draw on both comparative politics research on similar regimes around the world and examples from Soviet and Russian history in this attempt to forecast the future role of the *siloviki*. Lessons from other countries suggest that the role of coercive force is often decisive at times of fundamental political change, but only highly cohesive armed groups tend to be successful in gaining and holding power. The Russian *siloviki* do not fit this model. Furthermore, the lessons of Russian history suggest that even when force-wielding structures do play an important role, it is most often at the behest of other political elites, rather than as

an autonomous force. Future *siloviki* behavior in high politics will above all be cautious and conservative. The *siloviki* are unlikely to be at the forefront of a radical political shift in Russia.

Russia’s “force structures” (*silovye struktury*) are the state’s military, security, and law enforcement bodies. *Siloviki*, then, are those who work or worked for one of the force structures, or “power ministries.” It was simpler in Soviet times, because there were three main agencies: the Ministry of Defense; the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD), which controlled the police; and the KGB (Committee on State Security). After the Soviet collapse, the number of power ministries proliferated as part of a deliberate strategy by President Boris Yeltsin to divide state coercive resources, in particular the powerful KGB that in August 1991 played the lead role in organizing the attempted hardliner coup against Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev. Although Putin has partially reversed this fragmentation, giving the FSB restored power in some areas, he did not return Russia to its tripartite structure from the mature Soviet system. Indeed, at times he has furthered this dispersal of power, most recently in 2016 when he created a powerful National Guard of over two hundred thousand armed personnel under the direct control of his longtime associate and former bodyguard Viktor Zolotov.³

It would be a big mistake, however, to assume that all *siloviki* share common interests and ideas. Indeed, the interests of these different organizations are often more in competition than in harmony. At a general level, this is Bureaucratic Politics 101: organizations with similar and overlapping missions often compete for power and resources. For example, multiple Russian law enforcement and security agencies – including the FSB, the MVD, and the Investigative Committee – have jurisdiction over economic crimes, an important

(and potentially lucrative) realm of activity in Russia's rough-and-tumble capitalism. Russia's power ministries also have deep legacies of conflict from the Soviet past, related to issues such as KGB monitoring of the military from the inside, or the privileged status of *chekisty* compared with average cops. Putin could not eliminate these rivalries even if he wanted to, and the presence of competing power ministries arguably strengthens his position and provides him with more reliable information on their activities.

Russian *siloviki*, although generally possessing a conservative worldview, also do not represent an ideological monolith. It is generally believed that *siloviki* tend to be statist and illiberal, favoring a hard line at home and a confrontational foreign policy abroad. As one former KGB general put it, *chekisty* "are patriots and proponents of a strong state" committed to "the resurrection of our Great Power." This characterization of *chekist* values does reflect many of the views of Putin and other *chekisty* from within his inner circle. As two of Russia's leading authorities on the FSB put it, "If the FSB has an ideology, it is the goal of stability and order." According to a 2008 sociological study of Russian elites, the *siloviki* were among the most status quo-oriented elite groups. At the same time, it would be a mistake to presume ideological homogeneity, especially across the different agencies, given the different organizational cultures of the military, the secret services, and the police. Surveys of the elite, including *siloviki*, demonstrate that power ministry personnel hold a range of political views.⁴

Another reason why the *siloviki* are not a unified force in Russian politics is that they are not defined solely by their organizational background; they also have informal ties to people outside their agency and, indeed, outside the state, such as private businesspeople. In other words, individual *siloviki* are not just members of a state

bureaucracy, but also inhabit a set of informal networks that cross administrative barriers and the public-private divide. Informal clans matter as much as formal positions and titles. The importance of clans and informal networks is, of course, not confined to *siloviki* and power ministry officials; it is true of economic and political elites at both the local and national level. This is part of "how Russia really works."⁵

Unfortunately, when it comes to enumerating the important clans, this fundamental insight into Russian politics – that informal clans matter as much as formal position – often coexists with a simplistic reductionism. In particular, it is often assumed that there is a single, unified *siloviki* clan encompassing all of the *siloviki* officials with top positions in Russian politics. However, there has never been a unified *siloviki* clan. Instead, there are multiple and competing *siloviki* clans, with connections that cut across formal boundaries. The battles for influence between these different clans are often intense.⁶

Further, these clan and organizational battles are about not just power but also money. *Siloviki* politics have been punctuated in the Putin era by periodic flare-ups around commercial ventures, and the ability of law enforcement agencies to exploit their authority for their own ends. There have been scandals around furniture smuggling, underground casinos, and money laundering. In all of these cases, representatives of different agencies, such as the FSB, the MVD, the prosecutor's office, and the Investigative Committee, have been at odds over who gets to oversee these lucrative areas of the underground economy. Law enforcement agencies are also frequently found to be complicit in protection rackets or raids conducted to advance private business interests.⁷

It is also worth noting that the *siloviki* have weapons other than guns. Under Putin, the power to arrest and the control over informa-

tion have been the most effective weapons. As Fiona Hill and Clifford Gaddy put it, “Core individuals collect and amass detailed compromising material (*kompromat* in Russian) that can be used as leverage on every key figure inside and outside government.”⁸ The agencies that have the upper hand in this gathering of *kompromat* are the FSB and the Federal Guards Service, the Russian equivalent of the U.S. Secret Service. This information can be used for either state or private goals, and Putin has proved himself the master of this process. *Kompromat* helps ensure loyalty in normal times; it might not have that effect in extraordinary times, however, when the rules of the game themselves are up for grabs.

Siloviki are clearly important players in Russian high politics. This is particularly true of *chekisty*, especially those with career connections to Putin. Claims that Russia under Putin is a “militocracy” carry an important element of truth, but they are also a serious oversimplification. First, the number of *siloviki* in top political positions has sometimes been exaggerated.⁹ Putin has relied not just on former KGB colleagues, but also on previous colleagues and friends from other parts of his life, including economists, lawyers, and businessmen he worked with in St. Petersburg in the early 1990s. Second, the *siloviki*, both in terms of formal organizations and in terms of informal clans, are not members of a single, unified team. As historian Thomas Gomart has written, “The *siloviki* are not a structured group. The *siloviki* are marked by intense rivalries and a high degree of heterogeneity.”¹⁰ Even within the different power ministries, there are intense battles for power, influence, and money. These differences make it harder for there to be a coherent *siloviki* response to a political crisis. Individual *siloviki* may play a role in affecting major political change, but not “the *siloviki*” as a coherent group.

The seventeenth-century English philosopher Thomas Hobbes theorized about the need for a powerful state, a Leviathan, to maintain social order and prevent “the war of all against all.” Ultimately, the Leviathan rests on coercive force because, as Hobbes wrote elsewhere, “in matter of Government, when nothing else is turn’d up, Clubs are Trump.”¹¹ Indeed, clubs are often trump in authoritarian and semiauthoritarian states, which may lack stable and legitimate political institutions for resolving conflicts without force. The Arab Spring dramatically brought home this point, when seemingly stable and resilient authoritarian regimes collapsed entirely or descended into civil war. From Tunisia to Libya to Egypt to Syria, men with guns have determined the fate of regimes. Similarly, the conduct of the power ministries was critical to determining the outcome of a series of “color revolutions” in the post-Soviet states of Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan, and, arguably, in preventing such revolutions in countries like Armenia and Uzbekistan.

These dramatic events have led to renewed efforts to explain the domestic political behavior of military and security bodies in the face of crisis and potential change. It seems clear that raw indicators of state coercive capacity – the size and budget of the forces, the quality of their training and equipment, and so on – cannot by themselves explain military and police behavior, although extremely weak states unable to properly maintain or pay people in uniform are obviously vulnerable. Rather, issues of cohesion and will are central to explaining whether coercive organs will support the existing regime, throw in their lot with the opposition, seek power for themselves, or splinter into competing groups. Cohesion and will, in turn, hinge on such factors as whether the military and security chiefs have tight links with the political leadership, and

whether their own fate, and that of their organizations, are dependent on these ties. Thus, during the Arab Spring, for example, militaries with strong communal (ethnic, tribal, or sectarian) and personalistic connections to ruling autocrats were more likely to shoot at protestors than those who had a more separate sense of institutional identity that made them less dependent on the existing regime. Similarly, coercive organs with strong ideological ties to civilian rulers, often forged in revolution or violent conflict, are more likely to remain loyal.¹²

Of course, force-wielding organizations are not acting in a vacuum, but responding to what other actors do. For example, police and security bodies may have no problem with harassing oppositionists and dispersing small groups of demonstrators (what political scientists Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way have called “low-intensity coercion”), but balk at being asked to shoot on large crowds (“high-intensity coercion”). Only those coercive bodies that meet the criteria just mentioned – such as strong communal or ideological bonds with authoritarian rulers – are likely to employ high-intensity coercion.¹³

Further, state coercive organs are not just objects of political activity, dependent on the actions of civilian rulers and opposition elites, parties, and movements – they can be subjects as well. This is particularly true of the military. As political scientist Samuel Finer observed, it arguably makes more sense to ask why the military does *not* get involved in politics than to ask why it does, given that it is a highly disciplined and hierarchical organization, with strong symbolic status as the defender of the nation and, particularly important, a lot of guns. At the same time, Finer noted, the military often lacks legitimacy to rule the state, and may lack the capacity to do so once the polity and economy are sufficiently developed. In general,

opportunities for coups are higher in poor countries with weak states and fragile economies, where military officers may be motivated to act by threats to the army’s organizational interests, or out of a desire to advance the interests of particular societal groups, such as that of coethnics. Countries also can develop a tradition of military coups, in which military and even civilian elites can come to see army participation in high politics as normal, such as in Thailand. Conversely, other militaries may develop an apolitical (sometimes called “professional”) identity that holds the view that their job is external defense and domestic military intervention is wrong. In contrast to the military, it is very rare for the police and secret police to be able to seize power on their own. Even in cases where the secret services played a central political role, such as in certain Middle Eastern so-called *Mukhabarat* (intelligence) states, they have never ruled the state in their own name, preferring to work behind the scenes.¹⁴

Whether clubs are trump, therefore, depends a great deal on the nature of the club. Some state coercive organs have the will and cohesiveness to intervene decisively in domestic politics, either to protect the existing regime or make a bid for power on their own. Other armed state bodies are more passive in periods of domestic political turmoil, seeking to shield the organization from the unpredictable consequences of taking on an internal role. The nightmare scenario that generals seek to avoid, but that sometimes arises regardless, is when internal divisions within the power ministries lead to outright confrontation or even civil war.

How likely is a Russian man on horseback to be a source of fundamental political change? Not very likely. Serving Russian military, police, and secret police officers almost certainly will not try to seek

power on behalf of their organization. The last unsuccessful coup attempt in Russia was in August 1991, a desperate effort by hardliners from the KGB, the military, the police, and the Communist Party to prevent the collapse of the Soviet Union. Before that, the most recent, and also unsuccessful, bid for power by a Russian general was during the 1917 Revolution and subsequent civil war. These two great cataclysms of twentieth-century Russian history are united by one central feature: they were periods of state collapse. During state breakdown, it is difficult for state coercive bodies, and especially the military, to stay out of politics. Absent another episode of state collapse, which seems improbable in contemporary Russia, a coup effort by a military or security grouping is highly unlikely. Russia is a relatively wealthy country with no tradition of military rule, and no successful military coup in over two hundred years – a poor candidate indeed for military dictatorship.¹⁵

What about power ministry behavior in the event of a major opposition challenge to the ruling regime, along the lines of a color revolution? Let's assume at the time of the challenge that it is either Putin or someone from his inner circle that he anointed as his successor in charge. Many would suppose that the power ministries would be firmly behind Putin or someone from his team, given that *siloviki* are seen as the dominant faction in the regime. In 2007, for example, political scientist Mark Beissinger argued that “the close association of the secret police (FSB) with the Putin Regime . . . renders it less likely that the secret police would defect, since the secret police have a direct stake in the preservation of their pervasive influence over government.”¹⁶

Given what we learned above about the nature of the different organizations that make up the Russian power ministries, and the attributes of coercive organs that remain loyal to authoritarian and semiau-

thoritarian regimes, however, there are reasons to doubt the cohesion and will of Russia's major power ministries to defend the regime during a crisis. Specifically, the three major power ministries – the Ministry of Defense, the FSB, and the MVD – all have strong and independent institutional identities and do not have robust ideological or communal commitments to Putin and his circle, particularly ones forged in violence during war or revolution. Obviously, the FSB is the closest of the three to Putin, and its current leader is a member of Putin's St. Petersburg *chekist* group, but the FSB does not command large numbers of troops. The military obviously controls massive coercive power, but it has traditionally resisted internal repression missions, particularly in the context of leadership struggles, and does not possess the attributes of a military inclined to embrace high-intensity coercion.

The leading force in dealing with domestic protests in post-Soviet Russia has been the MVD, with a combination of ordinary police, riot police, and, if necessary, the heavily armed Internal Troops. It was the MVD, for example, that played the central role in policing the 2011 – 2012 protests in Moscow, the largest mass demonstrations since the collapse of the Soviet Union. But in 2016, as noted above, Putin created a National Guard subordinate to the president that includes the Internal Troops and the riot police, and placed a key ally in charge. This move was widely interpreted as an effort by Putin to create a praetorian guard that would be a reliable instrument of domestic repression in the face of potential internal unrest.¹⁷

The creation of a National Guard suggests two interesting things about the role of the *siloviki* in confronting major political change. First, it implies that Putin and his team are worried about domestic stability. The current head of the MVD, Vladimir Kolokol'tsev, is a career professional cop

and is not known as a close Putin associate. The current minister of defense, Sergei Shoigu, is closer to Putin, but he also has independent political standing and popularity; his fate is not linked to Putin's. Plausibly, Putin believes that neither the MVD nor the military would be a reliable instrument of repression in a crisis. A new National Guard, shaped by his ally Zolotov, could be a more reliable weapon.

Second, the National Guard reconfigures the balance among the different power ministries. Not only did it undermine the MVD by removing more than two hundred thousand personnel from its ranks, it also created a new and potentially powerful competitor to the FSB. Putin's stated rationale for creating the National Guard was to fight terrorism and organized crime, but those are also FSB responsibilities. Future turf battles seem inevitable, in terms of access to power, influence, and opportunities for economic enrichment. Indeed, according to one source inside the security services, the creation of the National Guard was not about dealing with possible antiregime protests, but about redistributing power between the power ministries. "We are not afraid of crowds," this person said, "we are afraid of each other."¹⁸

This source did not say why the power ministries fear each other more than they fear crowds – is it because he thinks power ministry battles are more likely than mass protests, or because he thinks they can deal with crowds easily? If he thinks it will be easy to dispatch large crowds of protestors, his confidence could well be misplaced. It is doubtful that the National Guard would be a reliable tool of repression in the face of revolutionary pressure from below. It will have the necessary capacity in terms of personnel and resources, but it may lack the cohesion and will. Although Zolotov's personal fate is directly linked to Putin's, this is unlikely to be true at lower levels in the organization. These personnel do not

have strong ideological or kin ties to Putin and his circle, and thus may balk if ordered to deploy high-intensity coercion against large groups of peaceful protestors. Material rewards and patronage can sustain the organization in less extreme circumstances, but could well prove inadequate when the chips are down. Thus, for example, the August 1991 coup failed when second-tier generals and lower-level officers in the army, MVD, and KGB dragged their feet and otherwise resisted orders to use force.

There is one internal coercive force, however, that might be considered reliable in high-intensity coercion scenarios: the *Kadyrovtsy*. These are the forces loyal to Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov, typically estimated at around twenty to thirty thousand people. Regardless of their formal designation – many of them were technically part of the MVD and should be transferred to the control of the National Guard – it is widely believed that their loyalty is more personal than institutional, belonging to Kadyrov himself. In turn, Kadyrov has on multiple occasions pledged his personal loyalty to Putin and suggested that he is willing to defend Putin against his enemies, and Putin has likewise shown great confidence in Kadyrov. The *Kadyrovtsy* do possess many of the qualities outlined above, in particular the close personal and communal ties forged during violent conflict, that suggest they could be a reliable force in a crisis. Central power ministries, in particular the FSB, allegedly resent Kadyrov's influence and unconstrained behavior, but Putin has repeatedly resisted entreaties to remove or discipline Kadyrov. However, any attempt to expand the role of the *Kadyrovtsy* during a crisis beyond Chechnya, particularly in Moscow, would likely face push-back from the FSB, and perhaps the MVD and even the armed forces.¹⁹

A major social challenge in the form of mass mobilization would not, of course, inevitably lead to an attempted crack-

down. Indeed, the smartest regime strategy is often to do nothing and let the protests fizzle out on their own, and one might expect that the political leadership would be too smart to shoot at unarmed protesters.²⁰ Another possibility is that popular challenges lead to splits inside the regime, and this is the environment in which *siloviki* insiders arguably could play the greatest role in bringing about political change. For example, one could imagine a situation in which an unpopular president, whether Putin some years in the future or someone else, faces both popular mobilization and elite defections. Under these circumstances, the leaders of the power ministries would likely be influential actors, sought out by various elites seeking to build an alternative coalition. Similarly, *siloviki* members in informal clan networks could use their connections and access to *kompromat* to maneuver on behalf of either the sitting president or an alternative ruler from within the elite. In these types of scenarios, however, we are talking about a change in leadership, not fundamental change in the nature of the regime.

Soviet and Russian history suggests that elite conflicts over the top job (albeit normally without mass mobilization) are the periods during which military and security leaders play the largest role. For example, a few months after Joseph Stalin's death in 1953, top Soviet military generals arrested secret police chief Lavrentii Beria at the order of Communist Party chief Nikita Khrushchev, removing a major contender for power. In 1957, both the head of the military and the head of the KGB backed Khrushchev when others in the top Party leadership tried to remove him. In 1964, the head of the KGB quietly supported an effort led by other top Party officials, including Leonid Brezhnev, to remove Khrushchev from power. Thus, the military and especially the KGB were important players in Communist Party leader-

ship disputes, but their role was always secondary to that of leading Party officials.²¹

The most dramatic and violent struggle for power in post-Soviet Russia took place in September–October 1993. Yeltsin dismissed the parliament, which was still operating based on a heavily amended Soviet-era constitution. The parliament responded by impeaching Yeltsin and appointing his vice president as president. This constitutional crisis of “dual power” lasted two weeks, with both sides trying to elicit the support of the various power ministries. The force structures largely remained loyal to Yeltsin, including – critically – after an attack by armed parliament supporters on the mayor's office and Moscow's main television and radio tower left dozens dead. At that point, Yeltsin was able to call on the army, and especially his own presidential guard, to gain control of Moscow and arrest the opposition leaders. But the military only agreed to act after armed rebels initiated violence, and it took a personal visit by Yeltsin to the Ministry of Defense, and a direct written order taking personal responsibility, for the military to relent.²² The loyalty during the crisis of the Presidential Security Service and its head, Aleksandr Korzhakov, led Yeltsin to give Korzhakov more powers, telling him to turn his service into a “personal mini-KGB.”²³ In this case, like most of the Soviet-period cases, the coercive organs of the state acted in response to decisions of the civilian political leadership and worked to preserve the existing political order rather than upset it.

Informal clan politics have been important in the leadership transitions from Yeltsin to Putin (1999–2000), from Putin to Medvedev (2007–2008), and from Medvedev back to Putin (2011–2012). There was considerable behind-the-scenes politicking about all of these events, and in some cases, various *siloviki* factions were

involved. Putin's rise to the top under Yeltsin was not a *chekist* or *siloviki* plot, it was the civilian clan known as the Yeltsin "family" that played the most important role in advancing Putin's candidacy. On the other hand, the struggle over who might succeed Putin in 2008, or whether to find a way to have him serve three consecutive terms (perhaps by amending the constitution), definitely involved key top *siloviki* and competing *siloviki* clans. Similarly, the battle over whether Medvedev might be allowed to go for a second term in 2012 also featured prominent *siloviki*. In both of these cases, however, the key *chekist* was Putin himself: ultimately, it was up to him whether he would step aside in 2008 and return to the Kremlin in 2012. Further, these episodes were all resolved within the existing rules of the game.²⁴

There is one scenario for major political change that would likely involve some *siloviki* in a lead role: a move to make Putin "president for life." In 2007, Putin rejected the idea of rewriting the constitution to allow him to serve a third term. Term limits will next stand in the way of Putin staying on as president in 2024, when Putin will be seventy-two years old. Assuming Putin runs and is reelected in 2018, and faces no other threat to his rule in the meantime, pressure will likely grow from within the system for Putin to concoct a way to stay in power after 2024. Key members of his team will likely, as in 2007, see him as the best possible guarantee of their power and fortunes and press for a continuation of his rule. This "Putin forever" scenario would be significant intrasystem change, but it would be change for the sake of stasis, and therefore less transformative than the other scenarios considered above. Further, this would be another instance in which Putin himself would be the ultimate decider.

Overall, *siloviki* – both the formal organizational kind and of informal clan networks – have been most influential in help-

ing to decide who rules Russia when they are acting to preserve the existing order and are working in support of top civilian elites. The one time the head of the KGB, together with the head of the army and the police and leading civilian officials, tried to overthrow the leader of the state, in August 1991, it was a miserable failure. More common are circumstances in which behind-the-scenes maneuvering within the elite involves top power ministry officials or informal *siloviki* clans. But these instances tend to reinforce the status quo, not stimulate major political change. Russian *siloviki* in the current era are "the conservative guardian of the existing order," the role political scientist Samuel Huntington has ascribed to the military in countries facing the transition to mass politics.²⁵ In Russia, they tend to play this role from the side, not out in front.

Elvis Costello once sang, "accidents will happen" – which brings us to our final point. Perhaps the most likely way the *siloviki* will bring about fundamental political change in Russia is by mistake. Although top power ministry officials and the heads of the different *siloviki* clans would like to preserve the existing system, some of their actions could well lead to unintended consequences. One obvious way this could happen in a crisis is a bungled use of force against peaceful protestors that generates a more popular backlash. More likely, perhaps, is a slow-drip hollowing out of the system, as battles over power and wealth between different *siloviki* factions make the economy and polity progressively less effective. This type of institutional decay could tip into institutional breakdown, what political scientist Steven Solnick has called a "bank run," in which officials seek to appropriate state assets for themselves before it is too late, thus exacerbating the breakdown that they wish to avoid.²⁶ So far, Putin's oversight and managerial skills have held the system together, but if he cannot

find a way to reinvigorate economic growth in the medium term, then the struggle for resources may grow intense, putting the system under strain. Predicting accidents, however, is hard to do. Absent such a scenario of unintended consequences, the *siloviki* will, under most circumstances, be a force for stability, not fundamental change.

Fundamental future political change implies the unraveling of the Putinist system and its (partial) militocracy. This seems a tall order indeed, since the *siloviki* control the guns, the information, and key levers of economic and legal control. The *siloviki*, and especially the *chekisty*, are indeed inter-

twined in the status quo. They will certainly work to maintain it. But one should not overestimate the coherence and unity of the *siloviki* or the *chekisty*, nor the state that allegedly serves their interests. They are divided bureaucratically, politically, and economically. Moreover, they lack the cohesion and will that sustains authoritarian police states in a crisis. Benjamin Franklin, at the signing of the U.S. Declaration of Independence, remarked, “We must all hang together, or assuredly we shall all hang separately.” This is not the ethos of contemporary Russian *siloviki*. They are not revolutionaries, and they will save their own necks separately rather than die on the barricades together.

ENDNOTES

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Putin-Style “Rule of Law” & the Prospects for Change

Maria Popova

Abstract: In Putin’s Russia, the regime uses the law and legal institutions to fulfill political goals, to communicate them to society, and to manage the authoritarian coalition that helps the president govern. As a result, the law is highly consequential and important, but its use tends to be arbitrary, expedient, and instrumental, rather than predictable and principled. Can we expect any major shifts in the role of law and the courts over the next ten years? Russia’s legal regime is unlikely to undergo major evolutionary change and may outlive Putin’s tenure: both foreign and domestic pressures for change toward constitutionalism are limited. If a positive shift were to take place, Russia would inch toward authoritarian constitutionalism. But negative change is also possible. If Putin’s regime weakens, the politicized use of the courts against both dissidents and political competitors within the authoritarian coalition will increase.

Listen, all our opponents clamor for the rule of law. What is the rule of law? It is compliance with existing legislation. What does existing legislation say about marches? You need to obtain authorization from the local authorities. You got one? Go ahead and demonstrate. If you didn’t – you don’t have the right to demonstrate. If you do anyway – you will get a baton to the noggin’ [*poluchite po bashke dubinoi*]. End of story!

– V. V. Putin, August 30, 2010¹

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Ever since his ascent to power in the late 1990s, Putin has pledged his commitment to develop Russia into a law-based state (*pravovoye gosudarstvo*). However, his liberal opposition at home and critics abroad routinely decry Russia’s rule-of-law deficit. Why does this gap exist and will it narrow or widen in the near future? The gap could signal Putin’s disingenuous appeal to *pravovoye gosudarstvo* or the loss of meaning in translation between the term *rule of law* and its potential Russian equivalents. But it is also the case that both Putin and his critics are right even if they

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are talking past each other. Putin's Russia is far from the liberal constitutionalism associated with the rule of law. Neither does it have the authoritarian constitutionalism sometimes called rule *by* law. But the Putin regime does not pursue legal nihilism while trying to hoodwink domestic and foreign audiences into believing that law matters. Law does matter, but it serves a different purpose than it does in a constitutionalist context. In Putin's Russia, the sovereign uses the law and legal institutions to fulfill political goals, to communicate them to society, and to manage the authoritarian coalition that helps the president govern. As a result, the law is highly consequential, but its use tends to be arbitrary, expedient, and instrumental, rather than predictable and principled. Russia's legal regime is unlikely to undergo major evolutionary change and may outlive Putin's tenure; both foreign and domestic pressures for change toward constitutionalism are limited. If a positive shift were to take place, Russia would inch toward authoritarian constitutionalism (that is, rule *by* law), either because an increasingly professional judiciary starts to assert itself or because the current authoritarian coalition attempts to use the law to entrench its interests and ensure the survival of the regime beyond Putin. But negative change is also possible. If Putin's regime weakens, the instrumental and arbitrary use of the courts against both dissidents and political competitors within the authoritarian coalition will increase.

The liberal constitutionalism associated with the rule of law rests upon two main principles: equal responsibility and protection under the law, and substantive and procedural guarantees for fundamental individual rights. This means that everyone, including high-ranking members of the regime and its sovereign, is equally constrained by the constitution and ordinary legislation, not just on paper, but in prac-

tice as well. Liberal constitutionalism also requires a set of substantive laws that provide for fundamental rights. A politically independent and impartial judiciary is crucial because independent courts can better ensure that all litigants, regardless of their political, material, or legal resources, are equally bound by the law.

Putin's Russia is far from the liberal constitutional ideal. While its constitution does provide many fundamental rights – freedom of speech, freedom of association and assembly, and freedom of movement, to name a few – ordinary legislation has hollowed each of them out. The foreign agents laws and antiextremism laws undermine freedom of association; hate speech legislation and a 2014 amendment to the Criminal Code, which outlaws public calls for violation of Russia's territorial integrity, limit freedom of speech; onerous administrative provisions for registering in one's place of residence restrict freedom of movement; and the 2016 Yarovaya anti-terrorism law stifles freedom of assembly and conscience by introducing harsh sentences for organizers of unsanctioned protests, requiring Internet service providers and phone companies to store customers' communication data logs, and making it a crime not to report information about other crimes. Whatever rights do exist *de jure* are undermined *de facto* by the Russian courts, which do not uphold them consistently or predictably.

Russia's authoritarianism does not completely account for its weak constitutionalism, since constitutionalism is not always incompatible with autocracy. Autocrats can govern within a constitutional framework, even if they are not fully constrained by it. In an ideal type authoritarian constitutional regime, the autocrat sets the substantive law, often in negotiation with his governing coalition. The opposition does not have the opportunity to shape substantive law, either through the legislative process or

by appealing to the Constitutional Court. Many fundamental rights are not provided. Substantive law is biased against the opposition and imposes sanctions on it. For example, it may limit its ability to contest elections or its right to criticize the government.² However, once in place, the law is applied predictably rather than arbitrarily to individual cases by functionally independent courts.³ Oppositionists are sanctioned in accordance with the laws that limit opposition activity, rather than imprisoned on other charges. The courts are sufficiently removed from direct political influence and the constitution serves as a coordinating institution between the autocrat and the elites with whose help he governs. When the autocrat and his governing coalition reach agreements about how power is distributed and enshrine those agreements in the constitution or in ordinary legislation, there is enough expectation that commitments are honored and enforced in good faith by the judiciary.⁴

Currently Russia does not have authoritarian constitutionalism. Consider the contrast between the treatment of dissidents in Singapore, the prime example of authoritarian constitutionalism, and in Russia. In 1988, Singapore's highest court ordered the release of four dissidents arrested under the Internal Security Act. The court found that the government had not followed the proper statutory procedures and, in addition, argued that the government's excessive discretionary power under the Internal Security Act was contrary to the rule of law. The government complied with the decision and released the dissidents, but immediately charged them again and rearrested them, this time scrupulously following the letter of the law. It then passed a constitutional amendment, which forbade the judiciary from curtailing the sovereign's power to make law.⁵

This episode underscores both the authoritarian nature of the Singaporean re-

gime and its adherence to constitutionalism. As any authoritarian government does, the Singaporean regime went after dissidents and did so effectively. When one route to detaining them failed, the authoritarian sovereign pursued another and was ultimately successful in asserting the regime's dominance. However, the regime achieved its goals by respecting the constitutional process, the ordinary legislation that it had put in place, and, to some extent, the independence of the judiciary. The highest court was sufficiently independent to call out the government for failing to adhere to statutory procedure, and the government complied with the court decision and made a better effort at respecting the law. While it prevented further encroachment by the independent judiciary into its discretionary power, the regime did not discipline the judiciary either formally or informally. Instead, using its dominance over the legislature, the sovereign changed the constitution to emphasize his unfettered power to make law.

