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**DEVELOPMENTS IN
RUSSIAN POLITICS**

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Developments in Russian Politics

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**Henry E. Hale, Juliet Johnson,
Tomila V. Lankina**

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Contents

List of Contributors vii

Preface Henry E. Hale, Juliet Johnson, and Tomila V. Lankina xi

- 1 Putin and the Dynamics of Russia's Political System** *Henry E. Hale* 1
- 2 Russian and Soviet History** *Kristy Ironside* 19
- 3 How Russia's Past Influences Current Politics** *Tomila V. Lankina* 47
- 4 Nationalism, Identity, and the Russia-Ukraine War** *Gulnaz Sharafutdinova* 69
- 5 Russia's Gendered Politics** *Valerie Sperling* 87
- 6 Russia's Economic Policies** *Juliet Johnson* 107
- 7 Russia's Informal Economy** *Yoshiko M. Herrera and Evgeniya Mitrokhina* 127
- 8 Formal Institutions of Governance** *Grigorii V. Golosov* 143
- 9 Authoritarian Mechanics** *David Szakonyi* 161

DUKE

UNIVERSITY
PRESS

- 10 Federalism and Centre–Periphery Relations** *Vladimir Gel'man* 181
- 11 Chechnya** *Marat Iliyassov* 199
- 12 Inequality and Marginalized Groups** *Jeremy Morris* 219
- 13 Protest and Civil Society** *Katerina Tertytchnaya* 235
- 14 Climate Change** *Debra Javeline* 253
- 15 Russia's Invasion and Ukraine's Resistance** *Maria Popova and Oxana Shevel* 267
- 16 Russian Foreign Policy** *Kathryn Stoner* 293

Notes 315

References 317

Index 343

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PRESS

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Preface

On 24 February 2022, the Russian Federation launched a full-scale invasion of neighbouring Ukraine, sharply escalating its assault on that country which began in 2014. This war has killed tens of thousands, wrought immeasurable destruction, provoked sharper divisions than ever before between Russia and the West, and set off a competition for support from other countries ranging from India to Brazil.

The invasion presents a major challenge for Russian studies. For one, it has demonstrated the imperative to search for better ways to understand Russia. At the same time, the war has spotlighted Russian imperial ambitions and colonial attitudes toward countries around it and ethnic minorities within it, raising uncomfortable questions about whether our own views of these countries and peoples reflect this biased Russian gaze. Many call for 'de-centering' Russian studies by paying more attention to previously marginalized voices and perspectives, denying Russia and ethnic Russians the often unquestioned pride of place they have traditionally occupied in global research and education.

Developments in Russian Politics 10 reflects these new approaches to Russian studies. Understanding Russia is more important than ever and fresh perspectives are needed. In putting this volume together, one of our key goals has been to give readers access to diverse perspectives through a team of top-notch authors who reflect this diversity. We also break with a common tradition of organizing volumes on Russian politics primarily around formal institutions like parliament, the judiciary, or political parties that play more marginal and/or different roles in increasingly authoritarian Russia than they do in the wealthiest industrial democracies. This enables us to give due emphasis to societal factors and informal structures and processes that underpin support for Russia's political regime.

Chapter 1 frames the flow of post-Soviet Russian politics by emphasizing that informal institutions, networks, and practices can be as important as formal ones, clarifying the role of societal factors in it. Vladimir Putin's rise and long-term dominance, for example, cannot be understood without attention to all of this. The book then unfolds with four chapters examining

fundamental influences on contemporary Russian politics, including Russian history, culture, and identity. Building on this foundation, the subsequent five chapters address how Russia's political system actually works. By 'actually', we mean that we focus primarily on the logic by which it functions – a logic hinging on a complex interaction between formal and informal politics that is often misunderstood in the West – rather than on the many ways in which it falls short of democratic ideals. The remaining chapters each address specific topics that we believe are important for courses on Russian politics to cover. These include not only a dedicated chapter on the Russia-Ukraine war and another on Russian foreign policy more generally, but also chapters on Chechnya, marginalized groups within Russia, Russia's protest movement and civil society, and climate change.

By putting Russian history, culture, and identity first, however, we remain duly attentive to the crucial fact that these too are influenced powerfully by politics. This is true even of history. While the 'facts' of what happened cannot change, how people remember and interpret them surely can. The effort to shape Russian collective memory has been a major part of what many now call 'Putinism', including his efforts to legitimate the invasion of Ukraine. To be sure, one of the greatest challenges of compiling a textbook is that the factors that drive Russian politics influence each other and are influenced by politics itself. We hope, though, that our attempt to break this down for readers into a set of discrete, focused chapters provides a readable, understandable entrée into this reality, helping simplify the complicated without sacrificing nuance and debate.

