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How Proponents and Opponents of Political Change See Russia's Future

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INTRODUCTION

The Kremlin has consistently failed to define its vision of Russia's future. As a new year dawns, the only thing about the country's domestic political order that is clear is that President Vladimir Putin has secured the option to stay in power until 2036. While Putin may see keeping himself in power as the best guarantee of political stability, that reality is hardly a substitute for the specific socioeconomic goals that he has laid out at various points during his tenure.

But what about the Russian public? How do ordinary people with different political views see their country's future? Do they think Russia can return to strong economic growth amid the reality of state-sponsored capitalism and watered-down authoritarianism that dominate life during Putin's third decade in power?

In search of answers to these questions, we convened six focus groups in August 2020 in Moscow and Yaroslavl, a city of about 600,000 people located roughly 160 miles northeast of Moscow. In each city, we recruited three broad groups of individuals: regime loyalists, traditionalists, and liberals.

- Loyalists included supporters of the country's current political regime and were identified based on the fact that they supported the recent constitutional amendment allowing Putin to extend his time in office.

- Traditionalists included supporters of left-wing and patriotic alternatives to the current regime; in the Russian context, these people have extreme left-wing and far-right worldviews. They generally opposed the aforementioned changes to the Russian constitution yet support greater government regulation over the economy and the idea that Russia's development path is unique.

- Liberals included supporters of liberal alternatives to the status quo. Typically, such people opposed Putin's constitutional maneuver and favor a market economy, respect for democratic norms, and a pro-Western foreign policy.

A COMMON THREAD OF SOCIOECONOMIC PROBLEMS

Regardless of where they came from, geographically or politically, focus group participants pointed to a similar set of socioeconomic challenges facing Russia.

One of the top concerns across the board was protection of the environment. Participants brought up specific local issues such as air pollution or garbage disposal problems. (Some respondents, for instance, mentioned the case of the halted construction of a controversial landfill in Shiyes in the far northern region of Arkhangelsk; one respondent characteristically stated, "We need to borrow waste management technology from [Western countries like] Sweden.") Such issues have been at the heart of a wave of protests in various Russian cities in recent years over controversial projects such as landfills and urban renewal initiatives.

Another common yet all too familiar theme was that the authorities need to "focus on ordinary people," "listen to the people," and take their needs to heart. Such ideas were shared by liberally minded participants (who articulated these ideas better), traditionalists, and loyalists alike. All of them mentioned the need for more democracy and freedom in everyday life and for greater government accountability. They called for less official government pressure on ordinary citizens—making statements like, "They should not dictate to us what to do." They also noted that people should enjoy a right to freely and openly express opinions and criticize government officials without fear of being arrested or persecuted, an idea that is referred to in Russian as "freedom without consequences."

At the same time, many participants, including the more liberally minded ones, talked a lot about the need for the government to provide a better social safety net. They complained that current levels of state support are insufficient and that the coronavirus pandemic has made conditions much more difficult. Most respondents, including even traditionalists, also pointed to inadequate government support for small businesses hurt by the pandemic's economic fallout.

FAMILIAR PROBLEMS, DIFFERENT SOLUTIONS

While most participants readily identified a similar set of socioeconomic problems facing the country, they significantly diverged on their views of the potential solutions, including the role that the state should play. Both loyalists and traditionalists expressed comparable support for greater state-led interventions, while liberals consistently expressed support for limiting state involvement.

Supporters of state-led regulations called for renationalizing large enterprises and taking them "away from the oligarchs." They also called for large businesses to pay higher taxes. These participants indicated that they would like to see a prompt redistribution of revenues controlled by a small privileged class within Russian society to the benefit of a larger segment of the country's population.

Most loyalists and traditionalists agreed that the country would benefit from tougher penalties for tax evasion and corruption. Some called for convicted criminals guilty of serious offenses like corruption to be executed or have their hands chopped off "like they do in China." (At times, some respondents had rather strange and inaccurate ideas about life in other countries.) Such participants support a return to "strong-arm tactics" and "Stalinist methods" of running the country. Interestingly, they also suggested that "Stalin's iron fist" can coexist with democracy. In their eyes, the state should crack down on oligarchs, corrupt politicians, and bureaucrats. The thinking seems to be that similar punitive treatment should be meted out on Russia's foreign detractors, while ordinary people should be allowed to enjoy democracy and freedom. As one participant put it, "We don't want to live in fear." When asked whether the government should exert so much

control over society as a whole, one of the respondents noted, "There are already cameras everywhere."

