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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Heinemann-Grüder, A. (2021). Will Putin's Regime Survive? *Russian Analytical Digest*, 266, 11-12. <https://doi.org/10.3929/ethz-b-000477859>

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Will Putin's Regime Survive?

By Andreas Heinemann-Grüder (University of Bonn and Bonn International Centre for Conversion)

DOI: 10.3929/ethz-b-000477859

Putin's regime is a learning authoritarian system, not immune to crises but resilient. Russia no longer represents an electoral autocracy since elections have degenerated into plebiscites without any meaningful alternative. Many decisions are taken on an ad hoc basis, excluding institutions and beyond legal constraints that award legitimacy and ensure quality. In Putin's Russia, the absolutism of the autocrat, the tone-deafness of its leading circle and the autonomy of the security apparatuses reinforce each other. Since 2012, President Putin has been taking legal and repressive actions and has heavily invested in media campaigns to safeguard his regime and to protect it from interferences he deems dangerous. Putin's preventive counter-revolution has been successful so far, criminalizing independent civil society, discrediting opposition forces as a fifth column of the West, controlling the mass media and instrumentalizing social media, enlarging the outreach of the security apparatuses and successfully carrying out cyber attacks.

Putin's regime will survive as long as it commands sufficient state capacity. The security services and the judicial system monopolize public violence; the state is capable of levying taxes and extracting other resources; it provides basic public services. Bureaucratic procedures are functional. Russia did not lose a war. Putin's rule has compensated for the loss of Russia's status after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, made forgettable the uneasiness of having been economically overtaken by the Soviet Union's former allies in Eastern Europe and China. Putin also defused and substituted the never-admitted collective shame over Soviet mass atrocities by spreading a sense of Russia's and the Soviet Union's historical greatness. Putin's revenge for the Russian Versailles syndrome resonates among those age cohorts that spent their formative years in Soviet times and during the 1990s.

Russia's authoritarian regression fits into the global trend of democratic stalemate and reversal over the last two decades. While open military and one-party-regimes are growing less common, personalist regimes are quite persistent. The problem of Putin's succession is not solved, but succession crises should not be overestimated: Azerbaijan, China, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan have solved their succession problems without causing systemic crises.

Yet, political regimes usually become unstable once social and political upward mobility is suppressed, whenever a gerontocracy (as in the late Brezhnev period) is

cemented, and when the number of regime beneficiaries shrinks. The kleptocracy of the camarilla could count on silent approval as long as the regime was able to hand out clientelistic goods. However, its social clientele is shrinking, and this causes discontent, especially among the urban middle class.

The more Putin's regime radicalizes itself, the more some sources of its legitimacy evaporate—his image as anti-Yeltsin, James Bond or messiah. Appeals to the values of the *homo sovieticus*, to Orthodox traditions or hurray patriotism after the annexation of Crimea are losing traction. The generation born after the dissolution of the Soviet Union is beyond the reach of Kremlin propaganda and state TV. State-sponsored movements such as the former "Nashi" no longer mobilize the youth. Support for the regime is trending downwards. Russia's governance model as a petro-state is out of fashion; the fossil age is coming to an end.

The radicalization of Putin's regime is also a result of the structure of political power. Radicalization does not result from ideological worldviews; the leading circle in the Kremlin is anti-liberal, but otherwise free of any *weltanschauung*. Decisions are taken by a tiny circle of Putin's cronies without institutional or personal counterweights. The inner circle operates in an unthinking, stereotypical manner. While power derives from being close to the president, there are several "verticals of power". Each actor in the institutional arrangement has to weigh which channel of influence is most advantageous. Russia consists of a system of competing case managers (*kuratorty*). However, who is the most favored is not always easy to discern. In Russia's political regime, autocracy is combined with anarchy. This leads to bad decisions which have to be covered up or corrected. The constant pressure to hide mistakes and deficits leads to nervousness, blame-shifting and the suggestion of radical solutions. The failed attempt to murder Alexey Navalny is a case in point, Bellingcat and Navalny's team exposing the perpetrators. These kinds of failures lead to a search for the guilty party.

