

## THE RUSSIAN MATRIX: THE ART OF METAMORPHOSIS

LILIA SHEVTSOVA | NOVEMBER, 2013

The Russian personalized power system (the Russian Matrix) is once again demonstrating its ability to reproduce itself. This time the Kremlin is trying to ensure its future by returning to the past, reviving old myths, repressive mechanisms, and global claims. The eventual failure of this Forward to the Past campaign is foreordained. The only questions are about the price that will be paid for its failure and what will follow it.

### FROM IMITATING THE WEST TO CONTAINING IT

When in 2011 and 2012 a leadership and political regime crisis surfaced, the Kremlin was able to do away with its most serious manifestations. But the root causes of the crisis remained: They have merely been channeled inward. Various factors that continue to undermine the stability of the Russian regime. First, the ruling team is losing its social base (though it still retains its traditional electoral base). Second, the regime has lost some of its legitimacy among politically mobile segments of the population. Third, the regime's political base has begun to show some signs of discontent. Specifically, certain bureaucracy and business segments have begun to doubt the regime's ability to guarantee their interests. A fourth factor is the repression that the regime is increasingly resorting to. Fifth, a deteriorating economic situation is limiting state paternalism and payoffs to the people.

Clearly the political regime is beginning to lose its viability. But it is not dead yet. Nor, perhaps, has it even reached the final stages of its demise. The shock that the Kremlin felt when it first witnessed people taking to the streets of Moscow in protest proved to be of insufficient voltage to bring about either collapse or reform. But this jolt has forced the regime to search for new ways to shore up its positions.

The Kremlin's previous philosophy and model of governance came into being after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. At the time, the Russian elite recognized the dominant role of Western civilization and so tried to imitate its norms and use them to its advantage. "Join the West and pretend to accept its standards"—such was the slogan of the ruling team from Yeltsin's time through the early Putin and Medvedev years. The Russian regime rejected the policy of forceful containment of Western civilization and did not present its own system as an alternative civilizational model,



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opting instead to strive for cooperation with the West. This approach—imitating liberal institutions and integrating the Russian elite into the West—not only ensured the regime’s survival but also afforded relative freedom to the rest of Russian society, as long as it didn’t compromise the ruling group’s monopoly on power.

Beginning in 2012–2013, the Kremlin altered its ways of doing business. The current model of governance is based on a return to the idea of Russia as a unique civilization. This model presupposes the need to counteract Western influence both inside Russia and in the post-Soviet space. Moreover, this model means that Russia must formulate an ideological alternative to Western civilization. In the times of the Soviet Union, communism was this alternative; nowadays, Russia’s president has tried to cast Russia in the role of protector of traditional moral values from Western decadence and degradation. “We have been able to see many Euro-Atlantic countries effectively embark on a path of renouncing their roots, including Christian values, which underlie Western civilization. And we consider it only natural and right to defend these values,” says Putin. This role is not merely a rhetorical one. The Russian regime is seeking to create a geopolitical counterbalance to the liberal democracies in the form of the Eurasian Union. “Eurasian integration is a chance for the post-Soviet space in the new age and the world. . . . it is a chance to become an independent center of global development,” Putin explains.

Absent the strong Soviet ideological base, the Kremlin appeals to the Russian Orthodox Church to create its alternative to the West. Here is how Patriarch Kirill, head of the Church, elaborates on Putin’s idea: “Russia is a civilization-state, with its own set of values, laws of social development, social and state model, and a system of historical and spiritual coordinates.” The church ideologues thus demonstrate that Russia cannot exist as a rule of law state. Russia, they claim, can exist only if society is “in solidarity” with the regime—that is, only if society and the individual are and ought to be

subordinate to the regime. The fact that the state, with the support of the Church, which has become a state institution, is attempting to preach moral and political imperatives to society shows that the government has shifted toward not only controlling the political sphere but citizens’ private lives as well. Analogizing between the Russian and Iranian models, especially with respect to the role the Iranian clergy plays in political and social life, is not as far-fetched a notion as it once was.