The politics of any country, especially one as volatile as Russia has been in the past century or two, is always a moving target. We aim to provide readers with a conceptual toolkit for understanding the dynamism of Russian politics, rather than a static understanding of how Russia looks at a particular moment. We hope that our volume will continue to be useful for understanding Russian politics regardless of what the future may bring. And if there is one thing we can predict based on Russian history, it is that something unpredictable is sure to happen.

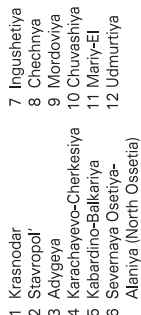
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Putin and the Dynamics of Russia's Political System

Henry E. Hale

Russian politics does not easily reduce to many concepts that people frequently use to describe it. Simple terms like 'authoritarianism' and 'dictatorship' do a good job of telling us that Russia is not a democracy, but risk creating the impression that all we really need to know is what the autocrat (currently Vladimir Putin) wants to do. While sometimes this may be the case, in other instances it is clearly not. That is, thinking in terms of an autocracy–democracy binary does not tell us much about how a political system like Russia's *actually works* in practice. More colourful terms like 'kleptocracy' or 'fascism' do satisfy the urge to condemn odious regime behaviours and accurately describe important parts of the system, but neglect others. Labelling it 'imperialist' tells us something important about the worldview currently driving much of Russian political behaviour, but says little about regime mechanics and dynamics. And calling Putin Russia's latest 'tsar' highlights important continuities in symbolism and geography, but deemphasizes many ways in which his regime is quintessentially 'modern' in attaining and exercising dominance.

Rather than start with concepts developed largely to describe Western polities or that orientalize others, it can be helpful instead to begin with some basic principles about the context in which politics happens as Russia's citizens in all their diversity actually experience it. This begins with conceptualizing Russia's most important political actors and thinking about what drives their behaviour, and then looking at the implications without initially worrying about whether the result fits well with familiar categories like, for example, 'democracy' or 'autocracy'. Such an approach yields a vision

of Russian politics as a system in which powerful, loosely hierarchical networks of people compete with each other while penetrating both the economic and political worlds when the rule of law is weak and corruption is high. This form of politics may at first seem exotic, but it is in fact very common throughout the world, and Westerners will find many of these patterns familiar in their own past and present politics.

The story of contemporary Russian politics, then, is at core a dynamic one about how these networks arrange and rearrange themselves politically, and how this process shapes and is shaped by the public. It takes us from the chaotic competition of the 1990s to the tightly fit machine that ultimately mobilized a full-scale invasion of neighbouring Ukraine in 2022, a brutal act that has killed thousands and is still wreaking carnage at the time of this writing. To focus on networks as political actors is not to discount the importance of ideology, ordinary people, or formal institutions like parliaments or political parties. All play their roles. But these roles are often deceptively different than those played in polities like the US or the UK. It is one goal of this book to explain how.

A social context of patronalism

Russia shares with much of the world a social context that I have called *patronalism*. The technical definition of patronalism is a social equilibrium in which people pursue their political and economic goals primarily through extended and roughly hierarchical networks of actual acquaintance, and often by meting out concrete, personalized rewards or punishments (Hale 2015). In short, this is a context in which personal connections matter to a degree that would seem extreme to most people growing up in the US or Britain. In the latter countries, connections can matter greatly for getting a job or obtaining good tickets to a show but, for example, people usually do not feel they need a personal connection to the leadership of a charity organization before they can be confident enough in it to donate money. Nor do they consider it common for doctors to expect personal rewards for providing needed medical services, or for professors to take payments of some kind for good grades or recommendations.

Patronalism is an ‘equilibrium’ because its practice is self-reinforcing when it is widespread, and therefore it is very hard to root out even when people are well-intentioned. While not all patronalism is corruption, an example involving corruption shows how this is the case. Suppose you are a

mayor and it is widely believed that you need to pay off various officials to get a new regional medical facility located in your town. You can decide to be honest and refuse to make the payments, but if you take the proverbial high road, some other ambitious mayor is likely to go ahead and make the payments and get the facility located in their region instead. The result is that your constituents will be deprived and may even blame you for not doing what was necessary. But if you make the payment and satisfy your voters by getting the facility in your town, you are contributing to the expectation that 'this is just how things work', making others more likely to do the same when they have a chance.

At the level of national leadership, the practice is even more deeply rooted. Leaders tend to find it comfortable, convenient, and effective to hand out individualized rewards and punishments through personal connections to get done whatever they want to get done. They thus have little incentive to do the very hard work necessary actually to change things fundamentally. Thus, while all three of Russia's post-Soviet presidents have talked about the need to root out corruption and modernize the state, this has remained more talk than real action.

Power networks in Russian politics

One implication of the centrality of personal connections in Russia is that the key 'players' in the country's political arena are often not 'parties' or even formal institutions like the parliament, but extended networks of actual personal acquaintance led by powerful 'patrons'. At the very least, this is how many political insiders in Russia see it. And despite the term's gendered root (patron), patronalism is not necessarily gender-exclusive. That said, in Russia, it is nevertheless intimately intertwined with patriarchal structures and a performative masculinity that Putin has brilliantly mastered, as Chapter 5 discusses in detail.