The Bolotnaya Square cases – in which protestors were charged with counts of mass riots and violence against police – illustrate Russia's deviation from authoritarian constitutionalism. Unlike in Singapore, Russian courts at all levels of the hierarchy failed to stop the government from violating defendants' rights to liberty and fair trial, despite the existence of reasonable protection for those rights in the Russian Constitution. The courts actively participated in the rights violations by holding the protesters in pretrial detention well beyond the statutory provisions. They also failed to note violations of the right to freedom of assembly, which resulted from police conduct during the authorized protest on May 6, 2012. Some Bolotnaya defendants won redress when they appealed to the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR), which affirmed the violations and ordered Russia to pay compensation. To prevent further

encroachment on its ability to use the law against regime opponents, the Russian regime did not introduce any changes that would have made the behavior of police and the prosecution strictly legal. Instead, in late 2015, the Duma passed a law that authorizes the Russian Constitutional Court to deem ECHR decisions “unenforceable.” Given the Constitutional Court’s record of deference to the regime, this effectively allows Russia to arbitrarily disregard individual ECHR decisions. The proponents of the law explicitly identified its purpose as the protection of Russia’s “legal sovereignty” (*pravovoi suverenitet*) vis-à-vis international institutions.⁶

The prosecutions of opposition activist Aleksei Navalny and billionaire oil tycoon Mikhail Khodorkovsky demonstrate that the Putin regime does not adhere to authoritarian constitutionalism, but uses law arbitrarily to sideline potential political opponents. Both Putin critics were indicted not for any opposition activities, but on unrelated fraud and embezzlement charges. Navalny was accused of embezzling funds from the state-run Kirovles timber company, and the indictment of his brother Oleg, which further increased the personal stakes for the opposition leader, underscores the instrumental use of criminal law by the sovereign. The timing of the case, prior to Moscow’s mayoral election, and the decision to give Aleksei Navalny a suspended sentence, but Oleg an effective one, support the impression that the embezzlement investigation was a tool used to suppress Aleksei Navalny’s political activities. In its ruling against Russia in the Kirovles case, the ECHR explicitly argued that criminal law was arbitrarily used against Navalny. In ECHR’s words: “Moreover, the Russian courts had found the applicants guilty of acts indistinguishable from regular commercial activities. In other words, the criminal law had been arbitrarily construed to the applicants’ detriment.”⁷

Khodorkovsky’s case is a bit less straightforward; legal analysts believe that the evidence of malfeasance against him and his oil company, Yukos, was stronger than in Navalny’s case.⁸ However, even if Khodorkovsky and Yukos engaged in large-scale tax evasion, fraud, and embezzlement, as the ECHR concluded in 2013, Yukos’s business practices were more the norm than the exception in the murky 1990s. By singling out Khodorkovsky but turning a blind eye to similar activities pursued by oligarchs who toed the Putin regime’s line, the Kremlin used the law selectively and arbitrarily to achieve the politically expedient goal of sidelining a budding political opponent.

The Pussy Riot case provides another example of the arbitrary and selective application of the law for political goals: that is, similar acts produced different outcomes in court. The punk rockers’ performance in the Cathedral of Christ the Savior was construed as a crime under Article 213 of the Criminal Code, which punishes premeditated hooliganism (a planned disturbance of public order). After a highly publicized trial, Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, Maria Alyokhina, and Yekaterina Samutsevich received two-year effective sentences. But Pussy Riot’s performance was far from the first example of an antiregime art performance. Tolokonnikova had long been a member of the radical art collective Voina, which from 2007 to 2011 engaged in about a dozen actions that similarly used the shock value of obscenity to criticize Russia’s police state and to challenge public morality. Voina’s main targets were Putin, Dmitrii Medvedev, the *siloviki*, and the Orthodox Church. Most of Voina’s actions involved some kind of law violation – its members shoplifted, drew graffiti, flipped over and burned police cars, and disrupted court proceedings by releasing three thousand cockroaches in a courtroom. In February 2008, Voina (and Tolokonnikova) staged their most notorious stunt: four couples

had sex in a public area of the Biological Museum while other members of the group held protest signs and filmed. The performance, called "Fuck for the Heir Puppy Bear" – a play on words in that Medvedev's name derives from the Russian word *medved*, or bear – drew significant media attention and was widely condemned as extremely offensive. Several of Voina's performances resulted in criminal investigations against individual members, including some indictments under the same Article 213 of the Criminal Code. However, all cases were eventually dropped by the prosecution or dismissed by the courts. Prior to the Pussy Riot convictions, the most serious legal consequence suffered by members of the art collective was a three-month detention from November 2010 to February 2011 while the prosecution investigated their involvement in a police car-flipping incident. That incident produced significant media coverage, both in Russia and abroad, prompting Banksy to contribute 4.5 million rubles to Voina's legal defense fund. Eventually, the court dismissed the charges.

The contrast in outcomes suggests that Pussy Riot's punk performance resulted in convictions not because it was more critical of the regime or Putin, more shocking to the public, better publicized, or more clearly illegal than Voina's performances. The difference was timing. In 2012, the Putin regime had decided to turn to "morality politics" and promote public commitment to traditional values.⁹ Within this context, the Pussy Riot performance attracted the attention of the regime, which used the case to publicize and sell its new morality politics to the Russian electorate. The prosecution and the courts acted in line with this goal and delivered convictions. Offering further evidence of the policy shift, in 2013, three of Voina's leading members fled Russia with their families, reportedly to avoid impending criminal prosecution.¹⁰

These high-profile cases suggest that Russian legal outcomes, while unpredictable if one goes by the content of the law, are entirely predictable if one knows the preferences of the political sovereign: the Kremlin always wins. However, this predictability is exaggerated. Outside a few very salient cases, the Kremlin either does not reveal its preferences or simply has no preferences. When the Kremlin's position is uncertain, lower-level political actors, the prosecution, and judges try to guess the politically correct outcome and this guessing game introduces significant unpredictability into the legal regime. In addition, when political actors vie for relative power within the regime, they often seek to demonstrate that power by influencing court decisions in politically relevant cases. Consider the frequent conflicts between mayors of major cities and regional governors. These conflicts are often fought vicariously through court cases, with each side attempting to mobilize enough political resources up the power ladder to secure a victory in court. Judges face the tough task of interpreting the signals that come from judicial superiors and the extrajudicial actors to deliver a decision that would be acceptable to whoever represents power (*vlast'*) in that concrete case.

In legal areas with low political salience, either because they are politically inconsequential or because there is broad political consensus over how such cases should be adjudicated, the Russian judiciary functions reasonably well. Freed from direct external interference or from the burden of trying to guess the preferences of politically powerful actors, judges decide cases in accordance with their *bona fide* interpretation of the law. Companies that use the *arbitrazh* courts to resolve disputes report that they expect acceptable judicial decisions if *vlast'* is not involved.¹¹ Ordinary citizens who have experience with going to court report that the decision in their

case was fair and the judge professional, even against the backdrop of reported lack of trust in the Russian judiciary overall.¹² In the early 2000s, when United Russia comfortably won elections and the regime had not yet moved toward suppression of political dissent, the courts adjudicated electoral registration cases without overwhelming bias toward progovernment candidates.¹³ In the late 2000s, Russians filed over half a million administrative lawsuits against the state, demanding compensation for wrongful decisions by federal agencies, and won most of them. Rather than a sign of the judiciary effectively constraining state agencies through law, the high win rate in such cases arguably reflects the regime's policy goal of providing an outlet for popular discontent with the bureaucracy.¹⁴

How likely is it that, in the near future, Russia would transition away from the current legal regime, based on the politicized use of the law and a reliably dependent judiciary, toward constitutionalism? Are those chances better if authoritarianism persists or if a major democratic breakthrough took place? If constitutionalism were to be established, would it happen through an evolutionary process or through a momentous act? Or should we expect further entrenchment of politicized justice and its increased arbitrary use against dissidents and within-regime competitors?

In the best case scenario, sustained investment in the judiciary, which Putin's regime has pursued since the mid-2000s, may lead to ever increasing professionalization. A more professional judiciary may be less prone to petty judicial corruption, which would increase popular trust in the courts. As trust rises and judges develop more pride in their profession, they may start pushing the boundaries of nonpoliticized adjudication beyond the pockets that now exist only by virtue of the regime's in-

difference. This would be a decades-long process, which could unfold only under conditions of political and economic stability and could take Russia closer to an authoritarian constitutionalist legal regime.

The prospects for short-term positive change, on the other hand, are low because the status quo serves the interests of Putin's regime. In contrast to constitutionalism, which constrains the sovereign, Russia's current legal regime allows the Kremlin to pursue political goals through the courts unfettered. As already discussed, Russia's politically pliable judiciary is an effective instrument for suppressing political opposition. The Kremlin has already used it to threaten, jail, or force into exile numerous political opponents: from credible competitors to far-fetched ones, from declared oppositionists to potential ones, from dissidents with high name recognition to the regular citizen protester.

The reliable dependence of Russia's judiciary also makes it a useful tool, through which the regime can communicate political goals to society. In the 2000s, the criminal cases that drove businessman Boris Berezovsky and media tycoon Vladimir Gusinsky into self-imposed exile told the public that the Yeltsin era of politically active oligarchs was over and the Putin regime had set out to wrest control over the economy from them. The imprisonment of Khodorkovsky, believed to have been the richest man in Russia, and the destruction of his company emphasized the triumph of the state over private business. In 2012, the Pussy Riot case ushered in the Kremlin's "morality politics" and signaled to society that traditional values were back *en vogue*.¹⁵ The Bolotnaya Square cases indicated that individuals who take part in political protests could pay a steep price, even if they are not visible leaders of the opposition. And the terrorism conviction of Ukrainian filmmaker Oleg Sentsov and the murder conviction of Ukrainian poli-

tician Nadiya Savchenko helped make the Kremlin's argument that Ukrainian extremist nationalists were responsible for the conflict in Donbas and sought to subvert Russia's newly acquired sovereignty over Crimea. A post-2012 anticorruption campaign has been used to neutralize one of the main rallying points for the opposition: endemic bureaucratic and political corruption.

The frequent use of presidential pardon or amnesty to release political prisoners underscores the information-delivering role of high-profile political trials. Mikhail Khodorkovsky and Nadiya Savchenko were released directly by Putin and, in both cases, he cited mercy and compassion as the drivers behind his decision. The pardons reiterate to the Russian public that, though granted mercy, the prisoners deserved to be prosecuted and convicted. It also emphasizes the power of the political sovereign over the legal process and, as a bonus, shows him as magnanimous.

But if all autocrats benefit from a dependent judiciary and instrumental use of the law, why do some accept some constitutional constraints? For some autocrats, the balance tips toward constitutionalism through external pressure. Authoritarian regimes with economies heavily dependent on foreign direct investment (FDI) have an incentive to credibly constrain themselves at least in the area of property rights in order to reassure investors that they would not be expropriated arbitrarily. Singapore may owe its authoritarian constitutionalism to this mechanism.¹⁶ Authoritarian regimes that need and expect significant foreign aid from democracies that care about the rule of law also have an incentive to accept some of the constraints that come from having an independent judiciary. This is part of the story behind the gradual empowerment of the judiciary in Mubarak's Egypt.¹⁷ Authoritarian regimes that seek legitimacy and recognition

from the international community are also pressured to adopt constitutions and show that they abide by the constraints in them. Civilian authoritarian regimes that lack the brute force of military dictatorships or the historically or religiously based legitimacy of monarchies are purportedly more likely to adopt a constitutional legal regime.¹⁸ In the near future, Russia is unlikely to move toward constitutionalism as a result of external pressure. Russia is a major recipient of FDI (ranked fourth globally) and it is hardly dependent on foreign aid.¹⁹ Even though per capita FDI is low and could increase significantly if guarantees against expropriation were stronger, there is an ideational obstacle to domestic reforms inspired by external pressure. Russia's return to self-perceived great power status makes it reluctant to pander to the international community. Over Putin's tenure, Russian foreign policy has shifted gradually yet decisively away from Yeltsin's attempts to win praise from the West. The "reset" with the United States failed. The Crimean annexation triggered a standoff with Europe and the United States through reciprocal sanctions. Interpretations of Putin's motives in the Ukrainian intervention vary. Some predict that as a resurgent expansionist great power, Russia will continue trying to push the West out of its former backyard. Others see the Kremlin pursuing "aggressive isolationism": a policy aimed at isolating Russia from Western influence to protect against a meddling color revolution.²⁰ Whether Putin's reaction to the Euromaidan revolution of 2014 was out of strength or weakness, both scenarios signal Russia's rejection of Western conditionality. In this context, it is unlikely that Russia would accept constitutional or judicial constraints in order to placate the West or the broader international community. Both the flaunting of international law through the Crimean intervention and the 2015 law spelling out Russia's intention to disregard certain

ECHR decisions underscore the limits of external pressure.

There could be domestic reasons for autocrats to choose to bind themselves through a credible constitution and an independent judiciary. They may use the constitution and the courts as tools to enhance legitimacy. Civilian and party-based authoritarian regimes like Russia's are purportedly more likely to choose this route toward power consolidation, because they cannot rely on sheer force like military regimes or on religion/tradition like monarchies.²¹ Autocrats may also use the constitution and an independent judiciary as a coordinating device. An independent judiciary can be used to keep the bureaucracy in line. A credibly enforced constitution can clarify how power is allocated within the authoritarian governing coalition, which would reduce the potential for intraelite conflict and political instability.²²

Putin's regime has used criminal law to manage membership of the authoritarian governing coalition. But since law is applied arbitrarily by a judiciary that lacks de facto independence, the legal process does not function as a coordination device, but as a political instrument. The post-2012 wave of criminal indictments of mayors, regional governors, and high-level federal officials for malfeasance, corruption, and abuse of office is a case in point. Members of the authoritarian elite who lose their political standing can expect to come under criminal investigation. They become scapegoats in a public campaign orchestrated by the regime to gain public legitimacy. When different factions fight each other, each seeks to get the upper hand by provoking a criminal case against the opponent. Whoever does get indicted is widely seen as having lost a political fight. Usually, the criminal investigation and the indictment follow, rather than precede, a presidential decree dismissing the governor for loss of confidence (*ustrata doveriya*).

In November 2016, even an incumbent member of the government – economy minister Aleksei Ulyukayev – was arrested, allegedly in the act of taking a \$2 million bribe. As the shock of Ulyukayev's detention reverberated through Russian society, commentators focused on guessing why Ulyukayev lost political favor with the president, which faction pushed for his downfall, and who could have protected him. The case underscores the widespread belief that, in Russia, legal repercussions stem from loss of political status, rather than vice versa.

The problem with this form of management is that it creates significant uncertainty within the authoritarian coalition; it is hard to know before a case plays out in the courts which faction has the upper hand. High uncertainty makes the regime more brittle. Factions are likely to pledge outward allegiance to the autocrat, when in fact their support for his rule may be eroding. As succession time approaches, the lack of a credible coordination device is likely to lead to significant political instability.²³

As Putin's age advances, the issue of authoritarian succession will loom ever larger for Russia's authoritarian elites. Some may try to pursue a policy toward the empowerment of the judiciary as an independent enforcer of the constitution in order to pave the way for an orderly transition of power. The inception of the rule of law and an independent judiciary is often attributed to an intertemporal bargain: current powerholders bind their own hands through an independent court in order to guarantee that their successors are constrained as well.²⁴ To be successful, though, these elites will need either the indifference or the tacit support of the Kremlin. The likelihood of the emancipation of the judiciary is closely linked to Putin's (and his faction's) view of the mode of regime succession. If Putin intends to die in office or has a credibly loyal suc-

cessor up his sleeve, the Kremlin will refrain from ceding any discretionary power to an independent judiciary. In theory, if Putin decides to retire without designating a successor and wants to guarantee immunity from prosecution for himself and his faction, he may pursue judicial empowerment. In practice, however, such a scenario is far-fetched. Yeltsin's transfer of power to Putin and the former's protection from prosecution through personal, rather than institutional, guarantees is a precedent that works against the institutionalization of an independent judiciary. More broadly, Putin seems to favor personal, ad hoc, behind-the-scenes bargains over formal institutional solutions. Unlike Lee Kuan Yew, the Singaporean patriarch who directed his country's spectacular transformation in part by guaranteeing the security of property rights through an impartial judiciary, Putin has overseen several rounds of property expropriation and redistribution.

As unlikely as it is, what would a policy aimed at moving Russia toward constitutionalism look like? Russia has the basic formal institutions that are associated with a constitutional regime and an independent judiciary, so no major institutional reforms are necessary. Still, some legislative initiatives that bolster the self-governance mechanisms for the judiciary and remove formal channels for executive influence over the courts may signal a commitment to change. What is even more necessary is a clear demonstration that the courts will not be used instrumentally and arbitrarily to achieve politically expedient goals. This means, at a minimum, a moratorium on the use of criminal law against leaders of the opposition. It also means that the courts should be kept at arm's length from major political controversies, so that they could start building a track record of political impartiality. A transition to constitutionalism can happen

only gradually, rather than through one or two major decisions. In the history of the American judiciary's emancipation from political influence, *Marbury v Madison* is often seen as a momentous decision. However, its importance is clear only in hindsight. The U.S. Supreme Court was in a politically precarious position throughout the nineteenth century.²⁵ And in Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan, and Georgia, what looked like major breakthroughs when the supreme courts ruled against political incumbents at the height of the color revolutions failed to usher in eras of judicial independence.

What about the possibility of a democratic breakthrough ushering in constitutionalism in Russia? If the Putin regime fell amidst prodemocratic social mobilization, rule of law and an independent judiciary may crystalize as one of the democratic revolution's main goals. That does not mean this goal is easy to achieve, however. Post-Euromaidan Ukraine offers a cautionary tale.

Three years after former Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovich's ouster, the Euromaidan's objective of fundamental changes to the judiciary remains elusive, despite strong societal demand for it. The Ukrainian judiciary continues to be both *de jure* and *de facto* dependent on incumbent politicians. After a few months of struggle with entrenched judicial elites, the new Poroshenko administration established control over the courts by muscling in some new appointees and getting old elites to pledge allegiance. In early 2015, the parliamentary assembly and its point man for the judiciary, Aleksei Filatov, outmaneuvered judicial independence champions in the Rada – led by the Samopomich-appointed deputy Rada speaker, Oksana Syroyid – and watered down a bill that was going to increase the formal independence of the judiciary.²⁶ The lower-levels of the judiciary have refrained from pushing for greater independence. Rank-and-file judges across Ukraine

demonstrated during the April 2014 judicial chair elections that they were afraid to rock the boat: they overwhelmingly reelected their incumbent administrative superiors.²⁷ The outsiders who Poroshenko initially appointed to clean up the prosecution were pushed out by early 2016. David Sakvarelidze, a veteran of former Georgian president Mikheil Saakashvili's judicial reform team, was fired from his post as deputy prosecutor general for "grave violations of prosecutorial ethics."²⁸ Vitalii Kas'ko, another deputy prosecutor general, resigned and faced criminal charges for the alleged illegal privatization of a Kyiv apartment. His supporters view his prosecution as political revenge by entrenched elites within the prosecution who were threatened by his investigation into prosecutorial corruption.²⁹

At the same time, civil society organizations, including the Lustration Committee, Maidan Self-Defense, and the Reanimation Package of Reforms (RPR), have been closely monitoring the performance of the judiciary. Some organizations, such as RPR, have engaged in advocacy and legislative lobbying for changes to the institutional structure of the judiciary that would increase its independence. Others, however, have blurred the line between civil activism and vigilantism, especially through "trashcan lustration" actions, in which activists physically attacked judges who were perceived as stooges of the Yanukovich regime and forced them into trashcans. Activists who "monitored" judicial elections, in which rank-and-file judges voted for the chair of their court, often disrupted the election and tried to intimidate judges into voting for or against a certain candidate. All this civic engagement happened against the backdrop of numerous public opinion polls that showed that an overwhelming majority of Ukrainians perceive radical judicial reform as a top priority.

The combination of societal demand for radical reforms and a business-as-usual

approach by politicians has put the judiciary in the precarious and humiliating position of being pressured and criticized from all sides. Judges have become scapegoats for much of the pre- and post-Euro-maidan dysfunction in the Ukrainian polity. Their legitimacy has plunged below even Yanukovich-era levels, as has their self-perception of autonomy. A 2015 survey by the Center for Policy and Legal Reforms shows that less than 10 percent of judges believe that the Ukrainian judiciary is independent. Even more damningly for the current government, 46 percent of judges believe that political pressure on judges is now just as strong as under Yanukovich and 29 percent of judges believe that political pressure has increased under Poroshenko!³⁰

The first Ukrainian lesson for Russia is that a transition to constitutionalism and judicial independence is harder to pull off than a transition to competitive politics, free and fair elections, and a free press. The second Ukrainian lesson is that judicial independence cannot be achieved through civil society pressure and monitoring. Civil society activists become yet another source of extrajudicial interference in the judicial decision-making process. The result is an even more cowering judiciary, rather than an emancipated one.

In short, it is unlikely that Russia will become a rule-of-law or a rule-by-law state after Putin. Whether Putin plans to die in office, loses power in a color revolution, or is replaced after the disintegration of his authoritarian coalition, the prospects for a transition to constitutionalism and an independent judiciary are slim. Both domestic and external pressures on Putin's regime to abandon its instrumental use of the law are weak. Ironically, the potential agents of change are Putin himself and members of his authoritarian coalition, rather than civil society. A gradual move to authoritarian constitutionalism is

theoretically possible if Putin and his close associates plan to leave politics and need guarantees that the future political incumbents would not use law and the pliable judiciary to prosecute them. Alternatively, a group of major business owners could push for the rule of law as a way of protecting their assets. In practice, however, Putin's demonstrated preference for informal bargains over formal institutions as coordination devices makes the first scenario unlikely. And the robber-barons-for-rule-of-law transformation has been expected for the past two decades; but we have yet to see any indication that it will happen.³¹

While positive change toward the rule of law is unlikely, negative change toward even greater politicization of the judiciary

is easier to imagine. If a credible challenge to the Kremlin's dominance emerges, the regime will reach for the courts as an instrument to suppress dissent. If the danger rises through civil society mobilization, the regime will use administrative and criminal law to deal more harshly with NGOs, social movement activists, and individual protestors. The fines will get bigger, the verdicts longer, and the procedural violations more blatant. If a charismatic politician with broad appeal emerges, either within or outside the authoritarian coalition, and harnesses ethnic Russian nationalism, even show trials could make a comeback. In that scenario, Russia could veer into the legal nihilism characteristic of previous periods of its history.

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Ideas, Ideology & Intellectuals in Search of Russia's Political Future

Elena Chebankova

Abstract: The intellectual discourse of any state can function within two broad paradigms: consensual and pluralistic. In the first case, political elites, intellectuals, and the public agree on the base parameters of what constitutes “the good life” and argue about the methods of application. In the second case, participants hold radically different, incommensurable views, which coexist in society. This essay argues that the Western political system broadly rests on the politics of liberal consensus, formed throughout the period of capitalist modernization. But Russia’s history took a different turn, following a path of alternative modernization. This engendered the politics of paradigmatic pluralism, in which a number of radically different politico-intellectual frameworks struggle for the dominant discourse. This essay examines these paradigms and argues that, due to the nature and substance of these models, fundamental change of Russia’s dominant discourse, along with its main politico-institutional parameters, is unlikely.

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Russia’s extant political system is stabilized through the politics of paradigmatic pluralism. More specific, two broad and radically different paradigms of “the good life” are present in Russia: pro-Western liberal and state-centered traditionalist.¹ Their mutual questioning and criticism allow society to function within a relatively stable framework. While the two alternatives have struggled for discursive supremacy, the nativist and state-centered paradigm has emerged as a hegemonic discourse, with the support of the majority of the population. It is focused on avoiding shocks to the extant system and on sustaining sociopolitical stability. This essay demonstrates that the paradigmatic split in Russia has been historically determined. It continues with an examination of the main dimensions of Russia’s hegemonic discourse, pointing to its general inclination toward national reconciliation and political stability. It then ponders the potential breakdown of the dichotomous nature of the existing ideological

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landscape and assesses the chances of a third, more radical alternative capturing the field. The essay concludes that, within the period under review, a fundamental change of the hegemonic paradigm in Russia is unlikely due to the dynamics of Russia's political system.

Until very recent years, the Western political system has mainly rested on the politics of liberal consensus. This implies that society reaches a basic agreement on the idea of the good life within a liberal framework and hopes that there will be a gradual "step-by-step convergence of all values with liberal values."² John Rawls called to establish a "base consensus" that would rest on liberal democratic, cultural, and political notions and act as a basic framework capable of encompassing diverging but "reasonable" ideas of the good life, thus buttressing pluralism of a liberal nature.³ This thinking has its origins in the monistic tradition of Plato and Aristotle that subsequently merged with monotheistic Christian conceptions to determine much of ensuing Western philosophy.⁴

Critics of consensus politics represent a less practiced alternative that calls for the coexistence of incommensurable paradigms of the good life, their incessant dialogue, and mutual enrichment. This is the intellectual posterity of Thomas Hobbes, David Hume, and John Stuart Mill, advanced in the twentieth century by Isaiah Berlin, John Gray, Jean-François Lyotard, Shmuel Eisenstadt, Bernard Williams, and others. These critics point to the "absolutization" of liberalism by the proponents of liberal consensus politics and advocate the need to introduce meaningfully different alternatives that could enrich the cultural landscape of society. In short, consensus politics seek to operate within one broad politically liberal episteme that houses divergent ideas of an invariably liberal coloring. Pluralistic politics, in turn,

have a number of epistemes that struggle to agree on the "base" positions, that propose meaningfully different ideas of socio-political development, and that compete for hegemony in the discursive realm.

A paradox of contemporary Russian politics is that, since the fall of the Soviet Union, it has rested on the pluralistic, rather than the consensus, model, with consequences for the country's intellectual landscape and potential for change to its extant regime. We shall address the participants in these debates as *critical intelligentsia*. To clarify positions at the outset, we will not limit our understanding of critical intelligentsia to those who are hopeful of altering Russia's extant political system. Rather, the discussion considers all those who ponder Russia's fate – her past, present, and future in its full complexity – as intellectuals. Hence, the account examines the full spectrum of existing opinion, regardless of its support or criticism of the existing political structure.

The two main paradigms of the good life – pro-Western liberal and state-centered traditionalist – struggle for position as Russia's hegemonic discourse. The first intellectual group, which includes some members of the government and financial elite, advocates the path of westernization for Russia. The second group adopts a conservative approach insisting on the creation of a strong state that relies on previous periods of Russia's history and her idiosyncratic political traditions. This paradigm has a pro-Western dimension, but it is a particular kind of westernization. It welcomes almost all aspects of Western modernity related to the capitalist economy, nation-state, religion, and family, but is skeptical about the West's postmodernist path. It also insists on Russia being Western and European but not subordinate to the West geopolitically. Although the pro-Western liberal paradigm is readily available in the current political climate in

Russia, it functions merely as a discursive alternative, not as a meaningful option seriously considered by the majority of the population. Permanent dialogue between the two paradigms, as well as the fact that the traditionalist discourse already contains some elements of the Western system, stabilizes the traditionalist discourse and makes unexpected shifts in the country's political trajectory unlikely.

The paradigmatic split and the difficulties experienced by the pro-Western liberal paradigm are rooted in history; things become clearer if we sketch Russia's past three hundred years. First, Russia has a complex relationship with modernity, a social paradigm that largely lends a liberal consensus matrix to the politics of most Western European states. Russia is a second-wave modernization country, a circumstance that predetermines the paradigmatic split. Second, Russia's idiosyncratic relationship with modernity barred her from forming a clear civic identity supportive of liberal consensus politics. Finally, Russia's tumultuous twentieth century further contributed to the consolidation of the existing intellectual rift. Let me elaborate on these factors.

Russia's embrace of Western modernity was rather tardy. The Petrine period (1682 – 1721) was a watershed, during which Russia had only just launched a painful transformation toward modernity, met with resistance from a reluctant population. In contrast, most European countries had already experienced the Reformation and Enlightenment. Russia also lagged behind in industrialization. Western European countries underwent the peak of industrialization during the late eighteenth and most of the nineteenth centuries. Russia, in contrast, industrialized during the late Tsarist period and in the first half of the twentieth century, part of the Soviet "alternative modernity" paradigm.

In general terms, countries that experienced modernization in the second or

third wave have faced the painful political consequences of ideological borrowing. A borrowed idea can be "an asset to the development of a country and a reminder of its comparative backwardness, that is both a model to be emulated and a threat to national identity. What appears desirable from the standpoint of progress often appears dangerous to national independence."⁵ Hence, this cruel dilemma forces a split within the intellectual scene of second-wave industrialization states, of which Russia is part.