What is it about Russia as a “civilization-state” that makes it unique? First of all is the linkage between absolute rule, with its geopolitical influences, and attempts to create a civilizational challenge to the West. Collective and individual subordination to authority (as well as the personification of that authority) is a characteristic shared by all autocratic regimes. But unlike all other autocratic regimes in the world today, Russia is trying to create a galaxy of satellite states and to present its worldview on a global stage. Incidentally, therein lies the difference between Russia and China; the latter (so far!) has not sought to create its own international alliances and to sell itself to the rest of the world as an alternative to the Western model.

The other thing that makes Russia as a “civilization-state” unique is its use of foreign policy as an essential tool for ensuring the survival of the Russian Matrix. The Kremlin uses foreign policy as a tool to help it recreate the great-power complex, which it sees as a basis for consolidating society around the regime when internal political resources are exhausted. Judging by the rhetoric being churned out by the Kremlin propaganda machine, one must conclude that the renewed great-power complex is predicated upon the desire to revise the rules of the game that emerged after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Putin refers to the 1815 Congress of Vienna and the 1945 Yalta Accords that “ensured the lasting peace” for a reason. The Kremlin’s attempts to justify the “new Yalta” are thus not only aimed at recreating Russia’s spheres of influence in the post-Soviet space

but also at returning Russia to the active role it used to play in other regions of the world. Thus, even as the Kremlin attempts to preserve the status quo inside the country, it is effectively turning Russia into a “revisionist” power as it relates to the world order. The weakness demonstrated by the West—exemplified primarily by America’s turn inward to focus on its own domestic problems—has tempted Russia to fill the resulting void on the international stage.

Some would argue with this analysis by pointing to Russia’s many and serious domestic problems, which would doom the Kremlin’s ambitious plans to reshuffle the world order. But present evidence would seem to contradict these objections: the unexpected role played by Putin in allowing Western leaders to save face in the Syrian conflict, Armenia’s refusal to sign the agreements with the EU, and Russia’s war with the EU over Ukraine. All of these things point to the fact that the paralysis afflicting the West has given the Kremlin more room to maneuver on the world stage.

### **IS THE RUSSIAN REGIME READY TO BECOME A DICTATORSHIP?**

One factor, to a large extent, informs the Kremlin regime’s logic: For the first time in Russian history, the security forces and their entourage—the people whose job it is to serve and protect the regime—are in power. Putin and his team are thus the first praetorians to occupy the Kremlin. Granted, it was Yeltsin who actually interrupted the tradition of civilian rule, thus dispelling any doubts as to his own intentions.

I would like to emphasize this point: the praetorian nature of the regime makes its struggle for survival fiercer. The Kremlin team is unlikely to leave power voluntarily.

Praetorians have ruled Brazil, Chile, Thailand, Turkey, and other countries before now. Another example of a praetorian regime is that of Mubarak in Egypt. At the outset, praetorians protected the interests of the middle class, which was represented by the officers who sought to modernize their

respective countries. As time passed, however, these forces tended to become defenders of the status quo. History shows that force structure representatives are incapable of managing complex and dynamic societies; they tend to abuse their administrative powers and sooner or later end up becoming an impediment to progress. Praetorian regimes eventually grow more and more corrupt and fall as a result of social explosions or coups. They clearly tend not to be prepared for peaceful transitions or transfers of power. And before losing power, they frequently attempt to survive by resorting to the total control of society.

Is the Putin regime ready to drift toward dictatorship? Evidently, even the Kremlin and its strategists are unable at present to answer this question definitively. So far, the regime merely reacts to forces or people that it believes pose immediate threats to its monopoly. The following is probably how the Kremlin thinks: Is our information monopoly in danger? Then we’ll clean up the media and do away with freedom of the press, but we’ll only eliminate media outlets with large audiences, letting smaller outlets off the hook. Are our electoral manipulations under threat? Then we’ll eliminate the NGOs that are trying to prevent or expose them; the rest are free to stretch their limbs a bit for now, but we will make sure they understand that we are watching their every move. There’s a threat from a political opposition movement? Then we’ll discredit its leaders or even jail some of them; we can leave the rest to sweat out their uncertain fate. A threat of mass protests? Then we’ll throw a few rank-and-file protesters in jail to show the others that anyone could share their fate.