The most important power networks in Russia today fall into at least three main categories. One set of networks grew out of the economy, building vast business empires by gaming the post-Soviet privatization process and then translating this wealth into political clout in ways examined in Chapter 7. These networks, led by figures widely known as 'oligarchs', would get 'their' people into positions all across Russian political society and often gained control of important mass media. In the 1990s, oligarchs like Boris Beresovsky, Mikhail Khodorkovsky, and Vladimir Gusinsky were household

names and thought to be among only a handful of men who essentially ran the country during President Boris Yeltsin's final term in office.

Another category might be called 'regional political machines', networks based in peripheral regions in which a strongman could use his (or, rarely, her) leverage as governor to gain control over local economic assets, media and legislatures. These assets could then be mobilized to deliver large shares of the province's votes to themselves or whomever they chose, leverage they could convert into influence in federal politics. Major political machines in regions like Tatarstan and Primorsky Krai were thus highly sought after allies by national politicians, though the biggest and most famous of all political machines was the one led until 2010 by mayor Yuri Luzhkov in Russia's capital metropolis, Moscow.

A third type of network consists of those with home bases in the state itself, figures that Bálint Magyar and Bálint Madlovics (2021) have called *poligarchs* (politicians whose reach extends deeply into the economy). The most prominent example today is that of Vladimir Putin, who turned an array of personal and professional acquaintances (many acquired during his days in the KGB or as a St Petersburg city official) into an extensive network that now dominates key posts in the state (most obviously, Putin himself serving as president), the economy (e.g. Igor Sechin controlling the oil company Rosneft), mass media (e.g. Yuri Kovalchuk founding the National Media Group), and multiple political parties with diverse ideologies (e.g. Putin's St Petersburg associate Dmitry Medvedev atop the United Russia Party). This network started to come together as a coherent power network of national importance in the late 1990s, as Putin was finally reaching the pinnacle of Russian power, and it is now unquestionably the country's dominant network.

The emergence of Russia's single-pyramid system

The process through which nearly all major power networks came to be arranged into a single 'pyramid' of power, recognizing the primary authority of a single patron, began in the 1990s under Yeltsin. The USSR's collapse had left that country's most powerful networks in a state of disarray, leaving myriad emerging regional political machines and budding oligarchs to compete intensely with each other – and with the Kremlin – for power with

only a weak institutional framework to govern this contestation. While Putin supporters today often exaggerate the degree to which the 1990s were a period of chaos and economic collapse, there certainly was a much higher rate of disorder than any fully functioning state would tolerate. By one count, as many as half of all regional acts were found to be inconsistent with the federal constitution as provincial networks and oligarchs often colluded to pursue their own interests without paying much heed to 'the centre' (Stoner-Weiss 2001, p. 121).

It was in this context that Yeltsin took moves that ultimately helped unify the country more through informal than formal means. Yeltsin laid the cornerstone in late 1993 when he defeated the Congress of People's Deputies in a dispute over the Constitution that turned violent, putting before voters a referendum question that effectively forced them to choose either a new basic law that strongly favoured the president or no constitution at all. He then employed a variety of methods to win over (or coerce) at least some major regional political machines to his side and to strike deals with key oligarchs. The most infamous deal, 'loans-for-shares', allowed figures like Khodorkovsky and Berezovsky to obtain some of Russia's most valuable assets, including oil, in return for providing the cash-strapped Kremlin with badly needed funds (Johnson 2000, 185–87). With a presidential election looming in 1996 and Yeltsin trailing badly in the polls, the Russian president opted against cancelling elections and instead (for the first time in post-Soviet Russia) successfully mobilized a broad coalition of regional political machines and newly enriched oligarchs to win a national election. Rallying against the candidate who had been favoured by many to win at the start of the year, Communist Party leader Gennady Zyuganov, the regional machines in Yeltsin's corner delivered huge numbers of votes his way (sometimes reversing outcomes between the first and second rounds of voting) while oligarch-controlled media warned of a dark communist restoration while burnishing Yeltsin's own image in their news and other programming.

Yeltsin eked out a victory, convincing many that the money, media, and machines he controlled could elect anyone president of Russia. These included some key people who ultimately helped Yeltsin pick Putin as prime minister, an appointment that effectively designated the little-known FSB (Federal Security Service) chief Yeltsin's successor in August 1999. One reason Yeltsin chose Putin is that the latter was steeped in the 'hardball' methods that Yeltsin and many around him thought were needed to bring Russia's independent-minded oligarchs and political machines to heel. The seeds of Putinism in the 2000s were thus sown in the 1990s.

