

# Putin's Tightrope: Maintaining Support in the Face of Domestic and International Policy Demands

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Watching President Vladimir Putin field the questions of high school students in Texas, that early assessments of Putin's chances for a long political life and autonomous political action were extremely negative seems almost implausible. In two years, Putin moved from being a puppet of President Boris Yeltsin's family to being the dominant fixture on the Russian political scene. This profound change in the universal assessment of the Russian president raises the need to reflect on the roots of his improbable success, the durability of his governing coalition in the face of new challenges, and the capacity of the United States to achieve its foreign policy goals in relation to Russia.

Since his appointment as prime minister in 1999, Putin's personal reputation for effectiveness and adroit political maneuvering merged with quick action to create widely shared assessments of regime success. Today, Putin's political future appears secure. He has revived the central state. Visible rivals have been neutralized in government. He has announced plans for far-reaching reforms of Russia's political, economic, and social welfare structures and he indicates a willingness to forge a new relationship with the United States and Europe. Through all of these efforts, his public opinion ratings remain extremely high.

Yet, despite all of these successes, Putin faces enormous challenges. Economists argue that far-reaching structural reforms still lie ahead. Land privatization has not extended to the battleground of agriculture. The criminal justice system is up in arms over changes in procedures. Military reform is stalled and faces serious opposition within the armed forces. Regional governors remain in the trenches fighting for their holdover levers of patronage. The Communist Party (KPRF) maintains significant popular support. Moreover on the mass level, public opinion polls suggest that a gap has always existed between Russia's reformist leadership and its more conservative voters. Further evidence suggests that Putin's support is conditioned on not inflicting economic, social, and military hardship on the beleaguered Russian population.

Putin has met challenges with a strategy of cultivating popular support and utilizing state power, or a combination of consensus and coercion, to construct and to maintain his governing coalition. This range of strategies underscores the hybrid nature of Russia's regime, which

combines democratic form with authoritarian elements. As Putin moves forward, the relative use and effectiveness of consensus building versus coercive strategies will have a profound impact on Russia's ability to sustain and develop its democratic elements.

## **A Case Study in the Consolidation of Power: State Intervention in Elections**

A key component of Putin's success is an extremely effective and far-reaching use of state resources to neutralize political rivals—the KPRF, Moscow mayor and head of the Fatherland-All Russia (OVR) party Yuri Luzhkov, regional governors, and Yeltsin-era robber barons. Although this use of state power is often reduced to a description of a battle between checkists and oligarchs, the Putin Kremlin's adroit political maneuvering goes far beyond the use of outright coercive institutions.

A critical component of the Putin strategy was an expansive state intervention in the electoral arena in the 1999 parliamentary cycle. The Yeltsin regime bequeathed a war chest of tried and true tools to control electoral outcomes, from the creation of parties of power to outright fraud. Although Yeltsin used these tools to prevent the formation of a viable national opposition, Putin expanded on this goal to eliminate rivals while creating a supporting coalition. The distinction is crucial. Yeltsin's strategy could not prevent the opposition majority, led by the KPRF, from asserting itself through the parliament despite the lopsided distribution of legislative-executive powers. In contrast, Putin's use of the Unity party in the election period and in the Duma neutralized opposition and enabled the passage of previously unattainable legislation.

The political strategy of Unity played an additional role in shaping future election outcomes. Unity is now the only game in town for ambitious politicians. How did this remarkable consolidation of the party system occur? Polling data of party elites reveal that Unity reflected relatively centrist positions that are meaningful only in contrast to the other organizations. The party's centrist positions can best be interpreted as “not Communist” or distinct from the KPRF, and “not Yeltsin,” or distinct from previous parties of power, rather than any real compromise positions. In this sense, Unity's positions provided important cues for Russian voters frustrated by the choice between two unpalatable extremes, the KPRF and the Yeltsin governing parties.

Importantly, Unity's positions, across the board, were distinct from previous parties of power. Particularly in the area of Russia's relations with the West, the positions of elite respondents demonstrated to voters that Unity and Putin were less pro-Western than the Yeltsin regime. These positions closed the gap between Unity and the KPRF and other nationalist organizations and drew electoral support from all segments of the electorate.