This fits almost exactly the policy of public intimidation that the Kremlin has adopted. To be even more precise, the regime is still experimenting. It is adjusting and adapting, trying to find the governance mechanisms that will guarantee control without simultaneously increasing social resistance.

When the regime saw that selective repressions had played their part and that public discontent had been neutralized, it

decided to conduct what it thought of as a harmless experiment with “managed elections.” The regime decided to allow limited forms of political competition on the local level to see how they would turn out, permitting, for instance, opposition figure Alexei Navalny to take part in the Moscow mayoral elections. In practice, this arrangement amounted to allowing new competitors to enter a race, but only on the condition that they wear a noose around their necks. It is impossible for regime opponents to win such elections, unless the regime is certain that they can be tamed. It is a mockery of democracy, of course—a Surkov-style “sovereign democracy” for the modern age, in which the regime is forced to deal with social awakening. There is no question that the Kremlin will begin tightening the noose as soon as the tactic of “competition without regime change” no longer works in its favor.

There is an axiom the truth of which Russia is yet to learn, and some in the country may learn it the hard way: The regime that elects to resort to violence, though it may do so selectively at the outset, will find itself unable to stop. It has to constantly reassert its strength; any sign of weakness will immediately trigger the consolidation of those who are hurting or who thirst for revenge.

Alexei Chesnakov, a former member of the United Russia leadership circle, offers an inside look at the evolution of the political regime. “Of course, the regime can wage a small war against part of the society. But having started to fight in earnest by deploying its repressive machine, it will not be able to stop. The more it uses repressive means as a tool to consolidate its support base, the worse off it will be—it will be increasingly held hostage to the sentiments it creates and pseudo-reality. It will have to pander to the basest sentiments. Political struggle in Russia is not a game one plays by the rules. It is not a competition; it is a genuine struggle for survival. Logic dictates that the elite and the regime itself will become targets after the opposition is quelled.”

This irreversible downward spiral into repressive violence emerges under certain conditions. For instance, the mechanism of violence must be justified by an ideology of suppression. Of equal importance is the presence of a loyal state apparatus that is ready to support the leader who is trying to keep the situation under control. Battle-ready force structures—not the perverted security apparatus, with its faith in the leader—are needed to accomplish this task. Finally, the regime needs the support of a mobilized elite. Does the Kremlin have all of these things? If it does not, can this “violence package” emerge in Russia? And under what conditions could it do so? So far, there are no answers to these questions. The decay that has been spreading along all levels of the power vertical has made for an unfavorable environment for the nurturing of a dictatorship. However, this does not rule out the possibility that a regime of diminishing strength and influence will resort to violence; in fact, it makes it more likely.

The ruling team is not yet ready to turn wholeheartedly to violence. The authorities have managed thus far to maintain stability through intimidation and limited forms of coercion. But the system will continue to drift toward harsher and harsher forms of repression.

The regime, with its diminishing base and resources, is neither attractive nor flexible. It has limited room to maneuver. Its only available tools are applying pressure and issuing threats. In keeping with the repressive pattern, state violence or even state terror against the public can break out at any time. This is especially true because the regime has resolved that it cannot leave the Kremlin. In other words, the clenched fist has been raised; the only question is on whom it will fall.

History and experience suggest that the regime’s increasing aggression internally will inevitably be accompanied by its greater aggression on the world stage. There are several signs of this happening in Russia: the continued nuclear standoff with the leading Western power, the revival of neoimperial

claims, the ruling team's attempts at promoting Russian values as an alternative to Western ones, and, finally, the Kremlin's return to militaristic symbols.