The problem of presidential succession

Before the hastily assembled machine from 1996 could be kicked into gear again, however, it nearly fell apart due to one of the central problems single-pyramid systems face: succession. With Yeltsin physically ailing and running up against a constitutional term limit, many of the political machines and oligarchic networks that had backed Yeltsin's re-election in 1996 now started to think ahead to a future without him, seizing the opportunity to try and proactively shape that future in ways that suited them. The most dramatic event was the emergence of a major new challenger to Kremlin power, the Fatherland-All Russia (FAR) bloc. FAR was a coalition of some of Russia's mightiest political machines (including Moscow, St Petersburg, Tatarstan, Bashkortostan) and powerful oligarchic networks (including Gusinsky's 'Most' network and even the state-owned Lukoil), with the popular former prime minister Yevgeny Primakov as its leader. As of summer 1999, this opposition was the odds-on favourite to win the December 1999 parliamentary elections and after that the 2000 presidential race.

This challenge forced the Kremlin to scramble, ultimately winning the presidency for Putin only after an absolutely wild set of events took place in the second half of 1999. At this time, a series of mysterious explosions killed hundreds of people in ordinary residential buildings in different regions of Russia and terrorized the nation. As detailed in Chapter 11 of this volume, Putin responded by sending the Russian military into Chechnya, a small restive region that he identified as the source of the problems, and many believe elements in the Russian state orchestrated the apartment bombings precisely to justify this action and help Putin gain power. It was not hard to convince Russia's majority that Chechens were guilty, given how the former tended to view the latter through an 'orientalizing' lens, as they did many other ethnic minorities.

The military assault on Chechnya proved highly popular. Demonstrating strong leadership after years of seeming chaos and incapacity at the top, Putin quickly shot up the presidential standings until by December 1999 he was already polling well above 50 per cent in the presidential race, more than double that of his closest competitor. In parliamentary elections that same month, a brand-new Unity bloc created just three months earlier surged to a surprisingly strong second place after backing Putin unequivocally. This proved Putin's electoral appeal. Then Yeltsin sealed Putin's status as

presidential front-runner by resigning on New Year's Eve, a move that made Putin (as prime minister) the new acting president and required presidential elections to be held early, in March 2000. Seeing the writing on the wall, some of the key networks in the opposition coalition started to withdraw or even lend their support to Putin in the presidential race. In patronal politics, it is imperative to figure out quickly who will win so as to always wind up on the winner's side: To be on the losing side, without independent courts to protect you, is to risk political and economic annihilation at the hands of the victors.

Tightening the political machine

One of the things Putin clearly learned from the 1999–2000 succession crisis was that one of the most serious potential threats to Kremlin power is the 'defection' of a coalition of regional political machines and oligarchs, especially those controlling mass media, to the opposition. Some of his very first moves, therefore, were to attack sources of gubernatorial and oligarchic power.

Targeting governors, as described in Chapter 10, he removed them from the upper house of parliament (the Federation Council), carved the country up into seven new 'federal districts' led by presidential envoys who could undercut gubernatorial power, and, starting in 2005, replaced direct elections for governor with a system that analysts generally treat as a form of presidential appointment. While the Kremlin restored direct elections in response to a wave of pro-democracy protests in 2011–12, they came with a big catch: to get on the ballot, a candidate had to obtain the signatures of a large share of deputies in lower-level councils, which were usually dominated by Putin supporters. This system, which came to be known as the 'municipal filter', was designed to ensure that no unwanted candidates could challenge the Kremlin's choice for governors, and indeed, only in a few instances has its choice lost (most recently in 2023, when a Communist Party candidate won the governorship of Khakasiya). To ensure that these Kremlin-friendly governors faced little challenge at home, mayoral elections have been steadily eliminated, to the point at which direct elections for mayor remained in place in only six regional capitals by the end of 2022 (Tubridy 2022). At the same time, to make sure that governors do not wield local power bases strong enough to challenge the Kremlin, governors are frequently installed who have little connection to the region. As Chapter 10 describes, to a great extent Russia now remains a federation in name only.

This process has also involved a strengthening of Russian ethnic dominance over its minority peoples. Some of the country's most powerful regional political machines, as in Bashkortostan and Tatarstan, had long advocated minority language rights and upheld locally important symbols of their distinct histories. Under Putin, however, central authorities steadily constrained the ability of the federation's ethnic minority homelands ('republics' in official Russian legal terms) to promote local languages and identities through education and state symbols. Some republics, notably Chechnya and Tatarstan, have managed to bargain for more such autonomy than others, but they remain striking exceptions. At the same time, the Kremlin has not gone so far as to completely eliminate the minority ethnic symbolism of its republics. Instead, Putin's strategy has been to quietly promote linguistic and symbolic russification and assimilation while publicly professing a vision of a 'multi-ethnic' and 'multiconfessional' Russian Federation that is nevertheless 'led' by the ethnic Russian people (Chapters 4, 11). This sense of ethnic Russian privilege also shapes the state's response to the many migrants who in the 1990s started pouring into Russia for work from the South Caucasus and Central Asia. This response has afforded them ample opportunities to work and send remittances home to their relatives, but also leaves them highly vulnerable to abuse and exploitation (Chapter 12).

