

## Introduction: Rethinking Putin's Political Order

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How are political decisions made in Russia today? The increasingly tense relations between the world's second nuclear power and the West makes understanding this particularly urgent. Yet most of the images common in the media and academia, although capturing some element of Russia's political scene, do not seem quite right.

To some, the regime of Vladimir Putin looks like a spruced up replica of the USSR of Leonid Brezhnev.<sup>1</sup> The Kremlin is again seeking to intimidate domestic critics and censor the press. Putin, who once declared the Soviet disintegration a "geopolitical catastrophe," seems to some intent on reversing it, bringing lands lost in 1991 back under Moscow's control. Having restored the Soviet national anthem, the Russian president is now said to rule by means of what one analyst, perhaps tongue in cheek, calls a "Politburo 2.0" (Minchenko 2013).

Others see the current regime as an offshoot not of the Soviet Union per se but of its most feared institution—the KGB, or, more broadly, the security and law enforcement agencies, whose officers and veterans are known in Russian as the *siloviki*. Putin, the one-time spy, is cast as the executor of a covert project to establish his former agency's dominance. Analysts portray the *siloviki* as a cohesive clan, now entrenched within both the Russian polity and the country's corporate boardrooms (Petrov 2002; Kryshтанoskaya and White 2003, 2009; Treisman 2008).

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<sup>1</sup> For instance, Gessen (2012, p.270).

To still others, the Putin regime is essentially a kleptocracy, whose leaders' central aim is "to loot the country without limit" (Dawisha 2015, 3). Putin and his cronies—mostly old friends from St Petersburg—are said to have enmeshed the state in nationwide networks of corruption. To understand Russian politics today, so this argument goes, one simply needs to follow the money.

While these three images emphasize the personal history and choices of Russia's second president, a fourth sees him as the instrument of something larger. Russian public life, it is said, is governed by *sistema*. What *sistema*—literally, "the system"—means depends on who is writing. In one view, it represents informal "power networks that account for the failure to implement leaders' political will" (Ledeneva 2013, 4). In another, it is a "style of exercising power that turns the country's people into temporary operating resources" (Pavlovsky 2016). The various usages share the notion of something timeless, rooted in culture, that blocks reform and devalues individual rights.

Finally, political scientists who look at Russia often find in it an example of "competitive authoritarianism," a type of regime that converts seemingly democratic institutions into props for dictatorship (Levitsky and Way 2010).<sup>2</sup> In such orders, elections are held not to choose new leaders but to intimidate the opposition (Magaloni 2006). Legislatures exist not to deliberate over laws but to coopt potential opposition or to enforce deals between the dictator and other power-holders (Gandhi and Przeworski 2006; Boix and Svolik 2013). The façade of democracy is constructed in part to earn respectability and Western aid.

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<sup>2</sup> Levitsky and Way (2010) classify Russia as "competitive authoritarian" until 2008, and then as a full authoritarian regime.

These images point to some recognizable features of Russia under Putin. Yet, as a guide to the country's politics and policy, they seem inadequate. Each exaggerates one aspect, while neglecting others. Each ignores much of what actually happens, day to day, in Russian government. Each is essentially static, presenting Russia today as a stabilized system, if not the incarnation of some unchanging Russian reality. They underplay the dramatic ways the country has changed over the past 25 years and imply a coherence that is hard to fit with the facts.

Like the Soviet Union, Russia today has a strong leader, a centralized state, superpower ambitions, and an aggressive foreign policy. Yet, unlike the USSR, it lacks a cohesive ruling party and a communist ideology. It has—for the most part—open borders and a market economy. Indeed, many of its leaders are eager capitalists, with their own businesses on the side (Lamberova and Sonin, this volume). The Soviet Politburo after Stalin, although dominated by the General Secretary, contained a number of political heavyweights with their own bureaucratic resources. There is nothing comparable in Putin's Russia. And, for all the propaganda on today's Kremlin-controlled television, the country remains far more open to information than in Soviet times.

Russia is also not a KGB state. In fact, the security services are so fragmented by clan, factional, and inter-agency rivalries, so divided by generational, bureaucratic, and personal conflicts, that they cannot act cohesively (Soldatov and Rochlitz, this volume). They lack a leader who could make demands of the president. Within government and the higher echelons of the presidential administration, the presence of siloviki actually peaked around 2008 and then fell, with individuals from private business mostly filling the gap.<sup>3</sup> In high stakes battles, top

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<sup>3</sup> See Ananyev (this volume), Rivera and Rivera (2014); the trend might now be changing again (see Soldatov and Rochlitz, this volume).

siloviki sometimes lose to big businessmen or other actors. In 2011, for example, the billionaire Mikhail Fridman fought to prevent the oil company Rosneft, led by Putin's friend Igor Sechin, from partnering with BP to explore the Arctic. Despite Sechin's security service background and personal ties to the president, Fridman won.

Although they have not captured the state, the enforcers have largely captured the criminal justice system, coopting and weakening the courts (Paneyakh and Rosenberg, this volume). Some key siloviki do participate in top discussions. But they do so not as holders of particular posts but as long-time, trusted confidants of Putin. Besides such personal relationships, their influence reflects two factors. First, their vision of a Russia besieged by the West increasingly fits Putin's conception of the facts. The Arab Spring and Russia's Facebook protests of 2011-12 appeared to validate the siloviki's warnings that the CIA was fomenting colored revolutions around the world and had plans for one in Moscow. Second, the top security service bosses control most flows of information to the president.