Loyalists and traditionalists expressed no interest in changes to Russian foreign policy: they are essentially satisfied with the country's current course. They believe that Russia has already restored its great power status and is once again a force that others must reckon with. They suggested that Russia could act a bit more aggressively in some instances, saying things like "we have to be even tougher with the West." Still, their preference is for the government to focus on the country's domestic agenda and to keep things in check at home rather than pursue new foreign adventures.

Those who backed Russia's recent constitutional changes want to return to a nationalized planned economy focused on heavy industry and to reimpose a robust state ideology. To these people, national greatness also means reclaiming former imperial (Soviet) territories, making other countries do Russia's bidding, and standing up to the United States.

Liberally minded respondents, by contrast, believe that Russia's social problems would best be solved by limiting the state's role to "setting the rules of the game," providing justice and equality before the law, ensuring security, and helping out the poor and needy. One such respondent said, "We don't need tighter control. The state should function strictly as software." (The respondent meant this in the sense that the state should provide a favorable natural regulatory environment for citizens and businesses to operate.) They expressed support for the rule of law and went so far as to suggest that Russia should adopt some form of the Anglo-Saxon legal system outright.

On economic issues, liberals proposed that the state should "leave business[es] alone" and "let people earn money"—the logic being that "the greater the freedom, the higher the standard of living." Liberals voiced support for breaking up state monopolies like Gazprom, Rosneft, and Sberbank and for privatizing large enterprises.

Liberals also expressed deep unhappiness about Putin's foreign policy. They want Russia to have a friendly relationship with the West, to adopt a less aggressive foreign policy, to jointly develop technologies with advanced countries, and to engage in peaceful competition on the global stage.

Table 1 offers an overview of how the three focus groups differed on their views of the economy.

Table 1: Russians' Opinions on the State's Role in the Economy

	Greater state intervention, the renationalization of large enterprises, and higher taxes on big businesses	**Increased support for small businesses and greater assistance for small businesses and self-employed individuals struggling with the pandemic**	**Increased social benefits and subsidies for ordinary Russians**
Loyalists	Supportive	Supportive	Supportive
Traditionalists	Supportive	Supportive	Supportive
Liberals	Unsupportive	Supportive	Supportive

Table 2: Russians' Opinions on Politics and the Government

	Government bureaucrats' actions	Putin's actions	Responsive grassroots democracy	The need for the government to rule with a strong hand
Loyalists	Unsupportive	Supportive	Supportive	Supportive
Traditionalists	Unsupportive	Unsupportive	Supportive	Supportive
Liberals	Unsupportive	Unsupportive	Supportive	Unsupportive

Similarly, table 2 offers an overview of how the various focus groups felt about Russian politics.

IF NOT PUTIN, THEN WHO?

All six focus groups shared an extremely negative assessment of current Russian government officials, the performance of the state bureaucracy, and the ruling party—United Russia. There was a consensus that those who "live well in Russia" are "those in power" and "those riding the gravy train" to become rich in corrupt or underhanded ways. Even the loyalists, who reported being relatively happy with their lot, subscribed to such a view.

The only difference that could be seen was in the groups' attitudes toward Putin personally. Liberals and traditionalists believe he is fully responsible for the country's problems, but loyalists are still inclined to stand up for the president by setting him apart from rank-and-file government bureaucrats. The old maxim, "good tsar, bad boyars,"—meaning that Putin has good intentions but is let down by his retinue—is playing out in the country once again.

Focus group participants who voted to extend Putin's tenure are not necessarily supporters of Putin per se. Some Moscow-based supporters who favored resetting the clock on presidential terms are often quite critical of him. But they cast their ballot in favor of the amendments package because they saw no alternative to the current president—this thinking appears to be the main political sentiment for most Russians. The idea that there's no one else and no plausible successors is neither questioned nor discussed. Besides, despite all the serious criticism of Putin, he is seen as the guarantor of the country's latest achievements. As one focus group participant anxiously noted, "Without him, they'll take away Crimea." Conservative traditionalists also see Putin and the Russian armed forces as important for protecting the country from the West, led by what is believed to be an aggressive United States.