As for the oligarchs, as described in Chapter 7, Putin early on forced the two with the biggest media assets (Berezovsky and Gusinsky) into de facto exile and offered a deal to the rest by which they could keep their property so long as they did not go against the Kremlin's political interests and economic priorities. He punctuated this 'proposal' with an emphatic 'or else'. What 'else' meant became clear in 2003 with the arrest of Yukos chief Khodorkovsky, at the time Russia's richest man, who appeared to be flouting Putin's preferred arrangement. As Putin's power grew, it also became evident that he could send a company's stock price plummeting merely by mentioning its owner's disloyalty and hinting at a new Yukos scenario, as the firm Mechel painfully discovered in 2008 (*The Economist* 2008). Additionally, oligarchs were increasingly enlisted to perform certain social functions aimed at preventing social explosions, as illustrated when Putin personally scolded oligarch Oleg Deripaska for neglecting his firm's obligations to the local population of the town of Pikalevo in 2009 (Barry 2009). Especially in the 2010s, figures with deep roots in Putin's own personal network rose to new economic heights, controlling massive economic assets ranging from the oil giant Rosneft to private trading companies like Gunvor and reputedly

siphoning off billions for their (and potentially Putin's) personal use (Dawisha 2014). Since the latter 2000s, then, oligarchic networks have not been a source of challenge for the regime, and many of them were in fact quite eager to demonstrate willingness to play ball. Inequality in Russia, therefore, remains high, with little emphasis on redistribution, leaving many groups marginalized in a precarious existence (see Chapter 12). This appears not to have changed despite the fact that Western sanctions have explicitly tried to impose costs on the oligarchs for their support of Putin as the latter presided over the annexation of Crimea, militarily backed an insurgency in eastern Ukraine, and ultimately launched an all-out invasion of Ukraine (Chapters 6 and 15).

Sealing these moves against oligarchs and governors was another key move: the formation of a dominant party, described in Chapter 8. By 2002, a new United Russia party was founded that included not only core Putin supporters, but former opponents like Moscow Mayor Luzhkov acting on the old maxim 'if you can't beat 'em, join 'em'. Governors soon rushed to join the party, which served a crucial purpose of helping bind elites to the regime. With the 2007–08 election cycle, credible reports emerged that the Kremlin was effectively directing even the financing of *opposition* parties, telling specific oligarchs which opposition or systemic parties they should fund (Morar' 2007). Of course, it hardly goes without saying that close Putin network associates have been in firm control of the 'force agencies' throughout his period in power. Even there, though, he has kept them divided in ways that would seem to ensure that no one figure could orchestrate a major challenge by himself even if such an unlikely idea happened to enter into his head, as Chapter 9 describes.

Finally, and perhaps even most importantly, Putin also learned from his rise to power that one of the surest ways to navigate a succession crisis and more generally to stay in power is to maintain popular support. Yeltsin lost public support during his time in office, incentivizing major networks in his power pyramid to break with him and form opposition coalitions, while Putin won popular support and thereby had a much easier time putting the coalition back together and incorporating new allies. Indeed, if a leader is genuinely popular, then calls by opposition leaders for 'democracy' lose their sting and hence their attractiveness since the opposition would likely lose even if democracy were granted. As we have already established, powerful patronalistic networks do not want to back the losing side of a power struggle, even if they may agree with its ideas. Furthermore, when a country's chief patron wields popular support, it is harder to rally people to the streets

in opposition and less costly for the regime to counter-mobilize or suppress, as Chapter 13 makes clear. And a truly popular president like Putin – one with demonstrated ‘political coattails’ – can alter balances of potential electoral power by his mere verbal backing, as when he sent his associate Dmitry Medvedev’s standing in presidential ratings soaring when endorsing him to succeed him as president in the 2007–08 election cycle.

The Kremlin has thus paid a great deal of attention to Putin’s public standing at the same time that it has sought to narrow the channels through which opposition could translate into regime vulnerability. This phenomenon appears in many of the chapters in this volume, explaining Putin’s attention to national identity construction (Chapter 4), his decision to undertake military action (Chapters 4, 11, and 15), his performative masculinity (Chapter 5), his attention to the economy (Chapter 6), his regime’s nuanced strategy for staying in power (Chapter 9), the way he has manipulated the formal institutions of democracy (Chapter 8), and the challenges he has faced from political protesters (Chapter 13).

Dilemmas of governance facing Putin

These lessons that Putin learned from his rocky rise to power and the actions he took in response, however, are fraught with dilemmas, and these are a constant source of dynamism in the regime (Petrov, Lipman, and Hale 2014). On one hand, popularity has been the crucial underpinning of stability in the system he established, enabling him to rise to power in the first place and also to move in and out of the presidency while still maintaining control. The best way to be popular is to give people what they want, and not to give them what they explicitly do not want. This does not necessarily require governing effectively and democratically; instead, the key is simply to appear to do so in the eyes of the public.

