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poisoning of double agent Sergei Skripal and his daughter, Yulia, in 2018 appears to be the main charge of the British government against the current Russian regime. But with the loss of the EU market, Britain also needs new trading partners. In the current international context, there seems to be no political or economic basis for a new cold war. Russia is most likely to continue with its policy of competitive interdependence with the West.

Of greater concern is the West's relationship with China, which is now the West's 'significant other'. The current British defence, security and foreign policy review considers China's power 'to be the most significant geopolitical factor of the 2020s'. While 'socialism with Chinese characteristics' in its current form is hardly an ideological 'challenge' to global neo-liberalism, China's economic and technological advance certainly does put in in competition with many Western companies. China presents an economic challenge to the hegemony of the USA which underlies the worsening relations between the two countries under Donald Trump and Joe Biden. The cloak of support for competitive electoral democracy, human rights, and the sanctity of interna-

tional law hides the USA's awareness of the Thucydides' trap: China is the ascendant challenger. President Xi Jinping is aware of this and has warned against any adversary taking precipitous military action. China, however, is not yet strong enough unilaterally to defeat military action by the USA. The formation of the One Belt One Road Initiative and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation as well as treaties with other states are an indication that China needs, and seeks, allies. Clearly, a pact with Russia would create a strategic and military bloc which would severely weaken the USA's military hegemony and form a military balance of power. A West European strategy, led by Germany, to avert a strengthening of political and military linkages between Russia and China might well move to a European understanding with Russia. The current policy of demonising President Putin is counterproductive: it diminishes Russia as a sovereign state, denies it a status as a world power and concurrently creates the preconditions for a Sino-Russian pact. President Putin is faced with the dilemma of how strongly Russia should be coupled with an Eastern alliance led by China.

About the Author

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Citizen versus Strongman: Revival, Social Class, and Social Decay in Russia's Autocracy

By Tomila Lankina (London School of Economics and Political Science)

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As Russia approaches parliamentary elections in September 2021, analysts confront a polar set of factors and dynamics that give significant fuel to both the "glass half full" and "glass half empty" sets of sentiments. Let us start with factors related to the global context. Across the world—whether in Myanmar, Belarus, Russia, or Hong Kong—citizens have been taking to the streets in peaceful pro-democracy protests. Simultaneously, we are seeing the rise and emboldening of the autocratic strongman. Unencumbered by considerations of the sanctity of human life, rights, or dignity, dictatorships and mild autocracies masking as democracies have signalled that repression is effective as rulers increasingly break the contract with their people and engage in pop-

ular repression. While citizens across the post-communist region and protesters globally have been learning from each other, so too have dictators. Morally, citizens eschewing violence and embracing the poignant symbolism of flowers, songs, or Valentine's Day heart shaped lights of course have the upper hand. However, practically speaking, they are powerless and outgunned, if not in some cases outnumbered if one looks at the vast armies of police "special forces" or actual army divisions deployed to suppress dissent.

It is with these considerations in mind that we ought to approach the potential of Russia's forthcoming elections—and the inevitable manipulations, electoral protests, and suppression that go with them—to

effect meaningful and irreversible change in Russia's regime. It is true that the scale of dissent this year has been unprecedented. Following the arrest of Aleksey Navalny, far more protesters than we have seen in recent years have taken to the streets. Even cities and regions where mass street activism had been unheard of witnessed rallies. This is clear if we examine overtime regional data in the [Lankina Russian Protest Event Dataset \(LaRuPED\)](#), which shows how the country is divided between habitually protesting and active regions and those which remain largely dormant. Another trend promising to increase the scale of protest is that, as seen during the 2011–2012 protest wave, citizens are united not by their allegiance to a leader, a party, or a movement, but rather by their antipathy towards the regime. There are also other dynamics that we should watch carefully and should not dismiss. Conventionally bracketed under the rubric of “demographic” or generational change, over the last two decades, there have been profound shifts in the cultures, mentalities, and outlooks of Russians, not just of the younger generations, but also across generations. Gone are the days of the socially awkward, insecure, and fearful *homo sovieticus*. Instead, we are seeing confident, well-travelled Russians who are aware of their rights as citizens, as an electorate, and as taxpayers, who have embraced the values of the Western middle class and who would not put up with anything less than the same kinds of freedoms and dignity that their European neighbours enjoy.

It is in this light that we should approach the phenomenal symbolism of FBK's “Putin Palace” video. Not so much a stunning exposure of the full extent of the regime's corruption—for many facts in the video were hardly new—it is a statement of the chasm between the values of the middle class and those of the regime. The former has internalised the sense of embarrassment associated with conspicuous consumption, and the latter symbolises precisely the kitsch, the vulgarity, the backwardness, if you wish, of the “uncool” regime. The contrast is clear when YouTube videos or retweets of arrests of prominent opposition figures—lawyers, publicists, journalists, intellectuals, both men and women, in their homes—give us a glimpse of their simple lives, the ordinary apartments, the modest furnishings, the happy domesticity. These are people eschewing greed, corruption, and disdain for the law to pursue their passions and fight for the dignity of the citizens of a future Russia. Contrast that with the now notorious “bunker” of the old man in the Kremlin. Middle class Russian citizens do not see such a lifestyle of Louis XIV palatial gold as “cool” or desirable as some may have during the “wild 1990s.” “Cool” is dignity, a rewarding and morally

uncompromised profession, and rights, not ski helipads, private chapels, vineyards, or yachts.

