

FROZEN LANDSCAPE: THE RUSSIAN POLITICAL SYSTEM AHEAD OF THE 2018 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

ANDREI KOLESNIKOV | MARCH 2018

Russia's March 2018 presidential election is not expected to dramatically change the country's political landscape, as Vladimir Putin's reelection is virtually assured. Yet the electoral campaign remains a useful point of departure for surveying the core features of the political system he has built and the growing long-term difficulties of maintaining this stagnant status quo.

The primary objective of Russia's current political system is to keep the ruling class—that is, individuals covered by the Putin brand—in power as long as possible. As Putin prepares for his presumably final term from 2018 to 2024, the elites who embody Kremlin-style politics and state capitalism (in which power equals property) desire only to mimic change. They will employ minor tweaks needed to adapt the political system to changing internal and external conditions. The political class has no intention of actually transitioning from a hybrid autocracy to a more flexible, democratic, and market-oriented system. Doing so would be too risky, as it might result in a loss of power.

Ironically, in rallying around a negative consensus against Western values and sweeping domestic changes, Russia's leaders risk destabilizing the very system they seek to uphold. Thus far, they have failed to offer a clear, compelling long-term vision of positive change for the country. In effect, the political regime is inviting its passengers—the Russian people—to embark on a journey without announcing the departure time, the destination, or the structural soundness of their vessel. The long-term viability of such a strategy seems very much in doubt.

THE PUTIN-LED POLITICAL SYSTEM

The Russian regime has not changed in almost two decades. The country is mired in a stalled status quo, while the prospect of meaningful alterations keeps getting put off. Amid a state of “bad equilibrium” in which all motion except inertia is rejected, state propaganda portrays the system as

continuing to improve, meandering from election to election, from one set of campaign promises to another.¹ But campaign promises have grown cheap or even totally useless, and Russian citizens' electoral expectations are now very low. With the economy in the doldrums, electoral expectations have devolved to highly pragmatic demands for lower



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inflation and higher wages and pensions, alongside a continuation—if possible—of Russian great power consolidation, a besieged fortress mentality, and attacks against perceived foreign and domestic enemies.

Against this backdrop, the March 2018 election will change little, only hinting at such a possibility. The campaign is giving rise to vague, illusory hopes for some nebulous changes and for another transition involving a slightly modified Putin-led team, which now has a new cast of regional officials and administrators. Putin's team now includes more technocrats, who are not as chummy with the president and who have not reached retirement age. These newcomers have earned Putin's trust due to their irreproachable service in positions within state bodies like the presidential administration, the protocol department, the ministerial bureaucracy, or the Russian Federal Protective Service. In other words, crony capitalism has given way to sentry capitalism.

A State-Centric, Personalized Governing Style

Russia's political system is highly state-centric. To paraphrase King Louis XIV of France—who once proclaimed that he was the state—in the case of Russia, the state is composed of the inner circles of the country's administrative, political, and financial elite. The prevailing view is that everything is done for the state, nothing exists outside the state, and everything is subordinate to the state—that is to say, everything is under the control of elites that hold positions of power within the state.

Putin and his immediate circle of supporters play an outside role in this personalized political system. In a number of cases, the president puts his thumb on the political scales and acts as an intra-elite arbitrator. Rules, legislative norms, and criminal repressions are applied selectively. Institutions have been profaned and do not function well, mostly only imitating real activity. The political system has been largely deinstitutionalized. The problems do not end here. It is commonly believed that the country's authoritarian system has at least one functioning institution: the presidency. To be sure, this office operates on the basis of manual control. But at least there is some measure of presidential control by virtue of the targeted, subjective decisions Putin reaches stemming from

efforts to lobby the imperial court, public engagement with the president's annual call-in television program, and other attempts to solicit the head of state's personal opinions about good and evil, or efficiency and inefficiency.