On the other hand, even creating the appearance of governing effectively and democratically can have the side effect of creating institutions and practices that can limit the discretion of the ruler and possibly even produce challenges to their hold on power. There is always the risk that fake opposition political parties intended to create the illusion of democratic competition, for example, could ‘come to life’ and become real opposition, or at least start to advance interests distinct from the Kremlin’s own. Many of Putin’s actions

in office can be understood as his wrestling with just such dilemmas. This can involve attempts to strengthen certain institutions and constitutional regularities at the same time as others are weakened in favour of the flexibility that working through personal connections and individualized rewards and punishments can bring. Richard Sakwa has characterized this combination of the formal and informal institutional realms as Russia's 'dual state' (Sakwa 2010).

Putin's appeal

Indeed, as several chapters in this volume show, along with all of the moves discussed above to stifle political competition and negate potential sources of opposition, Putin and his supporters presided over a number of positive changes in the way average Russians live – at least, prior to throwing much of this away initially in 2014 and then even more decisively in 2022 by invading Ukraine. First and foremost is the rapid economic growth of the 2000s, which proved a major boon to many Russians throughout the country, even though a wealthy few benefited disproportionately (Chapters 6, 7, and 12). Research has consistently shown that Putin has benefited politically from this economic progress (McAllister and White 2008). Research has also found that Putin's appeal, as well as resistance to his rule, has fascinating societal roots in communist and even pre-communist history (Chapter 3).

In part, Putin was lucky that his early years in power largely coincided with a surge in world oil prices, and he also benefited from a ruble devaluation in 1998 that had led the economy to return to growth shortly before he arrived in office. While it may not have been his policies that caused the economic growth during his first years in office, it is clear that his policies did not mess things up too badly in the 2000s despite the corruption at the heart of his regime. In fact, Putin oversaw a number of economic reforms that are hard to explain through a logic of kleptocracy and that have been widely recognized as making positive contributions to economic growth (Chapter 6). These include the institution of a 13 per cent flat tax and the creation of stabilization and investment funds to manage Russia's incoming oil wealth, funds that arguably helped Russia weather the 2008–09 global financial crisis relatively successfully. His regime has also found ways to perform economically despite Western economic sanctions since 2014. His

longtime central bank chief, Elvira Nabiullina, was named best central bank governor of 2015 by *Euromoney*, reflecting the strong performance of the Central Bank of Russia despite its corrupt surroundings and growing economic isolation.

Putin's public appeal has not been limited to economic performance, however, as was made clear when his popularity did not collapse after the period of rapid growth ended in the major economic contraction of 2009. From the very beginning, Putin's most fundamental source of support has been his image as an in-command, dynamic leader, something that has historically been much more important than where he has actually been leading the country. His surge in popularity in 1999 reflected a nearly euphoric sense that Russia was finally getting a take-charge, tough-talking, evidently competent, can-do leader determined to end what seemed to be Russia's ongoing decline and collapse after decades (in their view) of a doddering Leonid Brezhnev, a bumbling Mikhail Gorbachev, and an erratic, ill, or drunk Boris Yeltsin who were widely seen as better at destroying the USSR than building anything new in Russia. Moreover, Putin is widely associated in citizens' eyes with broad policy orientations that have at least plurality support in Russia, including favouring a deepening of market reform over returning to socialism (Colton and Hale 2014).

Putin did, though, shift his strategy for securing legitimacy after his support seemed to be slipping and the economy slowed in the early 2010s. In 2012, in the wake of the largest opposition protests his regime had yet seen, the Kremlin came newly to emphasize 'traditional values' as part of what is best described as an aggressive, illiberal 'imperial nation-building' project centred on Putin as the fatherly 'leader of the nation' (Chapters 4, 5). This shift, which experts frequently call the Kremlin's 'conservative turn', tapped into substantial public support for expanding Russian influence and territory. It soon produced the 2014 annexation of Crimea, a wildly popular move that sent the Russian president's approval ratings skyward. Scholars now debate whether the 2022 full-on invasion of Ukraine has had a similar effect. Many polls indicate overwhelming public support for both the war and Putin. But some analysts suspect many Russians are dissembling and find evidence that the invasion has instead caused anxiety and negative emotions to spike, dividing society between a segment of hardline imperialist or neo-Soviet warriors and a population either deceived by the regime's propaganda barrage or cowed into submission by its powerful repressive machinery (Chapter 15).