That leading Russian politicians benefit from massive corruption and links to organized crime has been credibly reported more than once.<sup>4</sup> A few close Putin associates—and others connected to them—have become extremely rich during the boom years, although their returns fell sharply when oil revenues sank (Lamberova and Sonin, this volume). But calling Russia a kleptocracy does not help much to understand its politics. Many key decisions—such as the intervention in Syria or the support of insurgents in the Donbass despite the risk of Western sanctions—make little sense in terms of Kremlin bigwigs' mercenary interests. Most state decisions have no direct impact on top officials' offshore accounts. And if corruption and theft

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<sup>4</sup> See, for instance Duarte and Meyer (2015).

are all the Kremlin cares about, it is puzzling how and why some difficult tasks, such as the reform and modernization of the Russian armed forces between 2008 and 2014, still get done.

Accounts of *sistema* sound plausible to anyone who has spent time in Russia. Yet in their vagueness and generality, they explain too little and too much. Too little because such images focus on how decisions are implemented and say nothing about what goals decisionmakers choose to pursue. Too much because—although authors of course recognize that some change does happen—*sistema* only seems to explain how initiatives get blocked. That extensive modernization has, in fact, occurred becomes even more mysterious if one sees the society and state as trapped in a pre-modern matrix of informal codes, cultural norms, and personal relationships. And if formal laws and regulations are routinely subverted, it is hard to understand why top leaders invest so much time and effort in getting them enacted.

Calling Russia a case of “competitive authoritarianism” helps focus attention on what is and what is not unique about its current order. But, as following chapters suggest, various aspects of Russia’s politics do not fit common understandings of how such regimes work. The parliament turns out to be neither a complete façade—a “rubber stamp”—nor a venue for coopting regime opponents or enforcing bargains between elites and a dictator. Rather, it is a forum for battles over policies among rival bureaucratic—and occasionally business—actors (Noble and Schulmann, this volume). In most cases, the results represent not some compromise between the parties or some cooptation payoff, but rather the relative skill, luck, and persistence of the players in a complicated game.

Elections, rather than intimidating the opposition by means of inflated “supermajorities,” seem to have mobilized regime critics, sparking angry demonstrations in 2011-12.<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile, Putin’s preservation of superficially democratic institutions is certainly not a bid for Western aid since Russia receives none and seeks to outlaw international agencies that wish to deliver any. If the point is to win respectability in the West, the defiant openness with which the authorities harass the political opposition is surprising.

In this book, we attempt to construct a richer picture of how Russian political decisions are made today. Our approach is empirical and inductive. By observing all that can be observed about the role and participation of key actors, we seek to develop a more accurate and comprehensive understanding of how the system operates, its strengths and weaknesses, and its potential for change. To be clear, this book does not claim to answer all the questions left hanging by previous accounts. And, to be fair, elements of some of the images criticized above also appear in ours. But from an intensive examination of available evidence, a number of new themes emerge.

### ***More modern***

A first theme is that it is impossible to understand Russia’s politics today without paying attention to the dramatic change that occurred in society between 1999 and 2011. During these years, Russia was modernizing rapidly. This process shaped both the Putin regime itself and the emerging threats to it that prompted the Kremlin’s reactionary turn.

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<sup>5</sup> Perhaps one might argue that it was the dwindling of United Russia’s “supermajority” in 2011 rather than electoral fraud that triggered the protests. But it is hard to believe that the Moscow protesters would have stayed home had the authorities faked an even larger margin of victory.

The pace of development shows up in a range of statistics, both economic and social. Between 1999 and 2011, the country's GDP per capita rose from a little under \$13,000 to \$24,000.<sup>6</sup> Living standards surged even faster. Adjusted for inflation, average wages and pensions both increased by 11 percent a year throughout this period.

As incomes grew, Russia became a consumer society, with chain stores and multiplex movie theaters spreading across the country. By 2012, Moscow contained more mall space than any other European city, and Russia had more than twice as many hotels as it had had in 2000 (Kramer 2013, Rosstat 2013). By then, the country had more ATM's per person than either Japan or the UK (IMF 2014). Communications also underwent a revolution. When Putin first took office, only one in every 45 people had a cell phone subscription. By 2011, Russians had 1.8 subscriptions *per person*. Back in 1999, hardly any Russian families owned a computer and the internet was virtually unknown. By 2012, three quarters of household contained a computer and 64 million people (55 percent of the population) were logging on to the internet at least once a month; by 2016 this had risen to 81 million people (69 percent of the population).<sup>7</sup> Along the way, Russian edged out German to become the second most used language on the web.<sup>8</sup> Social networks—both Russian and Western—had attracted 35 million daily internet users by September 2013.<sup>9</sup> Simultaneously, the media market boomed. Annual TV advertising revenues rose from \$235 million in 2000 to \$4.5 billion in 2011, while the internet advertising market grew from nothing to \$1.4 billion.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> World Bank (2016). Estimates at purchasing power parity and in constant 2011 dollars, accessed August 3, 2016.

<sup>7</sup> <http://fom.ru/SMI-i-internet/12610>.

<sup>8</sup> [https://w3techs.com/technologies/history\\_overview/content\\_language/ms/y](https://w3techs.com/technologies/history_overview/content_language/ms/y)

<sup>9</sup> <http://fom.ru/SMI-i-internet/11088>

Education levels had been impressive even in Soviet times. But in Putin's years, they rose still higher. Between 1999 and 2011, the percentage of the workforce with bachelor's degrees increased from 19 to 29 percent (Rosstat 2003, 42; 2013, 47). More and more of the record numbers enrolling in college were studying economics and management or computer science. Meanwhile, Russians travelled abroad more during the Putin years than at any time in the previous century. In 1999, Russians made 13 million trips abroad. By 2011, they were making 44 million a year (Rosstat 2003b, 2013b).