Intellectuals of those countries inevitably face an uneasy choice between losing intellectual and cultural independence by admitting their backwardness and adopting the externally borrowed progressive paradigm, or reaffirming nativism and tradition by holding on to the previously chosen path. The drama for Russian intellectuals is in the quandary of either adopting the ideology of individual freedom and bourgeois liberties, combined with embracing Western ontology, or clinging to the idiosyncratic centralized modes of governance that could conduct modernization and development, albeit in a risky alternative fashion. The latter option remains less explored, a problem that Aleksandr Dugin, a Eurasianist philosopher focusing on cultural and geopolitical aspects of the Russian civilization, described as the need for the development of a distinctively Russian epistemology and ontology.⁶

Further, Russia's complex experience with modernity impedes the process of forging a civic national identity, which also requires a bourgeois ideological consensus. Bourgeois elites that took the lead in creating the "imagined communities" of civic nation-states promoted the ideas of citizenship and society (*Gesellschaft*) at the expense of the traditional commune (*Gemeinschaft*); civil (economic), political, and social rights; individual liberty; civic responsibility; and representative de-

mocracy. These notions gradually formed the cornerstone of the liberal bourgeois base consensus, upon which most modern Western European societies rest. Hence, the idea of civic identity, as well as the civic nation-state, is closely related to the capitalist mode of production and its supporting political institutions. It also represents the cardinal feature of modernity.

Russia's path of "alternative modernity," engendered by Soviet Communism, featured a different set of values. Bourgeois individual liberties were replaced by the supremacy of community over the individual, the idea of liberating masses of workers in order to dispense with exploitation and enable fairer participation in the life of the community. Equality was understood as social equality, which differed from the Western understanding of equality of opportunity. From this point of view, Russia's alternative modernity has not created a social fabric with an immanent understanding of civic identity and civic nation that rests on the notions of bourgeois individuality, liberal rights, and personal freedoms. This hinders a liberal base consensus and lends credence to the nativist state-centered discourse.

Therefore, while we can successfully identify the Russian state and Russian people, we struggle to pinpoint the dimensions of Russia's civic identity.⁷ It comes as no surprise that 43 percent of respondents to a 2011 VTsIOM (Russian Public Opinion Research Center) poll did not feel like part of the Russian nation and 20 percent could not understand the very idea of nation. Only 37 percent of respondents felt like part of the nation.⁸ Hence, in order to embrace a Western consensus matrix, Russia would first need to adopt a civic identity based on the ideas of individual liberty and a bourgeois nation-state. Russia would next need to embrace modernity's framework of capitalism and liberal base consensus, and then enter the era of postmo-

ernity, with its global civil society and the gradual fading of national identity.

Finally, Russia's two major national catastrophes of the twentieth century exacerbate paradigmatic differences. The first state collapse followed Russia's entry to World War I, which resulted in the fall of the monarchy, disintegration of the empire, and subsequent (Bolshevik) October Revolution. The second major social catastrophe followed the fall of the Soviet Union. The demise of the erstwhile Soviet Empire completed the unfinished disintegration of the Russian Empire, the remains of which the Communists managed to reassemble in the course of the civil war of 1918 to 1921. These two major events contributed to the significant dealignment of Russian and Soviet societies, involving transformations of all societal cleavages, as well as the reconsideration of all preexisting cultural codes and behavioral patterns. Twice in the twentieth century Russia experienced the breakdown of historic myths, demoralization of society, decline in interpersonal and institutional trust, and a significant drop in civic responsibility. The liberal paradigm presided over the March 1917 Romanov abdication, the February Revolution of 1917, and the 1991 disintegration of the USSR.

It has now become clear that Russia's idiosyncratic relationship with modernity and the particularities of its twentieth-century history make the politics of paradigmatic pluralism almost inevitable. This predicament determines the nature of Russia's political discourse, both the hegemonic and the alternative. It is strategically important that Russia's elite allow a dialogue among the alternative discourses, while subtly marginalizing those that lie outside the state-endorsed dominant discourse. Moreover, the state does not try to reach a consensus between liberals and traditionalists, and thus fully embraces the existing divide within society. Various ideological alternatives appear on television, radio, and

in print. Radical liberals, foreign journalists, and advocates of 1990s-style policy are daily participants in Russia's main political talk shows. Yet pro-state conservatives usually outnumber and dominate them.

Pro-Western liberal ideas therefore appear peripheral. They act as a reminder that radical alternatives are available and that such alternatives could pose a threat to the extant stability. Hence, high public awareness of the neoliberal paradigm precludes it from being novel to the Russian public. Moreover, despite the paradigmatic pluralism, the 2000s saw the consolidation of a hegemonic discourse through a significant shift toward a political center. Having experienced the state collapse and the obliteration of preexisting values during the 1990s, contemporary Russians are reluctant to embark on radical vicissitudes. They lean toward socioeconomic stability at the expense of radical and, in particular, pro-Western liberal alternatives. This brings us to the nature of Russia's hegemonic discourse.

One cardinal feature of this discourse, and a consequence of the immediate post-Soviet experience, is that it remains open to debate with its counterhegemonic competitors. With the fall of the USSR, a peculiar kaleidoscope of radically different ideas ranging from overtly pro-Western, Euro-Atlantic, socialist, liberal, neoliberal, liberal nationalist, civic nationalist, Stalinist, nostalgically Soviet, and even fascist emerged in Russia to fill the void of erstwhile Soviet uniformity. Economic depression, along with a wealth of opportunities for rapid enrichment, has become a milieu in which such styles, ideologies, and movements develop. The need to survive this radically pluralistic environment from both economic and sociopolitical perspectives taught Russians to be tolerant of paradigmatic differences. Hence, post-Soviet Russians emerged from the collapse of the

USSR as pluralistic liberals who welcomed radically different alternatives.

Interestingly, intolerance of beliefs and political radicalism is often a feature of pro-Western radical liberal circles whose views unfortunately do not fit well with the inclinations of the majority. This often results in representatives of the liberal wing blaming ordinary people for self-imposed servility, a lack of civic consciousness, an absence of respect for liberal principles, and disdain for the countries that promote such values.⁹ It is also clear that the tactics of radicalizing the discourse impede the chances of a liberal project in Russia. Critics and sympathizers of the liberal cause often appeal to liberal public figures by asking them to reconsider their discursive practices. They implore them to abandon their Russophobia (or anthropobia) that manifests in shocking journalistic expressions, as well as political profanations, aiming to strike at the heart of Russia's hegemonic discourse.

These voices – in particular Sergei Kurginyan, Aleksandr Prokhanov, and Zakhar Prilepin – advise liberals to center themselves on Russia, turn to defending the country's interests internationally, and abandon the unconditional support of global oligarchy. These critics argue that the failure of the liberal project and de-Sovietization of Russia occurred not because of the nature of the Soviet Union, but because it became clear that alternative policies involved the full-scale deconstruction of Russian society in the interests of Western powers.¹⁰ Simultaneously, critics invoke liberals to develop a Russia-centered liberal epistemology that could challenge the extant political system from all directions without engaging in the destructive practice of national self-denial.

Many moderate liberals accept the need to play down their discourse and narrow disagreements with traditionalists. Russia's great Westernist philosopher, Aleksandr

Herzen, once emphasized his affinity with traditionalist Slavophiles: “Like Janus, or a two-headed eagle, we looked in opposite directions, but one heart beats in our breasts.”¹¹ But today, political scientist Sergei Stankevich regrets, “we have different hearts. It is our task to find ways in which we can rekindle our dialogue in a similar fashion to the dialogue between Westerners and Slavophiles in the 19th century.”¹²

Contemporary hegemonic discourse focuses on three notions: 1) the idea of state sovereignty; 2) the ideology of the multipolar world; and 3) the idea of national reconciliation. The multipolar world ideology bears the concept of state sovereignty at its heart. Hence, I will focus on the notion of state sovereignty and combine these points.

Over the past decade, the concept of state sovereignty, seen by the capacity for political development free from external influence, has become the principal unifying factor in Russia. There this idea, much in the classical republican and neo-Roman fashion, invokes civic solidarity, patriotic awareness, and a sense of belonging. Hence, the notions of external freedom and territorial integrity are unconditional “red lines” that Russia’s hegemonic discourse is unwilling to relinquish. Russian political scientist Vyacheslav Nikonov argues that only two countries in Europe – Russia and England – enjoy over five hundred years of sovereign independent history.¹³ The red lines have been drawn largely by Russia’s successful maintenance of its territory and ability to shape its future foreign and domestic policy over such a long period. Painful memories of occasional state collapses further consolidate the desire for sovereignty. Proponents of sovereignty use these examples to argue that grassroots movements would invariably emerge to restore national control over the state just as it happened during the Times

of Trouble – the period between the end of the Rurik Dynasty in 1598 and the start of the Romanov Dynasty in 1613 – and at the end of the Russian Civil War.¹⁴

Further, the international atmosphere created by the fall of the USSR also raised debates about state sovereignty. With the collapse, the United States took steps that had the potential to shift the international relations structure toward unipolarity. These have included various “humanitarian interventions,” “regime changes,” and other initiatives used to consolidate America’s global leadership. And while global institutional structures remained unchanged, these processes worried Russia’s intellectuals and policy-makers. They pondered metaphysical issues invoking questions over international ethics and the direction in which the contemporary world order should evolve.

Russia’s hegemonic discourse advocates a multiplicity of the world’s political forms and states’ entitlement to independent development. These ideas oppose the Euro-Atlantic universalist logic of globalist democratization. Russia’s minister of foreign affairs, Sergei Lavrov, argues that the ability of states to pursue political cultural distinctness remains the cornerstone of the world’s lasting peace. In his September 2015 speech to the Russian State Duma, he advocated creating a more just, polycentric, and stable world order. He claimed that imposing a particular developmental recipe on weaker countries would increase chaos and be met with resistance by many states.¹⁵ Sergei Kurginyan concurs, arguing that many developing countries undergo the phase of *incipient modernity* (*dogonyayushchii modern*), which the postmodern West, through its foreign-policy actions, dismantles. With this in mind, desovereignization of formerly secular sovereign states in the Middle East triggers the desovereignization dynamic worldwide. This has the potential to result in a new

“global disorder” that suits contemporary global capital.¹⁶

A search for national reconciliation is another cornerstone of the hegemonic discourse. It may become tempting to claim that the search for reconciliation would immediately imply a search for a “base consensus” and the desire to dispense with the politics of paradigmatic pluralism. While the construction of a base consensus could significantly overlap with the search for reconciliation, they still represent two qualitatively distinct categories. Reconciliation occurs when the two warring parties accept the existing divide and move forward on that assumption, meanwhile forgiving each other for transgressions that took place in the fight for prevalence. This does not involve forming consensus in ideological terms, which would invariably involve the prevalence of one ideological paradigm at the expense of another. Reconciliation is merely admitting that both sides have different opinions and that there are some issues that nevertheless unite them and help them move forward. Hence, they remain different albeit united on some consolidating grounds.

Those grounds need not be ideological. Proponents of reconciliation consciously avoid the push toward forming an ideological base consensus; neither side should dominate. In his November 4, 2015, speech to the Congress of Russia's Compatriots, Vladimir Putin insisted that the proposed reconciliation should not equate to uniformity in views, but rest on spiritual unity and a sense of belonging to one country united by common history and language. Indeed, history and attachment to a common homeland make people equal participants of the past glories of the nation and members of the same territorial community. There is always an appeal to civic loyalty and national unity in lieu of more divisive

ideas such as language, ethnicity, religion, or the ideological treatment of particular elements of political structures.¹⁷

Hence, intellectuals and the general public have formed a clear plan for reconciliation organized around the following points: First, they concur with an idea that contemporary Russia is a direct inheritor of the Soviet Union and that most achievements in the post-Soviet period stem from Soviet times. While the imperial and medieval eras made indispensable contributions to the development of the Russian state, it was the Soviet period that had a decisive impact on how contemporary Russia looks today. Achievements in science, technology, industry, medicine, and health care, the idea of victory in the Great Patriotic War – all derive from the USSR. As does Russia's current social divide between the wealthy and poor, a result of the privatization of Soviet industrial assets. The Soviet period also shapes contemporary Russian anthropology and Russia's collective unconscious. With the quest for consumption and a simultaneous idealistic vision of reality, Russians inherited most of their behavioral patterns from Soviet times.¹⁸

Second, the public must learn of the tragedies of the formative period of the Soviet state. This would require the publication of the real number of victims from the purges of 1921 to 1954. Speculation over the number of victims is unacceptable for both ethical and political reasons. This part of Russia's history must be accepted as a great tragedy and every person who suffered injustice must be vindicated. Nevertheless, society must not focus solely on tragic episodes but also admit positive aspects of the Soviet experience. Russian journalist Maksim Shevchenko has claimed:

The idiosyncrasy of the Russian Revolution lies in the fact that it socially elevated masses of Russian people who were previously considered mere building material for the good

life of the few. This process encompassed almost everything: purges of innocent victims as well as great victories and genuine sacrifices of the Soviet people. One historical period contained polar phenomena: monstrous bureaucracy resting on the dominance of the Communist party and the possibility of creating a truly socialist people's governance. The Russian revolution gave people the chance to construct a qualitatively different idea of equality, and our contemporary principles and ethics are direct inheritors of those ideals.¹⁹

Third, the Russian experience of revolution and industrialization must be compared with similar experiences of revolution, civil war, and industrialization in other states. The French Revolution and Reign of Terror usually figure as benchmarks. Russian scholars and commentators, including Sergei Kurginyan, Vitalii Tret'yakov, Natal'ya Narochnitskaya, and Pyotr Tolstoy, have argued that, despite tragic episodes, French people reconciled with the history of their revolution, ensuing terror, and the Napoleonic wars. These intellectuals also call for an examination of the history of revolution and civil war in China, Spain, and the United States. They conclude that civil wars, conservative reactions, and even terrors follow most revolutions and radical transformations worldwide.

This three-point reconciliation strategy reflects a deeply held suspicion that invalidating the Soviet experience could invalidate Russia's contemporary order and lead to the new redistribution of power and property or the territorial disintegration of the state. Many dominant-discourse thinkers argue that de-Sovietization would undo nearly a hundred years of the country's history and lead to the assumption that Russians are not capable of drafting the main structural, cultural, and ideological dimensions of their future. Hence, finding the right balance between admit-

ting to the wrongs of the Soviet period and acknowledging its rights becomes paramount. Russian media carefully treads that line. On the one hand, it denounces Soviet purges in almost every political analysis program. On the other hand, it recognizes Soviet achievements in the spheres of science, medicine, education, and ideological influence on the outside world. More important, the increase in the Soviet component of the discourse does not undermine its westernization. Aleksandr Zinovyev, the late Russian philosopher and émigré of the Soviet era, observed this phenomenon as early as 2000. He argued that a country like Russia would require a strong state with an almost Soviet-like bureaucracy to deal successfully with its challenges. At the same time, the construction of this new state bureaucracy would go hand in hand with increased westernization.²⁰

Yet this westernization is of a particular kind. The postmodern ideological package promoted by Western powers mostly generates skepticism among ordinary Russians. Looking at the West, Russians lament the growing domination of global oligarchy, "humanitarian" interventions leading to socioeconomic catastrophes, the growing lack of tolerance toward alternative opinions dressed in political correctness, and the substitution of real debate with media simulacra. In this light, Maria Zakharova, the spokeswoman for the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, claims that Russia does not reject but upholds Western values. Thus, in a contemporary world, Russians perceive that their nation has become the true defender of the ideals that erstwhile defined the period of Western liberal modernity.²¹

The final question concerns the stability of the extant balance between the moderate statist and liberal paradigms. How durable is their symbiotic coexistence and what could a legitimacy crisis, induced by either seri-

ous economic decline or a political succession, lead to? Here we should consider an outcome in which a revanchist and radical-chauvinist force dominates the scene. Though unlikely now, such a scenario was not a distant possibility throughout the past decade. Indeed, a more nuanced approach to Russia's ideological landscape would allow the exploration of a third, albeit minor, option. This discursive paradigm is often referred to as "political nationalism" or the "third force."²² It is focused on a radical agenda of repudiating external and internal enemies and advancing a project of "greater Russia." This force comprises diverging trends with wide-ranging ideological positions. Yet its representatives usually acknowledge Russia's discursive division of liberals and statist patriots and blame the Kremlin for being indecisive in repudiating the liberals.

They invoke the fate of Viktor Yanukovich, ex-president of Ukraine, who simultaneously pursued European-integration and politicoeconomic ties with Russia. This inconsistency, advocates of the third paradigm argue, ultimately led to Yanukovich's demise, and the Kremlin's inconsistency toward domestic liberals and the West could result in Russia's own liberal *maidan* revolution.²³ These ideologists claim that the Kremlin must steer toward a "patriotic" trajectory and abandon futile attempts to reach a dialogic balance with the liberals.²⁴ It is unacceptable, they claim, both that the statist's discourse contains substantial chunks of liberalism and that Russia's main media channels and state socioeconomic policies advance these positions. Russia, in their view, must adopt a steady line toward the national revival and cease "appeasing" the West by openly declaring it as an existential enemy rather than a dialogical partner.

Initially, such a radical approach may seem marginal. However, many observers claim that large segments of Russia's

financial, political, and special services elite – who come across as liberal or conservative in public – had shared in this ideology in private, at least until the Crimean and Donbas events.²⁵ In the aftermath of the 2005 Ukrainian Orange Revolution, it does not come as a surprise that the Kremlin viewed the nationalists as a tactical ally that could stabilize the extant political system and defend it from external interference. Therefore, this third cohort is substantial, uniting members of patriotic, liberal, monarchical, and even fascist opposition. As a political force, nationalists divided into two separate categories. The first group expected the restoration of the Russian Empire and advocated territorial expansion. The second wished for the creation of an ethnic Russian state and envisaged sacrificing some of Russia's ethnic territories in order to see this goal through.

However, this once-promising third force, buttressed by the silent support of financial elites and special services, gradually began losing its discursive niche. Some analysts claim that by 2016, nationalists had become so marginalized and fragmented that they could not meaningfully discuss participation in the forthcoming parliamentary or regional elections.²⁶ The emerging rift with the Kremlin, disagreements with the liberals, and the Crimean crisis all helped alter the discursive scene in Russia. As for the Kremlin, it subsequently sensed the danger associated with flirting with nationalists. The apparent failure of nationalists to protest against the West and their preoccupation with internal immigration indicated that, instead of protecting Russia's political regime from Western interference, this radical force had the potential to turn its guns against the Kremlin itself. The first signs of rupture between the Kremlin and nationalists took place in 2007 – 2008, when the state adopted a range of punitive measures against ethnic hatred and extremism. The

immigration process was systematized, the judicial review for racial crimes was revised, and the dissemination of xenophobic literature was restricted. Political nationalists then fully emerged as a radical stronghold of the nonsystemic opposition to the Kremlin.

Nationalists still had a chance to unite with radical liberals and form a single front against the statist. This would have granted them an opportunity to survive as a meaningful discursive paradigm. It does not come as a surprise that during the December 2011 protests, liberals worked with nationalists and formed a single anti-Kremlin front. The nationalist cohort hoped to capitalize on the shortcomings of the Kremlin's policies in the international arena as well as on the state's inability to tackle corruption and the economic crisis. Nationalists promoted two broad agendas that the liberal cohort has generally approved. The first agenda focused on the relationship between Central Russia and the North Caucasus and advanced the "Stop feeding the Caucasus" campaign, which sought to end Russian federal government spending on the region. The second agenda item was the general anti-immigration campaign geared toward the introduction of the visa regime with the Central Asian republics.

However, the events in Crimea and Donbas turned the tables radically, virtually obliterating this third discourse. Many nationalists initially supported the 2014 Maidan Revolution, attracted by the fact that their Ukrainian equals played a decisive role in the change of the Ukrainian political regime. Yet they quickly faced disappointment, given that the Ukrainian Revolution took on an anti-Russian ideological coloring.²⁷ The subsequent outbreak of the bloody conflict in Donbas led these nationalists to adopt a radically pro-Russian agenda, arguing in favor of Russia's direct military involvement in rescuing the "Russian world" in eastern Ukraine. This

policy, however, resulted in further disappointment, for the mobilization potential of Russian nationalists was minimal and they were not able to attract a substantial number of volunteers who would agree to take up arms for this cause.²⁸ This was mainly linked to the fact that Russia's general public was not in favor of the country's direct military involvement in the conflict and wished only to support the Russian population in eastern Ukraine rhetorically. This led to a significant narrowing of the discursive niche in which nationalists could engage.

Further, the political field previously occupied by the revanchist ideologists has been gradually taken over by moderate liberals and statist. Following the failure of the December 2011 protests, moderate liberals began appealing to values with social currency, praising patriotism, proclaiming their "love of the motherland," and supporting development of the welfare state. This trend deepened in the wake of events in Crimea. The overwhelming majority of Russians backed the Kremlin and by doing so squeezed the liberal support base. This partly made the liberals accept the advice of their statist opponents to soften their stance toward the "people." The statist also intensified their patriotic rhetoric, seeing it as a useful tactical instrument in the struggle for the dominant discourse. Russian political scientist Sergei Karaganov has argued that contemporary Russia remained a non-ideological state, thus adhering to our initial proposition of paradigmatic pluralism. Yet Russia obtained, Karaganov continued, the two consolidating ideas of sovereignty and defense, which united under the overarching notion of "patriotism."²⁹ This deprived nationalists of their habitual playground.

The fragmentation and weakness of the potential third force was demonstrated by its proponents' most recent attempt to set aside internal ideological differences and

unite into a single group. The January 25 Committee, established in 2016, represents a union of extremely diverse and largely incompatible forces. It includes monarchists led by Igor Strelkov, radical national democrats represented by Konstantin Krylov, National Bolsheviks led by Eduard Limonov, ultra-nationalist fascists such as Yegor Prosvirnin, and oppositionist former security service officers such as Anatolii Nesmiyan. This ideologically diverse group supports irredentist claims of ethnic Russians in the post-Soviet space and the idea of establishing an ethnic Russian state based on the principles of justice, legality, and equality.

Members of the Committee are driven by their mutual detest of liberalism and the West and the search for internal enemies within the Russian state apparatus. The slide of Russia's third discourse, from a formerly promising political force to a marginalized group of intellectuals with dubious goals, is perhaps unfortunate for those who wished to create a sustainable political paradigm within this field and move it in a moderate direction. Yet their current political weakness suggests that the arrival of representatives of this paradigm in the highest echelons of Russia's power is unlikely, even within the conditions of economic and political crisis.

A radical change that could fundamentally alter the political situation in Russia seems an unlikely prospect. Extraordinary as it may seem, at this point, Russia has run out of revolutionaries. First, contemporary Russia functions within the conditions of a paradigmatic pluralism that makes a vast number of options readily available. The presence of different paradigms in the mass media and public debate precludes the situation, in which a system-deposing paradigm could arrive unexpectedly, appearing more just and novel, and radically changing the hegemonic discourse. Despite the wealth of different para-

digms, the state-centered conservative episteme won the hegemonic discourse; the majority of Russia's population and her intellectuals support it. The main stabilizing feature of this discourse is that it does not seek ideological uniformity and welcomes various alternatives within the debate on domestic politics. It has little appeal to values and seeks national reconciliation. This discourse is also foreign-policy centered and, for that reason, has an overall consolidating effect. In addition, it is more open to debate than its liberal counterpart, which is often intolerant of nonliberal (but not illiberal) alternatives. Indeed, pro-Western liberals subconsciously feel that their paradigm may prevail only through the full and radical recasting of public consciousness that cannot take place overnight or even within a short period.

To realign the system fundamentally, one would need to dispense with the politics of paradigmatic pluralism and instill a new consensus, which could only be achieved via authoritarian means and would go against the grain of popular wishes. Considering the decisive liberal turn, those who anticipate that a changing regime in Russia would bear fruit and move the country in the direction of full integration into the Euro-Atlantic community overlook the fact that such a change could only be temporary. For this development to take full effect and result in a fundamental change, Russia would need the necessary conditions to form the liberal base consensus and move away from the politics of paradigmatic pluralism. This can only take place gradually through progressive accumulation of liberal capitalist behavioral patterns, a few generations of steady development in the modernist fashion, and the construction of the main dimensions of Russia's civic nation. The fifteen-year phase pondered in this volume thus does not allow sufficient time for a fundamental change of this magnitude.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ In philosophical terms, such paradigms of the “good life” can be seen through the Aristotelian lenses of spiritual, virtuous, and prudent politics that can ensure the welfare and flourishing of humans.
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- ³ John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).
- ⁴ John Gray, *Berlin* (London: Fontana Press, 1995); and Bernard Williams, *In the Beginning was the Deed: Realism and Moralism in the Political Argument* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005).
- ⁵ Reinhard Bendix, *Embattled Reason: Essays on Social Knowledge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 352.
- ⁶ Aleksandr Dugin, “Rossiiskaya identichnost’ v sovremennom mire,” lecture at the Ural Polytechnic University, 2012.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*
- ⁸ *Otkrytaya Studiya with Nika Strizhak*, “Kto my: Russkiye ili Rossiyane?” March 21, 2012, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CmlspuJ5AU8> (accessed January 17, 2017).
- ⁹ Vadim Slutskii, “Proryv gnoinika,” *Ekho Moskvyy*, March 6, 2014, <http://echo.msk.ru/blog/vadimslutsky/1273246-echo/>.
- ¹⁰ Paul Rodkin, “Pochemu desovetizatsiya dala obratnyi effekt,” *RIA Novosti*, May 21, 2015, http://ria.ru/zinoviev_club/20150521/1065729530.html.
- ¹¹ Bendix, *Embattled Reason*, 352.
- ¹² *Duel with Vladimir Solovyov*, “Kurginyan vs Nadezhdin,” available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QE1Na64gQ8U> (accessed November 17, 2015).
- ¹³ *Pravo Znat!* “Vyacheslav Nikonov,” November 7, 2015, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4j64b91T4ss> (accessed November 12, 2015).
- ¹⁴ *Duel with Vladimir Solovyov*, “Kurginyan vs Nadezhdin.”
- ¹⁵ “Vystupleniye Lavrova v Gosdume,” <https://russian.rt.com/article/123511>, October 14, 2015.
- ¹⁶ *Spetsial’nyi korrespondent*, September 29, 2015, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l615cZD4Eyw> (accessed January 3, 2017); and “Kurginyan: SShA – Novyi Karfagen, ustraivayushchii khaos po vsemu miru,” *Regnum*, September 30, 2015, <http://regnum.ru/news/polit/1982223.html>.
- ¹⁷ Bendix, *Embattled Reason*, 353.
- ¹⁸ *Tochka Zreniya*, “Velikii Oktyabr’ i sovremennost’,” November 7, 2015, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IXLLBYqMvRM> (accessed January 3, 2017).
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*
- ²⁰ Rodkin, “Pochemu desovetizatsiya dala obratnyi effekt.” A number of Russian intellectuals note that, from their perspective, Vladimir Putin and his elite are pro-Western, with Sergei Kurginyan branding Putin as a liberal statesman.
- ²¹ *Spetsial’nyi korrespondent*, September 29, 2015.
- ²² Valery Solovei, “Bol’ gnev i nenavist’. Tri uroka russkim natsionalistam iz ukrainskogo krizisa,” *Slon*, March 21, 2016, <https://slon.ru/posts/65611>.
- ²³ Igor Strelkov, “Dlya spaseniya Rossii my sozdayom tretyu silu,” *Dvizheniye Novorossiya*, January 31, 2016, <http://novorossia.pro/strelkov/1552-igor-strelkov-dlya-spaseniya-rossii-my-sozdaem-tretyu-silu.html>; and Igor Strelkov, “My protivostoim liberal’nomu revanshu,” *Kolokol Rossii*,

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- ²⁴ Eduard Limonov, "Prizrak, brodivshii po Rossii materializovalsya," *Svobodnaya pressa*, February 4, 2016, available at <http://svpressa.ru/politic/article/141645/> (accessed January 16, 2017).
- ²⁵ Solovei, "Bol', gnev i nenavist'"; and *Sut igr*, "Khvatit kormit' Kavkaz: Sergei Kurginyan ob etoi idee," 2011, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tUfBSi86Xa4> (accessed April 1, 2016).
- ²⁶ Solovei, "Bol', gnev i nenavist'."
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- ²⁹ Sergei Karaganov, "Mir nakhoditsya v predvoyennom sostoyanii," *Rossiia v global'noi politike*, February 17, 2016, <http://www.globalaffairs.ru/pubcol/Mir-nakhoditsya-v-predvoennom-sostoyanii-17999>.

Is Nationalism a Force for Change in Russia?

Marlene Laruelle

Abstract: This essay defines three categories of Russian nationalist actors: nonstate actors, whose agenda is anti-Putin; parastate actors, who have their own ideological niche, not always in tune with the presidential administration's narrative, but who operate under the state umbrella; and state actors, in particular, the presidential administration. In the future, the Russian ethnonationalism embodied by nonstate actors is the main trend that could pose a serious threat to the regime. However, the Kremlin is not "frozen" in terms of ideology, and its flexibility allows it to adapt to evolving situations. One of the most plausible scenarios is the rise of a figure inside the establishment who would be able to prevent the polarization of Russian nationalism into an antiregime narrative and could co-opt some of its slogans and leaders, in order to gradually channel the official narrative toward a more state-controlled nationalism.

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Is nationalism a force for change in Russia? If nationalism is an ideology supporting the overlap of "nation" and "state," then nationalists are those who push for a political agenda through which the nation and the state are intrinsically assimilated into each other. They may, for example, call for the state to grow to include territories that they consider as belonging to the nation, or separate from territories they see as alien to it. In the Russian case, the nation is not necessarily defined by a restrictive Russian (*russskii*) "ethnicity," but by a larger vision fed by the country's imperial past. I exclude from nationalism Russia's quest for great power, which I consider to belong to another repertoire, that of legitimizing the country's actions on the international scene and its branding.