The Kremlin's work in the realm of ideas, and its efforts accordingly to claim legitimacy, are by no means divorced from the patronal nature of Russian politics. In fact, the Kremlin actually works through different oligarchs or state-based patrons who fund and curate their own 'ideological ecosystems' that typically include everything from idea-generating scholars or philosophers to clubs, institutions, publishing houses, and media outlets that disseminate their ideas (Laruelle 2017). For example, former state railroads chief and longtime Putin friend Vladimir Yakunin and oligarch Konstantin Malofeev support such ecosystems promoting ideas related to religious Orthodox conservatism or great-Russian imperialism. There are both conservative and liberal ecosystems in the Kremlin's realm, and they frequently espouse visions that compete with or even contradict each other. This suits the Kremlin just fine, since it can pick and choose from the ideas that this competition generates depending on the situation it faces. The conservative turn, therefore, mainly reflected a new empowerment of one set of ideational entrepreneurs, with media and other Kremlin supporters drawing on them more frequently to justify Russian government actions at home and abroad.

Putin's strong-hand rule

To be sure, Putin's deadly 2022 Ukraine gambit also brought a massive crackdown on opposition at home, bringing repression to levels unprecedented since the Soviet era (Chapters 9 and 13). For almost two decades, Putin had practised a much more nuanced form of political domination, recognizing that he did not have to ban opponents in order to defeat them. Instead, more subtle mechanisms usually sufficed, instruments that are less costly or risky than attempting to establish a Soviet-style totalitarian state or practising ballot-box fraud on a truly massive scale. With economic actors (including media owners) understanding that their fortunes hinged upon not 'crossing' Putin and his allies politically, it could be very hard for opposition politicians to raise money, get media coverage, or even find premises in which to campaign – even without any explicit repressive orders from the top. Similarly, state employees could be mobilized to vote for the regime by communicating to them that their firms might be in peril if the precincts in which they were located did not produce strong votes for the desired candidates or parties (Frye, Reuter, and Szakonyi 2014).

Buttressing such practices, the most influential media skilfully delivered messaging that the Kremlin calculated worked in its political favour, led by the trio of state-controlled national television channels on which the large majority of potential voters continue to rely for political information: First Channel, Rossiya-1, and NTV (Chapter 9). With television so dominant, feisty independent sources of information like the investigative weekly magazine *The New Times* or the free-wheeling *Ekho Moskvy* radio station could be tolerated even when they reported on egregious regime corruption or voiced harsh opposition narratives, as long as they remained in certain ‘ghettos’ where funding was scarce and the effective audience minimal. Since most Russians (like ordinary people everywhere) gravitate to the kind of highly professional and attractive entertainment programming that can be found in Russia primarily on the country’s main television channels, they are likely to stay there for their news as well. News shows just had to retain a good ear in spinning events in ways that both amplified pro-Kremlin narratives and resonated with the public. Some social scientists have branded this style of rule ‘informational autocracy’ because of its reliance on manipulating information (Guriev and Treisman 2019).

In fact, until the 2020s, Russia’s leadership saw little need to institute the most brutal forms of repression found elsewhere in the world. Even today, unlike China and Saudi Arabia, prisoners (not to mention political ones) are generally not executed, though they can be badly mistreated or even tortured. And for the Putin regime’s first decade in office, the number of political prisoners was very low, rising significantly primarily since 2012 (Gel’man 2015). Only the most recent wave of repressions, those coming along with the 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine, compares with the scale of the crackdowns in Turkey after the anti-Erdoğan coup attempt in July 2016 or in Egypt following the Arab uprising and the ouster of President Mohamed Morsi in July 2013, not to mention routine repression in China and many other longstanding hard-core autocracies.

Moreover, when it comes to elections, Putin’s regime has actually taken care *not* to strip them of all meaning by eliminating every form of opposition. Instead, some kind of actual alternative has been on the ballot in almost every major national election in Russia, including at least a candidate from the Communist Party, which while having reached a comfortable arrangement with the Kremlin that retains its status as the second largest bloc in parliament, does represent something genuinely different for which people can vote. Even after the events of 2022, the pro-democracy and fiercely anti-Putin (and anti-invasion) Yabloko Party has avoided being banned, something the Kremlin

feels it can allow due to the party's low public appeal. This does not mean the Kremlin allows every opposition candidate on the ballot who goes for it. Far from it. The 'weeding out' of candidates through various judicial decisions and technicalities remains an important tactic for shaping electoral outcomes, as Chapter 9 discusses. For example, would-be contender Alexei Navalny was kept off the presidential ballot of March 2018 after the authorities hung clearly trumped-up criminal convictions on him (they ultimately jailed him in 2021). What all this means is that Russian voters are almost always given the *appearance* of at least *some* choice. And while independent (especially Western) media frequently report credible instances of fraud in Russian elections (perhaps most egregiously turnout figures over 100 per cent in occasional localities!), in reality the scale has rarely been high enough to dramatically shape electoral outcomes. The really important manipulation occurs before people ever get to the ballot box.

