



Russia of the Mid-2020s: Breakdown of the Political Order

Denis Volkov

The Russian Regime Today

At present, Vladimir Putin's political regime seems stable and solid. The president himself enjoys the approval of some 80 percent of the population. Approval of the government's performance has also remained high, as the Kremlin has proved rather effective in dealing with the current economic crisis, in executing covert operations to annex Crimea, and in maintaining social stability in the country. The system seems to be legitimate enough, both with the elites and the population as a whole, to suggest that the parliamentary elections of 2016 will once again result in a Duma controlled by the party in power. And, in 2018, Putin will be re-elected president should he choose to run for the office. The regime was able to maintain this legitimacy by demonstrating its vitality and ability to deal with several concurrent and successive economic and political crises. In 2005 and 2011–2012, it withstood a series of popular protests on a national scale (with mass protests on a regional level in 2009–2010); it managed to transfer presidential power from Putin to Dmitry Medvedev in 2007–2008, and back to Putin in 2011–2012; it weathered economic crises in 2009 and has coped adequately with more recent economic troubles. Further, Putin's Russia has projected power in the war with Georgia in 2008, the annexation of Crimea from Ukraine, support for the rebels in eastern Ukraine in 2014, and the intervention in Syria in support of the Bashar al-Assad regime.

And yet, with all these ostensible successes, I argue that the heyday of Putin's regime is already in the past and that in the next 10–15 years, the Russian political system may wind up in disarray. The legitimacy of the regime, which has been waning for some time, will eventually undermine its ability to maintain social order and deal with new and impending crises.

Waning Legitimacy

Putin's regime was at its peak in 2007–2008. Not only had approval ratings of the president and the government been exceedingly high for several years, but the majority of the population was confident about the future. People were sure that their lives would become better and better. When the majority of Russians voted for the United Russia party in 2007 and for Medvedev in 2008, they hoped to secure the socio-economic stability enjoyed during Putin's earlier term. This conviction certainly helped ensure a smooth transfer of presidential power from Putin to the far less popular Medvedev. But the economic crisis of early 2009 crushed that confidence in a better future. Soon thereafter, one could observe a gradual decline in people's support for the regime, which resulted in mass protests in 2011–2012. Despite the fact that in the next couple of years the Kremlin succeeded in dispersing street demonstrations, discrediting protest leaders in the eyes of the broader public, and dismissing the very idea that there could any be alternative to Putin and his course, the government failed for several years to regain its pre-crisis popularity.

Nothing helped to recover Putin's former high level of popular support. Almost no pre-electoral mobilization materialized in 2011–2012 (which usually results in a significant increase in the popularity of the regime). Putin's so-called May Decrees, which prescribed the expansion of social spending, helped to maintain people's support of the regime, but did not increase it. Even in the relatively economically successful 2012, these additional expenses became an excessive burden on the budget. This meant that in lean years the government would have to cut them one way or another, a step unlikely to increase its popularity. The exorbitant cost of the 2014 Olympic Games, in Sochi, boosted approval ratings by only a couple of percentage points. Only the annexation of Crimea, which provoked emotional support for the revival of Russia's "great power" status in the world, helped to reverse the trend of the regime's de-legitimization. But, although spectacular, the effect of Crimea had its limits. It increased popular support of all state institutions; the approval of the president alone went up 20 percent between March and April of 2014. But approval ratings of the president have been decreasing since the middle of 2015, while the approval of the government and prime minister have been falling since autumn 2014. By spring of 2016, all of these indicators (except for the president's approval rating) are down to a "pre-Crimea" level. The effect of the annexation on the people's assessment of the country's economic performance was even more modest. Economic optimism lasted only 3-4 months, after which all indicators returned to normal and then declined following the economic crisis at the end of 2014. Without good economic performance and another spectacular "success" in the international arena, the effect of Crimea on the regime's legitimacy could completely disappear in a couple of years.