As Russians became more educated, wired, and internationally travelled, their attitudes modernized in some of the ways that theories predict (Rogov and Ananyev, this volume). The share that favored a "democratic" political system rose from 45 percent in 1995 to 64 percent in 2006 and 68 percent in 2011—although the simultaneous growth in demand for unconstrained "strong leadership" suggests a certain ambivalence (World Values Survey 2016). Despite resentment of the West's perceived desire to dictate to Russia, the proportion who favored "Western-style" democracy rose from 15 percent in 2008 to almost 30 percent four years later, for the first time equaling support for a return to Soviet rule (Levada Center 2016, 33). Demand for a paternalistic, protective state—although still a majority position—was falling. The proportion that thought the state should guarantee all citizens a decent level of well-being fell from 71 percent in 2001 to 58 percent in 2011. Agreement that the state should only establish and enforce common "rules of the game" jumped from 19 to 34 percent (Rogov and Ananyev, this volume; Levada Center 2016, 63).

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<sup>10</sup> <http://www.akarussia.ru/node/2085>



The late 1990s and early Putin years had seen a strong demand for centralization, unity, and law and order. By 2012, the pendulum was swinging back. By that year, 70 percent agreed that Russia needed a political opposition, up from just 47 percent who had said this in 2000. Only 40 percent backed further centralization of political power, less than the 45 percent that called for political decentralization (Rogov and Ananyev, this volume).

Many parts of the state—corrupt, stagnant, inefficient—looked increasingly at odds with the mood in society. But a few were evolving towards greater effectiveness. Despite the image of Russia’s court system as politicized and venal, one sub-system—that of the commercial “*arbitrazh*” courts—was thriving (Paneyakh and Rosenberg, this volume). The number of cases that businesses chose to bring to these courts more than doubled between 1999 and 2012, suggesting if not perfect justice at least a useful degree of predictability.

Meanwhile, citizens and businesses were increasingly using the regular courts to sue the state, exploiting new powers that—surprising as it might seem—were mostly introduced during Putin’s first term. Here, the bias against acquittals in Russian jurisprudence worked in society’s favor. In 2010, courts ordered the federal government to pay \$220 million to compensate victims of wrongful state actions—70 times more than in 2001 (Paneyakh and Rosenberg, this volume; Trochev 2012). Even the penal system saw some humanization in the Putin-Medvedev years. The number of Russians sentenced to prison fell from 389,000 in 1999 to 206,000 in 2012. Judges were handing out more probation in place of jail time (Paneyakh and Rosenberg, this volume).

As opinions evolved and online networks spread, a new interest in civic activism began to emerge in some quarters. Participation was low, except for local efforts of homeowners to improve utility services and clean up their neighborhoods (Sobolev and Zakharov, this volume).

But, especially in the big cities, attitudes were changing. People began to donate money and clothes to those in need. Local ecological organizations sprang up to defend forests, lakes, and other threatened natural environments, or to shield historic architecture from the wrecking ball. When fires destroyed vast tracts of forest around Moscow in the summer of 2010, volunteers mobilized to help the burned villages. Floods in the south elicited a similar reaction. Motorists by the thousand protested the special treatment of privileged drivers, who could cut through traffic with their flashing blue lights. And, as the 2011-12 electoral season approached, thousands of young people with cell phones and internet accounts signed up to monitor electoral precincts. When they documented ballot stuffing and fraud—and when tens of thousands took to the streets to protest in Moscow and a few other cities—this marked the culmination of this phase of Russia’s modernization. It was also the trigger that prompted Putin’s reactionary response.

### ***Sudden stop***

The dramatic modernization of Russian life that occurred in the 2000s forged the Putin regime. Steadily rising living standards distracted Russians from the political divisions of the 1990s and demobilized the discontented, allowing the Kremlin to concentrate power more and more as the decade progressed. Despite resentment at Russia’s shrunken global status, the population was solidly *pro*-Western in the early 2000s, with more than 60 percent favorable towards the US and more than 70 percent favorable towards the EU (Rogov and Ananyev, this volume). NATO’s bombing of Serbia had outraged most Russians, but pro-Western sentiment bounced back surprisingly fast, especially after the 9/11 terrorist attack, which won Russians’ sympathy. At this time, Russians associated Putin not with assertive nationalism, but with Western-style economic and social progress. Support for him was higher among Russians with positive views of the West

than among those hostile towards it, and among those who said that modernization was necessary than among those who said it was not.<sup>11</sup>

And yet it was alarm at the consequences of this trend that motivated Putin's abrupt reversal in 2012. The regime that presided over modernization became the chief obstacle to it. Although Putin and his aides recognized the need for continuing economic progress to sustain the country's military defense and secure prosperity, they were determined to neutralize its social and political spillovers.

Three tasks were central to the Kremlin's attempt to freeze society. First, it had to demobilize and intimidate the minority that had begun to act on new desires for political participation and responsive government. Second, it had to, shake up the business/political elite, reminding those who had grown rich in the previous decade of their vulnerability. Third, with Russia sinking into stagnation, the Kremlin had to replace Putin's old appeal based on surging prosperity and progress with a new one based on national pride, traditional values, and a sense of external threat. In doing this, the Kremlin hoped to exploit the polarization caused by the unevenness of value change in a rapidly developing society. Putin was confident that in the factories of the Urals and small towns of Siberia a Soviet-style conservatism survived that could be turned against the city hipsters and other more modernized strata.