There are myriad actors promoting a nationalist agenda in Russia. In this essay, I distinguish three main categories of actors: *nonstate actors*, whose agenda is anti-Putin and who call for a national revolution to defend the Russian nation against the current regime; *parastate actors*, who have their own ideological

niche, not always in tune with the presidential administration's narrative, but who operate under the state umbrella, in the gray zone of the Kremlin's "ecosystem" of interest groups, lobbies, and personal connections; and *state actors*, in particular, the presidential administration. This dissociation is critical in order to advance a comprehensive assessment of what we mean by Russian nationalism and to explore its potential for being a force for change in Russia in the next ten to fifteen years.

Nationalisms are diverse, especially in a country like Russia. With the exception of a short period between the *perestroika* years and the mid-1990s, nationalism among non-Russian ethnic groups (around 21 percent of the country's population was identified as non-ethnically Russian in the 2010 census) has been limited.¹ In today's Russia, non-Russian nationalisms do not emerge as a potential force for change for several reasons.

First, the main secessionist region of the country, the North Caucasus, has changed profoundly since the First Chechen War (1994–1996). Social resentment is now expressed through Islamism and no longer through postcolonial calls for partition and independence. Second, the "sovereignty parade" of the years of the Soviet collapse seems to belong to the past, even if one could envision its renewal in the event of a new collapse of central authority in Moscow. If there are drivers that could push toward fragmentation of Russia's territorial unity, they are more likely to be shaped by economic realities – for instance, by the Far East's economic interaction with China, South Korea, and Japan – rather than by ethnic issues.² In the event of a collapse of central authority in Moscow, economic and political decentralization would not necessarily lead to territorial partition.³

Nationalism championed by ethnic Russians would potentially be more powerful

than the nationalist sentiments of non-ethnic Russians. But what do we understand by the term *Russian nationalism*? It is a blurry yet loaded notion. Conventionally, scholarly works devoted to Russian nationalism have tried to dissociate the plural nature of the phenomenon by classifying its contents into two broad categories: imperial nationalism and ethnic nationalism.⁴ I find this line of division to be artificial and not heuristic. The main ideologists of Russian nationalism belong to both categories: Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, often seen as a proponent of an imperial Russia, has been known for making repeated racist statements about the need to protect the Russian nation from external ethnic influences. Aleksandr Dugin, prolific theoretician of neo-Eurasianism, the quintessence of imperial Russia, is also famous for introducing in Russia fascist theories about Aryan races and their "spiritual fight" against Jews. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, champion of an ethnic Russia that would avoid any new imperial temptation, can be defined as "imperialist" from a Ukrainian or a Kazakh point of view, since he called for all territories populated by Eastern Slavs to join Russia. Even Vladimir Putin's statement about Russia as a divided nation, used to justify Russia's annexation of Crimea in March 2014, aroused debates among scholars about whether it should be interpreted as a sign of ethnonationalism or of imperialism.⁵

In order to avoid the pitfall of over-focusing on ideology, I propose to look at Russian nationalism not through its contents, but through its actors. Historically, the study of Russian nationalism has been part of the field of political philosophy, with the focus on ideas and concepts, their intellectual legacies and logical order. We are thus still lacking a sociology of intellectual life in Russia and an "ecology" of the places of its production: think tanks,

media, universities, the Academy of Sciences, and so forth. Ideologies are often fuzzy and shifting, and say nothing about the personal strategies, institutional status, and networks of their producers and funders. Typologies by ideological content tend to remain sterile if they are not combined with a more sociological approach to the strategy used by each group to speak to its constituency and to try to impact the political or cultural arena.

A more sociological approach may thus help us apprehend the mobilization potential of nationalism as a force for change in contemporary Russia. Accordingly, nationalism should be understood as both bottom-up and top-down: it is not a unidirectional message, but one whose function is to create social consensus between elites and the population, the state and the society. Even when propagated by state structures, nationalism is envisioned as capturing the general mindset or *zeitgeist* of the population, which, to use Weberian terms, consents to this ideological domination.

The Russian nationalists who are easiest to identify are nonstate actors, whose actions are noticeable through two main mediums: the Internet and social media on one side, and street violence on the other. Among nonstate actors, there are three main groups with different ideological backgrounds.

The first on the scene were the National Bolsheviks led by Eduard Limonov – the so-called *Limonovtsy* – who created a vivid youth counterculture around music, aesthetics, dress codes, and street violence targeting official institutions, such as police headquarters and judicial administrations. They emerged in 1993 – 1994 and have been able to survive red tape and political repression to the present day; they still shape a large part of Russia's youth subcultures and protest mindset.⁶ The second group is made up of, broadly speaking, skinheads.

Russia led Europe in the mid-2000s with about fifty thousand skinheads and other neo-Nazi groupuscules. Their numbers declined sharply in the second half of the 2000s, once the authorities, particularly in Moscow and the Moscow region, realized that they might pose a danger not only to migrants and other groups identified as their enemy, but to state structures as well. Skinheads were particularly influential and visible at the time of Andrei Belov's Movement Against Illegal Immigration (DPNI), which was disbanded in 2011. Attempts to unify them under one political umbrella have been numerous, but have always failed, the most structured example being the Russkie movement.⁷ The third group is made up of national democrats: a rather small cluster that became very visible during the 2011 – 2012 anti-Putin protests,⁸ then faded to some extent during the Ukrainian crisis, for reasons I will explain below, but is probably destined to become a rising element on the nationalist scene.

These three groups are shaped by one ideological principle: they are all viscerally anti-Putin and believe that the current Russian state is antinational and does not defend the interests of the Russian nation. They all call for a national revolution to overthrow the current elite and establish a new, genuinely national regime. This revolutionary feature sharply distinguishes them from actors operating under the state umbrella and who do not favor a change of regime.

These three groups share a relatively similar sociological background: their members are young people, from teenagers to young adults, who are more attracted by a way of life at the margins of the society and by a strong feeling of community and friendship than by an ideological message.⁹ Thus, members of one group can easily shift to another: the bridges between them are more important than their ideological differences might suggest. At the organizational level,

these movements are relatively similar: weak institutionalization, regular reconfiguration and recreation of new structures, and a cult of personality of the leader, often steeped in paramilitary culture (with some exceptions). The three groups also share an ambiguous relationship to state structures: they proclaim their hostility to the current leadership, but they have “patrons” inside the system, mostly in the security services or among some MPs, who help them avoid or at least limit judicial difficulties. The national democrats can be partly dissociated from the two other groups on the grounds that they also have more intellectual leaders, such as Konstantin Krylov at the journal *Voprosy natsionalizma* or Yegor Prosvirnin with the website *Sputnik i pogrom*. Obviously, the closeness of anticorruption lawyer and prominent political activist Aleksei Navalny with the national democrats, very noticeable during the anti-Putin protests but diminished today, contributed to their greater visibility, popular support, and modest respectability.¹⁰

Beyond their detestation for the Putin regime, the three groups are deeply divided ideologically. The National Bolsheviks combine Russian nationalism with leftist references to Bolshevism and anarchism, and have been influenced by Western European punk and postpunk culture. They condemn xenophobia and only legitimize violence against state structures and skinhead groups. Skinheads and other neo-Nazi groups position themselves on the other side of the political spectrum: they invoke White Power theories, claim links with Western European and U.S. counterparts, and focus their violence not against state structures, but against anyone identified as alien to the Russian nation: internal migrants, external migrants, Roma, Jews, antifascist groups, and homosexuals.

National democrats see themselves as opposing both National Bolsheviks and skinheads because they see the future of

Russia as that of a European nation-state, being both pro-Western in geopolitical terms and pro-democracy in political terms. On that basis, they reject the Bolshevism and anti-Westernism of the National Bolsheviks and the violence and leadership cult of the skinheads. They consider those two groups to be unacknowledged allies of the Putin regime because they both defend authoritarianism. The nationalism that national democrats claim for themselves is that of European populist movements that are able to work within a democratic environment, along the lines of the French National Front, the Austrian Freedom Party, and the Jobbik party in Hungary.

The three groups have seen their ideological stances challenged during the Ukrainian crisis: they had either to rally with Putin and recognize his annexation of Crimea as an authentic nationalist act, or to condemn him, whether for acting illegally (national democrats) or for failing to go so far as to incorporate Donbas (National Bolsheviks and skinheads). Limonov and some others decided to partly reconcile with Putin. National democrats and skinhead groups saw some of their supporters split between fighting on the Ukrainian side with the local far-right groups, such as Pravyi Sektor and the Azov Battalion, and the majority fighting on the side of the Donbas insurgency.¹¹

A second group, parastate actors, operate in the gray zone of the Kremlin’s administration. They support the regime in many respects and develop under its umbrella, but they also dispose of their own autonomy and ideological niche. In Putin’s system, everything considered a matter of national security or regime security is under his direct or nearly direct supervision, while nonstrategic questions and the everyday management of the state are left to a broader group of patrons, each in charge of supervising a domain, in a somewhat

loose hierarchical pattern. Multiple actors operate in this gray zone, maintaining obvious connections to Putin's inner circle's main figures, but without knowing exactly the degree of support they have, the red lines they dare not cross, and the strength and resources of competing groups. These parastate actors can be divided, schematically, into four main categories.

The Russian Orthodox Church constitutes an actor in itself, with an ideological agenda that resembles the state's, but does not overlap with it. First, the Church has a very diverse structure, and second, it has long-term objectives that contradict some aspects of the regime's short-term agenda. We saw examples of such divergences during the conflict with Georgia in 2008 and then with Ukraine in 2014, when the Moscow Patriarchate openly refused to recognize the rupture and played a paradiplomatic role of maintaining good relations with the republic and its elites and offering underground channels to pursue dialogue. Ideologically, the Church does not support the state narrative of rehabilitation of the Soviet regime and remains very critical of it, conducting many memorial activities that directly contradict the state discourse. The Church also has not had all its legal claims satisfied by the secular power.¹²

The second group of parastate actors consists of all official figures and representatives of the state apparatus, including government members and Duma deputies. Some, like Sergei Naryshkin, former chairman of the Duma, now director of the Foreign Intelligence Service, do not make explicitly nationalist comments, but are still known for protecting nationalist ideologists. Others have built their political legitimacy on an outspoken nationalist position corresponding to a particular ideological niche: for example, Natal'ya Narochnitskaya, who represented political Orthodoxy since the early 1990s, or Sergei

Baburin, who has taken a more pro-Soviet nationalist stance. Vladimir Zhirinovskiy and, to a lesser extent, Gennadii Zyuganov may be included in this category, as symbols of "constructive" or "systemic" opposition to the Kremlin, each with his own ideological and electoral niche and some official status in the Duma. This was also the case, for two decades, of former Moscow mayor Yurii Luzhkov, who played a critical role in developing Russia's policy toward compatriots.¹³

A third group of actors includes the military-industrial complex, the army, and all security services. They promote and fund several activities and associations that can be described as nationalist. At the local level, they fund institutions for the patriotic upbringing of children and teenagers, which have flourished all over Russia in the last decade. These include the paramilitary training structures and, more indirectly, the historical reenactment groups and search brigades (*poiskoviki*) that have come under the media spotlight with the cult of personality of Igor Strelkov, one of the Donbas warlords. At a more ideological level, they fund the Izborskii Club, the nationalist and conservative think tank launched in 2012 that brings together some thirty figures, ranging from Sergei Glaz'ev, a close adviser to the president, to the journalist and writer Aleksandr Prokhanov, and includes famous nationalist publicists such as Aleksandr Dugin, Mikhail Kalashnikov, and Nikolai Starikov.¹⁴ Their political representation is channeled by the Rodina Party, led by Dmitrii Rogozin, deputy prime minister in charge of the military-industrial complex. Rodina works as a launch platform for some radical nationalist themes that the presidential administration does not want to address directly, such as open references to ethnonationalism, nativism, and antimigrant theories, and maintains links with European populist parties and far right groups, includ-

ing some with a definite neofascist background. This third group displays a Russian nationalism that can be defined as “Red,” in the sense that the Soviet legacy plays a critical role in it, although it has been updated with ethnonationalist and religious references.

A fourth, more loosely defined group would include Orthodox businessmen, the two most famous being Vladimir Yakunin, head of Russian Railways until 2015, and Konstantin Malofeyev, who directs the Marshall Capital Partners investment funds.¹⁵ These Orthodox businessmen have personal connections to members of Putin’s inner circle (Yakunin himself is one of them) and regular contacts with the Moscow Patriarchate. They have built their legitimacy on Orthodox charity foundations and played a paradiplomatic role for the Russian state on several occasions, with Yakunin promoting a “dialogue of civilizations” at an annual conference at Rhodes, and Malofeyev defending Russian interests in Western Europe. Both Yakunin’s and Malofeyev’s foundations, respectively named for St. Andrew the First and St. Basil the Great, cultivate European far-right networks and monarchist émigré circles. They were, for instance, instrumental in advancing one of Putin’s pet projects for France: the construction of the largest Orthodox cathedral in Europe, inaugurated in Paris in October 2016. However, there are some indications, though difficult to document, that these Orthodox businessmen do make mistakes and cross the invisible line of what is authorized or not. This was the case when Yakunin was fired in 2015,¹⁶ and when Malofeyev had to pull back from the Donbas insurgency, which he was funding and supporting, after the Kremlin decided the insurgency narrative had gone too far in calling for a national revolution that would threaten Putin himself. In contrast to the third group, this group displays a Russian nationalism that is more White than Red, with implied

references to Tsarist Russia, the Romanovs, and the Church.¹⁷

It is inherently difficult to assess the level of autonomy of these parastate actors. I define them as *nationalist entrepreneurs* in the sense that they have genuine room to maneuver, to determine their ideological preferences, and to cultivate their own networks. But their entrepreneurship remains fragile, and must work in permanent negotiation and tension with competing groups and with the presidential administration itself. Just as the oligarchs’ empire is not secure, remaining dependent on individual loyalty, the ideological empire of these entrepreneurs is also unstable and can be challenged and dismembered.

Is the state itself an actor of Russian nationalism today? Here I identify the president and the presidential administration as the critical institutions embodying the state. Can we identify a Russian nationalism that is promoted by the state? I argue that the state does not produce nationalism per se, but rather an eclectic combination of ideological references, closer to a blurry *Weltanschauung* than to any kind of doctrine.¹⁸ In this kaleidoscope, what can be identified as nationalist is much more marginal than, for instance, what belongs to the repertoire of conservatism.¹⁹

The role of a state leader is to embody the state and the nation, and to provide a grand narrative for it that goes beyond political divisions, economic ups and downs, geopolitical reconfigurations, and intrasociety socioeconomic and cultural gaps. It is thus, by definition, a language tinged with pathos, with different colors and tones depending on the national culture and historical references. In many aspects, Putin’s speeches about the nation – the state-sanctioned grand narratives such as the opening of the Sochi Olympics – are not different in essence from those of many other countries, including Western ones. Emphasizing the

uniqueness of the nation, its great qualities, its contributions to the world, or the continuity of the state beyond political regime changes is not specific to Russia.

What is specific, at least compared with many Western countries, is that the nation's master narrative is intimately articulated and instrumentalized by the regime to secure its legitimacy and to marginalize opponents, real or imagined. Putin's speeches therefore are not a sign of an inherent and essentialist Russian nationalism that is different from those existing in the rest of the world; but the state's use of the national grand narrative it produces in domestic political struggle is a critical characteristic of the regime.

Contrary to what some scholars and experts thought they observed during the Ukrainian crisis, Putin and the presidential administration do not favor Russian ethnonationalism. In fact, they consider it threatening to the country's stability and unity. They exhibit respect for ethnic and religious diversity and cultivate their power vertically, creating relationships with the national republics' elites, which are among the most fervent supporters of the status quo. However, they also have to manage the rise, via parastate actors, of discourses that call for valorizing the status of ethnic Russians, linguistically and culturally. This trend is embedded in the steady level of xenophobia displayed by Russian society, which, though weakened by the Ukrainian crisis, is likely destined to rise again in future years. Moreover, the state-sponsored rehabilitation of the Soviet past, in the hope that a generalized Soviet nostalgia would help to secure the Kremlin's legitimacy, and of Russia's historical continuity between the Tsarist regime and the Soviet one contributed to valuing ethnically Russian elements.

Can we determine whether the language used by the state pertains to a civic or an ethnic nationalism? First, this is

an ideal-type that cannot be found in reality. Second, it is a binary grid of interpretation that overlooks the existence of a third way: state nationalism.

It is difficult for Putin and the presidential administration to promote a civic nationalism in the Western sense of the term, since this would mean focusing on the individual rights of citizens to express their support for but also their dissatisfaction with the regime. Civic nationalism understood as giving rights to citizens to criticize the status quo cannot function in the current Russian political environment. This has to be articulated with the loss of legitimacy of the notion of *rossiiskii* (the Russian state and citizenship), which is still used in all official documents as a legal term, but is slowly losing its meaning in the Russian public space, except for the national minorities, for whom dissociating between civic and ethnic identity makes obvious sense. For the majority population of ethnic Russians, *russskii* (defining Russians ethnically as well as linguistically) tends to replace *rossiiskii*, without implying a change of meaning: both terms are considered as equal and interchangeable, as we see, for instance, with the growing overlap between *russskaya istoriya* and *rossiiskaya istoriya* (both referring to Russian history).

What the regime is pushing for is state nationalism: the symbol, embodiment, and quintessence of the nation is the state. This state "covers up" for the ethnic diversity of the country, protecting minorities while giving preeminence to ethnically Russian cultural elements; it guarantees stability in exchange for political loyalty and deference; and it embodies historical continuity in the face of regime changes and collapses. This state nationalism combines features from the Soviet regime, growing references to the Tsarist past, room for autonomous voices of national minorities, and ideological borrowings from the globalized culture, ranging

from references to the neoliberal managerial world to so-called conservative values. It is an eclectic piece of bricolage.

Putin's aim can be summed up as follows: this vision of the world has to be precise enough to enable the marginalization and delegitimization of those who challenge the regime, but still vague enough that the vast majority of people will subscribe to it. The Kremlin's *Weltanschauung* thus plays the card of the lowest common denominator, cultivates the register of the implicit, the symbolic, the parable, and provides a large repertoire from which each person can draw almost at will. The flexible character of this *Weltanschauung* confirms the fundamentally instrumental character of ideology for the Kremlin: the authorities want to avoid tying themselves to an overly rigid concept that would limit their leeway for action, and to be able to shift from one register to another without having to account for it. Flexibility also has another virtue: it consolidates the popular consensus around the regime, since nearly everyone can identify with the broad directives proposed.

There is a shared foundation to this *Weltanschauung*, a basic minimum for each and every one: namely, to declare oneself a patriot, to show a certain pride in the resurgence of the country since the fall of the USSR, to cultivate a certain Soviet nostalgia, and to criticize the unbridled liberalism of the Yeltsin regime that brought the country to the brink of civil war. Today, those who endorse the pure and simple adoption of the Western model are rejected. Russia's right to oversee its "near abroad" and the reemergence of a "voice of Russia" in the world are considered legitimate. It is good form to defend a cynical vision of the international community as being manipulated by dominant interests masked by great idealistic principles, and to share in a culture of conspiracy. There is support for the idea that Russia cannot permit itself to have a new rev-

olution or shock therapy, and that it has to reform itself in a gradual manner, at its own rhythm.

Atop this foundation, there are several ideologies available for collective consumption, and none of them are given superiority. One can be nostalgic for the Soviet Union or for the Tsarist Empire, and can consider any one of Ivan the Terrible, Nicholas II, Stolypin, Lenin, Stalin, Gagarin, or Putin as the supreme hero of Russian national history. One can desire that Orthodoxy should become the state religion or be glad about the secularity of state institutions and celebrate the country's religious diversity. One can see Russia as the country of ethnic Russians in a permanent struggle for their survival against minorities or celebrate the country's multicultural harmony. One can endorse the most complete isolationism or exalt Russia's commitment to creating a multipolar world with its allies. One can wish for the resurrection of pan-Slavism among Orthodox Slavic "brothers," or of Eurasianism across the Turkic-Mongolian world, or of the "Russian world" embracing the Russian diasporas, or find a model in the Byzantine Empire or in present-day China.

Based on this overview of Russian nationalism and its contemporary actors, can we identify nationalism as a force for change in the Putin regime?

Nonethnic Russian nationalism could reemerge under the label of Islamism, both in the North Caucasus and, more dangerously for Russia, in the Volga-Urals region, as well as among labor migrants. Ethnic Russian nationalism embodied by nonstate actors with an anti-Putin agenda could pose a more serious threat to the status quo. While the National Bolsheviks and neo-Nazi groups are likely to remain marginal, the national-democrat trend reflects the current sociological evolutions of Russian society, attracted by the European

way of life and identifying with Europe as a “white” country facing the threat of “invasion” by migrants and Muslims. This xenophobic nationalism, increasingly linked to what has been defined, for Europe, as “welfare chauvinism” – the view that the welfare state is being exploited by migrants and that only natives should have access to public goods – is mainstream in many European societies. It will probably grow in Russia, too, given the current economic crisis, which tends to intensify symbolic tensions around migrants both domestic and foreign, along with the need for the North Caucasus to be heavily subsidized by the center (thus the “Stop feeding the Caucasus” campaign launched by Navalny and other national-democrat figures). Moreover, Russian public opinion is very much shaped by its reading of Europe’s current refugee crisis, and there is an obvious mirror effect between the way the Russian media depict the European situation and how many Russians characterize a threat they want their own country to avoid.

With the current economic crisis, hopes for a continuous rise of living standards in Russia, especially for the middle classes, are collapsing and could produce a chain reaction, partly delegitimizing Putin’s regime and giving birth to new waves of popular protests. As in 2011–2012, the anti-Putin nationalists would be part of such a grassroots movement and could play a critical role in offering the ideological “glue” necessary to build a coherent anti-Putin discourse: it could link state corruption, ethnic criminality by minorities and migrants, and the endless thirst for public subsidies to the North Caucasus into one story about the regime not giving enough care to the Russian ethnic majority and its needs. It is very improbable that the determinants of such resentment would not include any nationalist claims, one way or another.

However, the state structures – the presidential administration and the parastate

groups – are well aware of the risk of a grassroots antiregime nationalism. They discovered it during the anti-Putin protests in 2011–2012 with the Navalny phenomenon, but some signs were already noticeable a few years before. Since the second half of the 2000s, some antipolice and antistate corruption narratives have emerged during the numerous antimigrant riots in several of Russia’s cities and suburbs. This grassroots nationalism is different from the state- and parastate-sponsored versions in its higher level of xenophobia and ethnonationalism; state and parastate structures are favorable to a more Soviet-style nationalism, believing in the “community of destiny” of all the peoples of Eurasia, and therefore being friendlier to non-ethnically Russian groups.

However, this dissociation works only at a broad, general level. A closer look reveals that the Rodina party positions itself as a bridge between the state and some of these grassroots ethnonationalist movements, especially the skinhead ones. Personal links and supports were solidified in the mid-2000s when Rogozin’s adviser, Andrei Savelyov, a member of the Duma, worked closely with Belov and his DPNI movement, with the hope of bringing the street activism of skinhead groups under Rodina’s control. The new Rodina, which reemerged in 2012, follows the same logic of connecting with radical grassroots groups as well as their European counterparts. There are therefore some sections of the parastate landscape that support a more ethnonationalist agenda and try to disconnect it from its original anti-Putin orientation.

One may also notice, at the parastate level, a growing trend toward a new brand of Russian nationalism that would engineer a consensual vision of the Russian nation and overcome traditional lines of divide. The Izborskii Club works as a laboratory for producing this new unifying narra-

tive that would satisfy both the Sovietophiles and those more nostalgic for the Tsarist Empire and for Orthodoxy. This push to combine a divergent ideological repertoire has been interpreted by some scholars, such as Timothy Snyder and Alexander Motyl, as a sign of fascism in today's Russia. I reject the terminology of fascism to describe the current regime. The Russian establishment is largely nihilistic in terms of values and does not believe in a revolutionary ideology that would dramatically modify the country and create a new mankind; on the contrary, the narrative promoted by the state is one of the status quo, conservatism, and counterrevolution.

The current Russian regime is not frozen in terms of ideology. It cultivated an intense nationalist atmosphere during the Ukrainian crisis only to calm it down later. Since mid-2016, it has reintegrated some liberal figures, such as former finance minister Aleksei Kudrin, who has been asked to draw up a new economic program for the country, and former prime minister and head of Rosatom, Sergei Kiriyenko, now deputy director of Russia's presidential administration, without having to change its doctrinal paradigm. This flexibility allows it to adapt to evolving situations. Russia's demographics will probably play in favor of a rise of ethnonationalism: as in Europe,

the civilizational narrative about a white and Christian Europe having to protect its values from migrants and Islamism could become a dominant frame of discourse for the Russian population, and will have to be accommodated, one way or another, by the political leadership.

How might the probable growth of grassroots nationalism, shaped by xenophobic sentiments, interact with the regime's ambiguous quest for a more definitive ideology in future years? One of the most plausible scenarios is the rise of a figure inside the establishment, such as Dmitrii Rogozin, who would be able to prevent the polarization of Russian nationalism into an antiregime narrative and could co-opt some of its slogans and leaders, in order to gradually channel the official narrative toward a more state-controlled nationalism. The story of Russian nationalism is a story of co-optation by the authorities of topics and leaders, and of mutual interactions with some segments of the population. Whoever succeeds in capturing the mobilization potential of Russian nationalism will, once in power, have to maintain the state as its cornerstone: only a focus on the state avoids a too-radical ethnonationalism that would destroy the unity of the country, and preserves the consensual storyline of Russia as a great power having the right to a say on the future of the world.

ENDNOTES

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The Atlas That has Not Shrugged: Why Russia's Oligarchs are an Unlikely Force for Change

Stanislav Markus

Abstract: There is demand among Russia's oligarchs for systemic change, but not for the rule of law proper. Instead, it is the de facto accountability of political elites and improved relations with the West that the Russian oligarchs want from the Kremlin. However, the oligarchs currently lack the capacity to effect change. Their insufficient leverage vis-à-vis Putin is rooted in their competition for rents, which prevents them from confronting the Kremlin as a united force. In addition to analyzing the lack of systemic pressure for change from the oligarchs, this essay considers the prospects of individual oligarchs who have nevertheless pushed openly for liberalization or tried to effect incremental change. It also draws on comparisons with other countries to chart the political behavior of Russia's business elites in the future.

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Will Russia's super rich change the political status quo? To start, we must recognize the diversity of the Russian business elites, also referred to here as the *oligarchs*. In terms of their proximity to power in today's Russia, three groups stand out: Putin's friends, *silovarchs*, and outsiders.

Putin's personal friends are connected to him through the Ozero dacha cooperative, his hobbies, and his career; this is the most exclusive network. The so-called *silovarchs* (a portmanteau of *siloviki* and oligarchs) are business elites who have leveraged their networks in the FSB (Russian Federal Security Service) or the military to amass extreme personal wealth.¹ While the circles of Putin's friends and the *silovarchs* partly overlap, the *silovarchs* make up a larger group, most of whom are not Putin's friends. An even larger number of the super rich in Russia are outsiders who are not personally connected to Putin, the military, or the FSB. Despite their lack of direct connection to Putin, however, they are still deeply embedded

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in the Russian state; their outsider status is only in reference to the two other groups.

While none of these three groups is monolithic, these categories are useful to highlight the distinct power resources at the oligarchs' disposal. Putin's friends possess the highly prized "access to the body" (*dostup k telu*): the privilege to be heard by – and possibly to sway – the most powerful individual in Russia via informal conversations. Quantitative analysis suggests that being Putin's friend increases an oligarch's wealth significantly, and that this increase is particularly pronounced in times of high oil prices.² Meanwhile, the *silovarchs* have direct access to coercion, either through their current appointments in the power agencies (the police, FSB, military, and other security services), or through their close personal contacts there. More than other groups, the *silovarchs* possess the power of (c)omission: they can implement Putin's orders – or refuse to do so. Since 2003, Putin's friends and the *silovarchs* have steadily risen to control crony sectors of the economy and to hold important positions in the executive branch. These groups are disproportionately represented on corporate boards of the so-called state corporations, and they often own large stakes in firms from sectors in which profitability depends on government favor (including oil, utilities, telecommunications, defense, and construction).³ However, compared with Putin's friends and the *silovarchs*, the influence of outsiders is much more mediated. Some outsiders have held seats in the Duma, while others have lobbied via the Russian Union of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs (RUIE), a business association representing large capital.⁴

Our main issue – the pressure for change – generates two questions. Is there any demand for change on the part of the oligarchs (and if so, in which direction)? And to the extent such demand exists, do

the oligarchs possess sufficient leverage to shift Russia's trajectory?

The lack of oligarchic demand for systemic change toward the rule of law seems a foregone conclusion; "overdetermined" in social scientists' parlance. Let us analyze it in terms of economist Albert Hirschman's conceptualizations of responses to adversity: *exit* (opting out of future transactions), *voice* (communicating a complaint, grievance, or proposal for change), and *loyalty*.⁵

Consider *exit*. Unlike trapped constituencies, such as the uneducated labor force, Russia's business elites have ample possibilities to retire not only their capital, but also themselves, abroad.⁶ Would they risk demanding institutional change at home when they can so easily change their individual circumstances? The data on investor visas show that Russian business elites are increasingly purchasing foreign residence permits.⁷ The top issuers of investor visas for Russian big capital are, in descending order, the United Kingdom, Portugal, the United States, and Austria. In these countries, investor visas lead to permanent residence or citizenship and involve a minimum \$1–3 million investment and, in some cases, proof of job creation. The United States and the United Kingdom, in particular, have experienced a sharp rise in the number of investor visas issued to Russian nationals since 2010.