So tight has this system become that Putin has felt emboldened to embark on radical policies that did not have clear prior popular support and that would bring his own population economic decline and (for some) even death. Thus, while one December 2021 poll found only 8 per cent thought Russian troops should be sent to fight in Ukraine (Hale et al. 2022), Putin was clearly confident he could use his propaganda machine to sell the population a false narrative justifying the war based on a particular vision of Russian identity, and ramp up his repressive apparatus to manage any discontent.

While the scale of this move was a shock to many, it did not come out of the blue. Russia had grown more assertive in international relations throughout the Putin era, after an initial period of surprisingly extensive cooperation with the United States and its Western allies (Chapters 15 and 16). With 2014, however, Russia increasingly challenged Western (especially American) dominance. It did so not only by invading Ukraine, but also in such actions as sending troops to Syria, developing a military presence in Africa, supporting the regime in Venezuela, and actively attempting to influence election outcomes everywhere from the United States to France. Importantly, this was not always the work of the Foreign Ministry or even Russia's extensive intelligence services. As can be expected from high-patrimonialism countries, the Kremlin also exercised influence informally through some of the political-economic networks in its coalition. This has included the networks of Yevgeny Prigozhin and his Wagner Group, Chechen strongman Ramzan Kadyrov, as well as nationalist oligarchs like Konstantin Malofeev, all of whom are playing very direct roles in Russia's invasion of Ukraine (Chapters 11, 15). This did not always end well for the

networks involved. In 2023, long-standing tensions between Prigozhin and top military brass led the former to launch an armed ‘march on Moscow’, to abort it after Putin labeled this treasonous, and then to die in a mysterious plane crash several weeks later.

Conclusion

Major debates remain about how firmly Putin controls the machinery of Russia’s state. Some, like Timothy Frye (2021), characterize Russia’s leader as a ‘weak strongman’, someone who faces significant constraints from public opinion and the different political coalitions upon which his power depends. Others see an extraordinarily powerful leader who has shaped the worldviews not only of key Russian elites, but also of much of the population to such an extent that they can hardly conceive of a Russia without him (Sharafutdinova 2020; Taylor 2018).

What we can conclude now, though, is that Putin, building on a foundation set in the Yeltsin era, has managed to establish a tight single-pyramid system in Russia and has now used it to pursue an aggressive course of territorial expansion that would negate the very existence and statehood of one of Europe’s largest peoples, Ukrainians. At the same time, what we see today is surely not a ‘consolidated’ system of government. Instead, one of the most important lessons of post-Soviet Russian politics is that its system has constantly changed. Change, in fact, is arguably an essential feature of the system as Russia’s chief patrons constantly recalibrate both institutions and ideas in order to hold their coalitions of rivalrous political-economic networks together.

They are very creative in performing such recalibrations, and they do not always move in the same direction. For example, when United Russia’s popularity was at a peak in 2007, the Kremlin replaced the district-based first-past-the-post component of elections for the State Duma with party-list voting that would weaken the regional political machines it was still undercutting at the time. But after United Russia’s popularity dropped in the early 2010s, the Kremlin restored district-based elections so that the Kremlin could compensate for a lower United Russia party-list result with pro-Kremlin candidates whose district victories could be engineered by regional political machines that were now more firmly under Putin’s control. Putin’s own ceding of the presidency to Medvedev during the tandem period can also be understood as a successful regime recalibration; it was during this time that the balance of people thinking the country was going in the right

as opposed to the wrong direction reached its peak, one that was not surpassed even with the annexation of Crimea (Colton 2017, 14–15). Between 2012 and 2014, the regime recalibrated with its 2012 ‘conservative turn’, its 2014 occupation of parts of Ukraine, and a sharp uptick in repression. And in February 2022, of course, Putin initiated the most far-reaching recalibration of all, launching his all-out invasion of Ukraine and putting his repressive apparatus on steroids. Russia has continually surprised us, and a careful look back at Russian political history should lead us to be open-eyed about the possibility that Russian politics may again take us in directions that at the moment may seem unthinkable.

At the same time, an understanding of the network dynamics that lie at the heart of Russia's single-pyramid system should give us some tools for making the unthinkable at least a little bit more thinkable. For the near future, it suggests we need to keep a careful eye on the politics of succession, and to expect Putin as he ages and faces at least the formality of elections to pay particularly close attention to public opinion as a key resource influencing how much control he will be able to exercise over the succession process. We should also expect him to be highly concerned about the relationship among different networks that are now integrated into his political system but could, with possible succession looming, quickly go their own ways should their patron's political future suddenly seem in doubt. How the war plays out could powerfully influence all of these factors. These are likely to be among the crucial questions for students of Russian politics in the years ahead.

Questions for discussion

- 1 What role do networks play in contemporary Russian politics?
- 2 What are the main sources of Vladimir Putin's power?
- 3 How powerful is Putin; can he essentially do anything he wants?
- 4 Does public opinion matter in an authoritarian system like Russia's?
- 5 How likely is Russia's current political system to change?

Recommended reading

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