To what extent did this counterattack succeed? On the surface, extremely well. A flood of punitive legislation, combined with a smear campaign against leading liberals, and a few politicized trials helped to scare protesters off the streets. The siloviki, set free to hunt, ramped

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<sup>11</sup> On attitudes towards the West and Putin approval, see Treisman (2014). In April 2011, among Russians who agreed that modernization was necessary, 76 percent said that they trusted Putin "completely," "mostly," or "partly." Among those who said modernization was not necessary, only 61 percent trusted Putin (FOM, "Penta 15/2011" poll, [sophist.hse.ru](http://sophist.hse.ru)).

up prosecutions for “extremism” and halted the decline in the number in jail (Paneyakh and Rosenberg, this volume). Businessmen and technocrats considered close to Medvedev—the figurehead of optimistic modernization—were forced to undergo a kind of vetting, as Putin’s silovik friends breathed down their necks.<sup>12</sup> Moderates in the state-controlled media were edged out, and the tone on pro-Kremlin television grew more strident (Lipman et al., this volume). The rhetoric of Orthodox traditionalism and homophobia certainly struck some chords with the public. But it was the Crimean intervention that finally reversed the previous slow slide in Putin’s rating, driving it up above 80 percent.

While the new policies certainly reconsolidated power, the research in this book suggests the difficulty of maintaining this strategy. The Kremlin cannot completely abandon economic progress. It faces the challenge of promoting pre-modern values in a world of post-modern technologies. Development has not stopped; it has just been temporarily arrested, and, in fact, many of the previous trends have continued.

Between 2011 and 2015, the proportion of Russians who used a personal computer every day rose from 36 to 53 percent, and the share logging on daily to the internet rose from 38 to 57 percent.<sup>13</sup> The proportion of those employed who had higher education edged up from 29 percent in 2011 to 31 percent in 2014.<sup>14</sup> The number of foreign trips Russians took rose from 44 million in 2011 to 54 million in 2013, before falling back again.<sup>15</sup> Even as the collapsing ruble made

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<sup>12</sup> One businessman reportedly crawled across the floor of Putin’s Kremlin office to show his subservience, to the president’s amusement (Pavlovsky 2016).

<sup>13</sup> Levada Center (2016, 171); <http://fom.ru/SMI-i-internet/12610>.

<sup>14</sup> Rosstat (2015).

<sup>15</sup> Data download from Rosstat ([www.gks.ru](http://www.gks.ru)).

such travel more expensive, it was trips to the former Soviet neighbors that suffered; Russians still travelled more to countries beyond the former-USSR in 2015 than they had in 2011.

Civic activism has continued, despite the crackdown on NGOs. Since 2012, citizens have initiated more than 5,000 petitions on the online platform Change.org—attracting 17 million signatures (Sobolev and Zakharov, this volume). More than 500,000 Russians signed one protesting the destruction of European food smuggled into Russia evading Putin’s sanctions (Moscow Times 2015). Some NGOs organized petitions on their own websites. After 120,000 people signed one promoted by the WWF-Russia demanding tougher legal penalties against oil spills, the Duma passed a law enacting such penalties in 2013.<sup>16</sup> Activism is not just on the internet. When a friend of Putin, who had won the contract to collect road fees from truck drivers, introduced a new costly system, drivers from 43 regions held a 10-day strike in protest.<sup>17</sup>

At the same time, public opinion may not have moved as decisively towards reactionary nationalism as appears at first glance. In fact, the polling data for this period are mixed and often contradictory, suggesting confusion and some discomfort about answering sincerely (Rogov and Ananyev, this volume). In January 2016 fewer Russians than in 2010 favored a political system resembling the current one or Western-style democracy, while very slightly more expressed a preference for the Soviet system (37 percent compared to 34 percent in 2010). The big gainer was “don’t know,” chosen by 19 percent, up from 12 percent in 2010.<sup>18</sup> Yet, in another question posed in November 2015, more Russians said they would like to live in “a Western-style state

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<sup>16</sup> [http://wwf.panda.org/wwf\\_news/?207193/Russian-seas-finally-protected-by-parliamentary-law](http://wwf.panda.org/wwf_news/?207193/Russian-seas-finally-protected-by-parliamentary-law).

<sup>17</sup> *The Moscow Times*, “Russian Truck Drivers Strike for 10 Days Against Platon Tax System,” February 22, 2016, <https://themoscowtimes.com/articles/russian-truck-drivers-strike-for-10-days-against-platon-tax-system-51905>.

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.levada.ru/2016/02/17/predpochtitelnye-modeli-ekonomicheskoy-i-politicheskoy-sistem/>.

with a market economy, democratic institutions, respect for human rights, but with its own character [*uklad*]” (31 percent) than favored “a state with its own unique institutions and path of development” (24 percent).<sup>19</sup> Paternalist expectations continued their decline: between 2011 and 2015, the share who thought the state should guarantee a decent standard of living dropped from 58 to 49 percent, while support for one that would just “enforce common rules of the game” rose from 34 to 41 percent (Levada Center 2016, 63).

Anti-Western sentiment soared after the annexation of Crimea, and more and more Russians expressed warm feelings towards Russia’s new eastern partner, China (81 percent favorable in early 2015, up from 68 percent in 2011). Yet, travel statistics tell a different story. The numbers of trips Russians made to the US, the UK, Germany, and France were respectively 42, 18, 16, and 36 percent higher in 2014 than in 2011. Over the same years, the number of Russians travelling annually to China fell by half a million.