Moreover, many participants said they are more than happy with the traditionalist (albeit somewhat platitudinous) quasi-religious and ideological sentiments that are part of the package of constitutional amendments that Russia passed. These changes included a ban on same-sex marriage and a mention of safeguarding the memory of Russian forefathers who passed on their ideals and faith in God. Participants suggested this brand of Russian spirituality contrasts starkly with the purported irreverence for religion in the West, where "they have turned all their churches into cafes." (This is another example of the sometimes distorted views some respondents displayed about life abroad.) One attendee noted, "Americans wrote the previous constitution for us, so Putin was right to add a whole bunch of amendments." (This is another example of ignorant and prejudiced views of other countries: in reality, the United States had nothing to do with writing the 1993 Russian Constitution. Instead the respondent presumably meant to assert that Russia blindly borrowed

the institutions of Western democracy when forming the country's first post-Soviet governing structures.)

The focus groups revealed that neither Putin's critics nor his supporters could identify a specific agenda that they expect him to pursue going forward. Rather, they largely expressed a fear of momentous changes. Based on their post-Soviet experiences, they tend to associate change with personal setbacks and plunging living standards. That tendency gives many Russian people, regardless of their political outlook, a continued stake in preserving the status quo.

Still, the respondents expressed that they did want to see new faces in Russian political life. It is telling that most respondents, regardless of their political views, expressed sympathy for former Khabarovsk governor Sergei Furgal, who was arrested in July 2020 on suspicion of having ordered hits on business rivals some years earlier. His arrest and firing provoked mass protests in Khabarovsk. The focus group respondents see him as an example of a politician who looked out for the interests of average people. At the same time, hardly anyone who participated in the focus groups believes that mass protests like the ones in Khabarovsk can effect serious change.

As far as the advent of the post-Putin era is concerned, most participants suggested that Putin would likely appoint his own successor. In the run-up to such a move, participants predict that the country's elites would either wrangle for power or strike a deal among themselves. Some traditionalists and liberals suggested that a revolution, popular uprising, or coup d'état are low probability scenarios. All participants noted that ordinary people would be unlikely to influence the transfer of power and would have to be content simply observing it.

CONCLUSION

Virtually all respondents agreed that Russia's economic situation is bad, but most of them primarily blame state bureaucrats and oligarchs rather than external factors such as the impact of the coronavirus pandemic or the price of oil (which are also significant). While traditionalists are convinced that the situation would improve if the state reassumed total control over the economy and tackled corruption, liberals advocate for privatization, demonopolized industries, and deregulation at the national level while calling for greater state support for ordinary people at the local level.

The differences between those who supported and those who opposed resetting the clock on Putin's presidential terms proved to be insignificant. But different ideological groups expressed their discontent with Putin in diametrically opposed ways. Supporters of a blend of socialist, statist, or nationalistic (traditionalist) views tend to see Putin's traditionalism as not radical enough while also criticizing him for failing to provide people with an adequate social safety net. Liberal respondents, on the other hand, essentially consider Putin a dictator who suppresses civil society, political opposition, and the market economy.

The focus groups demonstrated why many Russians peacefully accepted the resetting of the clock on presidential terms as something even reassuring—because of the perceived lack of alternatives. Russia's political status quo continues to benefit from a familiar combination of inertia, apathy, and a desire for greater state support for regular people. The shortcomings of the existing system are all well known, but there are few people capable of articulating credible alternatives that might bring about meaningful change. Still, few participants portrayed Putin as a positive force for the country's future development or someone who will be able to solve Russia's numerous problems.

Finally, there is an appetite among the respondents for a new generation of government officials and local

leaders, as evidenced by the widespread support for the jailed governor Furgal, despite the nature of the charges against him. Yet crucially, there is little faith among Russians in the idea that large-scale protests by ordinary people can actually help bring about the changes they would like to see.

All in all, these findings seem to reveal public dissatisfaction with Putin's regime from a variety of standpoints. Nevertheless, the majority of respondents, except liberals, lacked the ability to articulate forward-looking thinking and seem willing to put up with the current state of affairs in Russia. In a sense, this marked a severing of the nation's present from its future—the authorities' lack of goals prefigured the people's lack of ideas about the future as well.

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NOTES

All of the quotes that appear in this article were taken from participants in the focus groups that the authors convened.

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