

Russia on the Eve of its Presidential Election

HOW LONG CAN CHANGE AND STASIS COEXIST?

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At last, Vladimir Putin has decided that he will indeed be a candidate in the 2018 presidential election. Considering how long he has been in charge, it may seem that little has changed or will change in Russia's political sphere. However, in recent years, Putin has had his own personal perestroika and has modified Russia's political order to sustain his successful authoritarian system. By looking at the recent rejuvenations he made to Russia's political landscape, we can gain a more comprehensive sense of where Russia is headed. Despite clever alterations to personnel and decision-making processes, and the firm incapacitation of the opposition, there may be troubled times ahead. Russia faces deep economic challenges and Putin may experience problems rolling back his self-branding as a "war chieftain." The Russian political system is beset by a certain stasis and the president is in a legitimacy trap. Putin is sure to remain personally popular, but the government and economic situation as a whole are increasingly unpopular.

The New Political Regime

Russia's post-Soviet political regime has been "sultanistic" in nature, but it is a different regime than when Putin won the 2011-12 presidential election. The regime's most radical transformation took place in 2014 when Russia annexed Crimea. Although the Russian leadership seemed to suddenly enter a new identity zone at that time, the Kremlin had been making preparations for a while for a regime shift, in terms of both leadership postures and operating procedures.

The main change for Putin himself was that he transitioned himself from being a political leader to what might be called a "sultanistic military chieftain." In 2012-2013, his approval rating of 60 percent was among his lowest since 1999, but once he took

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Crimea and became a war commander, his public approval rating [sharply increased](#) to about 86 percent in 2015. During this time, public trust levels also improved toward all state institutions. Even though trust levels toward agencies of the state ultimately went back down to where they were before the annexation of Crimea, the public's views of Putin remained constantly high.

The condition of Putin's new legitimacy is still top-down in nature, from leader to political/economic elites. One change is that the dependence of the elites on him grew while his dependence on them decreased. Part of this was based on structural changes: the "new" leader no longer needed the elites to deliver him votes in elections. For example, the legitimacy of governors became based not on popular votes but whether Putin supports and/or appoints them. Since 2014, it is safe to say that the authorities no longer need elections to maintain legitimacy. Due to this, there have been fewer elections and those that have taken place (assorted local and regional elections as well as the 2016 parliamentary elections) have been marked by a lack of competition, low voter turnout, and generally low visibility (the Kremlin no longer needed to work hard to attract attention to its candidates/policies).

What we learned from the 2016 parliamentary elections is that as the leader's character strengthened, Russia's already weak institutions weakened further. The trend of increasing centralization has resulted in fewer autonomous centers of influence. Already a while ago, Russia stopped being a federation of regions and became a federation of "corporations" – a super-centralized state with a single center: Putin. It seems efficient, but it leads to a problem that can best be described as a cascade of hostage-taking: the country is held hostage by the regime, the regime is held hostage by Putin, and Putin is held hostage by his own 2014 decisions.

Overcoming Crises of Legitimacy

On May 6, 2012, large-scale protests in Moscow's Bolotnaya Square served as the major impetus for a moment of regime transformation. These protests demonstrated that the March 2012 presidential elections won by Putin did not secure his legitimacy. In the spring-summer that followed, the Kremlin began to exhibit a policy of confrontation with the West and self-isolationism. This shift was already becoming inevitable, and to many extents would have happened with or without the Ukraine/Crimea conflict, although the conflict helped expand Putin's useful "war chieftain" status.

Putin had already been slowly "nationalizing the elites" by increasing control over them and reducing splits and betrayals. From 2012, he began constructing a powerful propaganda machine, and started to suppress civic organizations that he considered disloyal. The list of power consolidation steps goes on and is rather well known. The key aspect is that a chieftain's legitimacy depends on there being a constant feeding on external threats so that society can be "saved" by, and consolidate around, the leader.

There is no easy way for Putin to return to electoral legitimacy. If he wins the 2018 March elections with, say, a 65 percent turnout and 62.6 percent voting, as was the case in 2012, he will be considered not as a strong elected leader but as a rather weak chieftain. A spiral of public criticisms in the election period would be devastating for him. The Kremlin cannot win like Central Asian rulers do, although there are a few Russian regions where the center's political machines are solidly in place. Putin has thus fallen into a legitimacy trap: he will be unable to maintain a chieftain's legitimacy and switching that support to electoral legitimacy is difficult and uncertain.

What are Putin's options? It seems there are two possible approaches, but neither is good. He could have backed another candidate while holding a Deng Xiaoping-type role as the informal leader. Or he could have transformed the elections into a plebiscite by creating the vision of a deadly threat to society and exploiting for himself the image as the savior from this threat. However, he has already employed and exploited this kind of "besieged fortress" rhetoric.