Interpreting the polls on sentiment towards the West—as well as approval of Putin—presents challenges. One possibility is that the surge in Putin’s ratings reflects not a shift in opinion but a change in who agreed to be surveyed. Given relatively low participation rates, even a small increase in willingness to participate among pro-Putin, anti-Western nationalists—along with a decrease in willingness among pro-Western, Putin critics—could produce a large apparent change (Rogov and Ananyev, this volume). If this is the case—and it is difficult to test—then polls might be picking up a change in social cues rather than any real change in attitudes. At the same time, the appearance of broad popular agreement with Putin’s agenda may be inflated by the Kremlin’s strategic packaging of issues. By combining one issue with broad public

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<sup>19</sup> <http://www.levada.ru/2016/01/14/rossijskaya-demokratiya/>.

resonance—discomfort with homosexuality—with others for which Russians have less enthusiasm—restrictions on civil rights—Putin’s team created the illusion that Russians backed the whole program (Rogov and Ananyev, this volume).

In short, striking as the post-Crimea rally behind Putin and the surge in national pride has been, various aspects of modernization continued. Although less visible than before, tension remained between, on the one hand, a population that had over the previous 15 years become more educated, internet-connected, international, and eager for responsive government and, on the other hand, a state whose leaders’ main concern was to preserve an overwhelming concentration of power. Russia’s regime is not a stabilized system. Rather, it has been in constant evolution since the early 1990s, and—for better or worse—that evolution is likely to continue.

### *Informational autocracy*

That said, how can one best characterize how Russian politics works right now? Another theme emerging from the chapters is the Kremlin’s preoccupation with flows of political information. Since soon after his first election, Putin has sought to control such flows. Indeed, he is an almost perfect example of what Guriev and Treisman (2015) call an “informational autocrat.” Such leaders—even when lacking a commitment to democratic principles and facing weak institutional constraints—recognize that violent repression in modern societies is costly and often ineffective. Instead, they attempt to convince the public that they are competent leaders, coopting or censoring the media to shape the messages that citizens receive.

Such leaders win the sincere support of much of their population, but this support is based on information that has been manipulated by the regime to achieve that purpose. When the

state has plenty of resources, the regime coopts the media and elite to cheerlead on its behalf and conceal its failures. But when resources are scarce, leaders increase censorship. Violent repression is a last resort because it undercuts efforts to portray the leader as effective and benevolent.

The mission of such informational autocracies is to manufacture the kind of popular backing that makes it possible to rule via superficially democratic institutions. To do so, the authorities must provide citizens with a compelling narrative that shows how, even when conditions are hard, this is because of external attacks or domestic saboteurs rather than the incumbent's incompetence or dishonesty. Such regimes rely on opinion polls not to identify popular demands to satisfy so much as to check that the information strategy is working.

Putin's regime can be understood as following this logic. As revenues grew scarcer after the global financial crisis, it did, as predicted, move towards tighter censorship. The Kremlin has also become increasingly repressive towards those opposition actors who wish to challenge the official narrative, but not towards the public at large, which it still hopes to win over by propaganda rather than by instilling fear.

The chapters that follow document this information strategy. Within a few years of coming to power, Putin had established control over all news-reporting national television channels. At first, managing their broadcasts relied almost entirely on cooptation—media “friends” of the regime were happy to trade favors without any compulsion (Lipman et al., this volume). The soaring revenues of media companies during the economic boom enabled cooperative executives to become rich. Yet after Putin's return in 2012—and especially after the war in Ukraine—the methods hardened. The state media adopted a strident anti-Western tone,



broadcast faked news reports, and blocked critical voices almost completely. The remaining islands of independent media came under intense pressure.

The Kremlin's approach to the internet shows an even starker evolution. Early on, Putin promised web entrepreneurs that he would "opt for freedom" over "excessive regulation," and for much of the next 12 years, he did little to tighten controls (Nossik 2014). He may have underestimated the political importance of a medium he dismissed once as "fifty percent pornography."<sup>20</sup> Things changed after the protests of 2011-12. Declaring the internet to be a CIA project, Putin licensed the security services and their helpers in the Duma to devise intrusive technical controls and legal penalties to deter online opposition activity (Nossik 2014; Lipman et al., this volume). But, the FSB did not seem completely up to the task. It was civilian political consultants who recruited trolls to plant pro-Kremlin comments on blogs and websites. And the internet companies were pressured to do the censoring themselves (Soldatov 2016).

Like other informational autocracies, Putin's regime invests heavily in opinion polls to monitor the success of its approach (Rogov and Ananyev, this volume). Sources differ on whether these polls ever affect policy decisions; they may, for instance, have persuaded Putin not to remove Lenin's embalmed body from the Red Square mausoleum or to raise the retirement age—two unpopular proposals. But polls certainly provide diagnostics to the Kremlin on the effectiveness of its propaganda. "It is as if you have a sick person and you infect him with new viruses and take his temperature," one former official told me. "The thermometer reveals how the viruses are affecting him."<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/6693>

<sup>21</sup> Interview with Aleksei Chesnyakov, January 2016, Moscow.

### ***Russia's two systems***

Several chapters point to a disconnect between two ways in which Russian political decisions are made. A useful analogy comes from psychology. In his book, *Thinking Fast and Slow*, Daniel Kahneman argues that the human mind operates in two modes or phases. “System 1” refers to the spontaneous and largely unconscious processes by which the brain draws conclusions and makes decisions based on instinct, practice, and routines. A realm of “freewheeling impulses and associations,” it “operates automatically and quickly, with little or no effort and no sense of voluntary control.” By contrast, “System 2” is “the conscious, reasoning self that has beliefs, makes choices, and decides what to think about and what to do.” It monitors proceedings and intervenes episodically. “System 2 takes over when things get difficult, and it normally has the last word” (Kahneman 2011, 21-5).