In terms of loyalty, it pays to support a system that allows one to prosper. For the oligarchs, it may be precisely the lack of rule of law that facilitates the expansion of riches,⁸ such as through a variety of corrupt schemes commonly referred to as "raiding."⁹ To be sure, the environment of constant danger is not for the faint of heart. According to Russian entrepreneur Mikhail Gutseriyev, who left Russia in 2007 after being pressured to sell his company Russneft, "only in London did I realize that . . . back in Russia I had spent 20 per-

cent [of my time] on business, and 80 percent on confrontation [*protivostoyanie*].”¹⁰ And yet, when given a chance in 2010, Gutseryev returned to Russia, suggesting that the risks of “confrontation” may be well worth the rewards. In a 2007 survey of the executives at 396 Russian manufacturing enterprises, 24 percent of the respondents agreed with the statement: “the poor protection of property rights presents not only a threat but also an opportunity for business growth.”¹¹

Finally, even when business elites voice their disagreement with the system, they may press the state for de facto accountability at the firm level via stakeholder alliances with labor, the community, or foreign investors.¹² Such alliances serve as ersatz institutions, allowing business owners to protect their specific firms while avoiding the need for country-level rule of law.

Taken together, the above factors imply that business elites are partly complicit in the persistence of Putinism, their complicity being not only self-fulfilling, but also self-serving. Trends among the Russian billionaires suggest as much.¹³ According to *The Economist*’s crony capitalism index for 2016, billionaire wealth from the crony sectors in Russia is the highest in the world as a percentage of GDP (18 percent), followed by Malaysia (13 percent) and the Philippines (11 percent); it has also risen since 2014 (from 16 percent).¹⁴ Meanwhile, most of the unfortunate Russian billionaires who lost their billionaire status from 2006 to 2015 were not victims of the state, but rather of market conditions or of unscrupulous rivals.¹⁵

Yet to conclude that the oligarchs are content with the status quo is premature. To identify what the oligarchs want, let us move beyond the rule of law as the benchmark.

Russia’s super rich may not want institutionalized accountability writ large (com-

petitive and honest elections, plus legislative and judiciary independence). But there is likely to be demand for de facto elite accountability. From the oligarchs’ perspective, the latter could theoretically be achieved in several ways, including 1) a relatively impartial elite arbiter, such as Soviet-era Brezhnev or Ukraine’s Kuchma before the Orange Revolution; 2) an empowered oligarch-controlled parliament, such as the Ukrainian Rada after the Orange Revolution; 3) Singapore-style authoritarian legality guaranteeing property rights without competitive politics; or 4) powerful associations of large businesses that can check the state, as in Porfirian Mexico.

The demand for such de facto elite accountability, in whatever form, is rising. The conditional nature of oligarchic ownership in Russia has long been acknowledged, the local joke being that there are no billionaires in Russia, only people working as billionaires. Yet the conditionality imposed on the oligarchs by Putin early in his first tenure (“stay out of politics, keep your property”) is becoming unreliable. The contrast between the 2003 case of Mikhail Khodorkovsky and the 2014 case of Vladimir Yevtushenkov, both business oligarch targets of Putin’s Kremlin, is telling. One could easily argue that Khodorkovsky flouted Putin’s “rules” by financing opposition parties and threatening to interfere with Russia’s foreign policy (via plans for Yukos’s pipelines and asset sales to U.S. firms). Yevtushenkov, however, epitomizes oligarchic loyalty to Putin. Yevtushenkov abandoned his patron Yuriy Luzhkov, the ex-mayor of Moscow to whom Yevtushenkov owes his fortune, when Luzhkov’s relations with the Kremlin grew tense in 2010. (Yevtushenkov, it so happens, is married to Luzhkov’s wife’s sister, which must have made for some tense dinner conversations.) But no matter: Yevtushenkov’s oil company, Bashneft, was expropriated, decimating the oligarch’s wealth, despite the fact that

Yevtushenkov's progressive buy-up of Bashneft shares from 2005 to 2009 had been meticulously coordinated with the Kremlin. Igor Sechin, Putin's favored *silovarch* in charge of Rosneft, reportedly masterminded the 2014 attack on Bashneft. The fact that Putin let a loyal oligarch (Yevtushenkov) be devoured by Sechin raises the question of what exactly loyalty to Putin is worth.

Recently, another apolitical oligarch, Sergei Pugachev, has faced the Kremlin's wrath. In exile since 2012, Pugachev faces criminal charges in Russia and claims that the Kremlin had expropriated about \$15 billion of his business assets. Formerly referred to as the "Kremlin's banker," Pugachev was notably a member of Putin's inner circle in the early 2000s.

The irregular application of unwritten rules must make Russia's business elites nervous. A careful observer may note that Putin's group of friends is rather fluid. By 2010, Putin distanced himself from friends of the late 1990s and his first presidency (including Pugachev), reaching out instead to friends from his younger years: that is, from the early to mid-1990s (such as from the Ozero dacha cooperative) and even from childhood (as in the case of Arkadii Rotenberg). Is there a guarantee that Putin will not "unfriend" some of them, too?

The tide of commercial litigation by the Russian business elites in Western jurisdictions suggests that, for the oligarchs, Putin is not living up to the role of arbiter or enforcer of authoritarian legality.¹⁶ One would expect the expatriates to sue the Russian state from abroad, since the very reason for their self-exile is persecution at home and/or distrust of the Russian system. More interestingly, however, many lawsuits adjudicated abroad nowadays are between Russia-based claimants. In other words, even oligarchs who are comfortable in Putin's Russia are not satisfied with the dispute resolution in their home country. It gets better: some lawsuits now involve Rus-

sian government entities as plaintiffs suing, in Britain, the self-exiled oligarchs who reside in London (as in the case of *Deposit Insurance Agency v. Pugachev*).

Overall, there is demand for greater predictability in business-power relations on the part of the oligarchs, but no vision on how to achieve it. Given Putin's erratic decisions, the oligarchs have no reason to trust him with the role of stabilizer or enforcer, even if he plays that role by default. A more institutionalized form of authoritarian legality is also unpalatable to many oligarchs, given how diligently the FSB has been collecting *kompromat* (evidence of legal wrongdoing that can be used for blackmail) on business elites, including the *silovarchs*.¹⁷ Meanwhile, popular resentment of the super rich in Russia makes honest and competitive elections a risky proposition. Russian business elites have closely watched the instability in Ukraine in the wake of democratization, including both the reprivatization attempt after the 2004 Orange Revolution and some anticorruption initiatives after the 2014 ouster of Yanukovich.¹⁸ Finally, the oligarchs' experience with the RUIE and its mixed record in improving state-business relations has cooled business elites' enthusiasm for association building.¹⁹ RUIE's requests on behalf of Khodorkovsky and Yevtushenkov were ignored by the Kremlin. At the end of the day, the question facing the Russian oligarchs is urgent but unanswered: which way from here?

In addition to greater predictability, another vector of implicit oligarchic demand for change aims at a more West-friendly foreign policy. This demand is conditioned both by tangible personal losses from Western sanctions experienced since 2014 by Putin's friends and some of the *silovarchs*, as well as the desire by all categories of oligarchs to keep the West as a viable exit option. The latter implies that the Russian super rich want to prevent the reputational

damage abroad from spiraling entirely out of control. The twenty-one richest Russians lost a total of \$61 billion in 2014, one quarter of their total fortune, leading some analysts to predict a “chilly fallout between Putin and his oligarch pals.”²⁰ One caveat here is that new fault lines may emerge between a subset of the *silovarchs* who profit directly from the defense industry (and are therefore interested in a continued standoff with the West) and the rest of the business elites.

Most Russian oligarchs would benefit from a shift in Russia’s trajectory toward greater de facto elite accountability and lower hostility vis-à-vis the West. But is this implicit demand matched by the oligarchs’ capacity to achieve it?

The answer is no. The key reason is a collective action problem. While in smaller economies the actions of a single larger-than-life oligarch (such as Bidzina Ivanishvili in Georgia) may change the status quo, the sheer number of Russia’s super rich, all equipped with their own power resources, implies that sustainable leverage requires cooperation.

Cooperation, however, is not the Russian oligarchs’ strong suit. For Putin’s friends and the *silovarchs*, the problem resides in the competitive nature of the Russian kleptocracy. Russia’s piranha capitalism is defined as much by a “bully in the penthouse” as it is by “termites in the basement”: individual state employees at all levels of the executive hierarchy view the rents they can extract from the economy as a zero-sum game.²¹ Even if Putin wanted to be a trusted arbiter among the oligarchs, the implementation of Putin’s decisions would be a challenge in a system whose executive branch is pulled apart by competing kleptocrats, not least the *silovarchs* who have effectively undermined a number of Putin’s priorities, including international defense contracts, Gazprom’s strategy in Europe, and electoral manipulation.²²

To be sure, oligarchic clans offer a form of collective action, but they appear fragmented, overlapping, and ever changing.²³ Putin’s closest friends are not above mutual sabotage, including that of their patron: consider analysis by *The Economist* showing that a state-linked Russian oil trader, Gunvor Group, was regularly driving down the price for Urals, a Russian export oil mixture, for the private profit of Genadii Timchenko, a supposed Putin loyalist.²⁴ When nominal loyalty yields to predatory temptations, group cohesiveness suffers. Pugachev, Putin’s former St. Petersburg friend, has embezzled oligarchic donations to Putin’s election campaigns, including a \$50 million donation from Lukoil alone, according to the chief editor of Russia’s independent TV channel Dozhd’.²⁵

The outsider tycoons, too, are anything but cohesive. This was most vividly demonstrated by the five-year struggle for Norilsk Nickel between Vladimir Potanin (famous for engineering the loans-for-shares scheme in the 1990s) and Oleg Deripaska (affiliated with Dmitrii Medvedev, Aleksandr Voloshin, and the vestiges of Yeltsin’s “family”). Potanin initially outsmarted Deripaska, who, in turn, vowed to fight Potanin “to the death” as both oligarchs engaged their massive administrative resources at home while also suing each other abroad in a series of battles between 2008 and 2012.

In addition to wars within the groups of Putin’s friends, *silovarchs*, and outsiders, these groups also appear to be at each other’s throats. Four oligarchic clans, in particular, are currently competing for decreasing rents under economic decline: Putin’s friends (including Timchenko, the Rotenbergs, and the Koval’chuk brothers); the FSB-affiliated *silovarchs* headed by Rosneft’s Sechin; the army-connected *silovarchs* headed by Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu; and the Gazprom clan headed by ex-president Medvedev and Aleksei Miller. Interestingly,

Putin's friends have lost some key battles over the production of oil pipelines and the control of main TV channels.

Public knowledge of oligarchic rivalries likely constitutes only the tip of the iceberg, making collective leverage by the super rich in Russia an unlikely proposition. But collective lobbying is not the only path to leverage for the super rich.

Let us reconsider *exit*. As noted above, from the oligarchs' perspective, their opportunities to leave Russia may reduce their demand for change. However, from Putin's perspective, capital flight or its implicit threat as such can put pressure on the system by depriving the Russian economy of investment, jobs, and tax revenue. In other words, an exit may reduce the oligarchs' explicit demand for better arrangements from the state while simultaneously increasing the oligarchs' implicit leverage to get such arrangements. Exit as a form of leverage does not depend on collective action, since every oligarch can exercise it individually.

In Russia, it is more difficult for individual *silovarchs* and friends of Putin – as compared with outsider oligarchs – to rely on exit as an implicit threat, due to the intimate connections to the state apparatus of Putin's friends and the *silovarchs*, as well as the progressive tightening of (Putin-inspired) legislation restricting state employees' foreign asset ownership.

In any case, Putin has been starkly insensitive to the implicit exit threat of Russia's individual capital owners. As one oligarch noted in his comment on the Bashneft attack:

The Kremlin certainly would understand that it was going to hurt the stock market; that it's going to add to the whole economic situation; that it was going to frighten the business community. . . . They went ahead anyway . . . because they wanted to deliver a message: "Behave yourself."²⁶

Instead of counteracting capital flight by improving the investment climate, the Kremlin has tried to force capital back, for example through the "deoffshorization" campaign launched in 2013. Until recently, individual oligarchs could decide separately on whether to 1) keep their physical profit-generating assets in Russia; 2) register their assets and cash flows in Russia or offshore; 3) personally reside in Russia or abroad; or 4) let their family members reside in Russia or relocate them abroad. The winning formula for many oligarchs has been to keep their physical productive assets in Russia but register them offshore while also securing foreign residence permits for oneself and/or one's family. The deoffshorization campaign may indicate a shift in the Kremlin's attitude regarding these possibilities of *exit*. At the unlikely extreme, Putin may push the oligarchs to decide: either keep your business in Russia and register it there – or liquidate your assets in Russia and leave the country altogether. So far, many top companies such as RusAl, Metalloinvest, MTS, RusHydro, and Kamaz have pledged to stop registering businesses offshore and to repatriate their physical productive assets held abroad.

If the oligarchs' reaction to Western sanctions and economic decline is any indication, then the oligarchs' influence on Russia's trajectory will remain limited.

The RUIE has pointedly kept silent on Russia's economically ruinous foreign policy since the conflict in Ukraine has unfolded. Despite their massive financial losses in 2014, Putin's friends paraded their readiness to sacrifice even more for their leader in various interviews. Said Timchenko: "If need be, I will transfer everything to the state tomorrow. Or to charity. . . . My wife and I have discussed this many times. Personally, we do not need billions."²⁷ Of course, the propaganda aspect of such statements aside, the oligarchs care deeply about their billions. Yet their strategy of wealth

defense has been indirect: instead of pushing Putin to change course, the oligarchs have sought compensation from the state. In September 2014, the Duma adopted a law stating that Russian citizens who lost assets abroad due to sanctions would be compensated from the Russian treasury. The law sparked a popular outcry, as Russian taxpayers balked at the prospect of bailing out the oligarchs. Vladimir Ponevezhskii, the United Russia deputy who formally initiated the law proposal, laughably defended it as potentially benefitting ordinary citizens who may own apartments in Bulgaria.²⁸ Meanwhile, Arkadii Rotenberg's property (four villas, one apartment, and one hotel) happened to be seized in Italy hours before the proposal's initiation in the Duma, which some analysts interpreted as more than coincidental.

Putin's reaction to these attempts at personal compensation by the oligarchs was negative (both the Russian government and the supreme court rejected the Duma law), although some strategically important companies, particularly Rosneft, have received ample help from the state. As for the conflict in Ukraine, it fell to professional technocrat and former minister of finance Aleksei Kudrin to speak the truth (economic decline) to power (Putin). Meanwhile, the oligarchs bit their tongue – again.

The bottom line: absent greater cooperation by the oligarchs, or higher responsiveness of the Russian leadership to the threat of capital exit, Russia's business elites have little leverage to shape the country's development.

Eppur si muove! While the oligarchs' leverage in Russia is systemically limited, cases of vocal – if so far inconsequential – opposition by business elites do exist. Two types of instances come to mind.

First, the *renegade oligarchs*, such as Khodorkovsky, Chichvarkin, or Boris Berezovsky, have experienced persecution

by the Russian state, left the country, and then invested in opposition to Putin's regime from abroad.

Prior to his 2013 (apparent) suicide, Berezovsky had conducted a broad informational campaign against Putin, including financing a film that implicated the FSB in the 1999 apartment bombings in Russia. Berezovsky also wrote open letters to Putin (“Volodya, ... as a typical dictator, you are not ready to surrender power through elections”), to the Patriarch Kirill (“Your Saintness, ... help Putin come to his senses ... take power from his hands and peacefully, wisely, Christian-like, give that power to the people”), and to George W. Bush, among others.

Mikhail Khodorkovsky was pardoned by Putin in 2013 after a politically motivated ten-year imprisonment. The oligarch has since reanimated his foundation Open Russia, which provided logistical backing to hundreds of independent and opposition candidates in the 2016 Duma elections. Khodorkovsky has forcefully criticized Russia's military actions in Ukraine. He has also hired a substantial staff of professional journalists to fuel his growing online presence.

Yevgenii Chichvarkin, the flamboyant erstwhile owner of Evroset (Russia's largest mobile phone retailer), fled to London in 2008 after losing his business in a series of raids by the police. Though the fabricated criminal cases against Chichvarkin in Russia were closed in 2011 (the oligarch personally appealed to Medvedev on the matter), he chose to stay in London and engage in opposition activity.

In 2016, Chichvarkin joined forces with Khodorkovsky. The oligarchs conducted an online press conference in April 2016 from London, streaming live to the Moscow offices of Open Russia. By video, Chichvarkin suggested that color revolutions “should not be feared.” According to Khodorkovsky, Chichvarkin's experi-

ence in mass communications would benefit the “political-educational” mission of Open Russia. Despite their diverging political visions – Khodorkovsky calls himself a statist (*gosudarstvennik*) while Chichvarkin identifies as a libertarian – both oligarchs agreed at the conference that the current Russian power is, as Chichvarkin said, “hurtling toward a dead end.” When the Putin regime hits that dead end, the renegades plan to oversee a two-year “temporary administration” in Russia in order to ensure subsequent honest elections.

The renegade oligarchs face significant challenges in their quest to democratize Russia: they lack the support of the Russian population at large and they are disconnected from influential elites at home. If a political opening occurred in Russia, the renegades could potentially return and help steer the country, but they are unlikely to be the cause of that opening. So far, the renegades’ strategy has been to invest heavily in communications capacity; nurture and showcase a cadre of young politicians in the Duma elections; and wait for the Kremlin to make a mistake.

Putin has not been prone to mistakes, however – not when it comes to power preservation. But the Russian president may well become more vulnerable as he ages. This appears also to be Khodorkovsky’s timeline, given the oligarch’s prediction of significant change in Russia around the presidential elections of 2024.

Second, oligarchs such as Aleksandr Lebedev and Mikhail Prokhorov have engaged in the formal political process while living in Russia; I refer to such oligarchs as the *Trojans*. Like the renegades, the Trojans advocate for democratization and rule of law. However, they have stopped short of criticizing Putin directly, focusing on systemic shortcomings instead. More so than the renegades, the Trojans emphasize gradual, evolutionary changes.

Lebedev is a banker, media owner (he co-owns *Novaya gazeta* with Mikhail Gorbachev, plus several British papers), and former KGB officer. Lebedev ran for mayor of Moscow in 2003, but lost to Luzhkov. He also sought to run for mayor of Sochi in 2009, but his candidacy was disqualified. Lebedev successfully ran for the Duma, where he was a deputy from 2003 to 2007, switching his party affiliations from Rodina to United Russia to independent during his term. Lebedev has devoted resources to exposing high-level corruption in the Russian bureaucracy, and though he once cooperated with Aleksei Navalny, he has distanced himself from the prominent opposition activist since 2012.

Mikhail Prokhorov has owned major assets in mining, finance, and media (as well as the Brooklyn Nets of the National Basketball Association). He ran as an independent candidate in the 2012 presidential elections. In 2011, Prokhorov had become the leader of the Right Cause Party. After losing the presidential elections to Putin, the oligarch launched a new party, Civic Platform.

Prokhorov’s political involvement is the most high-profile to date by a Russian oligarch. His respectable 8 percent vote share in the 2012 presidential elections, despite the domination of the media by Kremlin-friendly outlets, suggests that the Trojans are better connected to Russian citizens and elites than the renegades. Furthermore, it demonstrates that divisions among Kremlin insiders can help the Trojans. Prokhorov’s political rise would have been impossible without the intensifying competition between the teams of Prime Minister Putin and President Medvedev at the time. However, Prokhorov’s experience also demonstrates two limitations of the Trojans.

First, the Trojans are no match for the Kremlin’s political technologists when it comes to strategy in the Byzantine world

of authoritarian populism. Prokhorov was defeated twice: by Putin and Volodin from without, and also by Vladislav Surkov and Medvedev from within. As the Right Cause Party was searching for leaders among the Russian establishment, Putin and his chief of staff Volodin sent signals to key figures (including German Gref, Aleksei Kudrin, and Igor Shuvalov) to stay away from the party, and they mostly did.²⁹ When Prokhorov took the helms of Right Cause, the party had already been drained of human capital at the top; its lack of professional leaders was barely compensated by celebrities like Alla Pugacheva, a Soviet-era singer whom Prokhorov recruited into the party. The next stage of Prokhorov's defeat involved his conflict with Surkov. Medvedev, interested in developing his own quasi-liberal party at the time so as to counter-balance Putin's influence, had outsourced this task to Surkov. (This is not without irony, since Surkov had also been the ideological godfather of United Russia, the presumed target of Medvedev's planned liberal force.) Surkov decided to take over an existing party, Right Cause, and pushed out Prokhorov from its leadership by cutting deals with other members of the party's governing organ. Medvedev watched from the sidelines and did not intervene.

Second, the Trojans have shown a limited commitment to political life. After defiantly declaring war on Surkov, Prokhorov traveled to Turkey for a one-month vacation. By the time of the 2014 St. Petersburg International Economic Forum, an annual event promoted by Putin, Prokhorov was entertaining Russia's elite with his traditional dance reception, complete with striptease dancers. His war on the establishment seems to have been forgotten. The message emerging from the Trojans' utility curves often spells hedonism, not political work. (Like Prokhorov, Lebedev is known to enjoy the company of intellectuals, celebrities, and beautiful wom-

en worldwide.) Unlike the renegades, the Trojans seem to play politics rather than to live politics. Opposition activity as a hobby – even when pursued by talented, charismatic, and wealthy individuals – will not unsettle Russia's political equilibrium.

Regardless of their proximity to power, most Russian oligarchs have been quiescent amidst attacks by the Kremlin, Western sanctions, and economic decline. Those who have pushed for change remain marginalized. Will this situation last? Two overarching lessons can be gleaned from other countries to forecast the political behavior of Russia's business elites.

First, oligarchs have good reasons to fear democracy, but this fear can be overcome. For the oligarchs, democratization involves multiple threats that have materialized to some extent across the world after the introduction of greater political competition. These threats include trust-busting and demopolization reforms (South Korea); pressure for higher taxes and redistribution (Argentina, Brazil, Mexico); collapse of order and spiraling violence (Indonesia); and revision of privatization results (Ukraine).

However, democratization is by no means anathema to the super rich. They are more likely to accept it or push for it when some of the following conditions hold: economic prosperity (South Korea); declining dependence of business profits on government connections (Western Europe, Mexico, Brazil); high dependence of political elites on big business for political finance (Ukraine); or a sharp increase in the autocrat's attacks on business elites (Kyrgyzstan, Ukraine, Belarus, Kazakhstan).

Of course, just because the oligarchs voice their support for democratization does not mean that political change follows. This brings us to the second point.

To effect change, the oligarchs need the people. Mikhail Prokhorov may empathize with Chung Ju-yung, the founder of Hyun-

dai, who established a new political party and ran for president in 1991–1992 in a bid to challenge the ruling Democratic Justice Party and the incumbent. Chung ran on a platform stressing competence and professionalism, just like Prokhorov. But he suffered a humiliating defeat, despite the fact that South Korea's business elites had closed ranks behind the need for change. Though fed up with economic incompetence of the regime, the chaebols—large family-run business conglomerates—remained alienated from the population at large. Collective action by the oligarchs is not enough.

The importance of popular support should be self-evident for the renegades and the Trojans: that is, for all oligarchs who openly advocate liberalization. But if the Ukrainian experience is any guide—even for the Russian business elites who care more about their material interests than any political vision—popular support is crucial. Quantitative analysis of the Ukrainian super rich suggests that business wealth is more resilient against various shocks (including authoritarian expropriation) for oligarchs who pursue “flexible” strategies aimed at legitimacy (via media and political parties) than for oligarchs who rely on direct power or asset mobility.³⁰

While the gulf has always been enormous between Russia's business elites and the general population, the Kremlin's economic (since 2009) and foreign (since 2011) policies have driven a further wedge between the tiny fraction of Russia's “one percent” and the rest. The Kremlin's military-economic populism has combined an aggressive stance abroad with patriotic

propaganda and the financial support of vulnerable population layers at home. In budget terms, this policy paradigm is too expensive amidst economic recession. Yet while the oligarchs pick up the bill—in the form of new taxes on oil revenue, Western sanctions, and lost trade—citizens at large applaud Putin.

The oligarchs understand Putin's game. The fugitive oligarch Pugachev cannot be alone in thinking that “today, personal friendship and loyalty don't mean anything.... Why does Putin need friends when 85 percent of Russians support him?”³¹ The billionaire Yurii Koval'chuk, Putin's friend who replaced Pugachev in his informal capacity as the president's personal banker, captured the prevalent mood best in his reaction to Western sanctions: “Put yourself in my place. If I start annoying him, like Kudrin does, telling him what he does not like, arguing back [*perechit'*]—how will that end for me? I will reduce my access to the body, punishing myself even stronger than the Europeans did. What for? For whom?”³²

In Ayn Rand's libertarian manifesto *Atlas Shrugged*, which has inspired generations of teenagers worldwide as well as wealthy entrepreneurs like Yevgenii Chichvarkin, large capitalists pull out of a state-dominated economy, forcing its collapse, and then take over leadership. Although some of the Russian oligarchs have resorted to an exit, it has not been sufficient for the Kremlin to change course. Meanwhile, divisions among the oligarchs as well as between the oligarchs and the population have prevented effective oppositional voice. The Russian Atlas just won't shrug.

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From Boom to Bust: Hardship, Mobilization & Russia's Social Contract

Samuel A. Greene

Abstract: This essay revisits the debate about Russia's "social contract," arguing that the ability of the Russian system to maintain macro-political stability in the face of significant and prolonged micro-level economic hardship hinges on a peculiarly disengaged relationship between Russian citizens and their state. Russian citizens are seen clearly to understand the failings of the political system and leadership, reinforcing habits of "involution" learned over decades of institutional dysfunction. A review of recent protest movements, indeed, demonstrates that general quiescence coexists with a deep-seated antipathy toward the country's ruling elite, which lends particular animus to grassroots contention in a variety of settings. The question for Russia's sociopolitical future, however, remains an old one: can reactive civic mobilization lead to a proactive process of bottom-up agenda setting?

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How and why loyal Russian citizens – and loyal Russian citizens, by most counts, make up more than 80 percent of the adult population – come to find themselves on the barricades is something of a puzzle. Since surviving a major protest wave in 2011 – 2012, Putin has reconsolidated power and legitimacy, supported by a more adversarial approach to politics at home and abroad. His approval ratings have remained high, even as the economy has collapsed beneath his feet. To many observers, the question is not why there are pockets of opposition and protest, but why there aren't more. In truth, these questions share an answer: the same shifts in politics that consolidated a super-majority of voters behind Putin has laid the groundwork for a much more contentious – and much more pervasive – kind of politics.

The boom years of Vladimir Putin's first three terms in office provided a sense of a set of social contracts: one with the elite (centered around rents), one with the broad mass of the population (centered around paternalistic "noninterference"), and

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one with the urban upper class (centered around the provision of space for “individual modernization”).¹ As living standards improved steadily over the course of nearly a decade and a half – providing, for the first time in post-Soviet history, a certain stability of expectations – a series of mobilizational interactions between the state and various challengers served as border skirmishes, outlining the contours of these settlements, illustrating how far each side could push (and be pushed) before something would break. Thus, a series of benefits protests and labor strikes in the mid-2000s seemed to set the terms of engagement between the state and most of its citizens, while more subtle standoffs with the economic elite and the most mobile urbanites led to similar understandings of the balance of power in society.²

The end of the boom provides an important opportunity to revisit received wisdom. Whereas the dislocation of the 1990s followed what had been many years of steady institutional decline, the current downturn – which is in its third year of economic contraction, bringing steep declines in GDP, income, and consumption – is the first in most Russians’ living memory to follow a prolonged period of hardening positive expectations. To economic hardship is added a range of other shocks, including ideology, elite hierarchy, political coercion, and international isolation.

In the post-boom and post-Crimea period, the primary public reaction to the apparent failure of the social contract is through a renewal of what in the 1990s was described as “involution”: a retreat from the public space and from universal institutions into relatively more robust networks of localized interpersonal relationships.³ But even as expectations of the state, which were already low, fell still further, the regime itself reengineered its own legitimacy through an appeal based largely on emotion. For most of the population

in most circumstances, this has been sufficient to produce consent. In other cases, however, recourse to the public sphere persists: citizens faced with severe or potentially irreversible threats to their welfare and quality of life engage, as they always have, in protest. Unlike prior mobilization cycles, however, post-boom and post-Crimea mobilization more quickly becomes ideological, driven first and foremost by the increasingly rigid and predictable tropes of the state’s own responses.

Looking to the future (a thankless but necessary task) is one of the goals here. The underlying trends – a state that increasingly seeks to engage its citizens emotionally and ideologically, and a population that feels increasingly alienated from the state materially – seem both unlikely to change and bound, over time, to produce ever more and ever sharper conflict. The ability of the current regime to withstand these challenges, while beyond the scope of this discussion, does not appear to be seriously in doubt. The intuition of this essay, however, is that real change in Russia will come not because power changes hands at the top, but because citizens at the bottom begin to regain their faith in the political community’s ability to deliver public goods.