However, this management style has inherent physical limitations. It is not always clear when the president's word or his direct orders carry real political weight and when they are elective and nonmandatory. It is uncertain why this approach sometimes works and sometimes does not work, or why certain political figures like Chechen ruler Ramzan Kadyrov and the head of the major oil firm Rosneft, Igor Sechin, get a lot of leeway while others get very little. The rules and informal understandings that shape relations in Russia's political and economic inner circles can be blurred in ways that favor particular players. The nature of Kadyrov's informal contract with Putin is more or less clear: Kadyrov ensures there is peace in Chechnya in exchange for greater latitude in his words and actions. Putin, not Kadyrov, intuitively decides the boundaries of these actions on a case-by-case basis. The president's terms for Sechin are similar: as the longtime head of Putin's various front offices, he has both literally and figuratively carried the briefcase for Putin. The oil Sechin is now responsible for is no less valuable an asset. Putin's leniency toward him is the result of trust and their unique personal relationship, about which few outsiders know the details.

Despite the limitations of the current arrangement, Russia's political system fundamentally lacks viable alternatives to Putin as leader, an absence of choice that is mirrored by the public's lack of input on the selection of regional officials at various levels, the heads of major companies, and key media personalities. This system precludes competition, or more precisely, Putin decides who is competitive and who is not.

Russia's post-Crimea majority—the social base of the regime—is held up by two pillars: public approval of the president's concrete actions (rather than his overall approval rating or electoral performance) and public approval of the annexation of Crimea (a constant cornerstone of the regime's legitimacy). It is no coincidence that the 2018 presidential election is scheduled for March 18, the anniversary of the

signing of the treaty that formalized Crimea's accession to Russia. It will not be an election in the true sense of the word, but rather a sort of celebration of the post-Crimea majority's identity.

This goes to show that loyalty by default is a vital trait of Russia's prevailing political system. When the president says something, the majority echoes his words. For instance, many Russians tend to vote for Putin's preferred candidates in regional elections. To illustrate the public's unquestioning loyalty to Putin, sociologists from the Levada Center invented a fictitious presidential candidate named Andrei Semenov, who supposedly enjoyed Putin's backing. Right away, Semenov received the support of 18 percent of voters, of whom 15 percent admitted that they had never heard of him before. Furthermore, 11 percent of respondents said that they had heard that Putin supported Semenov as a candidate.²

This survey indicates that some Russians are not just willing to live in a fabricated reality characterized by political hallucinations; in some respects, they already do—with seemingly complete indifference to what is happening in the country. Informational white noise and a polluted media space disorient news consumers into believing that they have heard certain news stories even when they have not. The cheap effects of disinformation and defamation mark the boundary between truth and mere plausibility. The story about Putin's alleged heir apparent is plausible and, therefore, many survey participants believed that they had heard it somewhere. Their thinking seems to be that if the president's new favorite is not known to the general public, so be it: it is hard to keep track of everything that happens up at the top, and if the president has appointed him, then it goes without saying that this is a worthy man.

The country's political system presumes a corporatist tendency to privilege state control over society at large. It is easier for such a government to control the system if all social groups are pigeonholed into narrowly controlled roles. This principle applies to state-controlled parties, including those that pretend to be the opposition; state-controlled public organizations, including those that pretend to be civil society

groups; professional associations; women's groups; and youth organizations. (In the last instance, the system's proponents want to indoctrinate young people and fashion them into future electoral fodder or mindless office plankton.) The government continues its campaign against Russian civil society organizations, such as NGOs that are not controlled by the state, volunteer associations, and other civic initiatives. In this type of monopolistic, corporatist system, any activity not sanctioned by the regime is seen as inherently dangerous and unwelcome. Meanwhile, the state keeps striving to create the illusion of civil society, using grants and administrative resources to support mock civic associations.

The Allure of Material Gain and Political Corruption

In this Russian model of state-centric governance, property generally has been distributed by the government rather than accumulated by private citizens without state involvement.³ Even the widespread privatization that took place in Russia during the 1990s did not enable business leaders—particularly major ones—to completely distance themselves from the state, especially members of the president's entourage. Prominent businessmen must fulfill the will of the state if they want their businesses to survive. It is sometimes impossible to distinguish private companies from state companies; Rosneft is a case in point. Those who control the state tend to own and manage assets. The system inevitably has become corrupt in the absence of economic competition, by way of political compromises and behind-the-scenes deals. Success in business, as well as the protection of private property, depends on a person's proximity to state structures at all levels from federal to local.