Putin's Personnel *Perestroika*

Over the last couple of years, renewal, rejuvenation, and generational shifts took place across national and local government agencies. The general configuration of the Russian elites has been updated by the Kremlin. It no longer makes sense to speak about "Putin's politburo," "Russia Inc.," or the Russian "solar system model" (with everyone rotating around Putin like planets revolve around the sun). Instead, we have the "Tsar-Sultan's court." A generational shift has been taking pace in this court. A generation of Putin's comrades-in arms is being steadily replaced by younger people. For example, Chief of Staff Sergey Ivanov (born in 1953) was replaced by Anton Vaino (born in 1972), and President of Russian Railways Vladimir Yakunin (born in 1948) was replaced by Oleg Belozеров (born in 1969). At the same time, there has been a dismantling of corporate-political machines (following the dismantling of regional ones). It looks like backwards development: heavyweights lead networks of allies, clients are leaving, and more atomized/independent managers are coming to replace the heavyweights.

There was also a radical changing of leadership figures over 2015-2016. Some important people were assigned new roles. Examples include: Vladimir Kozhin (from Property Management Department of the President to Class 1 Active State Advisor), Vladimir Yakunin (as mentioned, out as head of Russian Railways), Andrey Bel'yaninov (out as head of the Federal Customs Service), Yevgeny Murov (out as head of the Federal Guard Service), Viktor Ivanov (out as Director of The Federal Narcotics Service), Sergey Ivanov (off the Presidential Staff), Vyacheslav Volodin (back to the Duma after being in the Presidential Executive Office), and Sergey Naryshkin (no longer Chairman of the State Duma). Those who replaced these heavyweights are of a different caliber—either they are outsiders or moved up from positions that were two-three levels lower. This makes them less influential players in the domestic political arena.

This state management system could be called “neo-nomenklatorial.” Unlike the Soviet nomenklatorial system where the CPSU Central Committee played a major role in the management of cadres, in Putin’s new system, the new, mostly-younger “Chekists” are to play the major roles. The new system uses sophisticated control practices, although without mass selection and training of cadres; it is less formally institutionalized and does not have a “collective leadership.” One result of this is that it is not capable of reproducing itself and will not survive without the Tsar-Sultan.

The result of Putin’s re-shuffling to date is that quite a few of the erstwhile patronal networks have been decapitated, leading de facto to the liquidation of the second tier of government managers and the enhancement of the state’s monocentrism. But no political system can survive for long without institutions, either formal or informal. There is a type of re-institutionalization occurring in Russia. This movement can lead either to the strengthening of the current neo-nomenklatorial system or to its dismantling. In the first case, the system will become closer to the Soviet model and will include repressions in order to provide for the reproduction of cadres. If there is a dismantling, the nomenklatorial and elite systems can be seen as two poles, with forces moving toward one or the other. If it goes in the direction of a nomenklatorial system, systemic purges are needed to keep relative efficiency. In the case of its dismantling, open political competition might be restored.

The Further Weakening of Russia’s Governmental Institutions

The strengthening of the regime’s personalistic character over recent years has further weakened Russia’s institutional development. All areas have been impacted, with the judiciary, local election processes, and political party formation suffering most of all.

Russia’s Cabinet of Ministers lost face during the Rosneft-Bashneft debacle, which involved Economics Minister Alexey Ulyukayev being arrested (either rightly or wrongly so) in November 2016 and sentenced to eight years of hard labor at a prison camp.

In the judicial sphere, the High Court of Arbitrage was liquidated and the Supreme Court was moved away from Moscow (and its power brokers) to St. Petersburg. The dominance of repressive organs over courts has increased. The dehumanization of the judiciary parallels politically engaged verdicts and more imprisonments. The swift way the Constitutional Court ratified the Kremlin’s annexation of Crimea, for example, showed its non-independence and it further discredited the court system in the eyes of ordinary Russians (even though Russians generally support the pocketing of Crimea).

A cleansing of governors took place in 2017, following the reshuffling of *siloviki* in 2016. Twenty governors out of 85 have now been replaced, including 12 in September-October 2017 alone. Except for two cases, in Samara and Krasnoyarsk (where well-respected

leaders from the regional elite were appointed), unpopular governors, many in the middle of their terms, were replaced by younger technocrats who were unknown in the regions. This will have short-term benefits (just until March 2018) but it will lead to serious problems later.