Economic Slowdown

The economic slowdown in Russia had already manifested itself in 2011–2012. Russian GDP grew by 4.5 percent in 2010, 3.4 percent in 2012, and by only 1.3 percent in 2013—well before

any economic sanctions against Russia and the drop in oil prices occurred. In 2014, GDP grew only 0.6 percent; and in 2015, it contracted by 3.8 percent, according to World Bank estimates. The main cause of this slowdown was due to structural problems within the Russian economy, and no progress is likely until reforms are undertaken. Even if oil prices increase slightly and the majority of economic sanctions are lifted at some point (probably in one or two years), the main obstacles to economic growth will remain. The proximity of elections (parliamentary elections will be held in 2016 and presidential elections are scheduled for 2018) suggests that no drastic decisions will be made until after 2018. In fact, there is no guarantee that reform will be undertaken after 2018, as any structural reform in Russia would, by necessity, break up the monopoly on power of the ruling elite. And thus far, Russian authorities have demonstrated their determination to stay in power as long as possible, preferring the *status quo* to any type of change. So it is not unreasonable to expect economic stagnation to continue into the near future.

In the medium term, economic stagnation could be ruinous for the political order in the country should the state be unable to fulfill its social obligations, such as paying salaries, providing social benefits, and compensating for inflation. Such a state of affairs would certainly damage the legitimacy of the regime, and yet some time would be needed for the population to recognize the inability of the authorities to address these problems. In the short term, the population's perception of its well being does not automatically track with economic indicators. For example, the effect of the economic crisis of 2009 (when GDP contracted by 7.8 percent) was more of a psychological one: It made people understand that Putin's period of stability was over, although the increase in the standard of living of the Russian population was only stalled in 2009 (at least in people's perceptions), and then grew steadily until early 2015; that is, several months after the first signs of a new economic crisis were felt by the Russian public. The government was able to prevent panic in the banking sector—at the end of 2014 there were signs that people started to withdraw money from their bank accounts in fear that the banks would not honor their deposits—and this helped Russians accommodate themselves to the situation. However, the population is gradually plunging into depression. As economic forecasts promise only modest growth in the next several years, one can hardly hope for the return of optimism.

Social Strife

Gradual decline in the support of state institutions in Russia in the next couple of years may eventually result in mass protests on a national scale, as has already happened twice in Putin's Russia—in 2005 and 2011–2012—when his approval ratings were at a relative minimum. In a regime where an unpopular government cannot be voted out, the only means people have to express their discontent is open protest. Recent experience suggests that widespread disapproval of the government is one of the critical conditions that drive mass protests. In 2014–2015, a number of protest actions were held in various parts of the country: hunger strikes by health workers in Moscow and Ufa; protests of retirees in Sochi; rallies by holders of mortgages in

foreign currencies; rallies calling for the preservation of parks in Moscow and St. Petersburg; demonstrations in support of independent television in Tomsk; several oppositional marches; protests by truck drivers in several cities; and several hundred sporadic labor protests throughout the country. But none of these had the national scale of the demonstrations of 2005 or 2011–2012.

Nevertheless, the large number of more recent protest rallies indicates great potential for conflict within the Russian political system. This conflict is generated by two social phenomena. First, in recent years there has been a significant rise in civic activism within large Russian cities. Numerous groups and associations of citizens have sprung up to pursue their interests and defend their rights. Second, while undertaking such activities, these civic groups often encounter corruption, in which the interests of business and public officials are intertwined at the local, regional, or federal level. As authorities of the executive branch quite often influence the courts and parliaments on every level, almost no instruments exist to assist in settling such conflicts between citizens and corrupted representatives of the state.

With fewer resources available, conflicts may become even more bitter. The stumbling economy will, in turn, generate more protests connected with economic demands, as the standard of living falls and the state fails to compensate. Finally, as the events in Moscow in Manezh square in 2009 and Biryulyovo in 2013 demonstrated, growing social frustration may result in violent manifestations, and even pogroms against migrants, rather than civilized and peaceful protest rallies.