The interconnected political-economic nature of the state has long-standing historical roots in Russia. Alexander Etkind demonstrated this phenomenon in his book *Internal Colonization: Russia's Imperial Experience*, in which he describes how those who control the country's main resources also become the masters of the state. The income and rents they divvy up come from transporting and selling valuable resources (historically fur, and now oil). For these elites, it is vital to ensure the security of these goods, which is equated to their own security and (thus) that of the state. "Those who provide

security tend to grasp property,” Etkind writes, describing the Russian fur trade in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. “The group that trades the resource becomes indistinguishable from the group that protects the state.”⁴ As a result, he concludes that “the state’s dependency on the resources [fur or oil] makes human capital extraneous. Security is more important for [the] production, storage, and transportation [of such goods] than freedom.”⁵ In terms of Russia’s security-driven economics, the historical parallels of path dependence are almost literal: Gazprom’s natural gas pipelines roughly trace the land routes of Moscow’s historical fur trade, and the Nord Stream pipeline passes “along the old sea routes of Hanseatic trade with Novgorod.”⁶ Other examples—both historical and modern—abound. One particularly colorful example is the mention of “greyhound puppies” that a character brazenly solicits as a bribe in the nineteenth-century Russian writer Nikolai Gogol’s play, *The Government Inspector*. In such instances, political loyalty functions as a form of currency.

Virulent Nationalism

Modern Russia is not an empire, but the country’s political regime has imperial aspirations. In terms of foreign policy, Moscow positions itself as the metropolis of an imaginary empire, attempting to be a leader in the post-Soviet space and to divide the world into spheres of influence in the spirit of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Domestically, it indoctrinates the population with an imperialistic ideology. The annexation of Crimea was a military and political step as well as an ideological one. It was the culmination of an obsolete strain of imperialism that relies on authoritarianism and expansion, justified by the language of religion (the reasoning Putin used in his March 2014 address about Crimea to the Federal Assembly).⁷

These imperial ambitions perhaps indirectly explain (in part) the lack of competition in Russia’s economy, business sector, and political circles, as well as elites’ disregard for the property rights of economic players who are not connected to the state. Monopolistic, elite rent-seeking is obscured by a smokescreen of imperialist, isolationist, anti-Western, and anti-liberal ideology. The state’s unjust, ineffective model

receives absolution if not moral approval from the masses in exchange for national pride. This phenomenon can be described as ideological or moral rent.

To consolidate its supporters, the political regime—for many years and particularly following the annexation of Crimea in 2014—has whipped up an atmosphere of aggression and suspicion directed at those who disagree with or think differently than the state. The dissemination of the state’s isolationist, nationalist ideology is amplified with animosity-laced rhetoric toward all things foreign. The thinking goes that Russia is under attack (at the hands of the West, other foreign agents, undesirable organizations, and domestic enemies) and must defend itself. According to this viewpoint, Russians are being insulted, the country’s history is being misinterpreted, and its Christian Orthodox sensibilities are being offended, so Russians respond in a spirit of resistance.

The Russian regime’s seemingly fine-tuned system provides an illusion of control, but it is actually quite unbalanced. Amid an overflow of nationalism, things were bound to get out of control sooner or later. Sure enough, in some instances, the perpetually insulted, self-appointed defenders of the country have gone on the offensive—without the government’s approval. For example, a group of religious believers got riled up by the controversial film *Matilda* about Czar Nicholas II’s premarital affair with a ballerina. In other cases, hatred of opposition politicians and journalists has boiled over into physical attacks, including arson. Self-organizing movements, such as the South East Radical Block, have launched their own war against supporters of liberal, democratic values.

These activities have received tacit support, including from certain officials in the Russian Orthodox Church. The government has made it clear that it condones the behavior of such civic actors. Law enforcement agencies generally ignore their actions. In doing so, the government effectively stepped back and gave up its monopoly on so-called legitimate violence, at least for a time. Russian journalist Yulia Latynina, one of the victims of the state-tolerated aggressors, described the situation as follows:

The Kremlin systematically encouraged any violence that could be directed against the opposition. The Kremlin wanted to create some sort of “domestic Donbas” inside Russia, a situation in which all sorts of obscurantists take the initiative to mow down any seedlings of freedom, and the Kremlin can shrug its shoulders and say, “We have nothing to do with this: it is the will of the people, the will of miners and tractor drivers.”⁸

Granted, the Russian state is not completely unconcerned about this risk of violence: immediately after the wave of vigilantism, a number of political figures spoke out against such occurrences. Eventually, it became necessary for the government to take some action, so that the self-directed violent radicals (though not controlled by the Kremlin) would not damage the image of the state itself. Consequently, the most prominent agitators from a movement called the Christian State–Holy Rus were arrested. However, the government does not entirely know how to put the genie of self-organized pogroms back into the bottle now that the representatives of the regime’s social base are all fired up. This begs the question of how manageable the political system actually is. Is the government’s system of manual control all that effective if it allows attacks by those whose support it relies on?