The same data show that Unity's ambiguous center-right positions closely tracked those of Fatherland-All Russia's (OVR) center-left stance and mirrored OVR on issues of national security and relations with the West. The emergence of OVR and its ambitious leader Luzhkov illustrated the inability of the fluid party system to act as a barrier to new political forces and the potential instability of electoral politics. Taking full advantage of this fluidity, Unity presented voters with a plausible alternative to OVR: an effective national leader, a relatively moderate organization, and a break with the past government/Communist deadlock. The Kremlin used a media blitz and pressured regional governors to suggest that the critical difference between the organizations was the power of Unity to control the levers of state power. Both elite actors and voters quickly fell into line, abandoning OVR in favor of the new party of power.

State intervention in the 1999 parliamentary election cycle was an important component of Putin's successful consolidation of power. The Unity success in that election eliminated key rivals, weakened the KPRF, established a friendly majority in the Duma, and paved the way for Putin's painless election in 2000. The new law on political parties that finally established important barriers to entry for new political organizations institutionalized these outcomes, portending future electoral successes for Unity and Putin. However these are probabilities and not certainties.

## **Putin's Constraints: Coercion, Consensus, and Change**

Analysts increasingly point to the open political landscape as evidence that Putin is unfettered by constraint. A look at the tools used to clear the landscape suggests that this assessment is not entirely accurate. Putin won election because voters perceived him as a viable alternative to KPRF extremism and Yeltsin-era corruption and ineffectiveness.

Yet, the strategy of winning elections based on a lack of viable alternative choice is inherently dangerous. The KPRF is weakened but it is still an important political force in the electorate. As Putin himself noted in a recent speech to the state-sponsored Civic Forum, the party system incorporates antisystem parties inherently opposed to fundamental state policies. If the government's reform policies inflict further pain on voters, opposition messages may resonate with voters. If this happens, the lack of a viable alternative could propel the KPRF or a more extreme populist leader into national office. If Putin is determined not to let this happen, he may reach for increasingly coercive tools to ensure his own success at the expense of the democratic elements of the regime.

Reliance on tools of coercion to maintain the governing coalition is also risky. Despite increases in state power, that these changes will be successfully implemented through coercion alone is almost inconceivable. The costs of coercion are extremely high and demand ever-greater increases in resources to monitor and punish regime opponents. Increasing costs of popular and elite compliance with central state policies and regulations are incompatible with furthering economic and structural reforms that are likely to tax the state's resources.

In order to continue reform efforts, Putin will need to maintain popular support that will continue to neutralize political rivals and enable him to broker acceptable political bargains. Maintaining popular support will require that reforms be carried out without inflicting great pain on voters. For example, pension reform can only be successful if pensions continue to be paid and pension levels continue to rise. This implies that both the pace and extent of reform may move in fits and starts as the current regime scrambles to offset the costs of those reforms.

## **U.S. Foreign Policy Goals and Putin's Domestic Capacity**

Although Putin's emergence as a profound political force is little questioned, he still operates within political constraints. On the one hand, Putin has pushed key reforms further than Yeltsin dared. In almost every policy area, from privatizing land and pensions to relations with the West, Putin has gone far beyond the positions that Unity activists articulated. On the other hand, these changes fall short of full reforms. Many have very long lead times. Still others are bogged down in institutional conflict. Reforms still exist only in form, blocked at the stage of implementation.

As Putin moves forward with a wide-ranging series of reforms, his relatively underinstitutionalized coalition of support is likely to continue to shift rapidly. Careful monitoring of the pulse of the opposition, the content and sequencing of reforms, and the success of new policy implementation will provide important indications of whether or not Putin is building consensus versus moving toward increasingly coercive modes of governance.

A key component of the trade-off Putin faces as he moves forward is a trade-off between domestic and international policy. A “tough on the West” stance was critical to establishing Putin’s initial coalition and remains an important constraint on his policy options. Although the United States cannot predicate its security considerations on Russia’s domestic political considerations, the Bush administration must recognize the long-term trade-off between U.S. interest in a democratic and stable Russia and short-term foreign policy and even national security considerations. Pushing Putin too far beyond his coalition, too far out on the tightrope, could potentially provoke intransigence or reliance on coercion to ensure compliance as consensus erodes. As the U.S.-Russia relationship moves forward, U.S. demands on the president must recognize the waxing and waning of the president’s domestic capacity and constraints. Profound payoffs in terms of narrow policy objectives and the larger goal of establishing democracy in Russia are likely to reward patience.

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