Russia’s economy contracted by 3.1 percent in 2015 and, at the time this issue went to press, was estimated to have fallen by a further 0.6 percent in 2016.⁴ Hit by the combination of sanctions, falling oil prices, and a collapsing ruble, the economy has seen consumption decline by as much as 10 percent year-on-year – 2 to 3 percentage points faster than incomes have declined – as the government, too, has cut back on social spending.⁵

There has been a dramatic shift in the government’s approach to this crisis, compared with previous shocks. Whereas the Kremlin dug deep into its reserves – and put significant pressure on enterprise owners – to minimize the impact of the short-

lived 2008 – 2009 recession, much more of the burden of this deeper and more prolonged downturn has been placed squarely on the shoulders of citizens, in the form not only of falling incomes and rising prices, but also austerity, which has hit education, health care, pensions, and state salaries.⁶

Meanwhile, as noted above, consumption has fallen faster than income, as Russians themselves have tried to get ahead of the crisis.⁷ Spending has shifted from aspirational purchases – homes and cars, purchases that reflect plans and hopes for the future – to daily needs; mortgages and automobile loans have fallen by as much as half.⁸ All the same, many Russians have compensated through increased consumer borrowing, even as banks have made borrowing more expensive.⁹ The result has been an increasingly difficult – and often violent – relationship between borrowers and lenders, into which the government has been loath to insert itself.¹⁰ Similar friction has emerged between workers and employers, to a degree not seen since the rampant salary nonpayment problems of the 1990s.¹¹ One result is that more than half of working Russians are, in one way or another, not able to enjoy the rights and protections afforded to them by Russian labor, tax, and pension law.¹² Simultaneously, while 61 percent of Russians believe that now is a time to save rather than to spend, only 38 percent are prepared to trust their savings to banks.¹³ Not only does this leave savers without the protection of Russia's deposit insurance system, it has also left the Russian Central Bank fretting that, as households withdraw from the formal financial sector, monetary policy itself risks becoming irrelevant.¹⁴

Russians, of course, are aware of all of this. The Levada Center, a Russian nongovernmental research organization that conducts regular opinion polls, recorded precipitous drops in several key indicators beginning in 2014, represented here as composite indices

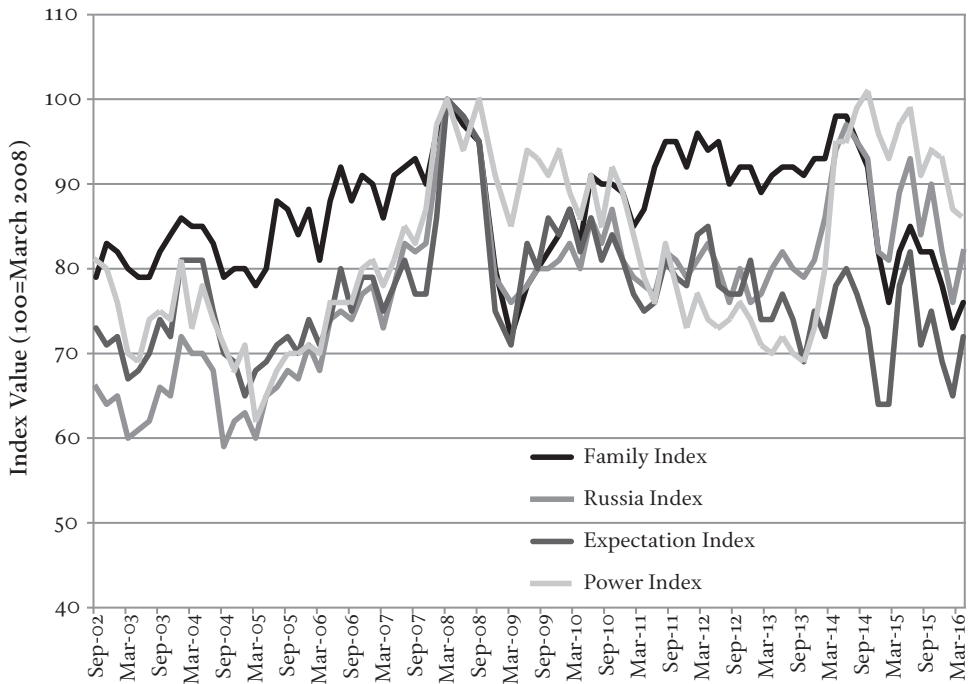
calculated from a range of questions asked by Levada in recurring polls: the “family index,” which measures sentiment about household economic prospects; the “Russia index,” which measures sentiment about economic prospects for society at large; and the “expectation index,” which measures sentiment about the future. At the same time, the “power index,” which measures sentiment about the country's political leadership, remained high (see Figure 1).

These data reflect a structure of public sentiment about power and the economy that cuts somewhat against the grain of conventional wisdom about authoritarian social contracts. When authoritarian leaders are popular – as Putin genuinely appears to be, or as Hugo Chavez was in Venezuela – it is often attributed to a broad public sense that the leader governs in the public interest, either through macrosocial redistribution or through more targeted but nonetheless pervasive clientelism. Russian citizens, however, see Putin as pursuing neither. Since the Levada Center began asking the question in 2006, the overwhelming majority of respondents have consistently believed that inequality in the country has gotten worse under Putin, not better (see Table 1). With similar consistency, fewer than one-quarter of Russians believe that Putin governs in the interests of the middle class, and many fewer still believe he governs on behalf of the citizenry as a whole; instead, Russians are much more likely to believe that Putin represents the interests of the *siloviki* in the coercive apparatus, the oligarchs, the bureaucrats, and big business (see Table 2).

And yet Russians are not particularly inclined to blame Putin for these or other failings. The number of respondents to a Levada poll in March 2015 – three months after the ruble lost more than half of its value – who had favorable opinions of Putin's handling of the economy was only 2 percentage points lower than in October

From Boom to Bust:
Hardship,
Mobilization
& Russia's
Social Contract

Figure 1
Levada Indices



Source: Data compiled by author from questions and recurrent polls published at Levada Center, <http://www.levada.ru/en/>.

Table 1

During Vladimir Putin's Rule, Has the Gap between Rich and Poor in Our Country Increased, Reduced, or Remained the Same as It was under Boris Yeltsin? (by % of Responses)

	March 2006	March 2007	March 2008	July 2009	July 2010	May 2011	May 2013	Sept. 2014	Sept. 2015
Increased	64	65	53	48	67	73	68	68	69
Reduced	11	9	13	15	11	10	9	11	9
Remained the Same	21	22	27	31	18	15	16	17	19
Hard to Say	4	4	7	6	4	3	7	4	3

Source: Levada Center, "Sbornik obshchestvennogo mneniya 2015," <http://www.levada.ru/sbornik-obshchestvennoe-mnenie/obshchestvennoe-mnenie-2015/> (accessed February 10, 2017).

Table 2
In Your View, Whose Interests does Vladimir Putin Represent? (by % of Responses)

	Oct. 2000	July 2001	July 2003	July 2005	Sept. 2006	Aug. 2007	Oct. 2010	July 2011	July 2012	July 2013	Aug. 2014	Aug. 2015
<i>Siloviki</i>	54	43	51	51	24	39	34	33	43	41	39	42
Oligarchs	24	15	27	25	23	18	26	29	39	35	30	31
Bureaucrats	12	15	21	26	21	19	24	22	32	30	24	28
Big Business	16	16	21	23	12	13	18	22	26	23	19	24
Middle Class	10	16	19	23	24	31	27	25	21	24	22	23
Everyone	5	7	7	6	10	12	8	12	11	12	14	16
Simple People	13	15	15	18	18	24	20	19	14	11	13	14
Cultural & Scientific Elite	4	8	9	11	7	10	10	9	10	9	10	13
Yeltsin "Family"	25	22	25	20	13	13	11	13	14	14	9	13
Intelligentsia	5	10	9	12	7	10	10	10	7	8	9	7
Hard to Say	13	18	11	12	12	13	14	12	7	10	15	10

Source: Levada Center, "Sbornik obshchestvennogo mneniya 2015," <http://www.levada.ru/sbornik-obshchestvennoe-mnenie/obshchestvennoe-mnenie-2015/> (accessed February 10, 2017).

2009 (41 percent versus 43 percent); approval of Putin's economic management was higher in both periods than in November 2006, when the economy was actually doing better. Nor does Putin get much credit for his foreign-policy successes. Again in March 2015, a year after Putin engineered the highly popular annexation of Crimea, approval of his foreign policy stood at 69 percent, only barely above the 66 percent rating he received in October 2009 (see Table 3).

Indeed, a closer analysis of the Levada indices suggests that, evidence of pocketbook voting notwithstanding, the relationship between economic sentiment and political approval is anything but straightforward. As shown in Model 1 of Table 4, the "family index" (again, measuring pocketbook economic sentiment) does not correlate with the "power index" (measuring approv-

al of Putin and the government broadly). The "Russia index" (measuring sociotropic economic sentiment) correlates very strongly with political approval, as does the forward-looking "expectation index" (Models 2 and 3). And when the indices are combined, the family index becomes significantly correlated with the power index – but negatively (Models 4 and 5). In other words, sociotropic sentiment translates into regime approval most strongly when Russians are particularly unhappy about their personal situation, and vice versa: when Russians are feeling personally positive, they seem to have less need of their leadership.

This, in turn, comports with the observations of Russian sociologists, who have noted across a range of studies both an increasing reliance on interpersonal ties – often highly localized, but increasingly augmented

Table 3
In Your View, How Well is Vladimir Putin Handling . . . ? (by % of Responses)

	. . . the economy			. . . foreign policy		
	Nov. 2006	Oct. 2009	March 2015	Nov. 2006	Oct. 2009	March 2015
1 (worst)	5	4	7	4	2	2
2	12	12	15	5	5	6
3	40	36	34	21	22	18
4	29	31	30	39	41	37
5 (best)	8	12	11	25	25	32
Hard to Say	5	5	3	7	7	4

Source: Levada Center, "Sbornik obshchestvennogo mneniya 2015," <http://www.levada.ru/sbornik-obshhestvennoe-mnenie/obshhestvennoe-mnenie-2015/> (accessed February 10, 2017).

Table 4
Levada Indices

Model	1	2	3	4	5
Family Index	.119 (.177)	-.252* (.193)		-.513+ (.103)	-.589+ (.106)
Expectation Index		.617+ (.179)			.204+ (.101)
Russia Index			.781+ (.074)	1.082+ (.068)	1.000+ (.071)
R-square	.014	.257	.610	.784	.806

* significant at 0.05 level

+ significant at 0.005 level

Dependent variable: power index. Standardized beta coefficients are reported, standard errors are in parentheses. Source: Levada Center, "Sbornik obshchestvennogo mneniya 2015," <http://www.levada.ru/sbornik-obshhestvennoe-mnenie/obshhestvennoe-mnenie-2015/> (accessed February 10, 2017).

with the help of online social networking platforms – and an increased sense of welfare among those who report having the most interpersonal ties. Thus, as Russian political scientist Ekaterina Shul'man has written, “People who feel part of a social network believe that they can do without the state – they have an increased subjective sense of wellbeing not because they are well led, but because they become more self-confident.”¹⁵ So, too, have individuals consolidated their own lives. According to Russian economic sociologists, what Lev Gudkov has called the “inertia of passive adaptation”¹⁶ seems to be giving way to a more proactive self-reliance:

Self-reliant Russians today are not a peripheral social group, not a marginal class, but a significant and growing group, reflecting the dominant trend towards independence and activism in society. The portion of Russians who claim responsibility for what happens in their lives and are confident in their ability to provide for themselves and their family without needing support from the state was 44% of the population in 2015, up from 24% in 2011.¹⁷

This is not, however, an entirely positive phenomenon, in the sense of increased autonomy, individualism, and self-reliance (traits that, in truth, were all central to Russians' robust coping mechanisms in the late Soviet period and throughout the 1990s). Disengagement from the formal state has a darker side: to wit, while some 75 percent of Russians report that their rights have been infringed in one way or another in recent years, only 39 percent reported that they appealed to state institutions, including law enforcement and elected officials, for help; fewer than 1 percent turned to the media or civic organizations; and 40 percent sought no help at all.¹⁸ Perhaps for that reason, as well, Russians by and large chose to ignore the September 2016 parliamentary elections, allowing the rul-

ing United Russia Party to achieve its largest ever majority on the back of the lowest turnout in Russia's post-Soviet history.¹⁹

By 2012, as Putin's personal appeal seemed to be waning (even as the economy was doing relatively well), support for Putin was boosted by his close association with bigger things – love of country and culture, for example – that most Russians hold dear.²⁰ In the wake of the 2011 – 2012 antiregime protest wave, and in the face of an economy that was failing to provide the kind of generalized growth in welfare that had accompanied Putin's first decade in office, the Kremlin opted for a new approach to public politics, one that was overtly confrontational, dividing society into more rigid categories of “us” and “them” with the help of values-oriented wedge issues, such as religion, sexuality, and, to a lesser extent, ethnicity.²¹ To this was added fear, generated by an aggressive public sphere – to which the Kremlin's acolytes are eager contributors – and an increasing threat (and sometimes fact) of violence.²² Later, pride entered the mix, as the return of Crimea and Putin's steadfast position in the face of Western pressure (and sanctions) produced a “rally around the flag” effect that has lasted until the present.²³ The resulting concoction of identity politics, fear, and patriotic mobilization – what Russian analyst Kirill Rogov has called “the Crimea syndrome” – had, by the summer of 2016, become an inalienable part of Russia's politics.²⁴

The result looked to many Russian observers like a rewriting of the implicit social contracts of the 2000s. “By the spring of 2014,” journalist Boris Grozovskii wrote, “in return for loyalty the state offered not growing welfare, but the feeling of inclusion in a power that was rising from its knees. This is a very powerful emotion, and in return the state now demands from the population not only loyalty, but also a preparedness to sacrifice.”²⁵ Having given

up the right to a real political franchise – Maksim Trudolyubov, editor-at-large of the independent Russian daily *Vedomosti*, has argued – society acquired not permanent prosperity, but only a loan of well-being from the state: “Now, the state is calling in the debt.”²⁶

That this shifting bargain would be outwardly welcomed by many citizens, meanwhile, is in keeping with previous patterns of pro-state mobilization, wrote the sociologist Lev Gudkov:

The events of 2014 – 15 are not the first time we have seen mass demonstrations of solidarity with the authorities. . . . A state of collective enthusiasm and unfettered national self-aggrandizement is generally preceded by a phase of mass disorientation, frustration, irritation and, sometimes, intense fear. The waves we observe in public sentiment are society’s reactions to rapid change in the institutional structure of the state.²⁷

But the regime was not the only part of the Russian political landscape that was consolidating. For one thing, the challenge of the Bolotnaya Square protests was overcome, but not eliminated. Even as the Kremlin has provided a new, charismatic, and traditionalist basis for its legitimacy – successfully rallying the majority of Russian citizens to its cause – studies of online and offline activity suggest that the 2011 – 2012 “Bolotnaya movement” has continued to grow both in numerical and ideological terms, incorporating the antiwar movement that emerged in 2014, those aggrieved by the murder of Boris Nemtsov in 2015, and a growing number of others drawn in by the activism of their friends.²⁸

Indeed, Russia has seen rapid growth in labor unrest, with a record number of work disruptions in 2015, according to the Center for Social and Labor Rights (see Figure 2). There are “clear signs of workers reacting to worsening economic conditions,” particularly wage arrears, which make up the

plurality – if not majority – of strikes and other labor disruptions, according to labor sociologists Stephen Crowley and Irina Olimpieva.²⁹ Labor mobilization is concentrated in regional centers and major cities and is focused on industry and transportation.³⁰ Rising, too, is the proportion of labor mobilizations that involve strikes or other stop-actions, from 39 percent prior to 2014 to 42 percent in 2016.³¹ Stop-actions are predominantly provoked either by nonpayment of salaries or by other changes to remuneration; other grievances – such as generally low salaries, rising costs of living, and poor working conditions – did not typically provoke work stoppages in 2016.³²

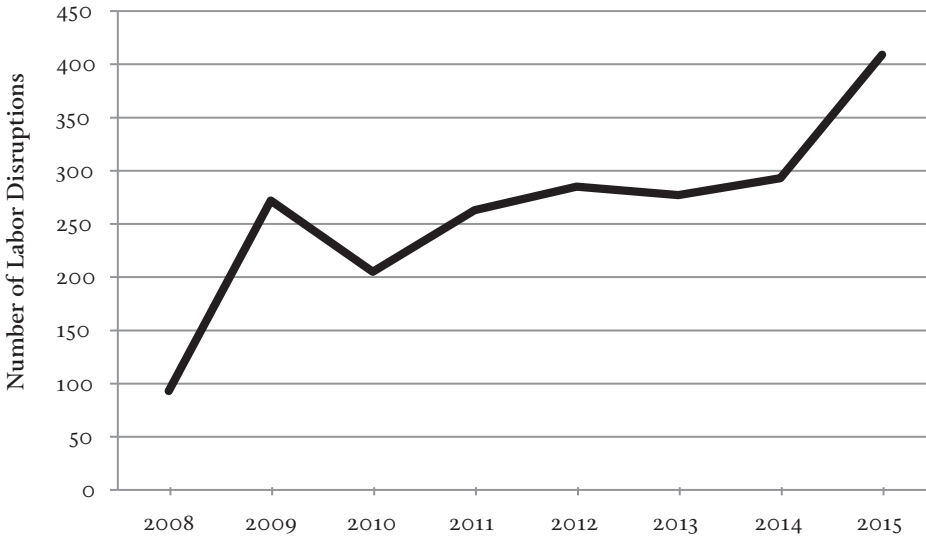
These trends mirror the findings of longer-term, more broad-based research into labor mobilization and economic protest in Russia.³³ Similar results are provided by an analysis of events cataloged by the activism website *Activatica.org*, demonstrating both an increase in overall levels of activity and an increase in the proportion of activity involving political and economic grievances (though environmental concerns predominate) (see Figure 3).

Insofar as our ability to observe is sufficient, the general mechanism by which grievance is transformed into mobilization in Russia has not changed: as they were throughout the first twelve years of Putin’s rule, Russian citizens remain capable of mounting meaningful resistance when the state presents a coherent challenge to their welfare. As before, Russians are more likely to mobilize collectively when the threats they face are immediate and potentially irreversible, and when the consequences of inaction are faced by an identifiable group of people at the same time and in the same way.³⁴ To see how things may have changed, however, let us briefly examine some indicative cases more closely.

Muscovites are protective of their green spaces. In a city clogged with traffic and

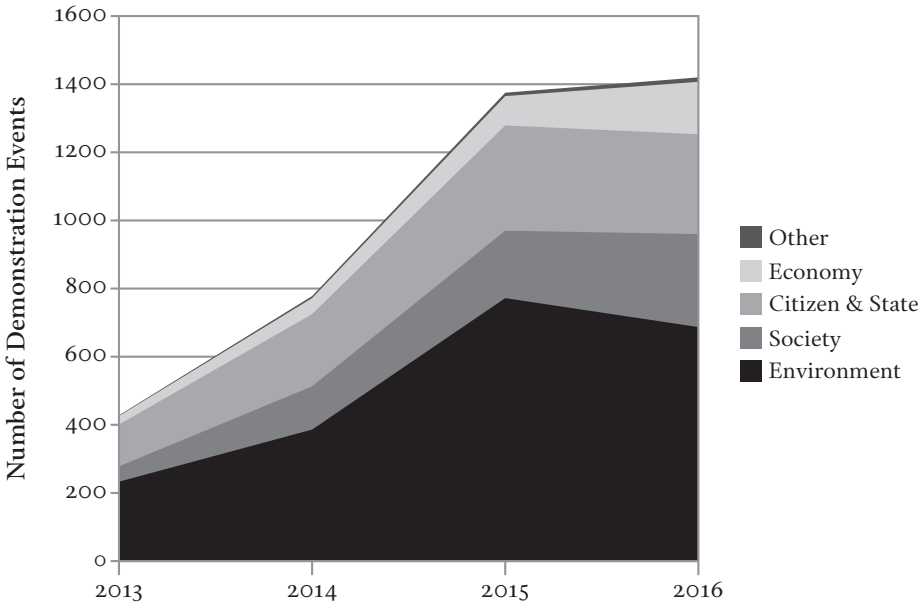
Figure 2
Labor Disruptions per Year

Samuel A.
Greene



Source : Center for Social and Labor Rights, *Trudovye protesty v Rossii v pervoi polovine 2016 goda* (Moscow : Center for Social and Labor Rights, 2016), <http://trudprava.ru/expert/analytics/protestanalyt/1712>.

Figure 3
Composition of Mobilization over Time



Source : Events counted by author at the Activatica database. See <http://activatica.org/>.

seemingly growing more crowded by the day, residents can usually be counted on to protest when developers set their sights on their courtyards, playgrounds, and parks. Most of these protests are local and small, and the majority don't last very long.³⁵ But some do.

On June 18, 2015, workers cordoned off a section of the Torfyanka Park in north-east Moscow; within a week, locals had begun protesting what turned out to be plans by the city administration and the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) to build a church in a corner of the park, part of a major effort by the ROC to build dozens of new churches across the capital. The pro-Kremlin camp wasted no time in reacting. On June 25 – the day of the first organized protest against the church – the website Ridus.ru, closely associated with the anti-Maidan movement and the pro-Kremlin National Liberation Movement, posted a long and detailed report, concluding as follows:

Against the construction of the church are arrayed a not disinterested group (village idiots and sincere neighbors attend, of course, for free) consisting of several social groups: leftists, [members of the Yabloko opposition party], Satanists-anarchists, people who hate the ROC on principle, and free citizens who have been brainwashed. . . . It's a courtyard Maidan in action, and none of the participants have anything in common with sincerity.³⁶

That, of course, set the terms of the debate to come. By July 9, rallies were drawing hundreds and then thousands of participants. Protest leader Natal'ya Kutlunina led off the proceedings, calling the park something of a second home for locals, a place where they could "go in their slippers and dressing gowns"; a city councilwoman from the ruling United Russia Party was booed off the stage.³⁷ As the summer wore on, protests grew in number and frequen-

cy, centered on a permanent camp blocking the entrance to the construction site, where the original locals were joined by left-wing groups and members of the liberal opposition, as well as residents from other neighborhoods facing similar encroachment. The left-wing blogger Maksim Serov put the fight in terms familiar to veterans of the Bolotnaya movement and the opposition's confrontation with the "patriotic" anti-Maidan and the National Liberation Movement: "It's them or us! The residents of our city, or the fascist obscurantists!"³⁸

And so the frame was set. As both sides dug in, many protesters evidently came to see their cause as bigger than the park, somehow bound up in the broader effort to block what some in the opposition called a creeping clericalization of Russian life and politics. In this, they were aided by the language that the Church's supporters used and the associations they formed: a page was launched on the Russian social networking site VKontakte in support of the construction of the Torfyanka church, combining religious symbolism with pictures of soldiers and references to patriotism, while the National Liberation Movement called the protests a threat to Russian sovereignty.³⁹ As the conflict dragged on into 2016, it was picked up by the "Russian Spring" movement that had supported the Russian mobilization in and around eastern Ukraine, calling for their own rally at Torfyanka and making the message even starker:

For us one thing in the situation with Torfyanka is obvious: "our" Moscow church-fighters and the Kiev Euromaidaners are one and the same. The same faces, the same methods, the same approaches, the same grantmakers. . . . They are preparing and training with an eye on a "Moscow Maidan" in 2016.⁴⁰

A remarkably similar dynamic took hold in a very different protest movement, or-

ganized by a network of independent truck drivers from around the country.

Trucks carry about 5.4 billion tons of goods per year in Russia, far outstripping any other mode of transportation for shipments of things other than natural resources. They do so, however, on roads that are both notoriously poor and notoriously expensive to build and maintain, the precise reasons for which do not need to be explored here. To help cover the cost, the Russian government decided to charge the owners of all trucks in excess of twelve tons a tax of 3.73 rubles per kilometer hauled.⁴¹ That was bad enough, particularly for the private truckers who account for roughly half of the sector. The big logistics companies had the bargaining power to pass the cost on to their clients (mostly retailers and distributors), who would then pass it on to consumers. But the privateers were under pressure to swallow the costs in order to compete.

Hearing the rumblings of protest, the government made an initial concession, reducing the rate to 1.53 rubles per kilometer for a few months – and then indefinitely – and putting a moratorium on fines. But for the protesters, the problem was not just the amount, it was the principle – and the fact that the principal beneficiary looked to be a company called RTITS, which won the concession to collect the tax and pocket half of the proceeds and was owned by Igor Rotenberg, the son of Arkadii Rotenberg, a close friend and associate of Putin. One popular protest placard featured the number 3.73 with a line through it; another said “the Rotenbergs are worse than ISIS.”⁴²

But the government was not budging. The strike began on November 21, 2015, initially in Dagestan; from there and elsewhere, columns of truckers began moving toward St. Petersburg and Moscow.⁴³ The same day, Yevgenii Fyodorov, a member of the Duma and leader of the Kremlin-backed National Liberation Movement,

broadcast an address to the truckers, which began as follows: Samuel A. Greene

We can see, you and I, that the United States of America is not sleeping. And now, through their “fifth column,” through national traitors, they have landed yet another blow against the Russian Federation. Specifically I am talking about the actions of the long-distance truckers, who are trying, on the orders of the United States of America, to liquidate Russian statehood.⁴⁴

Four days later, opposition leader Aleksei Navalny posted his own video message to the truckers on YouTube and on the website of his Anti-Corruption Foundation. With somewhat less emotion and hyperbole than Fyodorov had mustered, Navalny argued that the heart of the matter was corruption, and that the truckers and his activists – whatever other political differences they might have – should thus be able to find some common cause.⁴⁵

As the columns of truckers drew closer to Moscow, one of them – a twenty-seven-year-old trucker named Vladimir Georgiyevich from Leningrad oblast’ – told his story to *Colta*, a highbrow news and opinion website popular with the oppositional intelligentsia. It wasn’t politics that brought us out, he seemed to say, it was community:

The truckers – we’re not about politics. What’s that worth to an average worker? The average worker needs to work, to get his salary and feed his family. And that’s all he needs. But if they really start to go after us, are we just supposed to look on? I mean, here, we’ll give you some money for something that doesn’t exist and never will. There won’t be any roads. How many times have they lied to us: they promised to end the transport tax, and they didn’t. It’s the same with this system – they lied once, lied twice. They probably thought it would all go down quietly.⁴⁶

But if the Kremlin failed to predict the truckers’ reaction, so, too, did the truck-

ers fail to foresee the turn the government would take. As columns of trucks converged on Moscow, more and more messages flooded television and the Internet accusing the truckers of ties to Navalny, Washington, and the Euromaidan. Indeed, there was a kernel of truth: one of the protest coordinators was Sergei Gulyayev, a St. Petersburg activist who had been prominent in that city's contribution to the 2011 – 2012 election protests.⁴⁷ On December 3, when the truckers closed ranks outside Moscow and held their “snail day” protest, driving ever-so-slowly around the beltway, Putin gave his annual Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly; the truckers did not rate a mention. In an interview on the independent television station Dozhd', one of the truckers' representatives, Nadezhda Kurazhkovskaya, explained:

The president didn't meet our expectations. We expected more from him. We thought, after all, that he would stand with his people, but it didn't happen. We will fight to the last man, as they say.⁴⁸

The reaction from ordinary Muscovites, however, was warmer. Perhaps already accustomed to snail's-pace traffic, drivers took to social media – and, in particular, to the traffic monitoring and navigation apps that allow drivers to post messages about road conditions – to express their support and solidarity; “Nationalize the palaces of the Rotenbergs” was a common refrain.⁴⁹

When Putin departs the scene, the palaces of the Rotenbergs – at least those that are in Russia – could well be nationalized; at the very least, it would not be historically unprecedented in the universe of authoritarian transitions for a successor regime, whether democratically elected or otherwise, to target the cronies of its predecessor. But would either of those factors – Putin's departure and the disenfranchisement of his elite – change anything?

From the standpoint of sociopolitical mobilization, Putin's departure, when it happens, will be important. Mobilizational frames consist, first and foremost, of an injustice to be righted and a target who can be blamed for its persistence. The departure of a dictator will open up new political opportunities for movement organizations to seek direct political leverage, relieving the pressure for street-level activism. Putin's departure will also send activists out in search of new targets to blame: once problems begin to persist into the reign of his successor, blaming Putin will cease to be a viable mobilizational strategy.

The hardening of politics in Putin's third term – the deepening of dichotomies, the sharpening of political and ideational dividing lines, the increasing role of fear and coercion – has contributed to the consolidation both of the regime and its opponents. This was, of course, an inevitable result: civil society, as citizens' mobilized response to the state's intrusions into their private and public lives, reflects the contours of the state and thus consolidates to the extent that its primarily interlocutor makes itself tangible. Putin's state-led mobilization has brought new constituents from what had been the soft center of Russian politics more firmly into his camp, effectively preventing them from falling into opposition; but others have been pushed in the opposite direction. This is not an entirely new phenomenon, but it has gathered such force and velocity as to allow us to claim that Russian politics today are fundamentally different from what they were before.

When Putin goes, the regime, for a time, will become less tangible. The expectations that have crystallized over the last few years will shatter, as actors on all sides begin to form new sets of roles and understandings. The dividing lines will blur again, and Russians on both sides of today's politics will move back toward the middle. Thus, it is hard to overestimate the impact that Pu-

tin's departure will have on Russian civil society: it will radically reshape the landscape.

But in other ways, Putin's departure will change very little. The underlying tectonics of Russians' relationship with their state – their preparedness to see it as simultaneously dysfunctional and yet legitimate, unjust and yet worthy – does not change just because Putin leaves. It is noteworthy that none of the mobilizational efforts described above – nor, indeed, any of the mobilizational efforts described in any of the other studies of Russia cited here – could reasonably be called proactive. In fairness,

most mobilization is reactive, not least because most people live most of their lives in the private realm, venturing into the public only when provoked. But the absence of proactive public mobilization is not everywhere as nearly absolute as it is in Russia. Civil-social mobilization in Russia can, in fact, be powerful: it resists the state, pushes back against it, delays or stops its advances, and sometimes wins a reversal, all the while galvanizing communities of interest and ideology. The question is, can civil society become convinced that the state itself can change?