Self-organization among radicals and the epidemic of uncontrolled violence are only part of a broader increased proneness to conflict in society, in the government, and between the two. In and of themselves, these protests and other signs of conflict (which seem to be growing and spreading) are not the defining factor shaping governance in Russia. Rather, the underlying problem is dissatisfaction with the decisions that the regime makes without consulting ordinary people. This is particularly true in Moscow and St. Petersburg. Two notable examples of conflicts that politicized previously unpoliticized people were the decision to hand over St. Isaac’s Cathedral in St. Petersburg to the Russian Orthodox Church and the plan to demolish many apartment buildings in Moscow.⁹

THE KREMLIN’S PERMANENT COUNTERREVOLUTION

The objective of Russia’s political system and its leader is self-preservation. Everything else—the good and the bad—is only a byproduct of achieving this objective. This process never stops: to paraphrase Leon Trotsky, it is permanent counterrevolution. Socially vulnerable populations receive as much state support as is necessary to preserve the peace. At the same time, the people, deprived of the role of citizens, have become habituated to social dependency in exchange for supporting the regime.

In this system, everything is seen in a negative light. Citizens lower their standards of what they expect from the government and succumb to self-deluded thinking. Negatively driven mobilization and consolidation is predicated on the idea that Russians are under attack and rallying around their commander to defend themselves in a fortress besieged by foreign enemies and a domestic fifth column of co-conspirators. This viewpoint is informed by negative identification of in and out groups: such nationalistic Russians tend to see themselves as different and spiritual, safeguarding religious sensibilities that are being offended. In their minds, they refuse to peddle their sovereignty and insist on upholding their country’s thousand-year history.

This position, along with what might be termed chronic besieged fortress syndrome, presumes not only an increased proneness to conflict—with both outsiders and domestic dissenters—but also a rise in repression. This is, in part, a way for the state to rotate positions in the top ranks. The average governor never knows how he will retire, whether by being offered a low-stress position as a presidential plenipotentiary, or by being trapped in an anticorruption sting operation. State repression can also be preventive: the thinking goes that it is better to put a prominent opposition leader under arrest for several days before protests begin than to deal with the aftermath of mass rallies. Such repression is encouraged by the state and serves as the *modus operandi* for the police, investigators, and the courts.

Such intimidation makes the average person think twice about whether he or she is willing to attend a protest rally and take their chances in the paddy wagon, or whether they should instead just stay indoors and be discontent with the regime in the privacy of their own homes. The most fervent opponents of the regime, some of whom pursue human rights activities, occasionally find it best to leave the country, at least temporarily. They receive certain clear signals ranging from harassment (as Yulia Latynina experienced) to searches and other actions by law enforcement (as happened in the case of Olga Romanova, the head of a prisoners' rights organization called Russia Behind Bars).

In theory, this ideological framework aims to preserve existing political and economic structures: the annexation of Crimea serves as the permanent, unifying bond of the regime and its besieged fortress syndrome. How intensely the syndrome manifests itself changes depending on the state of Russia's foreign relations, but some elements have endured over the years: external enemies; a domestic fifth column; alleged pressure from the West; NATO enlargement; the symbolism of Moscow's intervention in the Syrian war as a demonstration of Russian might; a so-called axis of evil that includes the Baltic states, the EU, Georgia, Poland, and the United States; and Russia's thousand-year history, which serves as a foundation for its sovereignty and self-proclaimed victories.