In similar fashion, one might think of Russian politics as having its own two systems. The first—“normal politics” or “autopilot”—prevails when Putin does not personally get involved. Such cases, which constitute the vast majority of more mundane state activity, are poorly captured by common images of Russia as a centralized dictatorship. In this system, outcomes are determined by an often vicious competition between bureaucratic factions, business actors, regional elites, and powerful individuals. The second system—“manual control” (in Russian, *ruchnoe upravlenie*) occurs when Putin takes a clear stand. It involves a much more top-down dictation of actions—although the poor preparation of decisions and difficulties of

implementation mean that the desired outcome is only sometimes achieved.<sup>22</sup> Both systems involve corruption, power networks, and arbitrary and sometimes inhumane methods. Neither is particularly effective, although both can at times get results.

The rules of “normal politics” are anything but clear, and vary with the arena in which the battle occurs. Some are fought out in the Duma, where different actors may propose legislation, insert amendments, block and delay bills, or try to mobilize opposition to them with targeted leaks to the press (Noble and Schulmann, this volume). Other issues are fought out through the tortuous process of obtaining “sign-offs” (in Russian, *soglasovania*) from the multiple bureaucratic principals whose agreement is required before a particular change can be made. Another arena is the media itself, in which powerful actors, including even top siloviki, float “trial balloons,” or plant compromising—and sometimes untrue—stories to discredit their rivals (Lipman et al., this volume). To bring even more pressure, competitors enlist allies in the security state to prosecute and jail members of an opposed team. Although bargaining between factions does sometimes occur, the game is not primarily about negotiation. It is a cutthroat, zero-sum contest, in which no methods are ruled out.

Actors always have the option of invoking “System 2”—that is, appealing to Putin to intervene and decide the outcome. Sometimes they feel obliged to inform him and invite his guidance. But Putin may resent the intrusion or insist that the parties fight it out themselves, assuming all risk, and leaving him free to enter later at a moment of his choice, on his terms. One desperate strategy is to appeal to Putin through the press—as his long-time FSB associate Viktor

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<sup>22</sup> This does not correspond to a more common distinction between formal and informal politics (Sakwa 2010). Both systems involve both formal and informal aspects.

Cherkesov did in 2007, as he battled another silovik faction.<sup>23</sup> But this has never worked. In Cherkesov's case, Putin sharply criticized those who chose to air the regime's dirty laundry in public and demoted his old colleague.

“Manual control” is sometimes necessary to unblock lower-level deadlocks. When it works, it suggests the vitality and crucial importance of the country's top leader. During the global financial crisis, Putin appeared on television bullying industrialists into re-opening shuttered plants in the depressed town of Pikalyovo and browbeating retailers about the price of sausages (Treisman 2011). But when it does *not* work—which is surprisingly often—it risks eroding Putin's image of authoritative and effective leadership. This may explain why Putin often rejects appeals to him to take a clear position (Ananyev, this volume). There may also be an element of social Darwinism in letting the bureaucrats and entrepreneurs compete among themselves.

Fear for his credibility explains Putin's visible frustration at the failures of the bureaucracy to implement even decisions in which he has invested his reputation. His occasional *cris de coeur* on this sound odd in the mouth of a purported dictator. It sometimes seemed, he remarked acidly in June 2013, that “some agencies live entirely in their own little world” and “look solely to their own narrow problems” (quoted in Monaghan 2014, 15). “Will you do your work or not?” he exploded at a meeting of ministers and governors of Far Eastern regions that July.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> In an article in the newspaper *Kommersant*, Cherkesov berated those members of the security services who had become “merchants” rather than “warriors” and warned that fighting among security service factions could undermine the country's stability (Cherkesov 2007).

<sup>24</sup> Kremlin (2013), quoted in Monaghan (2014, 16).

Such frustration has led to a more informal approach to “manual control.” Putin has increasingly taken to bypassing state agencies to rely on parastatal institutions and surrogates. His Russian National Front, created in 2011, is a kind of civil society appointed by the state, with responsibility for mobilizing pro-regime volunteers and criticizing the performance of regional governors. While ordering the GRU special forces to conduct the military operation in Crimea, Putin enlisted everyone from Cossack vigilantes to the Night Wolves biker group to help out. Even when he uses formal structures, he seeks to hold individuals personally accountable for specific tasks, up to and including the threat of criminal charges.

Manual control went into overdrive in Putin’s third term with his “May Decrees,” a series of orders in which the president committed himself very publicly to specific targets on everything from teachers’ salaries to the mortality rate. Many were unrealistic, and the ensemble required fiscal resources many times greater than could plausibly be mobilized (Monaghan 2014). To keep the pressure on, Putin held regional governors personally responsible for their implementation and demanded regular reports on their progress. This may explain a noted increase in Putin’s meetings with governors since 2012 (Petrov and Nazrullaeva, this volume).

Of course, neither autopilot nor manual control work well if the vehicle’s engine is badly designed, corroded, and out of fuel. Pushing harder on the accelerator does not enable the car to travel faster than its potential or further than the gasoline in its tank will carry it.

### ***Degeneration***

Another theme, already mentioned, concerns Putin's increasing tendency, when he does get involved, to opt for informal mechanisms. One should not exaggerate—the state, with its complex bureaucratic routines has hardly disappeared. But more often than before key decisions seem to be getting made and implemented outside official institutions.

Several types of evidence point in this direction. First, records show Putin has been doing less of the public, formal things that presidents typically do to make and communicate decisions. After a burst of activity in 2012, he has been issuing fewer and fewer presidential decrees. In 2015, the number of these fell to the lowest level since at least 1994 (Ananyev, this volume; Remington 2014, 107). He also meets with the government or heads cabinet meetings far less frequently than in his first two presidential terms (Ananyev, this volume). His official schedule shows fewer meetings with law enforcement and security ministers, who are constitutionally subordinated directly to the president (Soldatov and Rochlitz, this volume). One presumes that more and more of the president's decisions are made in informal settings and encoded in secret decrees or unofficial instructions.