ENDNOTES

- ¹ See Daniel Treisman, "Presidential Popularity in a Hybrid Regime: Russia under Yeltsin and Putin," *American Journal of Political Science* 55 (3) (2011): 590 – 609; Lev Gudkov, "Inertsia passivnoi adaptatsii," *Pro et Contra* 15 (1 – 2) (2011): 20 – 42; and Samuel A. Greene, "Citizenship and the Social Contract in Post-Soviet Russia," *Demokratizatsiya* 20 (2) (2012): 133 – 140.
- ² Samuel A. Greene, *Moscow in Movement: Power and Opposition in Putin's Russia* (Palo Alto, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2014).
- ³ Michael Burawoy, Pavel Krotov, and Tatyana Lytkina, "Involution and Destitution in Capitalist Russia," *Ethnography* 1 (1) (2000): 43 – 65.
- ⁴ Ministry of Economic Development of the Russian Federation, "Ob itogakh sotsial'no-ekonomicheskogo razvitiya Rossiiskoi Federatsii v 2016 godu," <http://economy.gov.ru/wps/wcm/connect/9056bb04-390c-47f9-b47f-8e3b061bc7b8/monitor1-12.pdf?MOD=AJPERES&CACHEID=9056bb04-390c-47f9-b47f-8e3b061bc7b8> (accessed February 10, 2017).
- ⁵ World Bank, "The Long Road to Recovery," Russia Economic Report No. 35 (Washington, D.C.: World Bank, 2016).
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Russian Revanche: External Threats & Regime Reactions

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Abstract: Has the development of post-Soviet Russia in an international system dominated by a democracy-promoting United States bred an authoritarian reaction in Russia as a response to perceived threats from the West? Beginning with the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999, Russian elites have increasingly seen the United States as a distinctively threatening power, one with a strategy to exploit civic organizations, ethnic groups, and other forms of domestic pluralism as “fifth columns” in an effort to overthrow unfriendly regimes. With each new crisis in U.S.-Russian relations – Ukraine 2004, Georgia 2008, Ukraine 2014 – the Russian leadership has tightened controls over society, the press, and the state. The result is that the United States’ muscular promotion of democracy abroad has produced the opposite of its intended effect on Russia, leading successive Russian governments to balance the perceived threat from the United States by pursuing greater military and intelligence capacity to intervene abroad, and by tightening internal authoritarian controls at home to prevent foreign exploitation of the nascent internal pluralism that emerged in the wake of Communism.

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For the first post-Soviet decade, the pole star for Russia and much of Eurasia lay in the West. While championing their country’s distinctiveness, Russian elites sought investment, modernization, and integration into a set of world institutions and a liberal economic order that was designed and dominated by the U.S. and European states and companies. They measured their progress by the standard of Western states and institutions, and success was defined as access to the markets and influence in the institutions of Europe and the United States. Alternatives to Western liberalism, and in particular alternatives to liberal democracy, were certainly explored, but the basic standard remained.¹

That is clearly no longer the case. Over the past decade, and accelerating in the past three years, we have witnessed Russia’s deliberate distancing from Western (U.S.) values, institutions, rules, and norms, and

from the cooperative role that Russia had been expected to play in international affairs. This has challenged every aspect of Russia's rocky relationship with the United States and Europe. Internally, we have seen the tightening of societal controls, increasingly limited political competition, and a resurgence of nationalism and conservatism in ideology and rhetoric.

Is there a connection between Russia's geopolitical turn away from "the West" and its turn away from liberalism at home? Traditionally, if the link between Russia's political regime and its international relations has been discussed at all, the assumption has typically been that Russia's undemocratic internal politics and political economy drive its oppositional foreign policy.² Whether it is because of the economic imperative of low soil yields or the ideological imperatives of pan-Slavism and revolutionary communist ideology, scholars have repeatedly argued that Russia's domestic character drives it to expand and project power outward.³ In contemporary writing, it is often assumed that as leaders of a nondemocratic (kleptocratic,⁴ fascist⁵) regime, Russia's elite relies on distracting its population with military victories and imaginary external threats to stay in power. Putin pursues war abroad to gain legitimacy at home.

The arguments are familiar, if not taken for granted. Less attention has been given to the converse thesis: that the current Russian regime is partially the product of the post-Cold War international environment in which it developed – an environment that Russian elites, rightly or wrongly, have progressively come to see as threatening to their state's survival. Russia, in the twenty-five years following the end of the Cold War, developed in an era of unprecedented American power. Power need not imply threat, but it is the exception to the rule for states not to find the preponderance of power threatening. And over the course of the past twenty-five

years, and especially following the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999, American power and influence have come to be perceived in Russia as a multifaceted Western threat. By 2016, the predominant Russian view – expressed in official statements, state media, and elite policy circles – sees the United States as the preeminent military power in the world and leader of a military alliance that has marched relentlessly to the Russian border and has used force and funds to overthrow and infiltrate rival regimes.⁶ Russian restrictions on civil society and NGOs, on foreign aid and assistance, on the media, and on the control of strategic economic assets – all critical features of its authoritarian regime – have been justified as a need to internally balance against an external Western threat. Even if we grant that such fears are not fully grounded in fact, is it possible that a genuine perception of external threat has driven some of the Russian leadership's decisions about domestic control, and that an alternative international environment would have led to a very different, more democratic Russia?

These questions afford no definitive answers, since we cannot remove Russia from its international context and see how its regime might have developed in different conditions. But that is precisely the point. We cannot presume that the international environment in which Russia was situated had no effect on the internal changes that took place, nor that international relations will have no future effect on Russia's internal developments. In this essay, drawing on the sequence of contentious international events of the past two decades and Russia's inward turn toward authoritarianism, I explore the prospect that there is a vicious cycle at work in which external threats and internal closure feed one another, driving the Russian state deeper into a nondemocratic, reactive spiral in its relations with the United States and with its own citizenry.

We do not typically think of U.S. pre-eminence as a source of nondemocratic regimes. In the past decade, the authors who have begun to examine the role of the international environment in shaping domestic political regimes, both as a general phenomenon and within postcommunist Europe, have consistently viewed Western influence as a contributor to greater democratization. These authors have suggested that (liberal) international and regional organizations promote democratization by socializing elites, by leveraging the economic benefits of membership to shape the regimes of potential members, and by enhancing the linkage of nondemocratic regimes to the economies and politics of democratic states.⁷ Many have examined the longer-term impact of international democracy assistance programs and the construction of civic organizations and media that provide the basis for democratization, as well as more bilateral ties of linkage and leverage among neighboring states and allies.⁸ Others explore the role of transnational activist networks in mobilizing for democratic change in response to rigged elections.⁹ Democratic international society assimilates states through socialization, sanction, and transborder networks and interactions. There is no shortage of works that look at democratizing international influences.

Yet these works have a distinctly benign or liberal view of the international environment and the nature of international influence. External influences are primarily “benevolent” in the sense that outside actors are helping societies to overthrow the shackles of their nondemocratic leaders, and international influences work in the direction of democracy. This is a valid but nonetheless quite narrow view of the role of international influences on domestic political regimes. Significantly, perhaps, it is not the view of international relations one encounters in Moscow or Bei-

jing. It neglects the role of external threat or perceived concerns about national security and territorial sovereignty, and the effect of conflictual geopolitical relations among states on their internal development.

These are major omissions. Early social theorists drew a connection between external threats and internal freedoms, or the “constitution” of states. Otto Hintze, the military historian and contemporary of Max Weber, noted that to focus solely on the internal sources of political regimes was “in effect, to wrench each single state from the context in which it was formed; the state is seen in isolation, exclusive in itself, without raising the question whether its peculiar character is co-determined by its relation to its surrounds.”¹⁰ In keeping with the Realist tradition in international relations, the “surrounds” that influenced regime development were characterized as threatening, with the degree and nature of the threat determined by geography and proximity to other powers. States were not directly socialized by the other states that constituted their environment; their constitutions were a response or reaction to the security environment they faced. States were influenced not by the “values” of their neighbors, but through existential competition with them.¹¹ For political scientist Harold Lasswell, heightened levels of war and external threat would breed undemocratic “garrison states” at home.¹² The sparse contemporary literature on how external threats have shaped the development of political regimes suggests that external threats and interstate conflict work against the development of democracy.¹³

To assess the role of external threat it is useful to examine both the realities of relative power as well as Russian perceptions of threat. What is the international environment in which Russia has found

itself over the past twenty-five years? It is a world in which the United States is militarily dominant, active, and increasingly present on Russia's borders. During Putin's first term as president, from 2000 to 2005, U.S. military spending increased from \$415 billion to \$610 billion and its share of overall world military spending rose above 40 percent.¹⁴ The NATO alliance – at American impetus – steadily expanded: to Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary in 1999; to Slovakia, Slovenia, Romania, Bulgaria, and the three Baltic states – Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania – in 2004; and to Croatia and Albania in 2009. The alliance made clear that its doors were open to new members, raising the possibility that additional territories that were once part of the Soviet Union would become part of the NATO security architecture.¹⁵ At the Bucharest Summit in 2008, NATO explicitly stated that Georgia and Ukraine “will become members.”¹⁶

Along with the increase in relative U.S. military power and expenditure and the expansion of U.S. alliances was a shift in U.S. doctrine to define foreign democratization and human rights as a primary national security interest and to explicitly advocate interference in the internal affairs of other states. This shift in U.S. doctrine was bipartisan – as much characterized by the “muscular liberalism” of the Clinton administration's actions in the Balkans and the expansion of NATO as by the Bush administration's intervention in Iraq – but it was most clearly articulated in George W. Bush's Second Inaugural Address in 2005:

We are led, by events and common sense, to one conclusion: The survival of liberty in our land increasingly depends on the success of liberty in other lands. The best hope for peace in our world is the expansion of freedom in all the world.

America's vital interests and our deepest beliefs are now one. . . . Advancing these ideals

is the mission that created our Nation. It is the honorable achievement of our fathers. Now it is the urgent requirement of our nation's security, and the calling of our time.

Keith A. Darden

So it is the policy of the United States to seek and support the growth of democratic movements and institutions in every nation and culture, with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world.¹⁷

If the perception of threat derives from a combination of capability and intent,¹⁸ one would have to be strongly committed to the idea of the benevolence of American power and influence not to find the United States threatening in the post-Cold War period.¹⁹ Russian elites do not have strong priors regarding Western benevolence. The stated commitment to intervention “in every nation and culture” was perceived not as liberal benevolence but as the pretext for the use and expansion of American power. From the Russian government's perspective, the past twenty-five years have been a progressive revelation of the threat emanating from a preponderance of U.S. power.²⁰ Kosovo 1999. Iraq 2003. Ukraine 2004. Georgia 2008. Libya 2011. Ukraine 2014. Each crisis sparked and reinforced a growing elite narrative about the dangers of a powerful, interventionist United States.

What effect did liberal American dominance have on Russia? Some have raised the possibility that the collapse of one pole in a bipolar system has meant the end of effective opposition,²¹ or at least the end of an alternative normative standpoint.²² Michael McFaul argued that in the “unipolar” world that followed the collapse of the USSR, the removal of competitive pressures, combined with the singularity of the democratic, capitalist model, meant that the United States no longer feared revolutionary regime change; other states were no longer in a position to provide external

assistance to authoritarian regimes that repress popular opposition.²³ The effect of the international environment on domestic regimes would be to move them closer to democracy. In a sense, in a world with one normative pole and center of power, the only available option is to jump on the bandwagon.

Russia, of course, has done the opposite. In response to the build-up and repeated use of U.S. expeditionary forces, Russia increased military expenditure and undertook major reforms of the structure of the armed forces, creating a far more capable and less corrupt force.²⁴ Russia initiated limited reforms in Putin's first term and increased expenditure considerably, although military spending as a share of Russian GDP and overall government expenditure stayed relatively constant at approximately 4 percent and 10 – 11 percent, respectively.²⁵ Following the Russo-Georgian War of 2008, however, the Russian government pursued a series of transformative reforms under Defense Minister Anatolii Serdyukov, shifting from an officer-heavy mass mobilization force to a more effective mobile force based more heavily on well-equipped, well-trained professional soldiers. Spending increased while personnel were cut. The basic model of the Russian military was transformed. Snap inspections and readiness drills became the norm. Russia invested heavily in the production of a new generation of tanks and aircraft, and increasingly equipped its units with advanced weaponry. Russia continued to rely on nuclear weapons as a response to existential threats, but created well-trained mobile special-operations units that could be deployed quickly and quietly to counter conventional threats.

The Russian government also increased the repression of dissent at home. To what extent has the closure of Russia's political regime been a response to the increasing perception of a threatening international

environment as a result of these crises? Many raise the possibility that Russian leaders simply frame the international environment as threatening as a tool to preserve a corrupt and closed regime, and Russia is often labelled a kleptocracy. But a country whose regime is primarily devoted to the personal enrichment of its leaders should not invest over a tenth of its government budget in its militaries, especially not in actual preparedness through costly regular exercises. Kleptocrats – those who rule solely for the purpose of personal financial enrichment, such as Yanukovich in Ukraine or Mobutu in the Congo – take the money for themselves while allowing all aspects of the regime not critical to political survival to atrophy. If the Kremlin were simply ginning up the perception of external threat to stay in power, it would not have made real investments in defense. The government's spending suggests that the official statements about external threat are not solely propaganda for domestic consumption.

As noted above, we simply do not have access to a counterfactual world in which the United States were weaker and did not fuse democracy promotion abroad with military power. We can, however, gain some leverage by examining the timing and sequence of regime changes in Russia. If external threat is contributing to restrictions on domestic freedoms, then salient U.S. or NATO actions should be followed by closure of Russia's regime. Each new crisis in external relations should be met with a serial closing of Russia's doors to the international liberal order, with investment in coercive capacity and with a tightening of authoritarian controls at home. The Russian leadership's response has been to progressively balance against U.S. power and influence – a kind of “conservative realism” – manifest through tighter political control at home and more use of force abroad.

Judging from officially issued security documents, such as the Foreign Policy

Conception of the Russian Federation and the National Security Conception of the Russian Federation, the critical turning point in Russian perceptions of threat came with NATO's offensive military operations in Kosovo. Prior to this point, the United States and U.S. power were not presented as a threat to Russia in official government security assessments. NATO expansion – which began in the mid-1990s – was not well received in Russia, but NATO expansion alone appears to have been insufficient to raise the specter of a threat to Russia's territorial integrity.²⁶ Russia's security doctrine in 1997, which followed the invitation of Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic to join the NATO alliance, did not explicitly identify NATO or the United States in the list of threats Russia faced. Indeed, external military threats hardly merited mention. Even NATO's first (ever) major military engagement, the offensive operation in Bosnia against the Bosnian Serb forces, was undertaken with the approval of the UN Security Council. NATO expansion and the use of force were uncomfortable, perhaps, but not sufficient to lead to a fundamental rethink of the nonadversarial perception of the United States that had been in place since Gorbachev.

This changed with Kosovo. The NATO bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999 shifted perceptions completely: it showed that the alliance could (and would) be used for offensive out-of-area operations to intervene in the internal affairs of a sovereign state without United Nations approval. Russian leaders immediately registered the potential threat. The link of external (U.S./NATO) military power with internal opposition (the Kosovo Liberation Army) to undermine a rival government came to be perceived as a new model of warfare and the "foundation of a unipolar world."²⁷ In Russia's October 1999 National Security Concept – the first following the Kosovo War – international influence in Russia's

internal politics was identified as a threat to national security.²⁸ An expansion of the domestic control of the state was articulated as strategically necessary to prevent external actors from undermining Russia's internal security. In a world of asymmetric Western power, the notion that a state's internal opposition could be exploited by outside powers to undermine a regime created a perverse incentive for some regimes to circumscribe or eliminate the internal pluralism essential to democratic rule. The astute observer of Russian security policy and future National Security Council director Celeste Wallander noted in early 2000 that "many Russian analysts believe that bilateral relations [between the United States and Russia] are approaching Cold War levels of mistrust."²⁹

Shortly after the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia in the spring of 1999, Russia took an inward authoritarian turn.³⁰ Yeltsin selected a former KGB officer as his successor and the Kremlin tightened its vertical of power and invaded Chechnya to restore central government control, foreclosing the potential for a Kosovo-style Western intervention in Russia on behalf of an active separatist movement on Russian territory. The first terms of Putin's presidency saw a dramatic expansion of state control. State corporations and banks acquired key television media assets. The heads of state corporations and banks, in turn, were replaced with loyal cronies, typically with ties to the security sector (the *siloviki*).³¹ Natural resource assets were renationalized, with those personally loyal to Putin placed in control. Private wealth-holders either demonstrated political loyalty to the regime (Mikhail Fridman, Vladimir Potanin, Vagit Alekperov) or were expropriated (Mikhail Khodorkovsky, Vladimir Gusinsky, Boris Berezovsky). Foreign investors were pushed out of key sectors. New military districts were created and the elections of regional governors came to an end.

All of these developments, in turn, worsened relations with the United States. U.S. presidents criticized Russian actions, which in many ways simply reinforced the Russian view that in a world of overwhelming U.S. power, and a willingness of the United States to intervene in the domestic affairs of states, all potential internal opposition – whether ethnic/separatist, liberal, or humanitarian – was a potential fifth column waiting to be exploited by an overwhelmingly powerful external enemy. American concerns with internal Russian affairs reinforced the assumed link between the necessity of internal control and the countering of external threat.

The U.S. invasion of Iraq and the color revolutions heightened the sense that predominant U.S. power presented a novel kind of threat and continued the downward spiral.³² The color revolutions in Yugoslavia (2000), Georgia (2003), and Ukraine (2004) were particularly significant. Like Kosovo's Liberation Army, the opposition in these cases were perceived not as popular movements for freedom and democracy, but as organizational pro-Western proxies used by the United States to oust unfriendly leaders. Even when direct involvement of the U.S. government in these revolutions was not evident, many Russian elites assumed that the United States had a role, and that the "freedom agenda" shrouded a general U.S. strategy to oust unfriendly leadership. The assumption of a link between Western support and domestic opposition was not entirely groundless. Political scientists Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way point to the organizational linkage of the West to a country's business and NGO communities as a key factor influencing democratization.³³ As McFaul has noted regarding Ukraine, external assistance from the United States and European countries "played a significant role in underwriting the activities of civic organizations that helped get out the vote and then protect it" and "one of the

most effective media outlets, *Ukrainska pravda*, relied almost exclusively on external financial support."³⁴ Transnational networks did train activists and mobilize external support.³⁵ The triad of support for NGOs, election monitoring, and media organizations became an essential part of U.S. foreign assistance and international democracy promotion efforts.

Following the Orange Revolution in Ukraine, Russian security doctrines revealed yet another dark turn in Russian perceptions of the role of the United States in its internal affairs. Countering U.S. unipolarity was not simply a matter of building up Russian military capability to counterbalance U.S. strength. The goal was also to limit the U.S. "freedom agenda," which was posited as a vehicle for the extension of U.S. power and intervention through "hybrid warfare." Beginning in the early 2000s, Russian leadership articulated the view that the United States extended its influence through infiltration and subversion of unfriendly governments, that the United States exploits domestic and international law when and how it suits its relentless pursuit of power, and that much of the international order is a mechanism for imposing U.S. influence and designs. Regime change was equated with U.S. subjugation. Norm entrepreneurs and the domestic civil society organizations linked to them are the tips of the American spear. By January 2005, Russian state media was openly stating that Russia was the target of a new Cold War, waged "by political provocation, played out with the help of special operations, media war, political destabilization, and the seizure of power by an aggressively activated minority . . . with the help of velvet, blue, orange etc. revolutions."³⁶

The perceived link between the United States and domestic opposition – real or imagined – also negatively affected the domestic regime.³⁷ In May 2005, the head of the FSB (Federal Security Service), Nikolai Patrushev, warned in a speech to the

Russian Duma that foreign intelligence services were using NGOs to infiltrate Russian society and that “under the cover of implementing humanitarian programs in Russia, they lobby for the interests of certain countries and gather classified information on wide ranges of issues.”³⁸ The Russian government responded to the December 2004 Orange Revolution in Ukraine by creating new restrictions on NGOs, tightening control over foreign assistance, and limiting media freedoms, transnational advocacy networks, and election monitors.³⁹ Putin explicitly stated that the laws restricting NGOs were “intended to protect against the intervention of foreign states in the internal political life of the Russian Federation.”⁴⁰ The increased control of society – and the promotion of nationalist parasocietal organizations and the strengthening of the nationalist line in propaganda – followed fairly quickly on the back of the color revolutions and are reasonably interpreted as a direct response.⁴¹

When the U.S. government openly praised the 2011 – 2012 protests in Russia, with Secretary of State Hillary Clinton stating in a speech in Lithuania that “the Russian people, like people everywhere, deserve the right to have their voices heard and their votes counted,”⁴² the Russian government responded with the expulsion of USAID, a law demanding that entities receiving foreign funding must register as “foreign agents,” new restrictions on protest participation, and continued rhetoric about the influence of external actors on Russia’s internal affairs.⁴³ Prior to the crackdown, Putin noted that opposition leaders “heard the signal and with the support of the U.S. State Department began active work. . . . We are all grownups here. We all understand the organizers are acting according to a well-known scenario and in their own mercenary political interests.”⁴⁴ The perceived threat of the color revolutions – potentially with external sponsorship and encourage-

ment – effectively generated their antithesis in Russia: a set of authoritarian strategies, doctrines, and ideas. External support for democracy led to regime closure.

The internal closure of the regime and hostility between Russia and the United States spiraled downward precipitously with the crisis in Ukraine in 2014.⁴⁵ The extra-constitutional ouster of Viktor Yanukovich’s government and the seizure of power by a pro-U.S., pro-NATO, and anti-Russian coalition clearly marked a sharp increase in the perception of threat in Moscow, triggering a full triad of balancing efforts (military, internal, and ideological).⁴⁶ As a military response, Russia used its newly revamped special forces to quickly invade and annex Crimea and to sustain a separatist insurgency in eastern Ukraine. By May 2014, the Russian security doctrine identified color revolutions as a form of hybrid warfare used by the United States as the *primary* external threat.⁴⁷ New legislation further restricted the presence of foreign donors and limited foreign ownership of Russian media to 25 percent shares, which led to the sale and replacement of the editorial board of *Vedomosti*, one of the last moderately independent news sources. Opposition figures were targeted with propaganda and persecuted as “fifth columnists” of the West. The Duma passed legislation authorizing the FSB to fire on crowds.⁴⁸ And the Kremlin is creating a new National Guard that will be directly subordinate to the president.

Surely not all of Russia’s steps away from formal democracy should be linked to external factors. Boris Yeltsin shelled his own parliament and imposed a superpresidential constitution through a referendum in 1993, actions that have no evident link to international factors. The restrictions placed on political parties have no plausible international connection, since no political parties received foreign support. Moreover, some of the regime tightening – such

as the end of gubernatorial elections and the control of civic groups – corresponded to incidents of terror and secession that would clearly have heightened a sense of domestic threat. The Nord-Ost hostage crisis in October 2002 was followed by anti-terrorism laws restricting media coverage during emergency situations and the effective government takeover of NTV, the last independent television station. In the wake of the Beslan massacre in 2004 – and over a month prior to the Orange Revolution in Ukraine – the Russian Duma passed legislation ending the elections of regional governors. But the statements of the regime and the explicit efforts to close off avenues of foreign influence by tightening domestic controls suggest that even these domestic concerns were increasingly viewed through the lens of international threat and competition.

Not all countries would, or could, respond to U.S. power by balancing it or by introducing greater authoritarian controls. Germany and other NATO members responded by reducing their military spending and accepting diminished readiness to respond to external threats. They embraced American power and saw it as providing rather than undermining their own security. But Russia's Soviet past left it with a different set of priors, with which actions such as the NATO airstrikes on Yugoslavia resonated like a tuning fork. The Russian elite has a long history of perceiving internal opposition as agents of a foreign power. As George Kennan noted in his Long Telegram in 1947,

In 1924 Stalin specifically defended the retention of the “organs of suppression,” meaning, among others, the army and the secret police, on the ground that “as long as there is a capitalist encirclement there will be danger of intervention with all the consequences that flow from that danger.” In accordance with that theory, and from that time on, all internal

opposition forces in Russia have consistently been portrayed as the agents of foreign forces of reaction antagonistic to Soviet power.

The Russian reaction to U.S. power may not have been inevitable, but it certainly fit comfortably into Soviet Cold War narratives of enemy infiltration and threat.

To place the Russian reaction in broader context it is useful to recall historian and diplomat E. H. Carr, who pointed to the relations of power that underlay normative commitments in international affairs. Writing in the 1930s, but looking back at the ideologies of predominant states, Carr noted that internationalism and universalism were ideologies of states that aspired to world leadership – to hegemony. Universal values suit the powerful, Carr thought, for they justify universal intervention and interference in the internal affairs of other states, something only the powerful are capable of. “Pleas for international solidarity and world union,” Carr wrote, “come from those dominant nations which may hope to exercise control over a unified world.” Similarly, Carr noted that the ideological reaction of rising powers was a function of positions of relative weakness. “Countries which are struggling to force their way into the dominant group naturally tend to invoke nationalism against the internationalism of the controlling powers.”⁴⁹ Universalism, whether liberal or communist, is the ideology of the dominant. The aspiring or declining powers mobilize nationalism and particularism.

In the post-Cold War period, Russia developed in an international environment dominated by a United States that combined military power, a normative commitment to democratic regime change, and transnational activist networks for the promotion of democratic elections abroad. In the antiliberalism of great powers like Russia and China, we see the paradoxical effect

of the singularity of American power and dominance: a defensive inversion of dominant norms. For states strong enough to mount a challenge, and with a prior history of framing internal pluralism as a source of external threat, resistance to U.S. power will present as an antiliberalism that is likely to shape domestic institutions. It is depressing that the primary effect of a world dominated by liberal democratic states may not be the gradual extension of democracy and the normative assimilation of the world's nondemocratic emerging powers, but it should not come as a surprise. The primary effect of muscular liberalism may be to generate an opposing reaction.

This is precisely what we have seen in the Russian case, where the response to liberal democratic universalism and American power has been military buildup combined with domestic repression and a more conservative antidemocratic nationalism. In reacting to the perceived threat of U.S. power and potential interference in its domestic affairs, the Russian leadership consistently tightened its political control over the Russian state and society, further worsening relations with the United States. In this sense, the repressive regime in Russia is not entirely indigenous. It evolved in part as a response to the international environment of U.S. power and the international promotion of democracy. As liberal universalism has grown more muscular – more identifiably American in its networks of support and legal foundation – and penetrated closer to Russian borders through the expansion of NATO and the color revolutions, Russia has not grown more open domestically, but more closed. As the level of external threat has increased with confrontation with the West over Ukraine and the ensuing sanctions, Russia has simply grown more nationalist, more closed, and more repressive. Paradoxically – but perhaps predictably – the Russian reaction to U.S. power and democracy promotion was to shore up

both the doctrine and practice of nationalism, illiberalism, and nondemocratic rule. If Russia had a less threatening relationship with the United States, it is possible that we would have a very different, more democratic Russia. And, in turn, a more democratic Russia might have reinforced a better relationship with the United States.

This is not to suggest that the authoritarian turn in Russia or its conflictual relationship with the West is the “fault,” in any meaningful sense, of any particular U.S. government or leadership. Neither U.S. power nor its democratic institutions were plausibly subject to change in the post-war period. The simple fact of U.S. power combined with U.S. values might have been sufficient to make the U.S.-Russian relationship problematic. But beginning with Kosovo, the tightening of domestic controls in Russia following international crises with the West suggests that the marriage between power, particularly the use of military force, and liberal ideals was particularly pernicious in the Russian case.

And the Russian case is perhaps not unique, but rather begs some deeper questions about the relationship between power and ideas, and about U.S. power and the effective promotion of democracy. A muscular liberalism backed by the world's dominant power may lead to concerns that freedom will be exploited to interfere in the internal affairs of states. The enterprise of international democracy promotion – supporting media, civic organizations, and academics that are favorably inclined toward the values of the more powerful state – may paradoxically promote a repressive nationalist response, or at least undermine indigenous sources of democratization. Power, and especially military power, may undermine the capacity of a country to promote its ideas. Democracy's virtues may be the truth, but from the mouth of the most powerful state in human history, it can easily sound like a lie.