But there is another chasm that we ought to consider, that between the middle class—or, more precisely, the small group within it endowed with a public consciousness—and the rest. I am referring to the segment of the middle class free from the stupor of the pressures that, say, an underpaid schoolteacher or nurse faces daily in her work as a cog in Putin's electoral or repressive machinery, what I term Russia's “second class middle class” or, as the American scholar [Bryn Rosenfeld](#) aptly characterises it, as the state-dependent “autocratic middle class” segment. For, as I write in my [forthcoming book](#), communism in Russia never succeeded in fully abolishing the society of estates (*sosloviya*), with the small and superbly educated social minority of the intelligentsia of noble, clergy, or urban burgher background outnumbered by a vast army of the latter-day peasant habitually underprivileged in the system of imperial estates and the neo-estate social gradations of communism. Furthermore, as Alexander Libman and I explore in a [forthcoming paper](#) in the *American Political Science Review*, these estate legacies continue to influence Russians' orientations towards the political realm. These historical considerations should be at the forefront of how we approach, say, the question of policing of protest in present-day Russia, and indeed that of other post-communist autocracies like Belarus. We need to analyse the social milieu from which the massive army of recruits to Putin's National Guard come from, and to find whether it is the depths of social despair and deprivation, ideological conviction, ignorance, or a combination of these factors that make them turn into salaried enablers of the regime and perpetrators of its violence.

And so I come back to the opening discussion of this essay. Russian and global regime strongmen do not just feel emboldened because they see violence happening across the globe, because other strongmen are doing it and getting away with it. They are also confident of their power to recruit armies of enablers, presumably from the habitually socially deprived groups, elements of the criminal world, and the underclass. And as global social issues abound—whether due to Covid-19, the decline of the petrostate, or Western sanctions—and as dictators like Putin drive their economies further into the ground, so too are we likely to see more of the economically desperate and poor willing to trade principles for pay. It is for this reason that I cannot be too optimistic about what the intensely pointless ritualism of Russia's elections this year will bring to the country in terms of democratic change.

Please see overleaf for information about the author.

About the Author

Tomila Lankina is Professor of International Relations at the LSE's International Relations Department. Her research focuses on comparative democracy and authoritarianism, protests and historical patterns of human capital and democratic reproduction in Russia and other states. She is the author of two books and has published articles in the *American Political Science Review* (forthcoming), *American Journal of Political Science*, *British Journal of Political Science*, *Comparative Political Studies*, *The Journal of Politics*, *Comparative Politics*, *World Politics*, *Demokratizatsiya*, *Europe-Asia Studies*, *Post-Soviet Affairs*, *Problems of Post-Communism*, and other journals. Her latest book is on the historical drivers of inequalities and democracy in Russia. It is titled *Estate Origins of Social Structure and Democracy in Russia: The Discreet Reproduction of Imperial Bourgeoisie (Through Communism and Beyond)*. Cambridge University Press, 2021 (in production).

The Economic Consequences of Autocracy

By Michael Rochlitz (University of Bremen)

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In competitive democracies, elections are an institution to hold a government accountable. Good performance is rewarded, whereas poorly-performing governments have difficulties getting reelected. This holds especially true in terms of economic performance; the fate of the economy probably remains the most important factor in liberal democracies to determine if incumbent governments get reelected.

During Russia's parliamentary elections in 2003 and 2007, this was not so much different. After the economic crash of the 1990s, Russia's citizens were grateful for the economic upturn, and for a government that seemed less erratic than the administration of Boris Yeltsin. Despite some irregularities, the decisive victories of United Russia in 2003 and 2007 seemed to be a genuine reflection of the public mood.

Things changed in 2011. Eclipsing the effect of some useful reforms during the Medvedev presidency, Vladimir Putin's decision to run again for president and to head United Russia resulted in a 15% loss for the party in the December 2011 Duma elections, as compared to 2007. United Russia only managed to keep its majority through massive electoral fraud, sparking the most intense public protests since the end of the Soviet Union.

To crack down on protests, Putin tightened the screws upon his return to the presidency, sidelining Medvedev's more liberal economic team and extending the powers of the country's security services. The increase in repression was almost immediately accompanied by a downturn in economic growth, although global oil prices remained at an all-time high. While Russia's economy grew at an average yearly rate of 4.2% between 2010 and 2012, growth was down to 1.5% in 2013.

By the time of the 2016 elections, the situation had become even worse, with Russia's economy contrac-

ting by 1% in 2014 and 2.2% in 2015. To limit electoral repercussions, the Kremlin decided to play it safe by making the election as uneventful as possible. United Russia refrained from conducting any meaningful campaign, and the date of the election was brought forward to mid-September, when most Russians were just coming home from their summer holidays. The strategy worked, with low turnout and significant fraud ensuring that United Russia kept its majority in the Duma.

Five years on, the economic situation has now turned into a disaster. According to data from the World Bank (including an estimated economic contraction of 4% for 2020), Russia's GDP per capita in early 2021 is below its value in 2008. In other words, the average Russian citizen today is worse off than they were 13 years ago. In any competitive democracy, a government with such a dismal economic record would have been voted out of office long ago.

The problem is not so much the fall in oil prices since 2014, but rather a complete lack of strategy and vision by the Russian government. While Putin was mainly concerned with questions of foreign policy, Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev showed himself to be almost embarrassingly weak and unable to address the problem of Russia's sluggish growth. When he was finally replaced by Mikhail Mishustin in January 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic prevented Mishustin from introducing any significant changes, even though observers generally consider him to be a more competent manager than Medvedev.

The weakness of the Russian government was amplified by a shift in relative power within the Russian ruling elite, away from the more liberal, technocratic managers that were influential before 2012, and towards the security services, or *siloviki*. The latter either do not care about the business climate and the economy, do not understand the effect of increasing repression and