This fits with the practice already noted of bypassing state bodies in favor of non-state institutions and surrogates such as the Russian National Front. Another aspect is the increasing reliance on personal relationships and missions. Putin recruits freelancers—reportedly termed “curators” inside the Kremlin—to manage particular problem areas (Pavlovsky 2016). He lets the individual assemble his own team, and then, in the president's name, demand assistance and obedience from others. All this is at the agent's risk; if he fails, he can be quietly discarded or even prosecuted for rules broken along the way.

Of course, US presidents also sometimes appoint a “drug czar” or “regulatory czar” to oversee particular policy areas. But in Russia, such curators are informal, personal agents of Putin, with no oversight other than that of the Kremlin itself. The classic case—maybe the first—is that of Ramzan Kadyrov, the president of Chechnya, whom Putin gave virtually unlimited authority to impose stability in the republic. More recently, the businessman Konstantin Malofeev got the Kremlin’s go-ahead to organize ultranationalist volunteers to help local insurgents in the Donbass. Such use of freelancers may reflect frustration at the ineffectiveness of those with official responsibility. The FSB had failed to prevent—or apparently to predict—Yanukovych’s fall and the events in Ukraine, and it lacked agents on the ground in Crimea (Soldatov and Rochlitz, this volume). So Putin turned to adventurous types who seemed better informed. In a bizarre twist, Putin appeared later to have authorized Malofeev to try his hand at devising internet controls for the country. In April 2016, Malofeev hosted a meeting in Moscow with China’s “online tsar,” Lu Wei, and its “master builder of the country’s digital firewall,” Fang Binxing, seeking help from the Chinese with filtering technology (Seddon 2016). Such a meeting could not have taken place without Kremlin backing. Meanwhile, journalists allege that one of the key organizers of the regime’s internet trolling is another freelancer, a restaurateur who has catered meals for Putin, called Yevgeny Prigozhin (Chen 2015).

When he does work through the official channels, Putin seems happy now to undercut the mechanisms, sacrificing expertise to speed. In 2012, he weakened the *soglasovania* system of obligatory sign-offs (Fortescue 2016, 8; Ananyev, this volume). In 2014, rather than address disagreements in the cabinet, the Kremlin pressured Prime Minister Medvedev to sign controversial legislation while the relevant ministers were out of town (Gaaze 2014; Fortescue 2016). In 2015, the practice of budgeting for three years at a time, a proud innovation of Putin’s

second term which had survived the global crisis of 2009, was suspended. And rather than let the government work out a budget, based on broad priorities defined by the president, as in the past, Putin now insists on being personally involved in all spending decisions (Hanson 2015).

In general, however, Putin appears to consult less with his ministers and outside experts. When, in his annual address to parliament in 2014 he announced out of the blue a “total” financial amnesty, Finance Ministry officials reacted with confusion, wondering whether the president seriously meant to include the legalization of criminal money (Butrin and Visloguzov 2014). Other major decisions seem to have been sprung on the relevant ministers without forewarning.

The reluctance to consult may explain another pathology—an apparent narrowing and deterioration in the quality of information the president receives. Not only are silovik channels ascendant, even within the security community the FSB has come to dominate the supply of information, unlike in the 1990s and early 2000s when several agencies provided independent reports (Soldatov and Rochlitz, this volume). In recent years, Putin has made a series of embarrassing public misstatements. In January 2016, he told the German newspaper *Bild* that Russia had “more than \$300 billion in gold reserves” as well as \$70 billion and \$80 billion in two government reserve funds. He was off by \$150 billion, as the newspaper *Moskovsky Komsomolets* quickly pointed out (Nemtsova 2016). Then in April Putin had to publicly apologize for falsely claiming that the German newspaper *Suddeutsche Zeitung* was owned by Goldman Sachs; he said he had been misinformed by an aide (BBC 2016). In justifying Russian intervention in Ukraine, he claimed that Kharkov had been part of the tsarist province of Novorossia (Kremlin 2014). It had not. After his annual press conference in April 2015, the website Slon.ru published a list of 11 inaccuracies in Putin’s responses. Among these, he said



that the foreign debt to be paid off during the rest of the year was \$60 billion, when in fact it was \$83 billion according to the Central Bank, and he claimed that it was necessary to build a new space station because only 5 percent of Russian territory was visible from the International Space Station. In fact, all Russian territory is visible from the station (Aybusinov 2016).

This deterioration represents in part the sclerosis that sets in when a single leader has been in charge for a long time. Such leaders tend to exclude those who bring unwelcome news or views, eroding the quality of information and discussion, while simultaneously becoming overconfident in their own judgment. But in part, the administrative mechanism is being undermined by Putin's efforts to improve it. His resorts to manual control and "curators" create confusion, undermine respect for formal procedures, and exacerbate bureaucrats' reluctance to take responsibility on themselves (Stanovaya 2014). They encourage similar manual control and rule bending by governors in the regions. No one quite knows who has the president's special authorization and for what. The constant sense of urgency and the injection of siloviki into civilian policy leads to a contradictory mix of rash decisions and defensive inactivity.