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- ¹ Keith A. Darden, *Economic Liberalism and Its Rivals: The Formation of International Institutions Among the Post-Soviet States* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).
- ² In other works, Russia's regime dynamics are seen as unrelated to or immune from international influences. Henry E. Hale, *Patronal Politics: Eurasian Regime Dynamics in Comparative Perspective* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015); and Lucan Way, "Resistance to Contagion: Sources of Authoritarian Stability in the Former Soviet Union," *Democracy and Authoritarianism in the Postcommunist World*, ed. Valerie Bunce, Michael McFaul, and Kathryn Stoner-Weiss (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).
- ³ Richard Pipes, *Russia Under the Old Regime* (New York: Scribners, 1974), chap. 1; "X" [George F. Kennan], "The Sources of Soviet Conduct," *Foreign Affairs* (1947); and Stephen Kotkin, "Russia's Perpetual Geopolitics," *Foreign Affairs* 95 (3) (2016).
- ⁴ Karen Dawisha, *Putin's Kleptocracy: Who Owns Russia?* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2014).
- ⁵ Alexander J. Motyl, "Is Putin's Russia Fascist?" Atlantic Council, April 23, 2015, <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/is-putin-s-russia-fascist>.
- ⁶ John J. Mearsheimer, "Why the Ukraine Crisis is the West's Fault: The Liberal Delusions that Provoked Putin," *Foreign Affairs* 93 (5) (September/October 2014).
- ⁷ Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes after the Cold War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Jon C. Pevehouse, *Democracy from Above: Regional Organizations and Democratization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); and Milada Vachudova, *Europe Undivided: Democracy, Leverage and Integration after Communism* (London: Oxford University Press, 2005).
- ⁸ Thomas Carothers, *Aiding Democracy Abroad: The Learning Curve* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1999); Michael McFaul, "The Missing Variable: The 'International System' as the Missing Link Between Third and Fourth Wave Models of Democratization," in *Democracy and Authoritarianism in the Postcommunist World*, ed. Bunce, McFaul, and Stoner-Weiss; Kathryn Stoner-Weiss, "Comparing Oranges and Apples: The Internal and External Dimensions of Russia's Turn Away from Democracy," in *Democracy and Authoritarianism in the Postcommunist World*, ed. Bunce, McFaul, and Stoner-Weiss; Levitsky and Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism*; Daniel Brinks and Michael Coppedge, "Diffusion is No Illusion: Neighbor Emulation in the Third Wave of Democracy," *Comparative Political Studies* 39 (4) (May 2006): 463–489; and Kristian Skrede Gleditsch and Michael D. Ward, "Diffusion and the International Context of Democratization," *International Organization* 60 (4) (2006): 911–933.
- ⁹ Valerie Bunce and Sharon Wolchik, *Defeating Authoritarian Leaders in Postcommunist Countries* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011).
- ¹⁰ Otto Hintze, "The Formation of States and Constitutional Development: A Study in History and Politics," in *The Historical Essays of Otto Hintze*, ed. Felix Gilbert (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), 159.
- ¹¹ Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1979).
- ¹² Harold D. Lasswell, "The Garrison State," *The American Journal of Sociology* 46 (4) (1941): 455–468.
- ¹³ Ted Robert Gurr, "War, Revolution, and the Growth of the Coercive State," *Comparative Political Studies* 21 (1) (April 1988): 45–65; William R. Thompson, "Democracy and Peace: Putting the Cart before the Horse?" *International Organization* 50 (1) (1996): 141–174; Dan Reiter, "Does Peace Nurture Democracy?" *The Journal of Politics* 63 (3) (2001): 935–948; Douglas M. Gibler, "Outside-In: The Effects of External Threat on State Centralization," *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 54 (4) (2010): 519–542; Karen Rasler and William R. Thompson, "Borders, Rivalry, Democracy, and Conflict in the European Region, 1816–1994," *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 28 (3) (2011): 280–305; and Ronald R. Krebs, "In the Shadow of War: The Effects of Conflict on Liberal Democracy," *International Organization* 63 (1) (2009): 177–210. Given the large body of work on the central role of external threat and international competition in

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¹⁴ Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, SIPRI Military Expenditure Database 2015 [in constant 2014 USD], <https://www.sipri.org/databases/milex>.

¹⁵ As NATO expanded, the investment of its members in their military capability declined, but the addition of new members implied that the United States had greater capacity to extend its reach and influence eastward in Europe. (Mighty Montenegro will potentially be joining the alliance this year.)

¹⁶ See Angela Stent, *The Limits of Partnership: U.S.-Russian Relations in the Twenty-First Century* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2014), 167.

¹⁷ "Second Inaugural Address of George W. Bush; January 20, 2005," The Avalon Project at Yale Law School, http://avalon.law.yale.edu/21st_century/gbush2.asp.

¹⁸ Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1982).

¹⁹ These statements reflect the view that sovereignty of foreign governments is conditional (on democracy and human rights), and that U.S. power may legitimately be used to overthrow regimes that are illegitimate. When there is no international body that assesses legitimacy and states are judges in their own cause, this is threatening.

²⁰ Fyodor Luk'yanov, "Perestroika 2014: The Reasons Behind Moscow's Firm Stance on Ukraine," Valdai Discussion Club, March 19, 2014, http://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/perestroika_2014_the_reasons_behind_moscow_s_firm_stance_on_ukraine/ (original Russian at <http://www.gazeta.ru/comments/column/lukyanov/5952017.shtml>); and Valdai Discussion Club, "Vladimir Putin Meets with Members of the Valdai Discussion Club. Transcript of the Plenary Session of the 13th Annual Meeting," October 27, 2016, <http://valdaiclub.com/events/posts/articles/vladimir-putin-took-part-in-the-valdai-discussion-club-s-plenary-session/>.

²¹ William C. Wohlforth, "The Stability of a Unipolar World," *International Security* 24 (1) (Summer 1999).

²² McFaul, "Missing Variable"; Francis Fukuyama, "The End of History?" *The National Interest* (Summer 1989).

²³ McFaul, "Missing Variable."

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²⁵ SIPRI Military Expenditure Database 2015, <https://www.sipri.org/databases/milex>.

²⁶ There was a general awareness in Western policy circles that the expansion of NATO might negatively influence Russia's internal politics: Clinton had postponed an announcement re-

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- ²⁷ Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov, quoted in Stent, *The Limits of Partnership*, 43.
- ²⁸ Ted Hopf, "'Crimea is Ours': A Discursive History," unpublished manuscript, January 2016, 4–5; Stent, *The Limits of Partnership*, chap. 7; and Celeste A. Wallander, "Russian National Security Policy in 2000," PONARS Policy Memo No. 102 (Washington, D.C.: PONARS Eurasia, 2000), https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy_files/files/media/csis/pubs/pm_0102.pdf.
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- ³³ Levitsky and Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism*.
- ³⁴ McFaul, "Missing Link," 219.
- ³⁵ Bunce and Wolchik, *Defeating Authoritarian Leaders in Postcommunist Countries*.
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Images of the Future

George W. Breslauer

Abstract: This concluding essay outlines several alternative futures for Russia in the coming decades, building upon the perspectives and information in the preceding essays in this volume and relating these to my own thinking about the future of Russia. Hence, this essay does not represent a consensus of the issue's twelve authors, but rather a meld of their thoughts and my own.

After the collapse of Communism and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, most Western observers were hoping that Russia would eventually evolve into a liberal democracy. Nobody thought it would be either quick or easy, but the fascination of the time was to speculate about the steps that would need to be taken to bring about, first, a “democratic breakthrough” and, later, “democratic consolidation.” We all thought and wrote a great deal about indicators of, and strategies for, such a transition. We applied those insights or presuppositions to a continuous tracking of changes under Gorbachev and Yeltsin. As the Yeltsin years rolled on, contention intensified over whether the first post-Soviet president of Russia was leading the country through a difficult transition or was regressing toward authoritarianism and poisoning the nascent shoots of liberal democracy.

Putin's actions during the early 2000s were less ambiguous and helped to rebuild consensus among most Western analysts. But this time, the consensus was that the Putin regime represented “de-democratization,” or authoritarian consolidation. It became increasingly difficult to imagine how this might be reversed. Indeed, in the collection of essays in this volume, no author predicts a democratic breakthrough toward the rule of law, a flowering of civil society, or liberal democracy over the next ten to fifteen years. Transition to liberal democracy is now

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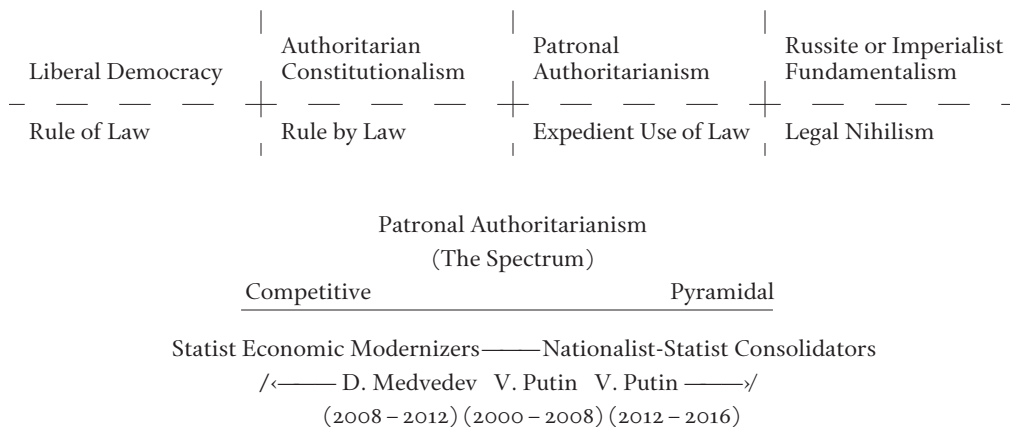
viewed, at least within the stipulated time frame, as somewhat chimerical. Moreover, there is widespread agreement among our authors on how to characterize the current regime. Steeped in the comparativist literature on varieties of authoritarian regimes, they would all define Putin's regime as some adjectival version of authoritarianism, be it "competitive," "electoral," "kleptocratic," "autocratic," "patronal," or "statist." These adjectives are not mutually exclusive; indeed, most authors in this volume would agree that they all capture some important feature of the system. Our authors differ, though not sharply, on what it would take to break out of this regime type, but none of them effuses optimism that such a breakout is likely.

So we have gone from guarded optimism about liberal-democratic futures to thinly qualified pessimism about the ability to escape a situation that, borrowing from political scientist Richard Rose and colleagues' observation about a different set of issues, we might refer to as a "low-level equilibrium trap."¹

What might be considered possible alternatives to this type of regime (see Figure 1)? Having eliminated liberal democracy as a likelihood, we can look to the other end of the political spectrum. There we might imagine a "Russite" or imperialist-fundamentalist reaction: a reversion to some kind of revanchist fascism, which is the nightmare of moderates and liberals along the political spectrum in Russia today, and which now looks like only a possibility, though a decidedly more likely possibility than a successful transition to liberal democracy. None of the essays in this issue assigns this fascist scenario a high probability in the next decade or two. But given Russia's travails at home and abroad and the escalation of revanchist and Russite-fundamentalist political rhetoric in the past five years, it is not difficult to imagine that a political-economic breakdown of some sort,

or an international security failure, could conceivably lead to the ascendance of a regime that is pogromist at home and militaristically revanchist abroad.

With liberal democracy and Russite or imperialist fundamentalism at the two extremes, a middling alternative to the current regime is what Maria Popova calls "authoritarian constitutionalism": not rule of law (an attribute of liberal democracy), but rule *by* law. This intriguing possibility – to which Popova lends credence but does not assign high probability – might be driven by the urge on the part of business elites and their political and ministerial patrons to gain stable expectations about how they and their property rights will be treated in the political and legal arenas. Popova calls this *authoritarian* constitutionalism because, while it would provide stable expectations to business elites, it would retain an authoritarian and exclusionary posture vis-à-vis the masses of the population. Brian Taylor's evidence of the military and security services only asserting themselves to avoid a breakdown of the state speaks indirectly to this possibility, since it leaves room for statist elites to renegotiate the terms of intralite reciprocity behind the scenes, with confidence that the *siloviki* will prevent a breakdown of the state's authority vis-à-vis the broader population. This accords with Stanislav Markus's observation that some business elites have a material stake in remaining open to the global capitalist economic order, which, in my opinion, could become part of such an intralite pact. Thus, even though Popova emphasizes how difficult it is to effect a breakthrough even toward rule *by* law, her essay introduces into our imagination an intermediate image that contains some degree of plausibility. Thinking about this possibility may be a useful antidote to thinking that the only alternatives to Putinism are a breakthrough far to the right or far to the left.



Whether one anticipates systemic alternatives to Putinism hinges in part on how one understands the regime currently in place. Most scholars would depict it as electoral authoritarianism, led by a strong presidency, in which the formal institutions that might check the power of the presidency, including presidential elections, have been neutered and hollowed out, but remain under the control of competing and interlacing patron-client networks that owe their allegiance to entities and individuals outside those hollowed-out institutions. A major feature of this “patronal” regime, as Henry Hale aptly calls it, is its ideological signature. It is supported by a broad, centrist coalition that marginalizes both the radical liberals or democratizers on the left and the most intolerant nationalist-chauvinists or fascists on the right. Elena Chebankova expounds on the breadth of this ideological spectrum, depicting a condition of “paradigmatic pluralism”: a multitude of paradigms that all stay within the parameters that Putin has defined as legitimate discourse. The center of gravity of this ideational pluralism is, according to

Chebankova, “a hegemonic discourse of state-centered conservatism.” And as Hale and many of our authors argue, the center of gravity of this networked, patronal regime is Vladimir Putin, the patronal network he heads, and the extended networks that compete for access to resources and influence on the president.

Marlene Laruelle usefully distinguishes among state, parastate, and nonstate actors, and their respective conceptions of Russian nationalism. Many state and parastate actors are networked into this regime, even as they compete among themselves for resources. And because the ideological signature of the regime is so broad, Putin, as the ultimate arbiter in this political system, is able to tack back and forth among networks and among points on the broad ideological spectrum as circumstances dictate. He can make side payments that keep people under the umbrella, even as he curries support from the other side. And as the ultimate arbiter among competing networks, he is able to play them off against each other. He may not always get his way, but he chooses his battles and has the re-

sources to define the general course and to punish defiance.

This strategy has clearly manifested itself during the past five years. After taking back the presidency from Dmitrii Medvedev in 2012, Putin shifted the balance within this coalition decidedly to the right, enforcing further restrictions on civil society, a more defiant posture abroad, and increasingly chauvinistic and xenophobic doctrinal formulations. This peaked after the Ukrainian crisis of 2014 and the Russian seizure of Crimea, when Putin explicitly invoked romantic Russian nationalism to justify his policies in Ukraine. But while he has remained defiant of Kiev and the United States, he soon backed off from using his most chauvinistic rhetoric and distanced himself from spokespersons, emboldened by Russia's intervention in Ukraine, who urged that he go still further. He had tested the edges of this paradigmatic pluralism and decided that it could be destabilizing in a multiethnic society to push the center of gravity too far to the right. Indeed, more recently, and in the wake of Western economic sanctions, Putin has granted greater leeway to talented economic reformers like Aleksei Kudrin to devise plans for modernizing the Russian economy, though it remains to be seen whether those plans will be granted a fair hearing in the corridors of power. In the wake of the arrest of Putin's economics minister in November 2016, it also remains to be seen whether economic reformers will retain such influence as they currently enjoy.

Within this broad coalition there is a spectrum that ranges from internationalist economic reformers, at one end, to "Russia-first" nationalist-statist consolidators, at the other. These are not necessarily mutually exclusive viewpoints; they focus on different types of issues and therefore do not necessarily compete along the same dimension. But, in practice, they are in tension with each other, since moderniz-

ing the Russian economy will require its greater integration into the capitalist international economic order, which in turn could be incompatible with a neoisolationist, Russia-first mentality. In principle, one could imagine neoisolationist, nationalist-consolidating economic reformers, though you would have to look hard for them. Thus, the coalition has a built-in tension, since most economic reformers are skittish about the prospect that nationalist consolidators would constrict both political *and* economic freedoms, and would inhibit Russia's integration into the international economy through confrontational policies abroad. In turn, many nationalist consolidators are apprehensive that economic reformers would unleash forces that might weaken political controls, reduce opportunities for rent-seeking through corruption, and appease adversaries abroad in pursuit of economic integration. When Medvedev was president from 2008 to 2012, the rhetoric he endorsed was more in the direction of the economic reformers. That rhetoric was marginalized after Putin returned to the presidency.

What factors might drive change within this broad coalition? And what would determine whether the Putin pendulum swings to the moderate left or to the moderate right? International events and the state of the international environment are certainly among those factors. On this score, the contrast between Keith Darden's essay here and Stephen Kotkin's recent work in *Foreign Affairs* on the same subject is stark.² Putin's post-2012 shift to the right within this coalition could be viewed as an expression of his preexisting personality and preferences in the face of protests at home. Or it could be viewed as a reaction to perceived provocation abroad. If Putin's revanchist initiatives are a product of political-cultural predisposition, then a Western strategy of containment and deterrence might

be called for (depending upon one's values and aversion to risk). But if it is a reaction to provocation – which Moscow defines as NATO expansion, U.S. and EU democracy promotion in the former Soviet Union, and the United States' self-serving dictation and redefinition of the norms of international relations – then a Western strategy of reassurance and flexible negotiation might be called for.

One could argue that Gorbachev's reforms at home and his "new thinking" abroad validate the containment approach. Ronald Reagan held firm on his policies of deterrence and provocation (the Strategic Defense Initiative, or "star wars," among others) and Gorbachev soon decided that he could not win this game. His "new thinking" about foreign relations broke decisively with the Leninist paradigm that had previously informed Soviet foreign (and domestic) policy. Why should we not expect the same from Putin or his successor, as long as the West stands firm against Russian adventures abroad?

One could argue against the desirability of such a strategy, whatever its theoretical persuasiveness as a feasible "game" in international relations, by citing the risks and dangers of accidental military clashes with Russia resulting from tit-for-tat escalations on several fronts. On this score, the current situation may be more dangerous than during the early and mid-1980s. But putting aside the risks, the differences between Gorbachev and Putin predict lesser success for a Western strategy of containment today. For one thing, Gorbachev was a democratizer who built his authority by promising to liberalize the political order at home and reduce international tensions abroad. And he was steeped in a socialist ideological tradition, recast in his mind by the influence of Eurocommunism, that led him to believe – chimerically, it turned out – that he could engineer a stable equilibrium at home and abroad

by building "socialist democracy" within the USSR and a peaceful global partnership between reformed socialism and capitalism. Hence, faced with Reagan's recalcitrant posture, Gorbachev became conciliatory, rather than defiant; faced with opposition from conservatives and reactionaries at home, he became still more radical in his domestic political reforms.

Putin, by contrast, has built his political authority by playing to the themes of constructing a strong, centralized, authoritarian state and recovering Russia's former status as a great power that adversaries will be forced to respect and deal with as an equal. He is not steeped in an ideological tradition suggesting that a conciliatory posture abroad and a loosening at home might effect a desirable and stable equilibrium, either domestically or internationally. He views the United States as a revisionist superpower that is seeking to transform the world order to its advantage and in its image. He, in turn, calls for spheres of influence based on mutual respect for how the other defines its security interests, without attempting to transform the other's political order. Thus, a contemporary variant of "idealist" American Wilsonian thinking confronts a contemporary variant of "realist" Russian balance-of-power thinking. The historical irony is that, forty-five years ago, the reverse obtained: American balance-of-power thinking (Nixon and Kissinger) confronted Soviet thinking committed to "making the world safe for anti-imperialism."

Hence, Putin's nationalist-statist, spheres-of-influence ideology predisposes him to believe that reinforcement of controls at home, and defiance of provocation abroad, is the only route through which Russia "will be great again." Such nationalism also predisposes him to believe that the Russian people will sooner suffer economic austerity than another loss of national pride. And it has predisposed him, most recently, to de-

fine the relationship with the West in civilizational and confrontational terms, with the “postmodern” values of the West (gay/transgender rights, for example) meeting a hostile reception from both Russian elites and the broad population. Hence, a U.S. strategy of active containment and Western aversion to a “grand bargain” based on significant Western concessions are less likely to induce Putin to become conciliatory than was the case with Gorbachev. Rather, what we have seen thus far is that Putin has moved decidedly to the right within the broad coalition in response to his perception of Western provocation. Some of his economic-reformist advisers have unsuccessfully urged him to reduce international tensions (such as by not responding to provocations tit-for-tat) as a prerequisite for Russia’s further integration into, and benefit from, the international economy. Putin has thus far rejected such advice, invoking great-power prerogative and arguing that the first conciliatory moves must originate in the West. At the same time, he has given his economic reformists the task of devising plans for the modernization of the Russian economy despite international tensions. In one respect, though, Putin has tried to exercise a moderating influence. He appears to remain committed to “internationalism” within Russia, apparently believing that a pogromist posture toward ethnic minorities within Russia would prove both destabilizing and unworthy.³

Of course, Russia is not insulated from pressures in the international environment. Putin’s “team” cannot but fear that a military accident could spiral out of control, which could make them receptive to Western suggestions of accident-prevention measures. (Under President Kennedy and First Secretary Khrushchev, for example, the telephonic “hotline” between the White House and the Kremlin was one such measure that gained traction after the mutual fright induced by the October 1962 Cuban

Missile Crisis.) Beyond the military realm, the international environment puts constant, albeit incremental, pressures on Russian business interests to engage in adjustments to global markets. Putin, in his rhetoric, may be expressing his disillusion with the United States and the European Union, and he has been talking more about integration with the Asia-Pacific region. But integration with Asia-Pacific economies would still generate international pressures for rationalization and greater transparency of the Russian economy, which economic reformers within Putin’s coalition would welcome.

Shifting our attention from external to internal factors that might induce shifts of emphasis within Putin’s expansive coalition, let us focus on society, civil or not. Samuel Greene’s essay reminds us that, beyond the educated urban middle class (which predominated in protests against Putin in 2011 – 2012 following rigged parliamentary elections), the Russian people – while conservative in orientation, viewing the state as “simultaneously dysfunctional and yet legitimate, unjust and yet worthy” – are not an inert mass. They can be activated by circumstances. What might be the consequences of anomic outbursts (like the “wildcat” labor strikes of the late 1980s), shocks to the economy (like a budget crisis that compromises wage payments in state enterprises), sustained austerity that becomes increasingly difficult to blame on some plot hatched in Washington, a drop in the president’s popularity, or growing popular anger about corruption at local and regional levels? How would a Russia beyond Putin respond to efforts by Russia’s regions – especially those in the Far East, the Lower Volga region, and the North Caucasus – to seize back greater autonomy from Moscow and/or further integrate their economies with neighboring countries, regardless of Moscow’s wishes. Although this issue of *Dædalus* does

not explore in-depth the centrifugal potential within Russia's regions, it seems apt to imagine how a messy political succession could intensify such forces.

All these kinds of issues and triggers may not lead to a breakout toward either liberal democracy or Russite-fundamentalism, but they are likely to lead to shifts of emphasis within the elite coalition, and growing contradictions (and inraelite political struggle) if those shifting emphases prove ineffectual. For example, to buy off such anger, Putin could dictate that local elections be made more democratic, attempting to deflect anger away from Moscow and toward local incumbents. Absent loosened restrictions on civil liberties, this might not make those elections "free and fair," but it could make them more competitive and less rigged. Or a would-be successor could try to push things still further to the right, as a means of mobilizing sentiment for a "Fortress Russia" mentality.

The issue of corruption, both petty and grand, is also likely to become a matter of public contention in a post-Putin succession context. In times of economic expansion, such as Putin's first two terms as president (2000 – 2008), popular gall about inequality and corruption could be muted and offset by a perception of economic betterment at both the personal and societal levels. Under such circumstances, individuals can rationalize that it is worth taking advantage of opportunities for personal economic betterment and upward social mobility than to dwell on, much less protest, the injustices of petty and grand corruption. But in times of economic contraction, the so-called inert mass can be activated by this issue, in both the regions and the center. Eruptions like the Arab Spring or the color revolutions are often triggered by economic austerity and a sense of indignation about the existing *political* order. (A demand to be treated with "dignity" is driven by a sense of "in-

dignation"; the words have the same root.) Russia's population, even beyond the urban middle class, is quite educated and therefore susceptible to indignation about levels of corruption and inequality that restrict their life chances and insult their intelligence and dignity. Is the current level of corruption and inequality in Russia, during a prolonged economic contraction, politically sustainable in a high-income, highly educated country? And if so, for how long? This disjuncture between Russia's high-income status and its deficit of democracy is one of the "paradoxes of Putinism" that Timothy Colton highlights in his contribution to this volume.

If the issue of corruption becomes a focal point of political competition, the initiative for response could come from the top as well, not just from disaffected portions of the broader population. Anticorruption campaigns are mechanisms for consolidating one's authority. They were Yurii Andropov's signature initiative in 1983; they are a key feature of Communist Party leader Xi Jinping's policies in China today. Whether they would work to the benefit of economic reformers or of nationalist-consolidators might depend on the motivations of the leader who is prosecuting the effort. As Popova notes, in November 2016, Putin's minister for the economy, Aleksei Ulyukayev, was arrested on corruption charges.

There are other circumstances that could induce shifts along the political-ideological spectrum. Elections, political succession, and incapacitation of the leader all are moments during which people – both state actors and nonstate actors – start thinking about alternatives and perhaps begin acting in pursuit of them. They are moments for the mobilization of pressure, both within the political elite and within the broader society. Of course, shocks like domestic terror attacks could, depending

on their scale, location, and intensity, shift the political calculus, more likely than not to the right. Or, during a political succession, there could be publicized splits within the elite – ministerial officials, the security services, and the military – as competing patron-client networks seek to position themselves to protect their privileges, which are often in conflict with those of other networks. The essays by Henry Hale, Stanislav Markus, Fiona Hill, Valerie Bunce, and Brian Taylor amply suggest the possibility, indeed likelihood, of splits or struggles within the elite at moments of high political uncertainty. And therein lies a connection between elite division and popular mobilization, for political activists are more likely to take risks when they perceive that divisions within the political elite make change not only desirable, but also feasible. Bunce's essay lays out the many ways in which the situation in Russia is similar to, as well as different from, the situation in countries of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union that experienced color revolutions. On balance, Putin appears to have learned from those experiences and has, largely through coercion and countermobilization, prevented the similarities of circumstance from becoming predominant. But in the context of a "messy" post-Putin succession, his would-be successors may not be as clever or potent in anticipating challenges.

The prospect of a messy succession is heightened by Putin's strategy of hollowing out the political and societal institutions that might check his power. This has left Russia without an institutionalized means of regulating the succession process, a point that several authors in this issue make, and that Fiona Hill emphasizes especially. Presidential elections remain as the prime mechanism for the formal expression of public will about who should govern the country. But who gets to compete in the elections, and how those people are chosen (or

blocked) remains up for grabs in future scenarios. Under Yeltsin, the choice of Putin first as prime minister and then as acting president was highly personalized: Yeltsin made the choice and his right to do so was not challenged. Conceivably, Putin could choose his successor in this manner as well, though today there are many more entrenched and competing patron-client networks that have a lot at stake in that choice. Fiona Hill reports that there are signs that Putin's team is seeking to preempt the possibility of a messy succession by exploring mechanisms that have been employed elsewhere for containing the intensity and visibility of political conflict during succession. This could provide incentives for Putin to retire gracefully at some point, and perhaps allow him to retain his wealth, his privileges, behind-the-scenes power, or – should an anticorruption campaign be launched by a successor – his freedom.

As we ponder the possibilities, we must bear in mind that the absence of a breakout to either liberal democracy or revanchist fascism does not mean that no significant change has taken place. By this definition, none of our authors expects systemic change; even "authoritarian constitutionalism" remains within the "authoritarian" genus. But the essays in this volume do lend credence to the possibility of significant change that is not systemic, which could entail significant shifts along the spectrum of the currently regnant paradigmatic pluralism. There is a human cognitive tendency to project continuity into the future, which some critics might characterize as a failure of imagination. But whether the projection constitutes continuity or not depends on one's definition of significant change. In the present case, the very breadth of the reigning coalition, and the possibility of an in-trialite bargain such as authoritarian constitutionalism, mean that Russia beyond Putin might be marked by any number of significant changes.

Putin has tacked along the political spectrum while firmly – some might say brutally – policing the boundaries of this coalition. This has required no small measure of political skill and instinct on his part. If he seeks to remain president through 2024, and if the international environment does not freeze him into a preference for the right of the spectrum, we may see him tack back to the left when and if he decides that modernization of the manufacturing and service sectors of the economy has become an imperative. Such a switch would compete, of course, with rent-seekers within the patronal pyramid who would be most attentive to protecting their access to opportunities for self-enrichment. Were the balance among competing patron-client networks to shift, this could result in a shift toward what Hale calls a “competing-pyramid” (as opposed to the current “single-pyramid”) patronal system. This is especially

likely in the context of a political succession, and could contribute to the “messiness” and open-endedness of that process. (To the extent that competing pyramids check each other’s powers during a succession, a stalemate might increase the chances of a move toward authoritarian constitutionalism.) The system would still constitute patronal authoritarianism, but would presumably open up new possibilities for shifts along the current political spectrum. Tacking along that spectrum may constitute insignificant change in the eyes of those who prefer a breakout to the far left or far right. But it may constitute significant change in the eyes of those who see a multitude of possibilities within the current spectrum, some of them normatively repulsive and some normatively attractive, depending on the values of the observer – or of the Russian citizens who must live under that regime.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Richard Rose, Neil Munro, and Stephen White, “How Strong is Vladimir Putin’s Support?” *Post-Soviet Affairs* 16 (4) (2000): 287–312.
- ² Stephen Kotkin, “Russia’s Perpetual Geopolitics: Putin Returns to the Historical Pattern,” *Foreign Affairs* 95 (3) (2016): 2–9.
- ³ A thought experiment comes to mind. Suppose Yuri Andropov had lived for five to ten more years, instead of dying within sixteen months of his selection as General Secretary of the Communist Party. Would Andropov’s initially hard-line reaction to Reagan have been sustained throughout Reagan’s presidency?

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Inside back cover: (Top) Consumers shopping for food on New Year's Eve at the Auchan supermarket at Aviapark Mall in Moscow, December, 31, 2016. © by Mikhail Svetlov/Getty Images. (Bottom) Patriarch Kirill at a meeting in Sergiyev Posad with members of the Holy Synod and representatives of local Russian Orthodox churches, July 18, 2014. Courtesy of en.kremlin.ru.



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