The respective syndrome of failure has to be corrected. Finally, radicalization results from the autonomy of and competition between the security services, especially the secret services. Over time, the modus operandi of the Kadyrov regime in the Chechnyan Republic of the Russian Federation has been diffusing from the Russian periphery to the center, including contract killings and employing irregular paramilitary forces.

The behavior of the security services will determine the regime's trajectory in the years to come; they can side with the incumbent, stay neutral or defect. Their calculus will be informed by their assessment of the power configuration (nobody likes to side with the loser), the prospect of amnesty (no tribunals), the danger of instability spilling over to their organization (no decay of the army or police as in the late Soviet and immediate post-Soviet case), the expected impact on patronage (who will lose privileges) and the regime challengers' offers regarding incorporation. The murder of the former spy Litvinenko in London and the attempted murder of the former spy Skripal in Salisbury deter potential defectors. The regime will deter civil society from autonomous activities and use targeted violence against opposition leaders, but is likely to shy away from shooting at mass demonstrators—as did Gaddafi, Assad and Yanuko-

vych. Putin will opt for harsh riot control instead of “bloody Sundays”.

With his exposure of the rottenness of Putin's kleptocracy and the sultanism of his cronies, Alexey Navalny was temporarily able to set the agenda of public communication. Like a person running amok, Navalny tried to force Putin into a decisive battle rallying the discontented around his martyrdom. Putin's spin doctors had to react, and they did by defaming, arresting and sentencing Navalny. Navalny targeted the personalist nature of Putin's regime, employing the policy style of a charismatic, populist and polarizing leader himself. Yet, any group of future challengers in Russia has to offer a programmatic alternative to Putinism, i.e., more than a mere replacement of the incumbent, and incentives to defect from the current winning coalition. Elite splits are more likely to end Putin's reign than protest.

About the Author

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Strategies for Russia: Avoiding a New Cold War

By David Lane (Cambridge University)

DOI: 10.3929/ethz-b-000477859

It is now over twenty years since President Putin first appeared at the apex of the Russian political elite. Since that time, relations with the West have cumulatively deteriorated. Russia's support for the secession of Crimea and the West's view of Russia's ‘hybrid’ warfare have led to a dominant political discourse of a new ‘cold war’. Donald Trump's initial attempts to improve relations with President Putin were sabotaged. Current relations between Russia and NATO, the United States, the United Kingdom and the European Union are increasingly hostile and include sanctions which have hurt not only Russian companies but also its citizens. The UK's current foreign policy review (March 2021), for example, will raise the cap on the number of British nuclear weapons and will extend their use to retaliation against cyber-attack. Even against the background of the enormous domestic costs of the 2008 world financial crisis and the 2020 coronavirus pandemic, it is planned to increase the UK's military budget. The UK is manifestly responding to former President Trump's exhortations for the Europeans to pull their weight in NATO to sustain their own defence. Russia and China are clearly in the sights as actual or potential aggressor powers. One

major future task for President Putin will be to try to improve relations; if he is unsuccessful, he will have to find means to strengthen Russia's defences.

President Gorbachev faced similar problems and adopted a reform position which ended the Cold War. This is unlikely to be necessary or repeated by President Putin. Gorbachev came to power on a reform platform resting on a weak economic and strategic base. Putin has consolidated power. His attempts to join the hegemonic powers have failed: Putin was ignominiously excluded from the G8 group of countries. Domestically, Putin is unchallenged ideologically and has no effective political opposition: there is no ‘reform movement’, no likely ‘coloured revolution’. The West is divided. The European Union has lost its image of freedom and prosperity, and Germany needs Russia's energy supply. The defection of the UK from the European Union will weaken the influence of the Atlantic alliance in Europe and strengthen European moves to normalise relations with Russia.

Perhaps of greater importance is the fact that Russia under Putin does not pose an ideological or strategic threat in the same way as the USSR once did. The alleged