Local self-administrations were de facto dismantled due to several managerial transformations, especially during the 2014-2015 “counter-reforms.” Moscow changed the balance it had in regional relations to give itself more benefits. Regional governments were increasingly and unilaterally creating self-administrations, but the wave of municipal statute revisions led to city managers being selected by commissions in which governors dominate. By early 2018, there were only eight administrative republics left that had direct popular elections for regional executives (Khakassia, Yakutia, Khabarovsk, Kemerovo, Novosibirsk, Sakhalin, Tomsk, and Chukotka). Eight other regions still have direct local elections, but this will expire at the end of each executive’s current term (Adygeya, Altai, Primor’ye, Krasnoyarsk, Voronezh, Novgorod, Yaroslavl, and Nenets). One should note that over the last year, governors and mayors have been under tough *siloviki* pressure. For example, Vladivostok’s mayor was under investigation and arrested, and Yaroslavl’s mayor was arrested and sent to prison for twelve years.

Elections are less numerous, especially at the municipal level. Political competition is usually very low because opposition candidates are eliminated at early campaign stages. Voter turnout is also low. The trend in recent years is that manipulations have increased while direct fraud has decreased. Electoral commissions at all levels are formed and controlled by the Central Election Commission, which is run by the president, Duma, and Federation Council. Regional governments since 2014 have enjoyed almost unlimited capability to regulate access to elections of regional governors and parliaments as well as of municipal deputies. In 2007 and 2011 all deputies were elected by party lists, but in 2016, half of them were elected in single-member-district races and the other half by party lists.

One result of the 2012 political reforms was that it made it easier for citizens to register political parties, leading to a tenfold increase in the number of official parties. However, out of 85 registered parties, there are only a dozen that participate in elections, and only four of them have factions in the State Duma. United Russia, with 343 mandates out of 450, has been and still is the party of power. However, it does not fully form the Cabinet. It is not the Duma with United Russia dominance that forms the Cabinet, but rather the Cabinet that forms the Duma and uses the Duma as an interface.

With United Russia securing a qualified majority in the 2016 Duma elections, its need for junior partners—a systemic opposition—has basically evaporated. The “Klishas law” adopted in 2013 reduced the minimal share of party list deputies in regional assemblies (from 50 to 25 percent). The requirement to have party deputies represented in

municipal elections was abolished. Thus, for example, Moscow and St. Petersburg are allowed to form legislative assemblies without party lists/party deputies. This lead to an increase of the influence of administrations onto the composition of bodies elected. All remaining political parties have been degrading due to the shrinking space for public politics. One paradox is that by increasing pressure on legal political parties and not letting Alexei Navalny's party be registered, the Kremlin could not prevent Navalny from establishing powerful support infrastructure in many regions, even without him forming an official party.

Conclusion

In spite of a number of crises, there is strong demand at both high and low levels for keeping the status quo in Russia. According to a Levada Center [survey](#) in June 2017, two thirds of Russians would like to see Putin stay as president and three quarters would like the same tough or even tougher line to continue in both Russia's foreign and domestic politics. Having more liberal domestic politics and softening confrontation with the West would be preferred by only 12-13 percent of respondents. Still, tension in society has been growing, particularly due to the absence of economic development prospects. Even though protests indicate signs of increasing and varying discontent, they do not pose a real threat to Putin's system. Feelings of great power status over-ride other considerations, at least for the time being.

We can say that the current political regime is new, but it is transitional, unconsolidated, and on the march. There are several elements that could lead to deeper and more serious transformations going forward. First, Moscow's political (Putin's legitimacy trap) and financial resources that are needed to maintain the status quo are almost exhausted. Second, more elite changes, and changes to the informal rules between the state and elites, may take place. The regime is making changes and has rejected parts of its previous frameworks, but it has not elaborated wholly new patterns of functionality. Russia is still in its zone of quiescence, which it entered back in 2005 when it refused to enact quality economic reforms. Whichever direction it ultimately goes, either more liberal (*Alexei Kudrin-esque*) or more conservative (*Sergey Glaz'yev-esque*), the static nature of the system will be disrupted. Because the system has a profound stasis, it will become unstable immediately when it moves more than tentatively in any direction. This kind of dynamic makes a new institutionalization drive inevitable. But for now, the Kremlin has weighed its risks and seeks to avoid mistakes caused by haste. It prefers to delay transformations that truly benefit society and milk Putin's role as the "Tsar-Sultan War-Chief."

Recommended reading about the transformation of Vladimir Putin's political system:

Phyllis S. Bendell (ed.), [*Daedalus*](#), Vol. 146, No. 2, Spring 2017. (Numerous **PONARS Eurasia** members feature in this issue: Timothy Colton, Henry Hale, Brian Taylor, Maria Popova, Marlene Laruelle, Stanislav Markus, Samuel Greene, and Keith Darden.)

Kirill Rogov (ed.), [*Political Developments in Russia 2014-2016: Institutions and Practices of Authoritarian Consolidation*](#) (*Politicheskoe razvitie Rossii. 2014-2016: Instituty i praktiki avtoritarnoi konsolidatsii*), Liberal Mission Foundation, November 11, 2016 (in Russian).

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