History and experience bear out the fact that praetorian regimes are doomed to fail. But when society is atomized, and when there is no strong opposition (because the regime is always nipping it in the bud), these regimes can postpone their demise ad infinitum. But the longer such a regime puts off its demise, the more dramatic that fall will be for society and for the regime itself when it eventually comes.

It is also important to understand the limits to the stability of the current political regime. One should beware of drawing extreme conclusions here. Neither the prediction that the regime will fall tomorrow nor the prediction that it will never fall are helpful here, because in both cases society will misjudge the regime and react to it erroneously.

### **HOW LONG WILL THE SYSTEM REMAIN IN PLACE?**

The Russian system's capacity to survive is much greater than that of the regime. The interests that sustain the system as a whole are much wider than Putin's support base. The system encompasses different business segments, the middle class, regional elites, state workers, system liberals and not-quite-system liberals, as well as some nationalists and imperialists interested in preserving absolute rule or some of its elements. Everyone who supports the current model of the superpresidency, Russia's great-power status, anti-Western views, and the regime's control of business comprise the social base of the personalized power system.

Nothing threatens the Russian system's survival in the near future. But the Putin regime—if that term means rule by a certain group of people—is more vulnerable. The regime is not only being rejected by the dynamic minority; it is also losing its support among the swamp-like majority. Indeed, the survival of the absolute power system requires the regime

and the leader who personifies it to be changed occasionally. So it isn't even popular protests that the current political regime has most to fear, but rather the internal logic of the system. Many already realize this truth, including many in the elite.

Opponents of the Putin regime shouldn't take much joy in the fact of its inevitable demise. After all, a new regime and a new personifier may rise to take the place of the old. Regime change and the change of the Kremlin team may very well become a way that the system of personalized power reproduces itself. History may repeat itself, in fact: Recall that the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 facilitated the preservation of an autocratic regime, albeit this time contained within Russia's borders. Back then, the Russian Matrix reproduced itself by discarding the old state. Perhaps future changes to the map—for instance, by excising the North Caucasus from Russia proper—will become another way to prolong the life of the personalized power system.

Meanwhile, Putin's continued presence in the Kremlin may accelerate both the crisis of the Russian regime and the development of an influential political opposition. At the same time, political regime change absent a viable political opposition would create the illusion of progress and change in government. In reality, it would simply be a way of reproducing the system of absolute power under a new leader and a new ruling team.

This would not be the first time that, in trying to prolong its life, the system of personalized power created problems that it could not solve. The Kremlin claims that Russia is a "unique civilization" and stakes a claim to be a global preacher of moral standards, but it can neither uphold those standards itself nor force other societies to recognize Russia's unique role. In this way, the Kremlin has recreated the situation that the Soviet Union found itself in during the late 1980s. Back then, having lost the conflict with the West, the Soviet elite tried to cooperate with the victors and to imitate their

principles. This time, however, the Kremlin's failure to offer the world a new civilizational model may result in another scenario: an autocratic Russia may turn to militant isolationism. Russian society and a significant segment of the political elite, however, are unlikely to tolerate such a turn.

In the next few years, Russia will demonstrate that it is impossible to stage a resurgence by means of civilizational retreat and reaction. The period of reaction is generally a time for reflection, for consolidation of modernizing forces, and for gathering strength to advance the modernist agenda. Russia may face two threats during this time. The first threat is the decline of public protest and further social and political degradation. These will threaten to plunge the country into a state of irreversible decline, in which society will no longer be able to mobilize itself for positive change. So far, this threat is merely theoretical, but the other threat is more plausible—that public protest will continue to accelerate, leading to a revolutionary change of regime in the absence of a political force that can create a rule of law state. Under such conditions, Russia will be saddled with a regime change that resulted from elite fragmentation, and the system of autocratic rule will be preserved.

Will there be viable forces in Russia that will consolidate during the reaction period and seize the opportunity to move Russia toward becoming a rule of law state? Will the West be able to overcome its crisis and become a reference point for those who would attempt to achieve this goal? These are the questions that should be of the most concern today. The answers to these questions will determine the future trajectory of Russian society.

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