

Developed Putinism: Change without Development

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Abstract

One of the key features of Putinism is its adaptability to changing circumstances, in part derived from sensitivity to shifts in the balance of power between the various factions. What was a strength has now become a vulnerability, since intra-systemic change is severely constrained in terms of both policy scope and societal depth. The limits on evolutionary potential are now evident by a growing inability to respond to the new challenges in creative and progressive ways.

Neither Black Nor White But Grey

Putin's leadership remains the subject of intense and polarised debate. For many he remains the saviour of Russia. He presided over years of unprecedented growth, and even weathered the economic crisis from late 2008 with relatively little damage because of textbook macro-economic management. Improvements in health care and welfare policies, accompanied by family support, have ameliorated the predicted demographic crisis. In international affairs Putin is seen as having restored Russia's status as an independent player, defending its interests while avoiding becoming boxed into some sort of 'pariah' status. After a string of still-born integration efforts in its neighbourhood, moves towards the creation of the Eurasian Union by 2015 look finally like a viable supranational project. Russia has allied with China in defence of the traditional postulates of state sovereignty and non-interventionism, while avoiding becoming the junior partner in what is becoming an increasingly unequal relationship.

Putin's critics take a very different view. His most intransigent opponents consider him the conscious executioner of Russian democracy from the very beginning, offering instead only the form while gutting political life of the competitiveness, dynamism and pluralism that a great nation deserves. Economic growth and rising living standards, declining poverty, and national integration are ascribed to buying off the population and opponents with the windfall energy rents. These rents allowed corrupt and self-serving elites to consolidate their power, using the language and forms of democracy to suppress dissent and pluralistic contestation. Fraudulent elections have deprived the regime of the final vestiges of legitimacy. The chimera of post-Soviet integration is little more than a distraction from the very real challenges facing the long-term viability of a resource-based and undiversified economy. Anti-Western rhetoric acts as a substitute for a genuine forward-looking programme, while Russia's 'cockiness' on the world stage reflects not a defence of traditional norms of international politics but the self-serving interests of an illegitimate ruling class. Authoritarian consolidation at home,

from this perspective, is reflected in an aggressive and counter-productive foreign policy.

Neither of these views does justice to the complex reality. Putin has been able to respond to some of the very real challenges facing Russia in a relatively competent and coherent manner. Thus his critics who accuse the regime of failing to deliver the basics of effective governance are off the mark. Even the various forthcoming mega-projects, from the Sochi Winter Olympics in 2014 to the World Cup in 2018, however wasteful the construction costs, are something in which the country can take pride. Nothing is black and white about a governance system caught up in the whirlpools of policy conflicts over the most appropriate developmental path, the country's place in Eurasia and in energy markets, and in general the position that Russia should adopt in a world torn between conflicting geopolitical blocs and weakened institutions of international governance, notably the United Nations system. However, the adaptability of the regime and its ability to provide public goods in a reasonably efficient and cost effective manner is declining, and the country finds itself increasingly locked in stalemate.

Stages of Putinism

Putin remains the dominant political figure in Russian politics, and thus talk of 'Putinism without Putin' is off the mark. However, neither he nor the country has stayed the same. Although there are profound continuities in Putin's leadership style, at least four different phases in his rule can be identified, coinciding with the classic cycle of leadership politics in general.

The first phase was of remedial politics. In March 2000 Putin won election in a hard-fought ballot, and quickly set upon stamping his vision of 'remedial' politics on Russia. Although Putin was careful not to attack Yeltsin personally, his politics was based on the idea that in the 1990s the Russian state lost the ability to manage affairs, the economy declined, and powerful special interests had emerged that threatened governance in its entirety. The era is presented as a new 'Time of Troubles' (*smutnoe vremya*), which takes an act of supreme concentration to overcome. The latent powers of the Rus-

sian state, eclipsed by powerful oligarchs and governors in the 1990s, were re-activated. However, the only effective carrier of these powers was not the new forces unleashed by Russia's capitalist revolution, notably liberal political parties, an independent business class or an active civil society representing the forces of democratic modernity, but the bedrock of the Soviet system, which had been overthrown with so much fanfare in 1991: the vast bureaucracy and the equally vast security apparatus (collectively known as the *siloviki*). From the first the Putin system was marked by the contrast between the declared goals of the administration, and the means by which its aspirations were implemented.

The turning point that inaugurated the second phase of Putinite politics, a period of regime consolidation marked by intensified constraints, was the assault against the Yukos oil company and the arrest of its head, Mikhail Khodorkovsky, on 25 October 2003. Two logics of modernity collided. Khodorkovsky came to represent a more liberal and open style of politics and economic governance. Although the creation and development of Yukos in the 1990s was accompanied by the shortcomings and sharp practices typical of that era, nevertheless in the early 2000s the company was transformed and presented itself as the modern corporation that Russia needed to become a developed and diversified economy. Unfortunately, this programme became a sort of crusade, which was perceived to threaten once again the prerogatives of the state. The response of the statist and *siloviki* was not long in coming. The regime destroyed not only a political opponent but also the oil company.

The gap between the regime and the state became increasingly apparent. The distinction between the two wings of the 'dual state', the administrative regime and the constitutional state, already apparent in the Yeltsin years became wider. Too often, when talking about strengthening the state, Putin in fact only reinforced the prerogative powers of the regime. So instead of consolidating the rule of law, the authority of constitutional institutions such as parliament and the formal procedures of modern governance, administrative practices predominated. Putin never repudiated the formal framework of the constitution, and indeed the core of his political identity is that he is serving the constitution, but the sphere of discretion (which exists in all political systems) became extraordinarily wide. This allowed the legal system to be subordinated to political authority and in certain cases (such as in the Yukos prosecutions) undermined the consolidation of independent courts and the rule of law in general. These two phases make up what we can call 'classical putinism', in which the historical development of the system remained open.