However, for now, as the legitimacy of the regime is still rather high, all of these separate cases of conflict and dissatisfaction are not going to transform into a wider protest movement. When the main bulk of the population is confident in the government, any criticism falls on deaf ears. But in two or three years, as the legitimacy of the regime wanes, the conditions for mass protests will be in place.

Such protests are unlikely to lead to the overthrow of the regime or cause democratization, as Russian authorities are not keen to share power. But they will most certainly cause socio-political unrest and significantly diminish the government's room for maneuver, as different social groups voice their demands more assertively. For example, in several years it may be much harder to pursue the current migration policy if the population becomes agitated with animosity toward migrants. This poses a dilemma: Without an influx of migrants, the majority of whom come to Russia from the Asian republics of the former USSR, it will not be possible to prevent further contraction of the population of the country; however, welcoming migrants in without proper integration will only increase popular discontent.

Faced with mounting levels of social strife, a more unpopular government will find it increasingly difficult to pursue virtually any policy. The current government was so successful in forestalling

panic in late 2014 in large part because of the involvement of the popular president. Using all of his authority, Putin stated that the situation was under control and would be resolved in the next couple of years, which had a positive psychological effect on the public. It is unlikely that this trick would have worked had his approval rating been low. On the whole, the success of the Russian government's policies is to a great extent determined by the people's detachment from politics, and the ability of the government to manipulate public opinion. But when people are *a priori* critical of the government, success is harder to achieve. In other words, the less legitimate the government is, the less acceptable its policies are to the public, and, therefore, the less effective the government can be.

Troubles With Elites

A breakdown in social stability will likely hurt the confidence of the elites, casting doubt on whether the government has things under control and has a reasonable plan of action. And without the consent of the elites, the political system will only sink deeper into crisis and become more dysfunctional. As the allegiance of Russian elites to the country's leadership is based to a great extent on the ability of the leadership to buy them off (through political and economic corruption, lavish salaries, ability to participate in public procurements, etc.), the scarcity of resources will undermine their loyalty even further. But their loyalty and consent is crucial for the efficient operation of the political system. Let us take as an example Russia's policy toward Crimea. From the annexation of the peninsula to its integration into the legal and social infrastructure of Russia, it was rather successful as all state agencies demonstrated coordinated work and no open criticism was voiced from within the political system. This happened precisely because of the high level of consent of the elites on every level. Without such consent, all manner of sabotage of governmental decisions could have been expected, from deliberate delays to open defiance, whereby no efficient decision-making would have been possible. To ensure the integrity of the political system, the only alternative to buying off the elites and the population is coercion. But it is an open question as to how effective such coercion might be under the conditions of waning legitimacy and scarcity of resources.

However serious the prospect of the described malfunctions of the political system might be, it is most probable that they will manifest themselves after 2018. Moreover, the weight of amassing problems is making Putin the most likely candidate to run as the representative of the current power elite in the next presidential elections of 2018. And there is now no doubt that he will win. But if the above argument is true, Putin's fourth term as president will not be an easy time for the country. Most likely it will be marred by economic problems, social strife, and growing dysfunction of the state apparatus. The system will probably survive, but no steady development is possible under such conditions. And for another decade Russia will remain a country in decline.

What is also troubling is that by the time of the next electoral cycle in Russia, in the mid-2020s, a large portion of the country's leadership will be in their late seventies. This will finally usher in a process of large-scale, natural replacement of Russian top elites. Such a change—in the absence of legitimate and well-functioning institutions (elections in Russia have the function of acclaiming existing authorities, rather than voting in new elites) and in a climate of social strife and economic troubles—will pose a big challenge. And there is absolutely no guarantee that the transfer of power in the mid-2020s will be as successful as the transfer of the presidency from Putin to Medvedev at the end of the 2000s. In this set of circumstances, there is a danger that the post-Putin political system could collapse altogether.

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