This defensive and repressive ideology forms a post-Crimean negative consensus in the minds of the Kremlin's supporters: Russia may have problems—very serious ones—but the country is united by common anti-Western, isolationist, and conservative values. This line of reasoning demands that the dissenting minority be convinced to join Russia's post-Crimea majority; otherwise, its representatives will be labeled pariahs or may even be convicted as criminals. Consequently, independent media outlets are being shut down, going bankrupt, or changing ownership; young people are being indoctrinated; and citizens believed to be too politically active or socially conscious are being intimidated. At the same time,

the Internet is being policed, and organizations are being labeled undesirable. Now there are even discussions about whether the state may formalize the concept of undesirable individuals, perhaps applying it to both foreigners and Russian nationals. A tyranny of the majority is emerging.¹⁰ Representatives of this majority are even terrorizing themselves, censoring themselves, and limiting their own civic and political activities.

Ironically, because of its crude and excessive application, the traditionalist Russian state ideology that is supposed to stabilize and safeguard the system is becoming a destabilizing instrument that is sparking conflict in Russian society. In practice, traditionalism is morphing into fundamentalism, which certainly does not promote the stability of the system.

What can be done to correct this state of affairs? Because of the negative nature of the Russian political system and the ideology that undergirds it, creating a coalition united by a program of positive reforms and modernization is difficult. Virtually all coalitions within the system have a negative basis: these alliances are aimed against someone or something rather than bent on pursuing a positive road map toward or a vision of a desired future. Any search for a model for the future is grounded in defensive negatives: more sovereignty (a perennial fixation of the Russian regime); import substitution; and independence from the West, including in terms of technological development. Even the digital revolution is turning into an isolationist dystopia that the state supports for its own sake, not least for the needs of its security services.

Instead of a vision of economic development based on political and entrepreneurial freedom, the Kremlin is offering an image of a distant future, a bit like the erstwhile promises of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. As Putin prepares to begin his presumptive fourth term, it remains unclear how long this stagnant status quo can continue without more meaningful signs of change.

NOTES

- 1 See Andrei Kolesnikov, “The Burden of Predictability: Russia’s 2018 Presidential Election,” Carnegie.ru, May 18, 2017, <http://carnegie.ru/2017/05/18/burden-of-predictability-russia-s-2018-presidential-election-pub-70013>.
- 2 Elena Mukhametshina, “Za kandidata v prezidenty Semenova gotov progolosovat kazhdyi pyaty izbiratel” [One in five voters is ready to cast a ballot for presidential candidate Semenov], *Vedomosti*, September 20, 2017, <https://www.vedomosti.ru/politics/articles/2017/09/19/734516-progolosovat-za-vidumannogo-kandidata>.
- 3 See, for example, the interesting ideas of Anatoly Chubais in “Izuchaya nastoyashcheye, proyektiruyem budushcheye: materialy yubileinykh gaidarovskikh chtenii posvyashchennykh 25-letiyu Instituta Gaidara” [By studying the present, we draft the future: the materials of readings held in honor of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Gaidar Institute] (Moscow: Gaidar Institute Publishing House, 2015), 70–71, <http://economytimes.ru/sites/default/files/Book.pdf>.
- 4 Alexander Etkind, *Vnutrennyaya kolonizatsiya. Imperskiy opyt Rossii* [Internal colonization: Russia’s imperial experience] (Moscow: Novoye Literaturnoye Obozreniye, 2016), 110.
- 5 Ibid., 138.
- 6 Ibid., 136.
- 7 Jan-Werner Müller, *Spory o demokratii. Politicheskiye idei v Evrope XX veka* [Contesting Democracy: Political Ideas in 20th-Century Europe] (Moscow: Gaidar Institute Publishing House, 2017), 29–30; Address of the President of the Russian Federation, March 18, 2014, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20603>.
- 8 Yulia Latynina, “Pravoslavnyi terrorizm-lait” [Orthodox terrorism-lite], *Novaya Gazeta*, September 11, 2017, <https://www.novayagazeta.ru/articles/2017/09/11/73786-pravoslavnyy-terrorizm-lait>.
- 9 For more on the causes, consequences, and mechanisms of the self-organization of civil society, see Andrei Kolesnikov, “Defending One’s Backyard: Local Civic Activism in Moscow,” <http://carnegie.ru/2017/05/02/defending-one-s-backyard-local-civic-activism-in-moscow-pub-69822>.
- 10 William Easterly, *Tiraniya ekspertov. Ekonomisty, diktatory, i zabytye prava bednykh* [The Tyranny of Experts: Economists, Dictators, and the Forgotten Rights of the Poor] (Moscow: Gaidar Institute Publishing House, 2016), 211.

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