In the third phase, between 2008 and 2012, Russia was governed by the 'tandem' form of rule. Dmitry Medvedev was constrained by the terms of the deal, but from the first showed signs of political independence and advanced a distinctive programme of his own. From his condemnations of 'legal nihilism' to supporting what he called 'modernisation', including measures to ease the pressure on businesses, Medvedev shaped a policy that was not anti-Putinite but represented a modification of some of the key features of classic Putinism. As a lawyer by profession, Medvedev was above all concerned with re-asserting the independence of the judiciary as part of a broader programme of strengthening the constitutional state against the arbitrariness of the administrative regime. While it is now customary to mock Medvedev's ineffectual style, in fact he represented a form of evolutionary development that could have maintained the achievements of the remedial aspects of Putinism while pushing back against the excesses of the consolidation period.

Just as Putin had transcended what he considered the limitations of Yeltsin's rule, so Medvedev, without condemning Putin the man, reflected the potential of the system to evolve by strengthening the institutions of the constitutional state, while clipping the wings of the partisans of the administrative regime. This was an idealistic but realistic possibility, and gained the support of a growing band of adherents who had been at the heart of the creation of classic Putinism. In the end the option of intra-systemic reform was scuppered by the constraints of the tandem arrangements, which did not allow the reformist programme to take political form to challenge the power of the *siloviki* and other defenders of the administrative regime. The swelling counter-movement to Medvedev's liberalising aspirations was provoked in no small part by concerns over the perceived unlimited geopolitical ambitions of the West in the wake of interventions in Iraq and Libya and the precipitate demonization of Bashar al-Assad in Syria as the insurgency began there in spring 2011.

The fourth phase is what I call 'developed Putinism', by analogy with the 'developed socialism' proclaimed during the mature phase of the Brezhnev era in the 1970s. The differences between the four stages should not obscure the elements of continuity, just as there are some profound continuities between Yeltsin's regime of the 1990s and Putin's rule in the 2000s. Neither the Yeltsin nor Putinite systems of rule were autocracies, but both share elements of authoritarianism in the management of political processes. Both sought to manage competing demands, with pressure for political participation and social welfare, the fragmentation of post-Soviet Eurasia, and new security challenges at the international level.

Developed Putinism

A single regime has perpetuated itself since 1991, with elections a secondary, legitimating, practice. Elections are not determinative of government, let alone of the regime. Elections do send a signal to the regime, and are thus not entirely nugatory. But the regime discredits its operative legitimating mechanisms, which becomes evident when there is a divergence between popular attitudes and electoral outcomes. Elections do not regulate social tensions but only exacerbate them, as was seen so vividly in the protest movement from December 2011.

As the dust from the succession crisis settled, the system of developed Putinism found new forms of political management. Four strategies were central: to coerce, constrain, co-opt and convince. Selective coercion was applied against leading figures in the opposition, notably in the persecution of those allegedly involved in the Bolotnaya Square disturbances of 6 May 2012 and the trial of Alexei Navalny. Constraints were imposed on non-official political engagement, with hefty fines imposed for infringements of regulations concerning demonstrations. There were also constraints imposed on the regime's elites, including their rights to hold shares and accounts abroad. The main co-optation mechanism is through the Popular Front. As for convincing, this comes through a range of ideological initiatives, including an accentuated anti-Westernism, closer links with the Orthodox Church, and the espousal of conservative cultural and family values.

Nevertheless, the opposition movement will live on. Suppression can only be an 'emergency' procedure, however long it may last. A systemic crisis occurs when the channels for systemic renewal become blocked. The various disciplinary techniques imposed upon Just Russia are a sign of a system in which control exceeds the ability to incorporate ideas for the perpetuation of the system itself. Medvedevism was always immanent in classical Putinism, but late Putinism suppresses the potential of this tendency. As the system of developed Putinism

becomes consolidated the scope for regime reconfiguration is evident, for example in the creation of the Popular Front, the decline of United Russia, the 'nationalisation of the elites', and reideologisation to accompany continuing strategies of depoliticisation. This only accentuates the difference between 'classic Putinism' and its developed variant. If the earlier version sought to reshape the classic instruments of democratic political representation, such as parties and parliament, the developed model is no longer satisfied simply with colonisation but experiments with more corporatist and populist instruments, as part of its broader reorientation towards a more nativist stance.

Conclusion

The Putinite system has become locked in a stalemate. Putin created a loyal pro-regime party (United Russia) that dominated parliament, but attempts to find new ways to manage political life when the old instruments have become discredited only reveals the limited range of options available within the narrow confines of developed Putinism. Medvedevism has become marginalised, at the cost of eroding political pluralism and the quality of governance overall. Political opposition as a political practice has been contained, but this allows only a bureaucratic managerial style to predominate. In the absence of an open public sphere and accessible mass media, corruption proliferates. The erosion of open politics forces conflicts to turn inwards and encourages the further growth of intra-regime factionalism. The stalemate in Russia will only be transcended by a broadening of the political options available to the administration. This could inaugurate a fifth and more pluralistic phase—Putin without Putinism; although this would entail dismantling the Putinite system from within. To achieve this, sustained pressure from democratic movements would be required accompanied by the reactivation of the constitutional state. The alternative is revolution and collapse.

About the Author

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