### ***Looking ahead***

To summarize, the Putin regime is neither a reprise of the Soviet model nor a security service state. Its leaders are neither simple kleptocrats nor hostages to a culture of informal networks. Its institutions do not match the picture scholars have developed of "competitive authoritarianism." Russia has a regime forged by modernization whose leaders now seek to reverse the social consequences of development. It is an informational autocracy, in which a leader aims to concentrate power and secure compliance like past dictators, but mostly by manipulating

information flows and intimidating actual and potential challengers rather than through large-scale violent repression. At the same time, it is a political order that operates in two modes: a no-holds-barred war among rival bureaucratic, business, and other elite actors, fought out in parliament, media, ministries, and the courts, which turns into a pantomime of vertical subordination when the president steps in to “take charge.” It is a state governed by slow-moving but highly formal bureaucratic norms and procedures, some of which have changed little from Soviet times, which are being eroded by both the clashing interests of “normal politics” and the arbitrary intrusions of a leader who seems increasingly impatient and often misinformed.

The current arrangement is not a stable system—it represents a balance between two forces: the transformational social impact of modernization and the attempt by the Kremlin to enlist modern media and technology to preserve an archaic structure of power. While predicting the timing of crises for such regimes is impossible, no one should be surprised when one occurs. The research in the chapters that follow provides some hints about what form change might take. Of course, the direction would depend on the nature of the transition and on the personality, values, education, and background of the leader who ended up in charge. But one can still distinguish aspects of the current political scene that are likely to remain important from those that are more fortuitous.

A first point, noted already, is that modernization has stalled but not stopped. Public opinion, although favoring strong leadership, and rallying behind Putin after the annexation of Crimea, is far less supportive of a closed, authoritarian system than might appear. Demands were growing for greater openness, honesty in government, and space for local initiative when Putin’s counter-attack struck. To some extent, such demands remain just under the surface. Indeed, sustaining the appearance of unity around a program of anti-Westernism and conservative values

requires a great deal of work by the media and a continual invention of foreign threats—with all the costs for the business climate and risks of escalation that this entails. Pressure will remain—especially in the event of leader or regime change—for a more open and modern style of government.

The vector before Putin’s return was towards not just greater modernization and openness, but also decentralization. Demand for authentic political processes at the local and regional level was growing. Between 2004 and 2010, about 60 percent of respondents favored direct elections of governors, compared to 20 percent that opposed this, which explains Putin’s concession on this score, bringing elections back, amid the 2011 protests (Rogov and Ananyev, this volume).<sup>25</sup> Any major political change is likely to be accompanied by further decentralization, whether deliberate or spontaneous.

On foreign policy, public opinion currently owes much to a media campaign that has simultaneously swelled pride in Russia’s military might, sown fear, and fanned resentments. These resentments are real and long-standing, but despite them Russians have shown a remarkably consistent desire to improve relations with the West except during relatively brief periods of international tension. As late as May 2013, 71 percent favored “strengthening mutually beneficial ties with Western countries,” compared to 16 percent who wanted to “distance [Russia] from the West” (Levada Center 2016, 252). Even after the recent barrage of anti-Western television programming, 75 percent of Russians in November 2015 thought the country should “improve relations with the USA and other Western countries” (Levada Center 2016, 252). There also seems to be a growing desire to define Crimea as a special case. In March

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<sup>25</sup> Of course, this was a tactical retreat that changed little in the actual practice of Kremlin control of governors. And the Kremlin has since sought to limit mayoral elections.

2014, as Russia annexed the peninsula, 58 percent of Russians insisted their country “had the right” to annex neighboring territories to defend ethnic Russians. By March 2015, that had fallen to 34 percent. At that point, a plurality of 47 percent said that Russia did not have a general *right* to take such actions, but that “in the case of the annexation of Crimea Russia [was] behaving decently and lawfully, in accordance with norms of international law” (Levada 2016, 211). This evolution suggests a disinclination for more adventures, although it does not mean that Russians intend to apologize for past ones.

The media—except for small islands of relative independence—have been turned into an instrument of the regime (Lipman et al., this volume). This relied almost entirely on cooptation rather than compulsion. After changes in ownership, new loyal proprietors could be rewarded with revenues as markets surged, and employees could be kept in line with straightforward career incentives. Were political control—along with state subsidies and protections—to weaken, it is easy to imagine media companies changing into primarily profit-seeking businesses. Greater competition and diversity would likely emerge, as entrepreneurs both international and domestic sought to capture part of the multi-billion dollar advertising market.

In business more generally, those favored by the regime would fight to keep their monopolies in the event of political change. But they would be outnumbered by those entrepreneurs and companies that were previously excluded along with those who stayed loyal out of necessity but without enthusiasm. Leader change would prompt a furious contest over the reassignment of rents. Whether this would generate more market competition would depend on the new leader’s strategy, his power to enforce market restrictions, and the number and relative lobbying power of the various business groups. At the least, it would break open current arrangements.

Our research suggests at least some desire among judges for a more humane approach to sentencing and reforms to reduce the conveyor-belt-like quality of court proceedings. Of course, those privileged at present would fight to retain their privileges. But for the most part judges appear to operate the way they do not out of choice but in order to survive within a system they cannot alter.

These factors point to a Russia, after the next round of political change, with a more modern, open, and decentralized political system and a freer media, a Russia not necessarily friendly towards the West but certainly less hostile. Some other factors are less encouraging. The law enforcement bureaucracies and security services have successfully resisted reform for 25 years. They continue to operate in part on the basis of Soviet-era procedures that create perverse incentives. In the event of political change, both leaders and rank-and-file officers are likely to fight to protect their positions and continued access to rents.

A second problem that is unlikely to disappear or improve spontaneously is the situation in the North Caucasus. In any transition, President Kadyrov of Chechnya would be motivated to protect and perhaps increase his power and central leverage. He has demonstrated the ability to deploy thousands of battle-hardened fighters to Ukraine and to stage violent special operations in Russia and abroad. His agents already operate in Moscow and elsewhere in the Russian Federation. A new regime would face the challenge that such an independent and powerful force represents.

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